

Chapter 1

How long had it been since the ancient warrior had first seen this view? Yodaka stood at the top of the hill looking back down towards the Great Barn. The Barn had been derelict since anyone could remember and sat near the end of a large field at the bottom of the slope he now stood atop. It must have been impressive in its day with the main hall a vast cavern that could easily accommodate four large houses. At the back end of the Barn was a small warren of rooms, of various sizes, which were probably used for storage, housing farm animals and offices. Now they were used by the Clan as sleeping areas' and the Elders Council meetings during the Gathering. As he looked at the Barn it brought back many memories, some good and some bad but always evoked a feeling of pride, as this was their Barn and everyone knew it to be so. Yodaka's gaze now drifted over to the right of the Barn, towards the Green Forest, as he saw members of the Clan weaving their way through the trees and out into the field. They walked in single file, as was the Clan way, using well worn trails in the overgrown field which snaked round towards the front of the Barn. To his left stood the Great Hedge, some distance away, which ran down the side of the field and disappeared into the distance as far as you could see. Where the hedge met the slope and made its way upwards, there was

a gap large enough for three or four of the Clan to pass through abreast. He again watched as a steady stream of the Clan came through the gap, some stealing a glance up towards him and nudging their young ones forward to stop them staring and gawping up at their Clan chief. In the far off distance behind the Barn he could also make out the Clan coming towards the Barn in a steady stream. Yes, this gathering would be the biggest anyone could remember. He had been standing watching everyone arrive for some time now, the sun had already moved half way across the sky and was just beginning to start its decent into the blackness. At the front of the Barn there seemed to be a small bottle neck developing, which was strange considering that one of the enormous doors was fully open, in fact nearly falling off its hinge. He looked closer and soon discovered the reason for the slow entry into the Barn. There on either side of the entrance stood his two brothers, Jounka and Blacken, living legends to the Clan, immortalised in stories and used to keep young ones in line if they misbehaved. “Blacken will steal you away in the middle of the night if you don’t go to sleep”, “Jounka can swallow a young one whole, if they are bad” that sort of thing. As the Clan filed past them, they slowed and dipped to show their respect to the two warriors. He must admit, they looked very impressive and slightly intimidating, standing either side of the entrance.

Jounka was almost as big as Yodaka and had over the years put a little bit of weight on his midriff, however Yodaka thought that even with this Jounka might be able to take him in a straight up fight, of course, he would never admit that to him or anyone. There are only three other Clan members that have ever seen Jounka in battle, being it was so long ago, the thought of it still sends shivers down his back, the red mist in his eyes as he hacked at The Hoard, cutting down dozens at a time, fighting his way through their defensive line like it was not there. On many occasions he had kept a safe distance just in case he had been caught in the blood lust whirlwind. Jounka's demeanor was always dark with his stern face and seemingly sour mood, however, Yodaka knew this to be a front, as Jounka had a heart as big as a Barn. Now his other brother was a bit of an enigma, Blacken "the Ghost" "Night Crawler" "Shade." Even as youngsters he was always distant and really only associated with their mother and baby sister Tigera. Blacken was the smallest of the brothers and famous for his unexplainable ability to suddenly appear beside you without warning. Extremely supple, agile and strong even when he walked down the path, it looked like he was floating. During the battle of the Great Hedge, Jounka had done his usual thing and cut through the Hoard's front line, deep into their ranks. I had followed him in, however as we stopped, we found ourselves completely surrounded with what appeared to be no gaps in their line. When suddenly

I felt something brush past my back and Blacken appeared at my side. To this day I don't know how he managed it and he never talks about it. Now that was a battle to remember.

Watching the Clan make their way towards the Barn indicated that there would be a large turnout for the gathering. Just as well he thought to himself.

Something was in the air

He had been having strange dreams of late about mother, or rather with mother. Don't get me wrong, she was often in my thoughts, however this was different. It was like she was there, with him. They would walk and talk about the Clan and even go hunting, although he could not remember all the dream, it was very surreal. He suspected his brothers and sister were also having these dreams and no one talked about it. No one also talked about the fact that the four of them had already lived at least five times as long as anyone had done. They had watched whole generations being born, live and pass to the Holy Mother's bosom and still they looked not much older than that of someone who had just entered adulthood.

Something was not right He did not need the Transformation and enhanced *Ka*, he sensed it straight away, long before she even spoke, his sharp instincts had never let him down before, however,

he had been sitting here for some time, was he sleeping? Had he nodded off with his thoughts? He did not need to turn around to know she was there “I see you mother” “I see you son, Yodaka of the Clan, head of the Elders, the great Lord GreySteel” “Are you real, Blessed Mother, or another dream?” “You know I am real, you have known this moment was coming” “The dreams” “Yes, the dreams” “I have missed you mother” “I have also missed you, my son” “Do the others know?” “I have been in all their dreams of late, Blacken and Jounka suspect but won’t admit it to themselves. Now Tigera is a bit different. She is my daughter and her gifts”, she let that statement hang there for a moment. “I was able to enter her dreams at the start and then she seems to have blocked me out” “Why would she do this?” “Having the Gift, she probably knew the day was approaching when we would all be united” “I have missed you mother” “You too my son, I have watched you all from a far, these last seasons and I am very proud of you all. I have missed you all but knew we would all be united as a family again in the great meadow. This has comforted me immensely” “Will it hurt?” “No” “What’s it like?” “You have always wanted to know everything and always want an answer. You will see when you see” mother chuckled ‘How soon” “Soon and not just yet”

Yodaka turned and, best way to describe it, snuggled into his mother. He buried his face in her hair and filled his nostrils and his every being with

her scent. And if truth be told, a small tear fell from his eye. Yodaka turned to look down at his brothers and in that split second there was a blur and he found himself standing alone with a deep aching in his heart. Was it a dream? Did he really just see, touch and talk with mother. He could still smell her scent, it was real Yodaka sat for a few moments of calm, enjoying his encounter. Now it was show time.

Now there are few things you need to be aware of in relation to the *Kin*. The *Kin* are, by tradition, rather shy and do not like mixing in large groups. In fact, many *Kin* will live out their lives having only met close family and not travelled far from their own back yard. Some will have lived most of their lives in isolation. Therefore, over a few Millennia, this lack of conversation and interaction led to the *Kin* developing other senses and skills rather than relying on speech. No one knows how or when it happened but gradually the *Kin* developed a close bond with nature and their surroundings and the very nature of all things.

They called this the Ka, an ability to communicate with each other by using their body language and minds. Again, over time, some of the *Kin* claimed they could sense others who had died and passed over to the Holy Mother, even claiming to have had conversations with them. One fact, which is not disputed, is the emergence of the Protectors. Once in every twenty generations or so, one is born who has the ability to transform. At first

these *Kin* were seen as monsters or spirits and were often referred to as Djinn. By tapping into the Ka these *Kin* were able to increase their size by up to six or seven times their normal size, appearing as huge giants or monsters. However, over time, when the *Kin* faced a threat, these Djinn would come to their rescue time and time again. Soon they started to be known as Protectors and leaders of the *Kin*. Most tribes seemed to have a Protector amongst them, living an extended life span. When they eventually passed, then a new *Kin* would emerge who now had this ability, as if passed on from the previous one.

Yodaka was a Protector and a leader of the Clan. Now the Gathering must begin. Yodaka concentrated and began the transformation. He was Lord GreySteel who had received the Blessing along with his siblings. It only took a second to change into his Djinn form. Yodaka knew that this tapping of the Ka power could be used for both good and evil. Some had abused this power, Lord Adeben being a prime example from the past. Suddenly he changed in shape, growing quickly in to an intimidating size, legs extending, body expanding until he was a Giant of the *Kin* with his huge muscles visible under his famous grey coat, Lord GreySteel was here.

He walked to the brow of the slope, took a deep breath and cried a thunderous calling “Let the Gathering begin!!” Heads from even the far end of the huge field swung and looked up to the top of the

slope. There stood Lord GreySteel, Clan Chief and Leader of the Elders Council. He started down the slope building speed as he went, his huge frame seemed to move so easily and gracefully as he jumped over large boulders. “Nothing stops GreySteel”, Clan members remarked as they stood open mouthed watching. As he made his way down the slopes, the crowd now surged towards the Barn and began to form a vanguard for their leader’s approach. “There he goes, showing off again” Jounka said “Be silent and show respect to your brother” Blacken growled “There is something he is.....” whatever Jounka was saying was drowned out by the throng of the Clan chanting “GreySteel, GreySteel, Greysteel!!!!

Chapter 2

Yodaka slowed down to a walking pace as he approached the entrance of the Barn. He could see the sour expression of disapproval on Jounka’s face as he got closer to his two brothers, who had used the distraction of their brother to also assume their huge Djinn forms

Yodaka approached his two brothers at the Barn entrance

Their senses heightened due to the transformation, both Blacken and Jounka stood up and stared open mouthed at their brother

“I smell mother!!!” Said Jounka

“He’s right, so do I, what’s going on Yodaka”
Yodaka looked from one to the other
“Explain” said Jounka in a deep, teeth barred,
almost growl
“You met mother, didn’t you” said Blacken
There was an awkward pause and Yodaka replied
with a simple “yes”
“Where is she?” demanded Jounka
“Gone”
Jounka went to continue but was cut off by his
brother
“Let’s talk in side, as the crowd is getting bigger”
said Yodaka as he started towards the Barn doors

The Brothers walk side by side and entered the large main hall of the Barn. The Barn was already full to the rafters, literally, as some of the youngsters now sat up in the rafters watching the goings on from above. To the far right, at the back of the hall, Tigera had set up shop in her usual spot and was surrounded by at least 20 or 30 youngsters. No doubt she was telling them the Clan stories and histories Yodaka looked over to his sister, even after all these years her features still looked like that of a fledgling, one who has just passed from youngster but not quite an adult. Her delicate long pointed face surrounded by her predominantly red hair distinguished her amongst the Clan and she was always easy to find in a crowd Their eye’s locked Now, being blessed by the goddess, Yodaka, his brothers and sister had various degrees of the *Ka*.

The *Ka* can only be best described as an ability to talk in each other's heads, like telepathy and much more as it also uses a combination of facial expressions, body movements and feelings which can give a far more fulfilling experience than just speech They spoke to each other, from across the hall with the *Ka*

"I see you, My Lord"

"I see you my Sister and no formal titles today please, I am just your brother remember" "Your face tells one story and your heart another"

observed Tigera Yodaka did not respond.

Tigera continued to talk to the youngsters, again, something the *Ka* allowed you to do was to carry on two, or more, conversations at the same time

"My senses are the best amongst us and from here, I can smell her"

"Say her name"

"No"

"Why not"

"It hurts too much" said Tigera

"We all have missed her you know" replied her brother

"Yes and I was there Yodaka"

"So was I"

"No, not like I was, we were connected with the *Ka* when it happened, you know this, I felt everything, the blows, the cuts the bleeding. I felt her life slip away like it was my own"

Tigera shook her head as tears began to form in her eyes and she turned her attention to the youngsters

Yodaka reached out across the void, “she said you had been resisting her and even you cannot deny the will of the Goddess.”

There was no response

“Let’s not argue little sister, we will discuss this later”

Yodaka continued down the left hand side of the Barn and caught up with his brothers. From an outsider’s view, Yodaka had only stopped and paused for a second, even if the conversation with his sister had taken a few minutes, another effect of the *Ka*.

“I suppose it’s time we put our plan in action” said Blacken

“Yes, have runners gather the chosen and meet us in the council chamber” said Yodaka, a little distracted. Blacken and Jounka looked at each other as they had sensed that Yodaka and Tigera had spoken in *Ka* but they said nothing.

At the back of the Barn amongst the warren of rooms there was a room slightly larger which had become the Council of Nine chamber. Here when the Clan met, the council members held discussions and heard the usual catalogue of disputes, mostly boundary related or betrothal issues and the like. Today would be different, thought Yodaka as the three brothers entered the chamber. The other six members were already there and partaking in some fresh rabbit that had been delivered for the council. All rose to their feet and the usual greetings were

exchanged. The other council members did not need the *Ka* to know all was not right with their Lord and a quick glance at his brothers confirmed it. Something was not right.

Yodaka looked to his brothers, more for support rather than permission to speak on their behalf.

“Once again we meet here at the Great Barn and it is a pleasure to see familiar faces I have not seen for some seasons now. Having just walked through the great hall it looks like this will be the biggest gathering of the Clan since the Great Journey back when the long tooth still roamed the land”

“Yes indeed” said Abba

“And have you seen the number of youngsters this time, the Clan has been busy!” And they all laughed, “And some more than others!” said Beta and they laughed harder and looked over at poor Yorith

“How many is it now” said Abba, “six, seven?”

“Nine” said Yorith

Abba nearly collapsed on the floor as tears ran down his face and his stomach began to hurt from all the laughing

Yodaka let the banter carry on for a few more minutes before sitting at the head of the group, which was now the unofficial sign that the meeting was to now begin.

He took a breath

“My esteemed friends, council of the nine, elders of the Clan and *Kin* companions. I have news to relay

to you that you may not find as palatable as this delicious rabbit”,

There is never good timing in anything and this was no exception as in strode three members of the Clan, barely into adulthood, which sent the council into uproar. No one disturbs the council in session

Balanor was well known to everyone, coming from one of the larger families in the Clan. They could trace their ancestry back beyond the Hoard Invasion. Balanor had a good disposition, known for his kindness, patience and even wisdom beyond his youth

Dede was in fact Abba’s grandson, a rather large youth who unfortunately had gotten himself into more trouble than anyone cared to remember.

Mischievous he may be, however, he had a heart as big as the Barn and the youngsters loved him very much.

Finally, there was Scappa. Possibly a step too far, thought Blacken, when he saw them all enter.

Scappa’s family was a remnant from the Hoard, Yodaka had granted asylum to a number of families after all was settled. They lived on the outskirts of the Boughs and made ends meet by scavenging for scraps and some said even stealing etc

“Dede, what is the meaning of this! Why are you with That!” spat Abba, indicating Scappa

‘We have been summoned grandfather”

“Who has summoned you?” demanded Abba

“Lord Jounka has”

“Settle down everyone “commanded Yodaka

“Blacken, if you please”

Blacken waited until everyone had sat back down and went to the front of the room and stood beside Balanor

He addresses the room with his deep base voice, using the *Ka* to project it

“I see you Council of Nine”

“We see you Blacken” replied the room

“I am Blacken of the 5th Borough, Lord Nightshade of the Clan and son of the blessed mother. I stand beside Balanor of the 3rd borough and invest him as my replacement on the Council of Nine”

Uproar!

“What! How can this be! It’s not true! What’s going on!” all shouts mixing in to one another

“Be seated!” shouted Yodaka, above the din

Blacken took his seat and Jounka went to the far end of the room and stood beside Dede

“I see you Council of Nine”

“We see you Jounka” replied the room

I am Jounka of the 5th borough, Lord Bearskin of the Clan and son of the blessed mother. I stand beside Dede of the 9th borough and invest him as my replacement on the Council of Nine”

This time there was no great uproar, more shaking of heads and a realization of what may be

transpiring here today, there were also a few tears starting to run down a few cheeks
Jounka took his seat and Yodaka went to the far end of the room and stood beside Scappa

“I see you Council of Nine”

“We see you Yodaka” replied the room

I am Yodaka of the 5th borough, Lord GreySteel of the Clan, head of the Council of Nine and son of the blessed mother. I stand beside Scappa of the *Forgiven* (he emphasised this word) and invest him as my replacement on the Council of Nine”

Yodaka went on without a break so as not to give the council time to react. As he walked back round to his position he continued.

“My brothers and I have served on this council since before your grandparents were born and we have lived three life spans of our kind. However, everything must come to an end, even for us and to ensure the Council and the Clans survival we must face reality and make preparations for what must be. These three youths will sit on the council from tomorrow as our replacements. Once this Gathering has concluded, my brothers and I resign from the council.”

“Our Mother has called us”

The last was a simple statement which left the room now stunned in silence, as everyone understood its meaning

A few seconds later the uproar, wailing and crying began

Back in the main hall, Tigera was just finishing her story to the youngsters She had obviously picked up the high emotions that were emanating from the council chamber and knew her brothers had delivered the news.

“And finally, Dad had saved the Blessed Mother from the yincan and she was safe and sound and back in the arms of Mum, who covered her in kisses and dried her hair with a towel”

“How long had the Blessed Mother been trapped on the banks of the stream with the yincan?” asked one of the youngsters.

“Mother never told us and I think it was all night!”

“Ohh, that’s scary”

“Yes, so remember, be careful if you come across a yincan!”

Tigera watched as her brothers entered the great hall to her right along with the rest of the council.

Tigera channelled the *Ka* and spoke within the mind of her big brother

“It’s done then brother?”

“Yes” said Yodaka.

“Have you found one amongst the Clan?” queried Yodaka

“To my right at the front, the youngster with the white socks and red hair” replied Tigera

“Ah, yes, she reminds me of a younger you, strangely!” Yodaka chuckled

“More, more, another one”, “tell us about the Long Night.” “No, the Harrage”, “no Blacken gets lost!”

All the youngsters where calling out their favorite stories. None of the assembled youngsters had heard the stories from Tigera, rather from their mothers and fathers and grandparents and to hear the stories from the Master story teller herself, using the *Ka* to project all the sights, smells and noises, was something special they would remember all their lives and tell their children and grandchildren about. Tigera looked to her brothers and they each in turn nodded they heads. Time to tell her last stories, stories that would be imprinted on all the assembled Clan and mostly on the mind and soul of her chosen little socks at the front, Kafrina, although she did not realise was about to be the custodian of the Clan. Not only would she hear and remember the stories Tigera was about to tell but during the telling all the Clan’s history would be sub consciously transferred to her.

“Settle down everyone, settle down. Tonight, I am going to tell stories that some of you will have heard extracts from but not from someone who was actually there and they are important to the Clans history. Now everyone come in closer. You small ones at the back, move down here to the front where there is plenty of space.”

Tigera watched as her brothers mingled in the crowd, acknowledging Clan members as they appeared to meander around the Hall. Tigera knew the truth of the matter was that they were getting into strategic positions. Tigera would call on their *Ka* to amplify her own thoughts thus enhancing the experience across the Hall, imprinting onto their very souls the sights and sounds of her stories.

“Yes, tell us a story!” several of them called out and not just the youngsters at the front!

Tigera now stood at the front of the hall and took one quick look around the faces staring at her, then she channelled the *Ka*,

She reached out to her brothers and felt their power flooding into her. She also felt their love and she allowed herself a small smile. She then did something she never did,

Tigera transformed in front of the Clan into her huge Protector form

As with her brothers her transformation took less than a few eye blinks to complete. Tigera grew in size to that of her brothers and still retained her delicate facial features. Her hair became like flames, long, thick and flowing down her back, her huge owl like eyes were a striking golden colour. There were gasps and intakes of breath as her beauty was even more enhanced and the youngsters at the front moved back ever so slightly at the

awesome sight of the huge Djinn now in front of them.

Lady Goldeneye looked down at the youngsters and gave them a small wink as she proceeded to sit down and get herself comfortable. Tigera wove the *Ka* and projected an image into the minds of all in the hall. She now held an enthralled audience as she began recounting the story.....

Chapter 3

Tigera pictured the *Ka*, as her mother had told her, a large lake, its waters deep and clear. Tigera pictured herself walking into the lake and immersing herself in the lake of *Ka*, drinking from it and filling up every fiber of her being with its power. Tigera opened her eyes and the Great Barn was now frozen in time. All round her nothing was moving and, as she looked, she saw youngsters at the front caught in mid yawn, dust particles frozen in the shafts of sunlight that cut through the Barn. Something caught her eye and she looked up towards the rafters. There caught in midflight was a

butterfly. Its multi coloured wings reflecting the light like tiny jewels. Oh how she liked butterfly's and gave herself a small smile. Had mother placed that butterfly there to prompt her? Perhaps, she thought and it was as good a place as any to start. Tigera now sought out her brothers in the crowd and reached out invisible tentacles of *Ka*, wrapping them in it and joining with their own subconscious minds. Once the link was complete, she felt the power of her brother's *Ka*, flowing back down to her. Although the male *Ka* has a slightly different taste, like milk just before it curdles.

Tigera took a large breath in and suddenly the Barn came back to life, if you could call it that, as everyone now sat in complete silence watching and waiting as they knew Tigera, the master story teller, was about to start. Yes butterflies, oh how she liked butterflies thought Tigera as she now projected her story to the assembled mass.

“Let me take you all back, far back in time. Back before even you're Grandfolks and their Grandfolks had even been born. A time when even I was a youngster.....”

From the West to East running main road in a small village, just before it leaves and heads out into the country side, you take a right and walk

down an un surfaced lane that feeds of the main road. You then come across two houses on your left. Passing them and heading up to the top of the lane stands a large metal garage. Slipping down the small path to the side, you enter a large garden which is surrounded on three sides by tall Fir trees, giving the sense of seclusion from the outside world. On the fourth side facing you is a large dilapidated house.

Approaching the house you can see that in its day it must have been a grand house standing two stories high with huge windows to the front and side. Moving closer in towards the house you look inside the glassless window to a large room at the rear of the house. The room is full of debris, old furniture and various odd items such as barrels and has a set of large glass doors looking out to a smaller garden and fields beyond, all be it the glass is no longer there and the doors are starting to list on their hinges.

Looking closer and standing very still you may be lucky to see a small cat sitting on the old broken sofa. The small cat has long auburn and black hair and a bushy tail. The small cat looks furtively around and spots a leaf blowing across the floor. She crouches and waits until it stops moving then pounces from her perch trapping the leaf under her delicate paw. Suddenly there is movement to her left. A butterfly has entered the room and all thoughts of the leaf leave her mind and now the chase is on. She runs and pounces in the air swiping

at the butterfly but misses. Undeterred she stalks her prey again, using the sofa as cover until the butterfly comes within range. Like a boxer in a fight, she swipes both paws alternatively as she moves across the floor on her two hind legs pursuing her goal until the leaf blows across her path and she pounces on it instead.

Cats can sometimes be fickle that way.

How she loved Butterfly's

And you think how happy and carefree it must be to be a cat. With not a care in the world!

And that's all you would see and think because you're not of the *Kin*.....

Other eyes now watched the auburn *Kin*'s game of chase. Hidden from view in the back garden, three *Kin* hid behind an upturned wheelbarrow surrounded by long grass and watched with an unnatural intensity. They remained hidden for a few reasons, not least the fact that the house stood at the edge of the boundary of the 5th Borough of the Clan and they were trespassing and more importantly they had been ordered not to be seen or interact with anyone from the 5th, or any other Borough, until told otherwise

“Over a week we have hidden and watched this family” hissed Ammon under his breath.

“Waste of time if you ask me”

“No one asked you” said Hondo

Ammon shifted his position to get a better view, his tail swiping across Sefu's face.

"Watch it!" growled Sefu, nearly revealing his hiding place as they saw the auburn *Kin* look quickly towards their position before turning her attention back to the butterfly again. Hondo gave them a stare and the two *Kins* lowered their heads, looking a little sheepish.

Another *Kin* now carefully picked its way through a gap in the fence at the back of the garden and crawled on its belly towards its companions hidden behind the wheelbarrow.

"Hey!"

The three *Kin*'s looked round at Bomani.

"Back over the fence, now" hissed Bomani.

The four *Kin*'s moved in single file towards the hole in the fence and carefully made their way through the gap turning left and following the fence until it met the small stream. They bounded across the stream and through the trees so they were now out of sight and hearing of the old house and any *Kin*.

"What kept you, we have been watching this bunch of nobody's for over a week now and can report, nothing!"

Bomani sat down and looked at the three others.

"Ok, I will tell you as much as I know and what I have been told"

"So, you know I was ordered by Lord Adeben to gather a small group and come here to the 5th and

watch this family. I was told to do nothing until instructed otherwise and just watch, wait and report back every couple of days.

The other bit of information was that Lord Adebén believed that the Mother was a descendant of the First”

“One of the First’s? Are you having a laugh” sneered Sefu

“If Lord Adebén thought so, then who am I to argue or question. Anyway, his instructions were to watch and report all the families coming and goings, who they spoke to and if they had any visitors etc”

“But specifically, do nothing to raise any suspicions that they were being observed”

“Well that all changed last night. Lord Adebén is on the move and expected to be at the Great River in the next few days. Others have now been dispatched to intercept any messengers that Lord Hamani may send out to warn and gather the Clan at the Great Barn”

“So his intention is to take the Great Barn first?” enquired Ammon.

Bomani continued “Looks that way and now the orders have changed completely. Hondo you could hardly contain your disappointment that you were missing all the action, well now it’s time for action as we have received new orders” Bomani paused and looked at them.

“Take out the whole family and leave no one to cause a possible threat in the future.”

They all looked at Bomani in silence.

“You’re from around here Ammon, you must have had a few run in’s with the boys?” enquired Bomani
“A few but they never scrap anymore. Their mother put a stop to that. I met Yodaka last month on the South border. He had a nice plump rat in his mouth. I jumped out and he just dropped the rat, looked at me, turned and high tailed back to his mother” he laughed.

“What about the mother, will she put up much trouble, being a *First* and all” asked Sefu

Ammon laughed

“Well I don’t know about all this *First* stuff. She does not seem to me to be anything special. To say she is related the first of our *Kin* to walk the ground and related the Holy Mother, well it’s all a bit of a whisker tail if you ask me”

“Ok good and just to be on the safe side we’ll take the redhead first and then see if we can get the boys one at a time. Finally, we will take care of the mother, Ammon they will know your whiskers so you take the lead to distract them while the rest of us move in closer” he finished.

Moldosa lay under the bed in the house. She was just settling down when for no reason she felt the hairs on the back of her neck begin to stand. Then the sick feeling began in her stomach and she wondered if she had eaten something that did not agree with her. The feeling very quickly changed and the ache in the stomach spread quickly across her whole body.

The feeling was fear and dread.

Moldosa made her way from under the bed and stuck her head out of the room door.

Nothing.

She could hear mom was in the living room and dad was in the kitchen and there was no sign of danger she could see. However, the feeling was growing, if that was possible and again changing into something she could not just identify. She made her way into the living room and saw that Jounka was sitting on the sofa with mum, curled up in her lap and was fast asleep. Moldosa walked over and jumped up onto the sofa and began to groom her son, knowing fine well that it would wake him.

“Mother?”

“Sorry son, I need you to get up and help me”

“What’s wrong?”

“I need to know where your siblings are. Can you please check the kitchen and back hall and I will check the other bedrooms. If you see them, gather them in the hall”

“Why?”

“Just do as I ask please. I’ll explain later”

Jounka found Blacken lying on one of the kitchen chairs and gave him a nudge.

“Mother wants us”

“Not now Jounka. I have no time for your games and I am tired”

“No game brother, she wants us and looks serious, something is up”

The brothers checked the back hall for Tigera and Yodaka but neither where there. They made their way back to the front hall where mother was already waiting for them.

“No sign?”

“Nothing”

“Ok they must be out. We need to find them now”

“What’s going on” said Blacken”

“I can’t really say, other than I have a very bad feeling that something is going to happen or has already and it’s not good. Let’s get out the house and find your brother and sister”

The *Kin* made their way out of the house via the front window, walked across the garden, jumped over the wall and stopped in the lane.

“Ok, I think the best way to find them is to split up and meet back here. Blacken you check up near the shed and path to the old house. Jounka, you head round back and across the stream. I will head up...”

Moldosa fell over as if she had been hit on the side of the head.

Moldosa head was spinning and everything went black. In the gloom she could she Tigera crouching in fear and spitting at something in front of her. This was very strange. Moldosa tried to look round to see what she was spitting at and the darkness closed in again.

Moldosa now looked at a set of yellow eyes. Something moved at the side of her vision and turning her head she again caught sight of another two sets of disembodied eyes. She tried to call out to Tigera and nothing came from her throat. Tigera was still crouched and where, Moldosa tried to look around but the darkness closed in again, however just as it did she caught the slightest glimpse of an old sofa arm...

“Mother, Mother, wake up!”

Moldosa came around staring into the faces of Blacken and Jounka who were still washing her face in an attempt to revive her. She was still lying in the middle of the lane.

“Mother, what happened, are you ok?. One second you were talking and the next you fell over like a stone. Then you started calling out to Tigera and mumbling something.”

Moldosa quickly sat up and looked around

“How long was I out?”

“Only a few seconds”

“I think Tigera is in trouble. Don’t ask me how I know, just trust me on this. I will explain later. We need your brother, now.”

Moldosa sat very still and concentrated. She was wise enough to know something was happening to her. You don’t just have visions, if that’s what they were, all of a sudden. She needed her son and if her *Ka* abilities, for whatever reason, were increasing then she had nothing to lose.

Normally when *Kin* talked in *Ka* they needed to be within a short distance and always in line of sight of each other.

Moldosa now concentrated her *Ka* and focused it into almost something like the beam from a torch that would thread a needle. She pictured her son and pushed the *Ka* out to find him.

“Yodaka my son, I need you now”

“Mother?”

“Yes son, it’s me”

“Where are you?, I can’t see you”

“I am in the lane in front of the house and I will explain later, Your sister is in trouble and we need you now. Make you way to the front entrance of the Old House and we will meet you there and be quick about it”

Moldosa quickly explained that they would meet Yodaka at the front of the Old House and they set of at a sprint.

Ammon slowly crept up to the big old glass doors at the rear of the house watching the red head all the time, making sure not to spook her and have her bolt out the house. He managed to get up to the entrance without the red head noticing as she was too busy chasing a butterfly. Foolish *Kin* he thought.

“Hello little one” said Ammon, quietly as not to frighten her. Tigera stopped dead in her tracks and swung her head round to see who it was.

“I know you, you’re... Ammon. You shouldn’t be here you know, this is our house.”

“I am only having a look around to see what it’s like in here, that’s all” Ammon said casually as he stood up and slowly looked around the room, moving a step at a time further into the room.

“Well you better go before my brothers find you here. They won’t like it and you don’t want to mess with them.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I think I saw them outside just a couple of minutes ago, so you better scarpers fast”

“Oh, I don’t think they are outside at all. In fact, I think they might be curled up nice in that house you all live in down the lane.

Anyway, even if they were here I’m sure they would just run and tell their mother on me. Very scary!” he laughed

Ammon had continued moving closer and closer towards Tigera and she was slowly backing away. Then she caught movement to her right.

“Who are you!?” she cried as she spotted Hondo and Sefu jumping down from the window sill.

“Now then now then, no need to get upset. Were just having a look round your nice house” said Bomani.

Tigera spun round to her right to see the large ginger tom leaning against the far wall.

Tigera was now very scared and realised she was in a very dangerous situation. She knew fine well that everyone was more than likely with mum and dad

in the house having their afternoon nap. Inside she prayed to the Holy Mother, the *first* amongst her *Kin* and outwardly she knew she needed to put on a brave face if she stood any chance of getting out of this without some serious damage.

Tigera liked to put on a bit of an act, although childish in her behavior sometimes and inside she was as shrewd as her brothers with the extra advantage of being Moldosa's daughter. She could see there was more than mischief in the ginger tom's eyes and that's why she was really scared. Now Tigera puffed herself up, making her hair stand on end as much as possible, as this gave the impression that she was larger than she really was. Tigera also forced herself to take a very small step forward, again a bit of bravado on her part, showing she was not afraid of the *Kin* now in front and to the side of her. Why didn't she just run, she thought.

Chapter 4

Bomani now strolled towards the middle of the room and Ammon swung over towards the wall. Bomani began to chuckle to himself "Now look at you getting all brave on us" he continued to laugh louder and the others joined in

“Now what is a big ugly tom like you doing laughing so hard, please share the joke?” said Yodaka

Heads snapped up to the top of the sofa where now sat the imposing figure of Yodaka. Yodaka swung his gaze slowly round the room to each of the *Kin*, pausing just long enough to catch their eye. There was steel behind that glance.

“Well if it isn’t Yodaka. Time I think for you to run back and tell Mother” sneered Ammon

“Tell me what?” said Moldosa as she deftly landed on top of the sofa at the far end, showing dexterity that defied her age and rather plump belly.

The intruders now all stole a glance at each other. Bomani looked at Yodaka and admitted to himself that he had underestimated the size and strength of the *Kin*, as he had never been this close before. The grey would put up a decent fight he hoped, unless the stories of him running away from Ammon where true. Three of the family, well it would save time hunting them all down. Just the other two brothers to deal with then, contemplated Bomani.

“You know, I have seen some ugly mugs in my time and you ginger take the prize for the worse of them. Oh and what is that awful smell coming from you?”

Again, the heads swung round and there nonchalantly stretching at the double doors was Jounka

Bomani now thought things were beginning to get out of his control and the plan he had made. Suddenly this was not looking as straight forward as they had hoped.

Sefu used the *Ka* and spoke to his counterparts.

“This is not how it was supposed to go down”

“We just take them out all at once instead of spending time hunting them” said Bomani
Hondo backed his friend. “It’s all the same, let’s just get this over and done with and we can take care of the last one after we have had something to eat”

Bomani smiled into himself, Hondo was right things may have changed but the outcome would be the same.

“You there, ginger, what’s your name?” enquired Moldosa.

“What’s it to you anyway.....Moldosa?” sneered Bomani

Moldosa began her small speech.

“I am Moldosa of the 5th Bough of the Clan, keeper of the Refuge House. You have entered our boundary, which is direct violation of 6 declarations of the *Kin* code as agreed in the Great Council of the Water.

Code 1 states, where a family has set up residence and with the blessing of its own elder’s council, this area will be deemed to be the rightful abode of said family. This family will have rights as set out here in the council in respect to its privacy and intrusion of any other *Kin*.....”

In reality, the speech Moldosa has just started was to buy some much needed time

The second Moldosa started speaking. She began to focus all her energy into her *Ka* and concentrated on a leaf that had just started to tumble across the floor carried by the wind. Moldosa watched as the leaf slowed down half mid tumble, suspended in the air just off the ground. In fact it had not stopped completely but rather was moving so slowly it appeared that way.

“Children! Hear me now”

“Mother what’s going on. This is strange. I can’t move. Is nothing moving, Yodaka can you move?” said Tigera.

“All in good time my daughter. You must all listen quickly. I am channelling all my *Ka* and yours to create, it’s hard to describe but it’s like a small bubble where we can talk in *Ka* while the world continues around us. To everyone else nothing is out of place and these vile *Kin* in front of us are currently listening to my boring speech, which is obviously deliberate on my part.”

“I sense real danger here. Not just the normal feral mischief making or bruising food fights. These *Kin* are out to cause real damage to us all. In fact, I fear they are here to break the first covenant of the *Kin* and we must act now or we are in grave danger”

“They cannot break the first covenant. It is unheard of mother. How sure are you?”

“I’m afraid I am very sure.”

“I can only hold this paused *Ka* state for a short time so we must decide, form a plan and act first if we are to survive the next few minutes. Children, for the last few seasons you have technically been preparing for such a moment as this. The hunting skills you have learned and gained as a team are second to none within the Clan. I have watched with pride as you have devised tactics to overcome all prey and even fought of the odd stray canine that has wondered into our territory. Now, I am sad to say, you must use these skills on our own *Kin*. Yodaka, you must form a plan quickly, drawing on everything you have learned and how it can be applied to this threat.”

Moldosa was watching the leaf as it was ever so slowly starting to turn in the air. She could not hold this state much longer and was already on Council of the Water, Code 5 of her speech to the intruders.

“Our bubble is failing quickly. I must concentrate to hold it for another minute or so. Yodaka, take charge now and make your plan quickly. I am now on Code 6.

We can do this my children. Have heart and courage and the blessings of the Mother will be with us.”

“And finally, section 3 of said Code 6, may allow for such indiscretion if any of the above, if and only if, an unsolicited invitation has been received by the

intruding party or parties from one of the occupants of the territory in question.

Have any of you received such an invitation?” concluded Moldosa.

There was silence for a second or two as the intruders looked at each other. Then Bomani began to chuckle to himself and the others started to follow suit, as it grew from a chuckle to a laugh.

Tigera chose this moment to spring forward, not too close and started spitting and screaming in Bomani’s face. Swinging her paws at him (she was never going to be close enough to hit him and that was the point!)

Bomani stopped laughing for an instant and took a small step back. Then he started laughing. This time it was a full belly laugh which was just beginning to bring tears to his eyes. The others, their focus now on Tigera, also howled in laughter.

Then it happened.

Now everyone knows that the *Kin* have the fastest reflexes of all animals and anyone who is unfortunate to witness two *Kin* fighting will probably tell you they saw very little except a blur of fur and much screaming and spitting. Apart from that, it’s very difficult to say exactly what happens during an actual contact fight as mostly it is a lot of shouting and posturing but here goes anyway

Yodaka watched as Tigera sprung forward and Yodaka slowly tensed his body not wanting to reveal too much to his enemy. As they started laughing their attention was on Tigera. Yodaka's attention was also on Tigera but was on the very tip of Tigera's tail. Tigera screamed even louder, then the smallest flick at the end of her tail. Yodaka released himself like a coiled spring. He launched himself from the back of the sofa and used the cushioned seats to add to his speed as he was propelled into the air. From Bomani's view, Yodaka was hidden behind Tigera. All of a sudden Tigera dropped to the floor like a rock and for a split second the Ginger Tom stood dumbfounded. Tigera had just dropped in time as Yodaka flew over her prone body. He actually felt the tips of her ears brush his belly and he crashed paw first into Bomani, knocking him flat to the ground a few feet away. He remained on top of the Ginger Tom as he had extended his claws just before he had made contact, ensuring a good grip. In the beat of two heart beats, he had already brought his back legs up and raked the belly of Bomani several times, on the last rake he felt warm liquid on his paw and knew he had penetrated the hair covering the belly, he had drawn blood. At the same time, he bit down as hard as he could on the Tom's neck, sinking his sharp teeth into the soft skin just below its mouth. Another heart beat passed and he ripped his bite to the left, taking fur and skin in his mouth. Yodaka

now spun off Bomani and then bounded to his left. Bomani was left bloody and confused.

Jounka watched as Tigera sprung forward. All eyes were on Tigera, however, Jounka was glued to Yodaka. He watched as his brother subtly tensed his muscle's, waiting for Tigera's signal. Yodaka sprung and so did Jounka. He flew to his right and took Ammon by surprise as he had just stopped laughing and was now watching Yodaka crash into Bomani. Jounka's large frame easily bowled Ammon over and Jounka quickly sank his teeth into the back of Ammon's neck. He pulled his prey's head back with his jaws, just like he had done on countless hunting trips, then raked his large claws several times quickly across Ammon's face, targeting the eye's first and then the nose. Blind in one eye and blood running from his nose into his mouth, Ammon felt the skin being ripped from the back of his neck as his attacker let go and jumped off him. He spun round the best he could, just in time to see a large grey face filling his vision, before he lost his second eye. Jounka had now sprung to his left and passed Yodaka in midair, like something from a wild dance, the two brothers pushed off each other in the air and Jounka now crashed with extra force into the side of Bomani as he was staggering to his feet.

Moldosa finished her speech and, as predicted, it had the effect it was meant to. The intruders now began to laugh and then Tigera did her thing.

Moldosa watched Tigera's tail and said a small prayer of forgiveness to the Goddess for the crimes her family were about to commit.

The tail flicked and Moldosa moved. With only two steps she launched herself from the back of the sofa and caught Sefu on the side of the head with a well placed open paw smack. This stunned Sefu and gave Moldosa time to then swipe the front legs away from the *Kin*, causing it to fall head first onto the floor. Moldosa leapt onto Sefu's back and sank her teeth into the back of the *Kin*'s neck. Moldosa then used her front paws to push Sefu's head back to the floor. Fur and flesh came away in Moldosa's mouth and left a large gaping hole in the back of Sefu's neck. Moldosa now reached down and brought her claws around Sefu's head. She dug her claws into Sefu's eyes and pulled the head back and up, exposing the soft under throat to Tigera who now quickly, precisely and with force, raked the exposed throat, delivering the mortal blow.

These *Kin* were really stupid, thought Blacken. All this time during mother's speech they had not once thought to count how many of the family were in the room. Blacken had used the speech to silently slip in through the window behind the two *Kin* to the right side of the sofa. He had sat only a couple of feet away and had lowered his heart rate and

breathing to almost a meditative state so they would not sense him behind them. From the shadows he watched and waited.

Blacken watched as Tigera sprung forward. All eyes were on Tigera, however, Blacken's was glued to Mothers.

Mother moved and so did he.

From behind he silently and quickly moved behind Hondo. As Mother crashed into Sefu, Hondo whipped his head and upper body round towards them and Blacken used this momentum to ensure maximum damage from his first and only strike. What Hondo did not see was the huge black claw of Blacken creep round his neck. As Hondo snapped his torso to the left, Blacken pulled his claw to the right, right along the soft spot just under the *Kin's* upper neck. The cut was deep and deadly, as Blacken's claws followed the line of the traverse jugular vein, opening it up. Sefu fell where he had stood, his eyes almost had a look of surprise in them as they stared at the ceiling.

Blacken looked quickly round the room, Mother and Tigera had taken care of one, this left the big Ginger tom and Ammon. Yodaka stood over Ammon and it was clear that battle had ended. Jounka now stood astride the Ginger tom who was moaning but unmoving. The rest of the room held an eerie silence.

"Wait" called mother to Jounka

They all now converged to the center of the room.

“What have we done here mother?” said Yodaka

“What was required of us” retorted Moldosa.

“We have broken the one and only law that should not be broken. There will be a penance to pay for this, now or in the next”

All heads turned to Blacken, for he very rarely spoke his mind.

“I will take account for what has happened here today. I and only I will and should answer for these crimes. I will travel to see Lord Hamadi and explain what has transpired. But before that happens, we have unfinished business, Tigera come here” Tigera obeyed her mother and moved closer to her who was now sitting next to Bomani’s head

“Why did you come here to attack us?” Moldosa asked Bomani.

Bomani did his best to look towards Moldosa and aimed a blood filled spit at her

“I thought that might be your answer.”

Moldosa now spoke to Tigera privately in *Ka*.

“Daughter, I want you to try and *see* your own *Ka*. Can you do that?”

“How do I do that?”

“Think of it like a large blanket, can you do that?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Now, take an end of the blanket and imagine you are pulling a thread. That’s it I can see you doing it. Now throw me the thread.”

Moldosa took the thread from Tigera and now started to inter twine it with her own. She was unsure how she knew how to do this, it had just

come to her. Moldosa thought of the *Ka* like a large lake and now she “drank” from it, pulling more and more into herself. She wove the two threads together into a large braid and then started to spin it into a single thread that now seemed to pulse with energy and life. Moldosa now pushed the thread with all her power and Tigera saw it enter Bomani’s head.

Now there are two things that was out of the normal here, firstly the fact that Tigera could actually see the *Ka* thread that her mother had woven and now penetrated Bomani’s head and secondly, it was impossible or so she thought to forcibly enter another *Kin*’s mind without the receiving *Kin* allowing it. Yet Tigera now watched, or more felt, her mother’s *Ka* enter the mind and suddenly expand in all directions like a spider’s web.

All was dark to begin, then flashes of light and blurred images. Moldosa focused harder on the images and they came briefly into view. *Kin*, lots of *Kin* moving in one direction, dozens became a hundred then became hundreds all moving towards a corpse of trees in the distance. The view zoomed in now, a large rock in front of the trees, a *Kin* on top of it and no ordinary *Kin*, a *Kin* at least five times the normal size, a Dinjin! A Protector. It was speaking, “and we shall take the bountiful lands beyond the great river and strike down and lay waste to the Clan!” the image faded, all black again, then two eyes in the distance moving closer, two golden eyes that shot terror into Tigera and made

her physically shiver. A disembodied voice spoke “and you will watch this family of the *First* Bomani and report back to me in four days” “But why my Lord? They are of no significance to the Hoard” “Do not underestimate this family. The mother is of the *First* and her children were born unnaturally of the *Ka*. Mind me or it will be your undoing. Now leave me and report back as I have instructed.” Darkness again, flashing images, two *Kin* lying dead in a ditch their bodies half covered “No messages will be delivered to the Borough’s from you two!” laughed Bomani. Darkness, Golden eyes again” We move to cross the river in three days, get rid of the *First* descendant and her offspring and be careful.” Moldosa and Tigera then felt as if someone had slapped them in the face and the connection was cut. Moldosa looked down at the ginger tom. His eyes had glassed over and his tongue lolled from his open mouth, he had gone to the great pasture. Silence fell on the room. “Tigera, share what we just saw with your brothers. Once that’s done, take these bodies down to the stream’s embankment and hide them as best you can. There is nothing more we can do today. We will meet back at home once you’re done. We will then prepare to travel to the Great Barn in the morning, where I will explain all that has happened to Lord Hamani and ask for forgiveness.”

Chapter 5

Far to the West, past the furthest boarders of the Clan territory, across the river, past the marshlands and foothills of the Wilderness events now began to take shape that would affect all the *Kin*.

Lord Adeben sheltered under the small bridge that crossed over a drainage ditch about half way up Goat Rock Mountain. He had arrived late last night and decided to shelter here for the night before continuing his journey to the meeting place the old witch had summoned him too. Although the *Kin* could see just as well in the dark, daylight seemed to offer a sense of protection, if only in his mind. The morning was just starting and the rain was now coming in sideways and every so often was turning to hailstones. He left the shelter of the bridge and headed round the side of the mountain, figuring it would only take about an hour to reach the cave Amaya was waiting in. Amaya seemed to have about four or five favorite meeting places, depending on what she wanted to meet about. Bleak place, bleak meeting was normally how it went. He was more than aware that she was manipulating him and he could not fathom the reason why. He had only become Protector less than ten Seasons ago, when he was no more than a youngster. The previous Protector had been with the Hoard for

around 30 Seasons when he suddenly just disappeared one night and the following morning he had awoken as a Dinjin and Protector of the Hoard, that's the way it goes with the *Kin*, when one Protector dies, another is summoned by the Goddess to replace him.

"What kept you Lord Adeben" whispered Amaya as he entered the small cave, having to return to normal form to fit in.

Amaya always appeared to him as a young, pretty youngster, why she bothered he did not know. When she used the *Ka* to summon or talk to him, he saw her true form, that of an old, fat and haggard turtle shell half breed.

"I have been busy, as you should know Amaya"

"Yes, I see the preparations are well in hand. You plan to move soon?" she enquired

"In a few days, why did you summon me all the way up here" he said with a hint of annoyance

"We must be careful Lord Adeben" she drawled

"there could be those who could watch and listen and betray our plans"

"*Our* plans?" Adeben said with a raised brow and a sudden swish of his large tail

"Sorry, your plan, my Lord" she mockingly bowed

"Don't take me as the fool, Amaya" warned Adeben

"I would never my *Lord*"

"I am cold, wet and hungry, so why have you dragged me all the way up here"

"The family I asked you to watch, did you send someone?" enquired Amaya

“Yes, I sent Bomani, a few of his own men and a Feral from the same parts, between them I think they can watch these Softies”

“I told you I had a bad feeling about this family, I have had visions of them in the past and now a new one”

“Well?” he said, attempting to sound interested

“I saw them standing over your body, blood thick on their teeth and claws!”

“You worry too much” he said dismissively

“Have I ever been wrong? What about the bird migration, the rats and the fish? Yet you still do not trust in the power of the *Ka*. You Toms are all the same, do not trust something you cannot fathom or understand. We females of the *Kin* are blessed with the power of the Goddess and the *First*. You would do well to mind what I say” Amaya said in an almost rebuking tone and not too strong as she knew she had to walk a fine line with this young Protector

Adeben did not say anything but contemplated what had transpired since first meeting with the old witch.

Yes, as predicted, the bird migration from the East had not happened as it had all his life. The rivers began to have less and less fish in them and the rats, a staple food for the Hoard, had almost all abandoned their lairs.

Amaya blamed the Clan for their troubles, the reason the Clan lived such opulent lives was due to

them over eating the birds that nested and stopped on their migration to the West.

In their greed, they ate the fish sprats rather than waiting until they were larger so less and less were surviving to make it down to the Hoards parts of the river. As the land died, then the rats had less and less to forage on, so they too were moving on by the look of it.

“This vision changes things, I think, so you need to make a decision on the next course of action”

advised Amaya carefully

“Yes, I do” mused Adebén

“The family of the *First*, I think something needs to be done there, is Bomani up to the job?”

“He was chosen wisely, he is loyal and true, most of all he is ruthless, even for a feral.

However, I had hoped to avoid involving anyone but myself in breaking the Law, as is my right as the Protector”

“So, your plan was just to march up to Lord Hamani and challenge him?” enquired Amaya, mockingly

“It’s not quite as simple as you make it out to be and on the other hand, simplicity is the best approach” he thought again

He realised that the old witch was mocking him and in truth she had said what he had once

contemplated. Avoiding harm coming to the Hoard and any other *Kin*, has always got to be an option

“Hamani is what, past forty Seasons?, I am the younger and fitter challenger and he would be an old fool to accept my challenge.

I will also have two, distinct, advantages.

The Hoard outnumber the Clan at least four to one, possibly five to one so when Hamani sees the numbers facing him he will no doubt do what is best for his *Kin* and the Clan. I also have an extra incentive that will just seal things. I will have the Water Clan at the front of the Hoard” he said to humor the old witch

“Yes, very clever my lord, You know it was Lord Hamani that actually chased them from the Clan Boroughs some thirty odd Seasons ago?”

“Yes, I was aware and when I told them of my plans, they could hardly contain themselves with joy and begged to be in the vanguard. I, of course, said I would consider their request” laughed Adebén.

“So you see, with the most vicious feral tribe the *Kin* have ever known in these parts standing right behind me, with another four hundred Hoard behind them, what do you think Hamani will do?” he said rhetorically “Anyway, if the old fool still does not see sense, I will take care of him myself, that should see any of the Clan he has managed to gather running back to their Softie homes” he finished

“Ah, in relation to him gathering the Clan, have we managed to find out if he knows something?” enquired Amaya

“I sent some scouts out last night before travelling here, so they should return under cover of darkness tonight with a report. I also plan to meet with Bomani tonight and get an update on his little task. I

think Hamani will know something is up and to what extent, that remains to be seen” he said
“It appears you have everything in hand, although the next few days will be critical”
“As best I can, Amaya, so these isolated visits will now end. If we need to talk, please come and see me in the woods as I don’t want to spend time away with the final preparations approaching”
“As you wish my lord” and she gave a small head nod
“Let’s hope all our plans come about as expected or it could be a long winter” and with, Adeben wasted no more time, he turned and left the cave heading down the hillside.

Adeben knew there were some tough decisions ahead over the coming days and he needed the familiarity of the woods and *Kin* around him he knew he could trust. As he made his way back he still contemplated what Amaya’s game was in all this, why was she so eager to help when she had not exactly been interested in the Hoard before now. In fact, she mostly lived in isolation here in the mountains or now and again could be seen down at the river speaking with the River Clan. He distrusted the old witch but needed her valuable intelligence on the Clan and foresight with the *Ka*.

It was dark as Adeben entered the woods and made his way to the old shed that nestled against the stone wall that ran from the river’s edge

up through the forest. As he approached, he saw Bomani was already waiting for him.

“I see you Lord Adeben, Protector of the Hoard and first amongst the Wood *Kin*” said Bomani

“I see you friend Bomani of the Marsh *Kin*, member of the Hoard Council” returned Adeben, then laughed and gave his companion a friendly slap on the shoulder with his huge paw.

They moved inside the shelter out of prying eyes and ears.

“How was your journey back to us Bomani?”

“More pleasant for seeing my Hoard *Kin*” he replied Adeben walked to the corner of the room and dug beneath an old flat piece of metal sheet, retrieving a large leg of rabbit tossing it to his friend.

“Eat up my friend, you must be hungry having travelled all this way at such speed. I did not expect to see you for a few hours yet”

“I knew this mission was important to you, even if I don’t understand why, so thought it best not to stop on the journey here in case you had any new instructions for me and my detail” he said between mouthfuls of rabbit

“Ah, your instincts are correct as always. I have just come from a meeting with Amaya and think it is time to step up the pace now on our plans” advised Adeben

“I don’t mean to talk out of turn and I do not trust that old witch my Lord. My senses and fur tell me there is something she is hiding and I don’t like it at

all” said Bomani through another mouthful of plump rabbit

“Let me worry about her my old friend, we have some decisions to make now for the coming days and the immediate future of your mission”

They settled down and Bomani gave Adeben a detailed account of the last week he had spent in the Clan Boroughs and of everything he had seen in relation to the family he had been sent to watch.

“I meet with the scouts later tonight and your assessment is that Lord Hamani is aware that something is amiss?” enquired Adeben

“Yes, I think so, from what I could see he has dispatched his own scouts towards the river crossings. I managed to keep ahead of them by not stopping. They are his close allies, ferals, not Softies like most of the Clan, so they know what they’re about and travel quickly and silently, they could be an issue if he sends them to gather support”

“Yes, your right. Things are moving faster now so I think it’s time to commit to the plan or not” thought Adeben out loud

“Can we wait another winter my Lord?”

“If we get this wrong, then the winter would be the last of our worries.”

Adeben sensed someone outside and moved towards the door. Waiting outside were the four scouts he had sent the previous night. Three of them were carrying scratch marks and blood on their fur, obviously they had been in some form of

altercation, this did not bode well at all, he thought as he ushered them into the room.

The next few minutes were taken up by the scouts reports from beyond the river

The four scouts took turns to update Adeben on what they had seen and done during their time across the river

“And finally, my Lord, we ran into Hamani’s patrols as we tried to find a crossing that was not being watched. Eventually we had to make a run for it over the old pipe bridge as it was only being watched by around six or seven of the Clan. As I said, we think Hamani is about to send messengers out to the Boroughs to gather what Clan members he can, this is leaving the river crossings exposed with minimal coverage.” He concluded

“Nassor, I again thank you and your cousins, for this very important piece of information. Now go and get something to eat and rest.”

“Bomani, can you go and find Moswen and tell him to send out word immediately, I will address the Hoard tomorrow. Now it begins” said Adeben in a solemn voice

Adeben caught Bomani before he left

“Once you have delivered the message, come back here one more time, please, I have your final instructions before you leave to return to the Boroughs”

Adeben sat silently reflecting on what he had heard today. First from Amaya, then Bomani and finally the Scouts. He wrestled with the next course of

action but remembered the last Cold Season and the large number of Hoard he had found starved to death when the snow had melted.

That had been the final straw in his decision. He did not have long to wait for Bomani to return and they sat in the corner again to give some privacy to their conversation.

Adeben gave his orders to Bomani, or rather the permission to break the First Covenant that had been delivered by the revered *First*. He gave instructions that any messengers he came across in the Boroughs were not to be allowed to deliver their message from Hamani. Finally, he gave the order to have the family taken out of the events that were to follow. As much as he did not trust the old witch, he would be foolish not to heed what she had told him. He now took time to feed and knew he must get a good night's sleep, he would address the assembled Hoard tomorrow and give the final orders to start the migration across the river to the Clan territory. As he started to drift off to sleep, thoughts still buzzed on all the finer details and of the inevitable confrontation that would happen between Hamani and himself.

Chapter 6

Moldosa woke early and for a few seconds the events from yesterday did not enter her head. Then like a thunderbolt it all came flooding back and sent shivers down her spine to the tip of her tail. She had gone down to mum and dad's bed late last night and upon jumping up, found she was last to join in as all the children were already there. It had been a disturbing day and they all had the same idea, nothing more comforting than a cuddle on mum and dad's warm safe bed.

Moldosa nudged Yodaka" Get everyone up and out to the back to get fed before we leave for the Great Barn"

With that, she jumped down off the bed and headed out back, Dad was already up and filling the dishes with food and milk.

Moldosa rubbed against dad's leg in a show of affection, as she knew judging by the big cases in the Hall that mom and dad were heading off for their time away. Moldosa could almost set the Seasons by when mom and dad went on their own trips and this was the one near the end of the Second Season and was the longest trip.

She ate what she could, to be honest she still felt a bit queasy from yesterday and headed out the window to take care of some basic needs. It was still dark outside, some light frost remained on the grass but there was no smell of rain in the air, so it looked like a perfect day for travelling.

One by one the siblings joined Mother in the lane and once all were assembled, they headed off towards the old house.

“How long will it take to get to the Great Barn” enquired Tigera

“We should be there before mid morning if we cut across one of the huge Wheat fields” replied her mother

“Is it wise to go that route given what has transpired” asked Jounka

“I don’t want to waste any more time getting to Lord Hamani and report what we have learned. At this moment we don’t know what is happening in the Boroughs and beyond, so it’s time to gamble on a short cut.” said Moldosa

They travelled in silence for the next hour or so. After passing the old house they cut up right, towards the road that ran West out of the village and followed at the side of it as it made its way across the Shared land. Shared land is where two Boroughs meet each other and there is a swath of land in between which any of the *Kin* can cross or use to travel on. This saves on any border disputes and gives each Borough common ground, literally.

Now another thing you should know about the *Kin* and travelling. Unlike the other animals you will find, like the Cani, dogs in the common tongue, who will often roam far from their home, sometimes in packs and can cover great distances in a relatively short time. The *Kin* will rarely travel

much further than a few hundred yards from their own backyards, preferring to stick with in their own Boroughs boundaries. Hence to most *Kin* the thought of travelling as far as the Great Barn was a terrifying prospect. The lands far to the West, where the Hoard lived, was to most of the Clan, a far off distant land that only existed in stories they told the youngsters at night. The suggestion that anyone could travel that far was preposterous! So understandably, Moldosa knew that her young would have doubts about this journey

Single file they travelled, as was the way with the *Kin*, each in their own daydream, thinking of the events that had transpired. Now and then they had to take small detours to avoid roaming dogs, this was not the day for Yodaka to get into any scraps with their canine rivals and in general the journey was passing without incident. Moldosa allowed herself a wry smile as she thought this was the quietest Jounka had been in weeks!

They had been following the Shared land of the 5th and 2nd Boroughs as it ran West. The road now turned North and their path lay more to the South West from here across the shared land that bordered the 4th and 9th Boroughs and the large wheat fields. The *Kin* mostly avoided the wheat fields if possible. They were vast and could easily accommodate at least four boroughs within their boundaries. There were several other reasons to avoid travelling through them, not least that you could easily get

lost. The Farmer had not cut the wheat yet, so it towered nearly three times the height of even the biggest *Kin*. This meant that you could not really see where you were going, no land marks to plot your course. Tales abounded of *Kin* who had entered the fields, never to be seen again and of course there are always stories of monsters and such that roam the fields looking for lost kittens and those silly enough to enter alone.

In reality, most of the stories were based on some form of fact, although very little. Yes, monsters roamed the fields, they were called badgers, foxes, dogs and rats. If you did not have your wits with you, yes you could easily get disoriented and lost in the middle of these fields, weakened by lack of water or food then you would be vulnerable to any animal that hunted here.

Moldosa was not concerned about getting lost, however she was apprehensive of what could be lying in wait. All the usual dangers aside, the fact that her family had been attacked in their own territory by *Kin* from so far away had been playing on her mind as they travelled this morning. For all she knew, they had been cut off from reaching the Barn and more of these ferals waited to ambush anyone who travelled this way, Moldosa called a halt at the edge of the field, where a small stream snaked its way along the edge of the field before turning East and heading towards their own Borough.

“Let’s rest here for a minute and get a drink”
commanded Moldosa

Moldosa looked over to her family and watched as they crouched down at the side of the stream and took in a drink of cool water. Although the hot months were beginning to wane and the wheat fields now stood at their tallest, it was a warm day and Moldosa had kept a fast pace up as they travelled, she did not want to be crossing the fields in the dark. She thought Tigera looked so small and fragile sitting next to her big brother, Jounka and she knew the potential that Tigera held in her abilities with the *Ka* and how important it might be for them all in the days and weeks ahead.

Tigera came over to her mother and lay at her feet.
“Mother, back at the house you showed me the *Ka* as a blanket”

“It’s one way of picturing it” said Moldosa

“Well, when we did that, I think something was hidden behind it”

“What do you mean?” enquired her mother

“I got a feeling that behind the blanket there was even more *Ka*, if that makes sense. Something bigger”

Moldosa looked at her daughter and made the decision that it was time to help Tigera realise her potential.

“You are very perceptive, my Daughter. Join with me now and I will show you something”

Tigera reached for the blanket, her mother had shown her back at the house and took a strand of *Ka* and reached out to her mother. Moldosa took the strand and followed it back to Tigera, their minds joining together.

“Now look at the blanket Tigera and focus on it. Fill your mind with it until it’s all you can see and sense. That’s it, you’re doing well, now go into the blanket and push against it hard. Now push through it as if it was a curtain, parting before you to reveal the biggest lake you can imagine”

Tigera followed her mother’s instructions pushing hard into the blanket until it split in front of her and revealed something she did not expect to see

“My dream place!” exclaimed Tigera “How did you know about this place mother?”

Now it was Moldosa’s turn to be surprised and slightly concerned

“What do you mean Tigera, your dream place?”

“Well, when I am sleeping and sometimes when I am just sitting dozing, I find myself in this meadow just over there next to the tree.”

Moldosa now looked at the scene before them. A large meadow field slopped down from where they stood. Filled with small flowers and knee high grass that was the most green grass you have ever seen.

At the bottom of the meadow sat the Lake.

Moldosa knew this lake, of course, as it was the Lake of *Ka*. The lake was a pale crystal blue colour and simmered in the hazy pale yellow light of the

never setting sun as it disappeared into the horizon.

This was where she came to draw her *Ka*.

“How did you find this place?” asked Moldosa, trying to hide her surprise

“Grandmere showed it to me” Tigera said, as if her mother should have known that

Moldosa broke the connection between them, her head spinning in confusion. She physically staggered back and the hairs on her back rising in alarm.

Moldosa’s sons immediately felt the change and jumped up, surrounding their mother, all poised in defensive mode looking furtively around them.

“Mother, do you sense danger?” whispered Jounka

“Is it the Farmers dogs or a pack of rats?” said Yodaka, looking all round them.

“No, sorry my sons, I thought I heard something behind us and I was mistaken” lied mother.

Tigera looked at her mother, with eyes starting to glaze. “Have I done something wrong mother” said Tigera in *Ka*

“No, my sweet daughter, we will talk more of this later”

Moldosa cleared her head and focused on the task at hand

Now Jounka spoke up, still looking around them with caution

“Do we really need to cross the fields. I think if we follow this edge for another hour or, so we come to the end of the fields and then the border where the

first Borough begins. We could then turn West and head towards the Great River”

Moldosa looked at Jounka and shook her head

“Before we move on, children gather to me now.”

We have not discussed what happened yesterday and perhaps we may do so later but for now there are things we must consider.”

“We were attacked in our own back yard by *Kin* of the Hoard. Some things were revealed with the sight of the *Ka* and we do not know what has been happening beyond our home. We saw messengers lying dead, what news did they carry? How far have the Hoard infiltrated the Boroughs? And how safe is it as we move closer to the Great River and ultimately the Hoard.”

Moldosa was slowly and deliberately, turning until she faced the field. As she did this, naturally her children kept their eyes on their mother, so now they now stood facing their mother with their backs to the field.

“Therefore, we must reach the Barn as quickly as possible and if the most dangerous place in the Boroughs are the Corn Fields, then oppositely it is the safest as well, no one will expect anyone to cut across it.”

“Mmm, kind of makes sense” admitted Yodaka

“But how are we going to get across it without getting lost?” he quizzed.

Moldosa stared straight ahead at her children, holding their gaze

“Look to your left, over my right shoulder, you will see an old bent oak tree Look carefully and behind it you will see it lines up perfectly with the large metal trees that carry the overhead wires. Now to your right the tower of the big building in town lines up with the stream cutting down the side of the far off hill and right behind me is a large boulder and if you look carefully, it is two different colours.”

“Now finally look all the way to your right. You will see a line of very old trees, trees that have stood for hundreds of seasons. There was once a large forest there before it was cleared to make way for fields. Now there is one thing that old trees want, not as much as the newer trees, like the Green Forest”

“Water” said Blacken.

“Yes, indeed son. The older trees would normally grow next to a water source, not always the case and in the main this is true. Those old trees to your far right are following the small stream that eventually passes the Refuge house and the back of our own garden” she finished

“Markers!” said Blacken excitedly

“Yes, markers that tell you that you are at the narrowest West part of the wheat fields and more importantly, can be seen from within the fields themselves. This is where we will cross and save time going around them. Spend some time now and imprint this spot into your memory for future reference.” She finished

She watched them carefully as they looked around them to the left and to the right, drinking in every detail they could about this one spot where the river turned from the edge of the field and snaked towards home.

“Now we leave, single file. Blacken take up the rear and everyone be silent now until we reach the other side of the field” she commanded

Moldosa turned and headed into the tall pale yellow wheat field, quickly followed by Tigera, Jounka and Yodaka. Blacken turned and gave one last look towards the direction of the Borough, this was the furthest any of them had travelled, except mother, when we will pass this way again he wondered, as he turned and followed the tall grey tail of Yodaka as it disappeared into the field

Chapter 7

They travelled silently in single file, never letting the tail of their sibling in front of them out of their sight. Every so often mother stopped dead in her tracks and turned to look behind her, getting her bearings. Only twice did his mother make any correction to their route, noticed Yodaka. He never really thought of her as the “take charge” type. Her demur had changed since the first attack at the house, more serious and direct with her instruction,

not in an “I am your mother” way, rather in an Elders way, with real authority. He did not want to even consider what was happening with her *Ka*. Mother’s abilities had suddenly increased like nothing he had ever heard about, except in tales of old. He gave an involuntary shudder right to the tip of his bent tail.

The journey from where they had set out at the edge of the field would have taken at least half of the day following the normal route, however cutting across the field had cut that down so much that the sun had hardly even moved across the sky when he could see the tops of the Green Forest, which marked the end on the fields.

Mother called for a stop.

“Rest now and listen” she commanded.

“I don’t know what lies ahead of us when we get to the Barn. Don’t even know if anyone will be there and if there is, who will be there.

However, there are some ground rules and instructions I need you all to follow just in case. No matter what, never leave each other alone. Stay together in twos at all times. Don’t speak unless I say you can...Jounka.”

“Yes... mother” sighed Jounka

“If I say run, you go no matter what and come back this way as few will risk the crossing.

No fighting, unless I say so, of course”

Privately, via *Ka*, Moldosa spoke to Yodaka

“Yodaka, look after your sister. I have a feeling that her part in this is not yet done, not by a long way and I fear for her.”

“Have you seen something mother? Is she in danger?” he enquired.

“I don’t see anything, that’s why I am worried.”

“Ok, I’ll keep an eye on her” assured Yodaka

They carried on for a short distance and found themselves at the edge of the fields, with the trees now standing tall before them like a wall. Yodaka looked to his right and the forest could be seen to bend away from the wheat field and appeared to be thinning out as it climbed North. To his left the forest ran up a slope and over a rise and seemed to go on forever, disappearing into the distance. They now turned left and followed the forest edge towards the rise. Mother again stopped and seemed to take her bearings.

“Not long now until we come to the Barn, stay close as we cut through the forest” was all Mother said.

They turned right and cut into the forest and suddenly the light disappeared and it was as if the night was nearly here, except the light had a dark green hue and the trees seemed to close around them making the air very still and oppressive. They came to a large tree stump and Mother called a halt again. Mother now turned left and headed uphill, travelling a lot slower than they had travelled all morning. As they climbed up the hill, the trees were noticeably thinning and every so often a shard of light split the canopy of branches, forming a circle

of light on the forest floor. They reached the top of the rise and Mother turned right again, leading them along the ridge until they suddenly came to the other side of the forest.

“Remember what I said, be alert for danger and stay close” reminded mother.

They had come out of the forest just on the left South facing side of the top of the ridge, so they could not actually see over the top of it which looked to the North. Mother did not lead them to the top, rather they traversed the slope following the line of the ridge as it ran directly West. After only a few minutes Yodaka could see in the distance a small *Kin* figure sitting on top of the rise. The figure was sitting bolt upright and its focus was down the slope to the North, so they remained unseen by this figure. Mother now slowed to a crawl and motioned to them to go belly down. They all dropped onto their bellies and crawled slowly along the side of the slope towards the figure, stopping a short distance away just below the figure. Yodaka could now see the *Kin* a bit better. The tom was slightly smaller than him and was equally black and white with, a completely white tail. He also observed the *Kin* was, in his opinion, in need of a good bath as his hair showed signs of matting in several places.

“Everyone wait here” mother said in *Ka*

They watched as mother crawled slowly up the ridge until she was on the top. Now she rose back on to all fours and slowly walked towards the figure

which had still not moved a muscle, her eyes scanning every detail.

Suddenly mother stopped in her tracks and her children watched as Moldosa lay down on her belly. “I see you Moldosa of the 5th Borough, daughter of the First. Approach now as you are a sight I have been waiting to see these last few days” said the figure without turning.

The children now began to move slowly towards the figure.

“Jounka go head on. Blacken and I will flank him, me to the left in front of mother, Tigera wait here in case we need help. Only come if I call” said Yodaka in *Ka*

Yodaka tensed his muscles ready for a burst of speed to reach the figure before it could harm mother.

Then mother spoke and everything changed “Lord Hamani, member of the Council of Nine and leader of the Clan, I see you. Please forgive my actions in sneaking up on our great Lord” she said head bowed.

“Sneaking?” laughed the great lord

“I could hear you lot coming through the forest you were so loud, except the black one, now he has potential.”

Lord Hamani now swung his head round and stared at the children.

Chapter 8

Lord Adeben rose before the first light. He had a fitful night's sleep which was broken often by dreams he could not now remember, however he knew they were not good ones. He exited the old shed and walked along the edge of the wall that ran down to the river. Spread out amongst the grass and reeds he could make out the figures of the Hoard as they slept in the pre-dawn gloom. Now and again a head rose to watch his passage and a nod to acknowledge their Lord. He stood and looked at the large boulder that stood at the edge of the trees and contemplated what he would say.

A brief thought popped in to his mind that this might be the last time he will see that rock. He turned and made his way back to the shed to await the dawn and the rise of the Hoard.

The events of the previous night still weighed on his mind, however, it was now too late to change the course on which he had embarked and if the sacrifice of a few ensured the success of the Hoards endeavours then all would be worth it. As the Protector, it was his duty to ensure the survival of his *Kin*.

Yodaka now watched as his mother exchanged formalities with Lord Hamani and to be honest, he was not impressed with his Lord. Was he

not the leader of the Clan and fearsome Protector? He looked more like a Feral and an unkempt one at that. However, looks can be deceiving and Yodaka was not going to take any chances. He spoke to his siblings again in *Ka*

“The plan is unchanged, Mother intends to confess our sins about the fight at the old Refuge house to Lord Hamani. If he makes any move to pass judgment on Mother, I will protect her with my life.”

“We are with you brother” they replied in unison.

“I sense you are troubled little daughter” commented Lord Hamani to Moldosa.

“That I am, great Lord and I fear that you will not like what I am about to tell you.”

Moldosa stole a very quick glance at Yodaka who was now only feet away

“I love you all very much” she said to them privately, before moving closer to Hamani.

“May I connect to you great Lord to tell my tale?”

“Approach” commanded Hamani.

Moldosa took another step closer and drew on the power of the *Ka*, projecting it towards Hamani, something similar to what she had done when interrogating Bomani, only gentler. Even then, Hamani’s eyes widened for a second as he had not expected such raw power and if you had been watching very closely you might have seen him lean back slightly as the power washed over him.

Both their eyes closed and so began the transfer of the information.

Moldosa was telling the tale from the moment she awoke that morning. The confrontation in the house, what she had seen in Bomani's mind, the disposal of the bodies and their journey here. As is the way with the *Ka* Lord Hamani experienced everything almost as if he had been there, with the added emotions that Moldosa had experienced. Yodaka watched with every fibre of his being, tensed and ready, looking for the slightest sign of forward movement from his Lord. Now and again Hamani's eyebrow rose very slightly as if surprised but other than that neither Mother nor the great Lord moved a muscle.

Tigera also looked on with interest but, for some reason, not with the alarm she could sense from her brothers. Without really trying too hard, she could actually see the *Ka* connection between mother and the great Lord. She allowed herself to drift and found herself at the edge of the clear Lake, without thinking, she bent down and took a drink.

Everything around her suddenly changed. She was back on the ridge with her siblings and as she looked around everything seemed to have a shimmer. The grass swayed in the breeze and it looked like small particles of light flew off them. She looked towards the trees and saw veins of light running up the trunks and down into the roots which she could now see under the ground. The roots now spread out in all directions and connected with other

trees nearby, like a spider's web. Although this could potentially be very scary, Tigera felt strangely at one and calm with what she was seeing.

Now she turned her attention to mother and this time it was not just the connection she could see.

Now Tigera could actually see the transfer of story mother was telling, as if mother was telling it to her.

Suddenly everything stopped

"Tigera, what are you doing!" exclaimed mother in a separate *Ka* to Tigera.

"I just wanted to listen to what was being said mother."

"Daughter, I don't know how you are doing what you are and if Lord Hamani finds out he will not be pleased. You don't force your *Ka* on someone without invitation, now stop this at once"

Tigera knew her mother was in no mood to debate, however, the problem was that she did not know how she was doing it either. She just "saw" what was happening.

Somewhere in the back of her mind Tigera was still at the lakeside so she concentrated and left the Lake behind. All at once everything around her returned to normal and she could no longer see the light of the trees and more importantly the *Ka* story between her mother and Lord Hamani. However, even without the *Ka*, Tigera could feel the tension in the air.

Yodaka had been studying both mother and Lord Hamani's body and face language and knew that mother was close to finishing the story. Both he and

Jounka had been moving closer to their mother and now stood on either flank. Blacken had also moved closer and was now adjacent to Lord Hamani's head.

Mother blinked rapidly and the *Ka* connection was over.

"A disturbing story" said Lord Hamani, as he changed in the blink of an eye to his impressive Protector size.

Yodaka moved almost as quickly as Hamani had changed. In a blur of speed, he pushed mother back and he and Jounka now stood between Hamani and their mother.

"If there is a Reckoning to be had, then it shall be mine as it was my plan that we followed at the Refuge house to rid us of these Ferals!" shouted Yodaka.

"You will have to go through us all to get to mother" growled Jounka.

Lord Hamani's voice now boomed, a deafening roar in their heads.

"Do not dare to presume what I will or will....." he stopped mid-sentence as he suddenly found himself alone on the ridge.

Tigera had watched as Yodaka and Jounka had moved into position. She knew what they were about to do, however she sat frozen in terror. Lord Hamani would kill them all! She thought to herself. Yodaka moved and Tigera retreated to the comfort

of the Lake pacing up and down the shore line. What to do, what to do, she cried into herself. Lord Hamani's voice now boomed in her head and Tigera screamed to herself, "NO! You shall not hurt my family!" and she jumped into the Lake. Tigera didn't know what she was doing but had to do something. She immersed herself in the *Ka* and channelled a solid wall of *Ka*, aiming it between her family and Lord Hamani. The effect was to shield them from the eyes of the world, including Hamani's, so to anyone watching the family just suddenly disappeared. Yodaka and Jounka jumped back, as they were now behind the wall and they could see it and did not fully understand it. On the other side of the wall they could see Lord Hamani, who appeared blurry, frozen in the same way mother had done at the house but only different. "How have you done this mother?" asked Yodaka "Look at Tigera, I suspect it is she that has something to do with it" said Blacken as he walked over to his sister. Tigera now sat frozen to the spot head skyward, her eyes had rolled back into her head revealing the white second membrane that protected the *Kin*'s eyes. Moldosa looked round her and seen that in fact, rather than a wall, they seemed to be in a dome of *Ka*. Moldosa connected to Tigera and saw her sitting in the Lake

“Tigera what are you doing, stop it this instant!”

“Sorry Mother but I was afraid Lord Hamani was going to hurt us!”

Moldosa changed her tone and lowered her voice

“We must trust in the will of the Holy Mother. She has determined our path, what will be, will be”

“If you say so mother.”

Lord Hamani knew *Ka* work straight away. He could obviously sense it, being a Protector and although instantly angry, it quickly passed to curiosity. He gently pushed against the wall with his own male *Ka* and the wall did not even budge slightly. Impressive he now thought. If there was any doubt that Moldosa was a direct descendant of the *First* then this surely would convince anyone. A slight shift in the air was all that changed and Moldosa and her brood appeared before Lord Hamani.

“My Lord please forgive my daughter for her actions. She was a little afraid of the Great Lord” said Moldosa as she moved towards Hamani, placing herself between Tigera and the large Protector who stood in front of them.

Hamani looked as sternly as he could towards Tigera and said in private *Ka* to Moldosa

“So it was your daughter who did this impressive feat?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Has she displayed such talent before now?” enquired Hamani.

“No, I was unaware that she possessed such a grasp of the *Ka* power. I did not even know what she just did was even possible...” said Moldosa.

“The Goddess sends us gifts when we most need them” Lord Hamani mused, more to himself than to Moldosa..

Lord Hamani returned to his normal size and addressed the children.

“I would now speak to your mother alone, without any eavesdropping from young Tigera please. Now continue along the Rise and look upon the Great Barn for the first time.”

Yodaka, who had been standing, now actually sat down and looked at his mother, head slightly tilted to one side, obviously indicating he was not for moving.

“Yodaka, if Lord Hamani had really wanted to pass judgment on me or any of us, do you think you would have really been able to stop him?” she said in her quiet motherly voice.

“I will be fine, now please all go and see the Great Barn” she finished.

They all rose silently and began to head towards the top of the rise. Blacken then stopped and turned around and addressed Lord Hamani.

“Tell me Lord, why don’t you just remain in Protector Form all the time. That way no one would mess around with you?”

“Blacken!” chided Moldosa.

Lord Hamani gave a small laugh.

“It’s a good question young one. The truth is very simple. Humans don’t understand us anymore, not like Millennia ago and they are so scared of anything they don’t understand that they would hunt us down. In fact, I have heard of Protectors that, thinking they are safe from prying eyes in Forests or on Moorlands, have been spotted by Humans who will capture their image and call them “Beasts” or “Monsters.” The next thing you know there are groups roaming the countryside looking for these “Beasts” and of course they have never found onethank the Goddess.”

Yodaka now led his siblings along the side of the rise for a short distance before turning right and heading up onto the top of the rise. As he crested the top he stopped suddenly, mouth agape, and drank in the view now before him.

He and his siblings now looked down on the Great Barn. He had often tried to picture it from Mothers description, however he had not really imagined it would be so huge. How was it possible to build something so big, was his first thought and why did the Humans let the Clan use it? He drank in the sight, looking right to the Green Forest with its tall trees that stayed green all year round and their pointed tops reaching high to the sky. They say they are responsible for poking holes in the night sky, letting all the tiny specks of light in. Over to the left of the Barn now stood the Great hedge, running North, all the way down the left of the huge field the Barn sat in. From here he could just see the top

of the hedge which gave an indication of how thick it was. Yodaka could walk through the hedge with his sibling's nose to tail behind him and they would still all be inside the hedge. Even with the large forest and huge hedge on either side of the Barn, the brown Barn still held its own and looked even more impressive, as if framed by a border of Green. "Come on, what you waiting for!" Shouted Jounka as he pushed past Yodaka and ran down the slope towards the Barn.

Chapter 9

The Sun had already passed the midday zenith and was now racing towards the mountains to the West when Lord Adeben made his way to the large Speaking Rock. Adeben now transformed to his Protector size as he climbed onto the Rock. He looked out to the assembled mass in front of him. From the rock to the stone wall which ran parallel to the river. From his sleeping hut to the small hedge on the edge of the field to his right, a sea of *Kin* eyes looked up at him in anticipation. He had thought long and hard all day as to what he would say when addressing them, each time dismissing and starting again. Now as he stood here in front of them, he knew it had to come from the heart, be passionate and capture their hearts if he wanted them to follow him on his quest. He said a prayer to the Goddess, took a breath and gave the most important short speech of his life.

“My fellow *Kin* and Hoard. Too long have we looked across the River and watched as the Clan has grown fat and like a parasite, eat everything they come across. The bird migration has stopped, there are no fish on this side of the river and the river rat numbers dwindle to almost extinction. All the while our babies and youngsters go hungry as their mother’s milk runs dry with lack of food, I say no more will we put up with this”

He paused for effect.

“In this great struggle in which we are about to be engaged, I offer you my sincere thanks. It is not merely for today and for all time to come that we should perpetuate for our children’s children this great and free Land which we shall enjoy all our lives to come. I beg you to remember this, not merely for my sake and for yours”

“The Clan is worth fighting, to secure such an inestimable jewel as the Great Barn and the fertile and bountiful nine Boroughs.”

Lord Adeben paused again and slowly swung his huge head from side to side, stopping long enough to catch the eye of a few of the *Kin* before him. He had them now, he thought.

“We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have many many long days of struggle and some of us will suffer the ultimate sacrifice. You ask, what is our plan and goal? I can say, it is to wage war with all our might and with all the strength that the Goddess can give us. I will be

amongst you at this time, not for my own glory and being resolved, in the midst and heat of the battle, to live or die amongst you all, to lay down, for my Goddess, my *Kin* and for the Hoard, my blood and if need be, my life.”

The silence was deafening for about 3 heart beats. Then the Hoard rose to their feet almost on mass and started cheering and cat calling at the top of their voices. Lord Adeben had never heard such a noise in his long life. It was simply breath taking and he felt his chest burst with pride at the sound.

Lord Adeben stood motionless, careful not to break the spell of euphoria that had swept across the assembled *Kin*. The cheering went on and he decided to wait another ten heart beats before slowly again looking from side to side, surveying the mass before him, nodding acknowledgement to faces he knew in the crowd.

Just as the noise level was starting to drop he cried out

“Shall we go my brothers?”

“Yes!” cried back the mob

“When?” shouted Adeben

“Now!, now!, now!” replied the Hoard.

Lord Adeben now crouched down and sprung high into the air, out over the crowd in front of him. The mass parted before him as he landed and he now began loping towards the direction of the river, the Hoard falling in behind him as he ran.

In reality, the Hoard Invasion had already begun several hours earlier. Lord Adeben had dispatched Nassor to lead a group of some thirty River Clan and Marsh Clan to scout out the crossings they had identified earlier and, as Nassor had reported, to see if Lord Hamani sending messengers out to the Borough's had, in fact, depleted the Clan's ability to defend all the crossings. As reported, he was also aware that the crossings were being guarded by the Clan's Ferals and he wanted to avoid a prolonged fight against these fierce *Kin* as a first quick victory at one of the crossings would keep the momentum going throughout the Hoard, so meeting Ferals might not guarantee that quick victory.

He reached the wall and easily bounded over it in one jump, landing on the other side he was met by Farzan of the Hill Sept, Masumi and Neit both of the Wood *Kin*.

"All is ready my Lord" said Farzan.

"Good Farzan. I suggest you head off now as you have the furthest to travel. Any word from Nassor's advance party at the main crossing?" asked Adeben

"It's early yet, Lord, we expect to meet Nassor's messengers on the way to the Bridge" informed Neit.

"You all know the plan, so let's get to it" said Adeben quietly.

Although the River was only a short distance from the wall and you could see it clearly from where they stood, there was no were to cross the wide

river nearby. Farzan headed off North with around one hundred of the toughest *Kin* the Hoard had. Mostly made up of the Mountain Sept who were basically as feral as you could get. Adebén had picked these specially, as he knew they were tough, living along the foot of the mountains on the desolate plains where hardly any trees or bushes grew. They had a hard existence as food was scarce and hard to catch amongst the ground hugging shrubs that the constant winds from the mountains ensured never grew past the height of the underside of their bellies. Farzan would lead this group North past the Bridge crossing to a place they had scouted out a few days before. The summer had been long and dry. The river had dropped and revealed a crossing consisting of stepping stones that they could jump one to the other without even getting wet. He was banking on Hamani not knowing about this crossing.

Once across, Farzan would lead his band straight towards the first light of the morning which after several hours of travelling would bring them out at the furthest Northern point of the Great Hedge.

The main body of the Hoard set out heading North, following parallel to the River a short distance away to their right. They had been well briefed to keep low as possible to the ground, tails firmly down and above all, silence was key. They travelled slowly due to the size of the party and still made good progress. Soon they were close to the

large pipe that crossed the River and Adeben slowed to a stop.

“Neit” called Adeben quietly.

“Yes, my Lord” she replied moving up beside him

“Is your party ready to cross?” enquired Adeben

“Yes, my Lord, we already sent an advance party of six to scout out the other side of the pipe to see if there are any spies. They should be waiting just up ahead.”

“Take your brave *Kin* and lead the way and wait for me before you cross.”

Neit gave a series of short calls and around twenty of the Wood Clan *Kin* moved up the outside of the main column to the front and they set off at a run with Neit at the rear.

Adeben waited a few minutes and then motioned for the Hoard to continue their advance up the path towards where the pipe met this side of the River.

Soon the pipe came into view as they rounded a bend in the River and he could see Neit and about half a dozen *Kin* waiting for his arrival.

The Hoard again slowed to a stop as they approached the Pipe.

“Any signs of Hamani’s spies?” asked Adeben.

“Strangely, none my Lord. Yet only two days ago we spotted at least four River Sept ferals patrolling along the river bank. We did find prints in the soft mud heading away from the River and they look to be around a day old.” Informed Neit.

“Well there is only two possible reasons I can see, Hamani has called everyone back as he knows we

are coming, or they are lying in wait to ambush you” mused Adeben.

“The scouts I sent out a few hours ago have followed the tracks across two whole fields, so I would say they have returned to the Great Barn” Neit said with confidence.

“Good and don’t take any chances as once across the Pipe I will not be able to send any back up.”

“We will my Lord” nodded Neit.

“Look for my signal when you are in position in the forest. Strike fast and strike hard Neit. We will meet at the top of the ridge victorious in our endeavors.”

Neit gave a short respectful nod to her Lord and led her remaining party across the Pipe.

Lord Adeben now led the Hoard North towards the Bridge. He picked up the pace, not quite a run rather the loping pace the *Kin* used to travel, they now moved quickly towards their goal which they could see silhouetted and lit up by the mini sun’s the Humans had placed on poles across the Bridge and on their roads.

At the increased pace it did not take too long for the party to reach the slope that went from the river edge up to the road that crossed the bridge. Adeben again called a halt at the foot of the slope and called for two scouts to move up the slope. Within a few minutes they returned accompanied by Nassor, who had been sent earlier in the day to scout out the crossing.

“I see you my Lord.”

“I see you Nassor, what can you report?” inquired Adeben in a whisper.

“All quiet my Lord, we have not encountered any of Hamani’s spies. My scouts tell me they tracked about a dozen or so *Kin* for several hours, moving away from the bridge towards the Clan stronghold.”

“A similar tale at the Pipe crossing” mused Adeben “Are you completely satisfied that no Clan remain?” asked Adeben.

“My Lord, we have scouted almost two fields in all directions and have not seen any Clan” replied Nassor

Lord Adeben looked back down the Hoard line, now all eyes were fixed on him. This was it, he thought, the point of no return once they had crossed the Bridge.

“Nassor, lead the Hoard across and I will follow last” instructed Adeben

Nassor gave orders quickly and the word was passed down the line. The Hoard now moved in groups of ten up the slope and then in single file across the bridge. Nassor had placed two of his *Kin* at either end of the Bridge to watch for anything travelling on the road towards the Bridge and all was quiet.

The Hoard moved quickly and it wasn’t long before the last group was making its way up the slope with Lord Adeben behind them. Adeben reached the top and watched as the last group then formed a single line and ran at full pace across the bridge, hugging closely to the side wall.

He was about to make the crossing when something moved at the corner of his eye to his left, across the road in the bushes.

In a blur he turned and transformed into his protector form. In one bound he had crossed the road and crashed into the bush.

The *Kin* now trapped under his huge paw was gasping for breath.

“I was wondering if you would turn up Amaya” smiled Lord Adeben.

The witch concentrated and channelled the *Ka*, lifting Adeben’s paw off her chest with ease.

Adeben was surprised at the ease in which she did this but did not let it show on his face. He knew the female side of the *Ka* was far stronger than the male, however he was not aware that it could be channelled in this way.

Amaya got to her feet “I was waiting for you my Lord before revealing my presence, which in hindsight, was a mistake. I was not aware you were so jumpy or would have declared my presence earlier.”

“Cautious is how I would describe it, witch” hissed Adeben.

“Yes, my Lord. I take it everything is going to plan. Farzan passed here some time ago with his party heading to the Stones crossing and I assume Neit is across the Bridge without incident?”

“All goes as planned, except we had thought there would have been Hamani ferals patrolling the far

river bank and it looks like he has recalled then to the Barn” replied Adebén.

“It is of no concern. Their numbers will not add much to Hamani’s defenses” stated Amaya.

Adebén returned to his normal size and turned toward the road and bridge.

“Shall we?” he said holding back a branch of the bush and nodded to the far side of the Bridge.

The two of them now sprinted across the bridge, Adebén at the rear, and met up with the Hoard on the other side who had left the road, crossed an embankment, cut through some small trees and waited in a small clearing out of sight of anyone travelling on the road.

“Nassor” called Adebén.

“Here my Lord” replied Nassor as he weaved his way through the crowd towards Adebén and Amaya “You know the way ahead and our route?” asked Adebén.

“Yes, my Lord, we scouted out the route a full Moon ago and I have my scouts ready to take the lead” replied Nassor.

“Good, then let’s be off, I want to be there before it’s fully daylight, so we can be in position for Farzan and Neit’s arrival. Make sure the pace is good Nassor” commanded Adebén.

Nassor sprinted off through the crowd and started issuing his orders.

In no time the Hoard were filing out of the clearing in complete silence, four and five abreast and

heading towards where the sun would rise many hours from now.

Adeben and Amaya were last to leave the clearing but just as they were about to pass through the trees, Amaya stopped and turned to look back.

“What’s the matter?” asked Adeben.

“I thought I could sense a *Kin* that was not Hoard” she said as she looked around the clearing.

Adeben could feel her channelling and he stood very still and slowly let his eyes scan around the perimeter of the clearing.

“Where?” he whispered.

“Don’t know, it was just more of a feeling and I am not sensing anything now” she said under her breath.

The two of them stood for a minute longer listening to the night sounds but there was nothing to indicate any movement or presence within the vicinity. They turned and hurried to catch up with the tail of the Hoard.

As they left the clearing, high above them the moonlight caught a tiny pair of eyes.

Chapter 10

Natsu sat and looked up at the tree towering over her. It was by far the tallest tree she had attempted to climb, it would easily be almost twice the height of the great Barn. She walked around the

huge thick trunk trying to see different paths through the branches. The first part looked fairly straight forward. It was once she started to get higher up in the thinner branches that the challenge would lie. Not only did she have to climb nearly to the top, Natsu would have to make the ascent with a rat in her mouth for food as she could be up the tree for a few days.

Natsu had circled the tree at least five times now and had picked out her route to at least half way up the tree. The rest of the way she would need to use her instincts. She sat down at the foot of the tree where the large plump rat had been placed by one of her fellow Sept ferals before they had headed South with her twin brother Fugen.

Lord Hamani had picked Natsu and her twin brother Fugen for this important mission as there were two main criteria required. The ability to climb and to know the secret paths across the Marshes, which both her brother and she could fulfill. Their mother was the mighty feral warrior Lima, who, if Lord Hamani was not the protector, could easily be the leader of the Clan if she wanted to be and the nature of Ferals was more nomadic and the thought of being tied down to one place, The Barn, was scarier than a pack of marauding Cani. Natsu was also aware that her mother had went wandering with her close band of hunters nearly two moons ago and Lord Hamani had send runners to find her and still there was no sign. The Clan would sorely miss her mother and her band and there were rumors that it

was not chance that Lima decided to go wandering at this time of peril as all knew that Lima and Lord Hamani did not always see whisker to whisker. Natsu now bent and grabbed the rat in her mouth, just behind the back of the head and sprang up onto the first low hanging branch. The going was easy in the lower branches and she made progress quickly soon reaching about the mid-point of her climb. From here on in Natsu slowed her ascent as the branches were quickly becoming thinner and although she was of slim build, compared to other *Kin* her age, the branches now started to bend beneath her weight. Her problems were several in nature, not only did she have to climb the huge tree, she had a rat in her mouth which threw her weight distribution off, it increased her weight and branches she would have stepped on normally she could not. Finally she had to find a spot that gave her an uninterrupted view of her mission. Natsu had spotted two potential spots and now, once up in the higher branches, one of these looked to be the best. Gingerly she edged her way up to the spot where three small branches intersected creating a small platform she could lay down on. At the same time below this platform was several heavily leafed branches that would allow for concealment from anyone looking up. Natsu wedged the rat between two small branches, spread herself across the small platform and gazed Westward.

From her high vantage point she now had a good view of the river as it flowed from North to

South and more importantly, she had an uninterrupted view of the stone bridge that the Hoard would cross. The only downside was that the far bank of the river also had a large line of trees that followed the rivers course and she could not see past them, even at this great height. Below her was a clearing and the only natural place the Hoard could meet once they had crossed. From here she could observe their numbers, identify any leaders and, once they had moved off, return the quick way over the marshes to Lord Hamani.

Day had turned to night, back to day and finally to night again. It was now what the *Kin* called the “quiet time” when most of the *Kin*’s night prey had finished foraging and gone back to their holes etc so hunting was slim pickings. She sat in almost a semi trance and her thoughts drifted to her twin brother who she had left at the large Pipe crossing the day before with the same mission. Twins in the *Kin* is actually a very rare occurrence, even though a female can have litters of five or six, they are not twins or triplets etc. Natsu’s bond with her brother was even closer, even to the point that when they are next to each other their *Ka*’s will intertwine. When separated by a distance they seemed to still be connected somehow and if her brother stepped on a thorn then Natsu felt it in her paw. She could also nearly pin point where her brother was as she kind of “felt” his presence.

Natsu now reached out to her brother, like she had done already several times, as it was comforting to feel his presence.

Nothing.

Suddenly Natsu was wide awake and all her senses were going into overdrive. Natsu took a breath and calmed the feeling in the pit of her stomach. Within a second or two she had composed herself and now examined this event rationally. Often Natsu would not be able to “feel” her brother due to him moving from the area she was searching as their connection was based on them knowing roughly the area they were in. Rationally this meant that her brother had moved away from where he had been keeping watch which meant that the Hoard were on their way. Now she focused her attention to the far bank of the river, opening her eyes wide to take in as much light as possible, looking for any slight movement out of the normal. Every so often she had observed the advance party of hoard, which had arrived a few days ago, scamper periodically back and forth over the bridge. Now the activity had increased significantly and Natsu took this as a sign that the main body of the Hoard were due to arrive soon. She didn't have to wait much longer and soon, at the far reaches of her vision, far to the South, dark shadows could be seen moving slowly along the river bank towards the far side of the bridge.

Natsu sat very still reducing her breathing to a minimum and to the untrained eye you would

think she was actually asleep. This would help ensure her hiding place would not be discovered by eye or by *Ka*. This was actually harder than she thought it would be as Natsu could not react to what was transpiring before her. Lord Hamani had told her that the numbers of the Hoard that he thought would cross the bridge would be large, however Natsu did not expect the numbers she had sat and watched cross the bridge below her. Natsu had originally thought she would count the numbers crossing and that soon became impossible as *Kin* after *Kin* crossed in a steady stream to the clearing below which was now completely full. Finally, the last of the Hoard crossed the Bridge and Natsu knew that the figure at the back was Lord Adeben, even though he was not in his Protector form, just by the way he held himself and the behaviour of the *Kin* around him. Natsu watched as eventually the Hoard started moving off across the field until just Lord Adeben and an old female were left. Natsu began thinking about which route she would take to get back to the Barn and this was nearly her undoing. The old female and Adeben had just turned to leave the field when suddenly the old female's head snapped around and she looked around the clearing. Natsu froze and controlled her breathing, clearing her mind as she had done before. She now seen the unmistakable aura of someone who could channel *Ka* and Natsu had never seen an aura that was so intense, deep and bright, not even when Lord Hamani transformed. This was a

development she knew was especially important to tell Lord Hamani about. Natsu watched as the Hoard disappeared into the distance and she then waited around double the amount of time it had taken them to cross the huge field before slowly making her way down the tree, which as everyone knows is far, far more difficult than climbing up. Soon she was back on solid ground, she gave one more look in the direction the Hoard had taken before turning North and weaving through the trees. Natsu followed the wall that bordered the field on her right until it came to an end and turned right heading in the general direction of the Barn. Now on the North side of the wall lay the huge expanse of marsh, bog, ditches and streamlets. This was the most dangerous part of all the lands that bordered the Borough's and all the *Kin* avoided it at all costs. Tales abounded of Clan members who had wandered into the marshlands never to be seen again. No one dared cross them, no one except Natsu of course. She had learned the secret pathways through the marshlands from her mother, Lima, as soon as she was able to walk and this was also one of the reasons Lord Hamani had chosen her for this mission. Navigating across this landscape would allow Natsu to be at the Barn almost twice as quick as the route the Hoard would need to take, thus giving the Clan plenty of warning and time to prepare. Natsu sat on the wall and surveyed the landscape before her, she looked in every direction, picking out landmarks, noting every rise and hollow

of the marshes until she nodded to herself, said a quick prayer to the Holy Mother and sprinted into the Marshlands.

Chapter 11

Moldosa woke and looked round the Barn. It was still very early and the Barn was still with only the occasional movement of Clan members adjusting their sleeping positions. From where she lay she could just see out the Barn doors and thought she saw a shadow passing by. Moldosa stood and stretched her muscles and headed for the door, tip-toeing over *Kin* sprawled out on the floor. Moldosa exited the Barn and looked around to see who had passed the door, however she could not see anyone in the immediate vicinity and was just about to channel her *Ka* when she glanced up the hill. There sat Lord Hamani just visible in the dark. Hamani swung his head round and seeing Moldosa, headed back down the slope.

“Can’t sleep my Lord?” enquired Moldosa

“I have a feeling that none of us will be getting much sleep in the days to come” replied Hamani.”

“I see you were watching for any new arrivals from the Borough’s. Do you think they would really arrive this early in the morning?” asked Moldosa.

“I was not watching for new arrivals, rather I was waiting for some news” said Hamani.

“The twins” said a voice through a yawn.

Moldosa and Hamani spun round to face Tigera who had obviously came up behind them without being noticed and now sat yawning with eyes half closed..

“What did you say” asked Hamani.

Tigera gave another yawn.

“Answer your Lord and do it quickly daughter” said Moldosa with a hint of annoyance in her voice

“Yes mother. Lord Hamani is waiting for the return of the twins” Tigera said.

“What do you know of this?” said Hamani.

“Don’t worry Lord” and at that, Tigera suddenly opened her eyes very wide and her head tilted to one side

“The brother will be here soon and his sister is”

Tigera paused for a second “cutting across the marsh lands, very impressive” she observed.

“They will both be here before it gets light” she finished

With that Tigera stood, turned and wandered back in to the Barn without another word.

Moldosa swung her head back round and Lord Hamani was staring intensely at her.

“I think it’s time we had that overdue conversation about your brood, don’t you?” said Hamani.

Moldosa looked at the ground for a few more moments then raised her head.

“If I may?”

Hamani gave a curt nod and Moldosa connected with the *Ka*.

As the story is transmitted with the *Ka* its more around senses, feelings and impressions and sometimes it's difficult to put these into a narrative as the person telling and the person receiving put their own view on what is being relayed...

Moldosa took a moment to gather her thoughts and began.

“It was less than a moon from when I had last visited the Barn several seasons ago. The days were getting shorter and the nights slightly colder. I was sitting on top of our house's roof looking at the night sky when I heard dad's whistle to come in. I stood and stretched and as I turned I heard a whisper on the wind.

” keep them safe.”

I spun round, crouching, looking all around me ready for anything. I stayed frozen, lowering my breathing, listening out for where it had come from and alert to any intruders and nothing was there. I even reached out with the *Ka* to see if I could sense another *Kin*, however there was nothing anywhere. In fact, that's an understatement, I felt nothing and sensed nothing which was a bit disconcerting as if my *Ka* had been cut off.

Dad was now whistling constantly and I knew he gets worried when I don't come running so I put it aside and made my way off the roof and down to the door where dad was waiting with open arms. I was strangely not hungry and decided to go to bed.”

“That night I had the dream, as I call it. I was walking in a huge meadow with tall grass and flowers all around me. The air was full of life with birds swooping and spinning, bees buzzing and butterflies everywhere. I then looked down the hill and saw the lake at the bottom of the meadow and knew instantly what it was. I also knew where I was and strangely not afraid. Then I saw a small white kitten sitting at the lakes edge and I was drawn towards it.

“Are you alright little one?” I asked

Her small head turned toward me and looked up with the largest blue eyes I had ever seen.

“Yes mother, I am now you are here” she said

“I am not your mother little one. Have you lost her? Was she here?” I said looking around.

“Are you not the *First*?” she said tilting her head.

I gave a little laugh and said “No little one, I am not the First. Why did you think this?”

“She said I would meet the *First* and the mother and all would be right. She said I was not to be scared of the big field or lake.”

“Who said this to you?” I asked.

“I can’t remember” the little kitten said and tears began to fill her eyes.

I took her into my chest and kissed the top of her head. Instantly she stopped crying and looked up with a big smile on her face.

“You are the *first* she said! Thank you, thank you” and with that she slipped from my arms and started running up the hill.

“All is well! All is well” she shouted over her shoulder as she ran.

I watched her as she reached the top of the slope and disappeared over the top, only to be replaced with the largest Protector *Kin* I had ever seen. The huge *Kin* began walking down the hill, or rather looked like it was floating as it was so nimble of foot, long hair flowing in the breeze, then the eyes suddenly locked onto me and held me memorised until everything else faded away and the only thing I could see was the huge beautiful face, smiling at me.”

“You are my daughter” a voice said.

“Who are you?” I said.

“I am Grandmere” said the voice in my head.

“You are blessed from the *First* and now you must fulfil what is required” she stated.

“Yes” I said in a trance like state “What is required?” I asked.

“Dark days ahead. Keep them safe” was the reply.

“Who?” she enquired.

“Keep them safe Moldosa, daughter of the *first*, mother of the rest” Grandmere repeated.

I don’t understand” I cried.

“They are coming, keep them safe until required”

“Who?” I cried again, so confused.

“My blessing is with you now” she said and then the huge face leaned down and gently kissed my forehead. Suddenly all frustration and confusion left me and I was again in the meadow watching the

butterflies. Four very young kittens played, chasing each other and the butterflies.

Laughing, they cried out “Look at us mother!”

“I see you, my Gift’s!” I shouted and joined in the game until it started to fade into blackness.

Then out of the blackness came the huge burning yellow eyes

“Keep them safe” echoed in my mind

“I woke with a start the next morning looking all round me. The dream still fresh in my mind which was a bit disorientating causing me to feel dizzy and it did not help that those eyes still felt like they were burning into my mind. It also felt like I had not eaten or drunk in days. I rose and went straight to the kitchen where mum had already put out some food. I ate it in a few seconds and the feeling of hunger did not recede. I looked up at mum and she went and got me a second helping. I made my way outside and as I did so my stomach cramped, sending spasms up and down my body, causing me to bring up all the food I had consumed. That’s when I felt it That’s when I felt the impossible. I used all my senses and checked myself.

I was now confused and frightened.

Every so often I would think I was catching a voice on the wind, or was it in my mind I could never really know. Just that same phrase “keep them safe.”

I stayed on the grounds around our house and the Refuge house whilst my belly grew fat. How could I come here and explain, how I was in this condition with no Toms near me. Who would believe me? At worst they would call me deranged, mad or worse, so I stayed away

Two moons later I gave birth.

That first night, as they suckled on me, I fell into another deep sleep and found myself in the great meadow again. Surrounded by a multitude of youngsters playing and chasing. Beside me sat my brood watching on as if approving. Looking up the meadow I saw the great Protector, Grandmere, sitting at the brow of the hill watching the proceedings. She gave me a nod and said, “revered mother” and then all the youngsters playing in the meadow turned and smiled all calling out “revered mother!”

I looked back up the hill and there sat four huge protectors. They looked so familiar and I turned to ask the children and they had gone. Looking back up the hill the four huge heads turned towards me, bowed and said, as one, “Mother.”

I awoke the next morning and have not had any such dreams since or seen anything like it when I visit the meadow and lake in my mind when accessing the *Ka*” Moldosa said with a finality.

Moldosa broke the *Ka* connection and looked at Lord Hamani as he sat staring at the ground.

“Please say something” Moldosa said in a whisper. Hamani sat for a few moments before swinging his huge head up and staring straight into Moldosa’s eyes.

“There is a lot to take in, daughter” Hamani said slowly.

“I am annoyed that you did not come to me in the first place.”

Hamani fell silent again and Moldosa sat next to him waiting...

Tigera broke the silence as she came back around the corner in a haste.

“They are coming” she said.

“The twins?” asked Moldosa.

“No, the Hoard are coming” she said, then stared off into the distance, closed her eyes and threw her head back.

She could see the unmistakable “light” from someone using the *Ka* far to the South. It was very strong and Tigera thought she could see, or more sense, a very dim shadow round that light. She started to weave one strand at a time and within the blink of an eye had a huge translucent “blanket” which she now cast around her.

“They are all coming, all of them. I can’t count them, so many, they just keep coming, too many” she broke off and shook her head.

Slowly she turned to her mother and Hamani and looked back and forward, hesitating, she finally faced her mother.

“What is wrong daughter?” Moldosa said, as her daughter was obviously upset and not herself.

Tigera now stood very still, her eyes wide. She looked deep into her mother’s eyes.

“We have a very simple decision to make” said

Tigera

“Run.”

“Or stay and die” she stated.

Moldosa stared at her daughter for a few seconds and then gave her a small nod.

“I will alert the Clan, have them break their sleep and assemble at the great doors”

With that she turned and headed back towards the Barn with a steady purposeful stride. She knew as her daughter’s powers were growing this could bring her the sight. So was she warning her or had she had a vision.

“Or stay and die” still rang in her head and Moldosa knew Tigera was talking directly to her.

The hair on the back of her neck involuntarily stood up.

Chapter 12

Lord Adeben called a halt to the Hoard’s march. They had been travelling all night and progress had been slower than he had hoped for. Their route had taken them South of the Barn and the Great Hedge and now they stopped only a field

away from the large corn field that sloped up to the ridge that guarded the Barn entrance. He had hoped that they would advance on the Barn in the dark. Their numbers were far more than the Clan, probably six Hoard for every one Clan and the Hoard was weary, tired and hungry compared to the well fed Clan. However, with still overwhelming numbers, his plan had not changed and remained fairly simple with the vast majority of the Hoard involved in a straight head on run up the field which will probably send most of the Clan running when they see their numbers. The only consideration he had given to Amaya was to send some extra Hoard to join the small group Neit commanded heading through the trees, that lined the field on the right, ensuring that no Clan could surprise their right flank or get in behind them.

He now watched as Amaya made her way through the Hoard toward him. Outwardly she was using a glamour spell with the *Ka* to project a youthful appearance. To him he could see the old witch walking slowly toward him.

“Well met, my Lord” she said as she sat down beside him

“How are you holding up Amaya?” he replied.

“Don’t you worry about me” she retorted.

“life in these old legs yet” she chuckled.

“But we have a more pressing problem” she said, lowering her voice and looking around.

“Let’s move away slightly” she continued.

Once they were out of listening range she sat down and raised her head to the sky, eyes closed. Adebén could sense the *Ka* being channelled by Amaya, as if the air around them was crackling with energy and he involuntarily moved back slightly. He had a deep respect for the female *Ka* and, if told, was just a little nervous around any female channelling.

“Whats up Amaya?” breaking the silence.

“I told you to take out that family” she whispered.

“We are being watched, or more monitored, by someone at the Barn. I am picking up three *Ka* signatures. One is male and will be Lord Hamani but the other two are female signatures. One is obviously the mother, Moldosa, as I can pick up her unique scent off one who has met with the Holy Mother.”

Amaya paused and tilted her head to the side

“Very Curious” she said “I am being blocked.”

Now Adebén took notice

“Is that possible?” he said

“Nothing is impossible with the *Ka*, however, I have never had it done or known it to be done. The power is raw, large and seems untrained. I am assuming it’s the daughter,”

“So, what is the problem?” enquired Adebén,

“I have told you before, the presence of this family alters and distorts what I can see of the future.

Don’t you ever listen!” she chided.

“Tell me this witch. Will it prevent me ripping out their throats?” he said through gritted teeth.

“No and” started Amaya.

“But nothing!” he cut her off.

“Get me a runner!” he bellowed to no one in particular.

“Yes, my Lord” said a bowing and shaking youngster.

“Get me Nassor” he barked. Amaya had put him in a mood.

Lord Hamani sat on top of the Barn roof looking North down the field behind the Barn.

“I see you Yodaka” he said.

Yodaka walked over and sat beside his Lord and also looked down the field. They both sat in silence for a few moments.

“You’re looking to see if the rest of the Clan will come” Yodaka said as a statement.

Hamani said nothing still staring ahead.

“They are not coming my Lord.”

Still nothing.

“Tigera says the Hoard have arrived in the South field”

Now the old head slowly swung toward him.

“We need to make preparations quickly, my Lord” Yodaka pressed.

Hamani gave himself a little shake, as if waking from a dream or nightmare, and again stared at Yodaka. As if seeing Yodaka for the first time he realised that before him sat a young *Kin* and it seemed to him, with an old soul.

“My Lord?” he looked at Hamani quizzically.

“Your right Yodaka. For whatever reason the rest of the Clan are not coming. I had held out a little hope that they would come at first light and that is not happening.”

“They have become too lazy and content over the years, not hunting, foraging or patrolling their Boroughs, my Lord.”

“Possibly” said Hamani.

He sat for a second, then looked Yodaka in the eye.

“We have to save the kittens, youngsters and those unable to fight call your siblings, we have a plan to form and time is against us”

“And your mother” he added.

Nassor sprinted up to Lord Adebén.

“You summoned me my Lord”

“Ah, Nassor my loyal friend. I have an assignment for you. Take ten of the Marsh Clan and move up through the Green Forest that runs up the right hand side of this field. Neit will already be waiting there with the Wood Clan. Take charge of his band and watch for the Hoard moving up the field and when we are nearly at the top, then attack from the side. This should distract them and split their numbers. This will be over very quickly and we can then all finally enjoy the bounty of this land the Clan have enjoyed for themselves for far too long” he said with a wry smile.

“It will be my honor and privilege to be the vanguard of our glorious attack!” said Nassor, bowing deeply before his Lord.

He stood up and sprinted off to gather his troops. Adeben allowed himself a little smile, the first in a long time. At last this was nearly over and his *Kin* could finally rest in this new land.

Lord Hamani, Moldosa, Yodaka, Jounka, Tigera and Blacken sat on top of the ridge that separated the Barn and the South field

“Everyone understands the plan?” Lord Hamani asked.

“Yes, my Lord” they replied as one.

“This is now not a battle for the Great Barn. This is a battle for the survival of the Clan. May the blessing of the Goddess be with us all in our endeavors.

Be quick, be decisive” He looked at each of them, as if for the last time and nodded his head as the sign for them to go.

Chapter 13

Lord Adeben had watched Nassor disappear into the trees with his charges and had waited what he thought would be long enough for them to make their way up the hill, so to be ahead of the main mass.

He called for Amaya to be by his side.

He channelled his *Ka* and linked to Amaya to amplify it.

“My fellow Hoard!” he projected into all their minds.

“We have endured seasons of hardship, cold, starvation and attacks from the Cani. Now our goal is at hand. At the top of this field, over that ridge, stands the Clan’s Great Barn. Inside it is laden with food and comfortable sleeping spaces and all that is standing in our way are a handful of Lord Hamani’s Clan. Come with me now, up the field and take what is owed to us!” finished Adeben

There was a small silence and stillness, then the air erupted with calls and whoops.

Adeben now turned and purposely strode up the field with the Hoard stretched across the field at his back.

He had not gone far when he seen a Fog rolling over the top of the rise. The Fog began to grow, becoming thicker and thicker and moved quickly to cover the top half of the field.

“Amaya!” he called.

The old witch appeared at his side again quickly.

“Whats this?” he asked her.

“There should be no Fog at this time”

Amaya concentrated.

“Your right, it’s not natural. Someone is using the *Ka* to conjure this Fog.”

She closed her eyes and summoned the *Ka* and projected it in front of her. A small part of the wall of Fog immediately in front of her dispersed, about

the width of ten *Kin* and all the way to the top of the ridge. Adebén immediately started strolling up the gap, then looking up he saw a wall of Clan, shoulder to shoulder, atop the ridge. He stopped in his tracks and swung his head sharply to Amaya. “That’s more than a handful of Clan!” he shouted. “They have deceived us, hiding their numbers with the *Ka*. Probably the work of that Moldosa” she replied.

He looked round and saw the indecision in the faces of his Hoard. Some were actually backing away and a few had now turned around. They had been told that the Clan only had a small number of fighters and they were a bunch of Softies. What had appeared briefly before them through the gap in the Fog was not what they expected.

Adebén channelled to Amaya.

“This is why I brought you along. Do something now to fix this or you will not leave this field...” he said threateningly.

“My Lord, the Fog is a conjuring and I suspect what we saw on the ridge might also be one. I can only concentrate on one at a time. If I remove the Fog and it reveals a wall of the Clan at the top of the ridge, I don’t think that would be very useful to the Hoard behind us, given the reaction so far.”

“If we leave the Fog in place then that helps the small numbers of the Clan” said Adebén.

Lord Adebén Channelled the *Ka*, knowing that long exposure for males was not advisable and he would need to use it during the battle ahead. He now

needed the few extra seconds to consider the options. Turning around he looked at the now unmoving Hoard, almost frozen in his *Ka* bubble. Yes, they had superior numbers and the outcome of this was inevitable. However, as large as their numbers were they now looked thin and tired from their march and moral was extremely low.

Regardless of their numbers, if they looked up to the ridge and seen a full strength Clan, or in fact a larger number than had been told to them, then that could cause its own problems. The Hoard had already lost a good number of *Kin* deciding to head off on their own and if the easy victory he had promised looked not a forgone conclusion then he could end up with more desertions.

Fighting in the Fog also gives the Clan an advantage. With their small numbers they might be more mobile and could cause confusion in the ranks of the Hoard. Communication and coordinating their strike could also be limited as using the *Ka* to connect to so many, distracted by fighting, would be almost impossible.

He, grudgingly, had to hand it to Lord Hamani. He had not even considered this tactic and Hamani was using his Witch resource well. Amaya was right He had completely underestimated the Witch and her children and not again. He ended the *Ka* bubble.

“Amaya.”

“Yes, my lord, what are your instructions?”

“Break the Glamour that’s projecting all these fake Clan members, we can deal with the Fog later if we must.”

“Also, can you connect me to the Hoard” not a question, more a command

Amaya did as she was commanded.

“My Hoard hear me now!” Adeben began
“We are but moments away from our great victory and the spoils this land has to offer. However, before you is a Fog conjured by the Witches of the Clan but fear not, as this Fog cannot harm you and it will soon disperse once these Witches come up against the mighty Amaya!” at which point he grabbed Amaya’s paw and raised it aloft to a rapturous response.

“The Clan and their Witches may have more tricks in their whiskers, so stay alert to false visions. The Witches are named Moldosa and her daughter Tigera. Whomever brings these Witches down will have a seat at the Hoard Council table and eat until their bellies are full!” Once again this was met with a huge cry from the Hoard.

“Now onward and up the hill!” Adeben cried.

Chapter 14

The Hoard had advanced far quicker than any of them had expected, thought Yodaka. Their plan had relied on the Hoard having a rest once they

had reached the bottom of the Southern field and this had not really transpired. Lord Hamani had also held out hope that the rest of the Clan would turn up before first light today and again that had not happened. Yodaka had estimated that a full Clan presence would almost have matched the Hoard in numbers and now with only about two Borough's worth of Youngsters and Adults to defend the Barn, a straight up fight was not an option.

It had only been a few moments since they had all stood on top of the rise watching the Hoard arrive at the bottom of the field. The others had left to carry out Lord Hamani's instructions and Yodaka stood and watched the Hoard.

He had watched them all arrive and settle, watched as they posted outlying scouts. It was hard to judge the numbers because of the long grass and he could easily see they were vastly outnumbered. He continued watching them for a while and expected they would move on the Barn when the sun was waning. He was about to turn away when he saw that the Hoard was very slowly moving up the field. He reached for the *Ka*.

"We have a problem" he said.

"Can you be a bit more specific" came the reply from Jounka.

"The Hoard are on the move" he said.

"Where are they going?" enquired Lord Hamani.

"Here" was the short answer.

"My brother is correct, the Hoard have started moving up the field" Tigera advised.

“We will come to you Yodaka” said Lord Hamani. Yodaka was now lying down on the top of the rise looking down the field, keeping out of sight. He was quickly joined by the others also crawling to the edge of the rise.

“This is unexpected” said Hamani.

“We need a new plan quickly, one that the Clan can follow easily without too much fuss and objection” mused Moldosa.

” Suggestions?” said Lord Hamani looking at Moldosa.

Moldosa looked at Yodaka but replied to Lord Hamani.

“Yodaka has always been our families strategist when dealing with incursions into our Boroughs, including the time of the mass Brown migration.”

“I think dealing with rats and the Hoard are two different things” said Yodaka

“What about the Vulpes that terrified the Boroughs last summer?” piped up Tigera.

“Not to mention the packs of Canis...” reminded Blacken.

“Try” was all Moldosa said.

Yodaka quickly looked around and every face was now turned in his direction. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Closing his eyes, he started to picture the scene around him. Not just in an ordinary way. A few seasons back he realised that by connecting very lightly to the *Ka* when he pictured what was around him, it was if he was looking down from four or five times the height of

the Great Barn. Now he applied this technique and could see what a great bird would see of the landscape around them.

Everything now slowed down as he moved around the area in his head, getting the full lay of the land and now seeing the obvious weak points and points that would be exceptionally hard to defend with their limited numbers.

This was impossible he thought.

In his head he took a deep breath. He needed to stay longer than was advisable in this state, which meant touching the *Ka* longer than normal and he often overheard Mother and Tigera describing the *Ka* like a clear crystal lake, however that was not the case for Toms. The Lake was pure *Ka* and only for females Males had to be content with small rivers that ran off the Lake. These Rivers were, by their nature, the Lake's way of getting rid of pollutants and impurities and therefore not pure clean *Ka*.

Already even after this short time he could feel and taste this in his mouth and seeping into his very essence. It was like drinking water with a slimy surface. He had heard the stories of Toms who thought to control the *Ka*, like females, drinking too much and going mad before dying a horrible death. He shook his head and concentrated again.

He remembered one of the many teachings he had been instructed on by his Mother.

“Here is the wisdom of the Holy Mother” Moldosa had said to them one night.

, “What is before us is easy to see and what is behind us can creep up and overwhelm us in the darkness of our minds.”

And therein lay the issue at hand. It was not the large force facing them in the South field and according to the report the twins, Natsu and Fugen, had brought back a large force had travelled North, on the far side of the river and would be coming at them from the North field or up the side of the Great Hedge. This would effectively cut off any chance of a retreat and put the kittens in huge danger

Lord Hamani was right. This was in fact a fight for survival of the Clan, not the Barn which is already surely lost to them this day.

Quickly he surmised that the obvious thing Adeben would do is send a force up through the Green Forest to attack them from the left flank. They had already accounted for that and it would be up to Blacken to hold that as long as possible to give them a chance.

Now he turned around in his mind and faced up the North field. He could see to the Barn’s left hand side the Great Hedge running down the field and disappearing into the distance. He gritted his teeth and moved further down the field. The taste in his mouth was making him feel very sick and he could feel the taint of the corrupted *Ka* in his body. Just a little longer he said to himself.

The Hedge not only ran the length of this field and also the next field too, which was even bigger. In

the distance he could just make out where it met the large wall. This marked the perimeter of the land of the farmer who had once used their Barn. The wall was as tall as the hedge and ran along the far field towards his right. Given that the Hoard had not settled in for a rest, Lord Adeben assumed the force he sent North would be able to attack at the same time. That ruled out the force having to travel North after crossing the river to get to the top of the Hedge and then turning right and following the Wall until finding a way through. The attack would come at the gap in the Hedge beside the Barn, he finally surmised.

He now felt extremely ill and weak. Too long and too much had he drunk the *Ka and* then as he came back up the North field, he spotted something he had overlooked. He could see a series of large furrows running from one side to the other of the field, about half way down.

He hoped the rumours he had heard about the Barn Chambers were correct, as he now formed a plan in his mind.

Yodaka disconnected from the *Ka* and fell to the ground retching and being sick. For the others around him it had only been a few heart beats since he had entered the *Ka* like trance.

“That was dangerous and stupid” said his Mother. Tigera ran over and kissed Yodaka on the head and helped him up

“It was very brave brother” she said giving the others a look...

“Thank you, little sister” he said looking down at her.

“Well do you have a plan or not?” demanded Jounka.

“I do, depending on the next answer from Lord Hamani” he replied.

“This will take a bit of time, time we don’t have, so little sister can you do the honors please?” Yodaka said quietly.

“Of course,” she replied.

Tigera connected to them all and then to the *Ka*. Blacken looked up and the birds had frozen in the sky and the trees had stopped moving in the wind. It sent a shiver down to his tail as he did not like being in this state.

“Now, Lord Hamani can you tell me about the small door on the back wall of the Council Chamber?” started Yodaka.

Chapter 15

Lord Adebén looked to his left and then to his right. Even he was not sure of the final count of Hoard as they had lost some on the way here through sickness and desertion. He estimated their line across the field stretched some ninety *Kin* wide and was at least five deep and in some places six or

seven. The line now stood some three or four bounds from the edge of the Fog and again he looked up to his right, toward the Green forest. He could see it too was enveloped in the Fog and more importantly Nassor and his Band, in the forest. He thought for a second, then reached for the *Ka* and called to Nassor.

“My Lord! thank the Goddess” Nassor exclaimed.

” Are you alright?” Adebena enquired.

“This Fog is not of nature and caught us by surprise. We were moving quickly through the trees when it came down, causing several minor injuries as *Kin* met tree head on and at pace” he said.

“The Clan Witches called it down. It covers the field before us leading up the rise. Unfortunately, Amaya had to disperse another Glamour they had called, so the Fog will need to wait until we reach the top of the rise. Stay on plan Nassor and I will see you soon at the Barn doors. May the Goddess be with you and us this day” and with that Adebena broke the connection.

As usual, Yodaka had been right twice so far, thought Tigera. The Fog had halted the Hoard, if only for a few moments, buying us some much needed time. But a stroke of genius, she admitted, was predicting that Adebena would contact the *Kin* making their way through the forest. As he had anticipated this, Tigera was waiting to see the connection and there it was! Just as he said. She was also conscious that only three *Kin* anywhere

nearby had this ability and one was with the Hoard. It was a calculated risk to do the same and unless you were looking for that connection then you would not see it.

She reached out

“Blacken” called Tigera in *Ka*.

“Yes” came the short reply.

“Yodaka was right, Adeben contacted the *Kin* in the forest and I have their exact location. We need to be quick, so I need to imprint on your mind” advised Tigera.

Blacken shuddered, he hated being intruded on with the *Ka*.

“Fine” again the short reply.

Tigera pressed on into Blacken’s mind and imprinted the location of Nassor and his company.

” They are much closer than I thought they would be,” mused Blacken.

“Thank you, sister,” he said.

“Your welcome” she said joyfully.

“Remember the sign” she said.

“I will” he replied.

As Tigera broke the connection she just caught his parting words.

“Take care my little one.”

Adeben broke the connection to Nassor. He nodded to Amaya and she connected to him to amplify his words.

“Brothers and sisters! This is it! This Fog is no more than a Glamour and cannot harm you. Move

with me, stay low and don't run ahead. Move as one up the rise and the Clan will run!" As he finished the Hoard let out a massive cry and he walked in front of the line and turned to face his *Kin*.

"One final incentive for you my *Kin*, whom ever brings me the head of"

He stopped short

A single disembodied voice drifted out of the Fog, somehow enhanced and with a slight echo to it, stopping Adeben mid flow.

It was not just a voice. It was a song of a *Kin*, or to be more precise, the song of the Clan and everyone stood motionless with chills running from their whiskers to their tails.

"Barring her fangs and Drawing her claws
Ready to strike a blow
Calmly she rules the field of the dead
And lets out a battle cry."

Now that single voice turned into what sounded like hundreds of the Clan joining in the choir. The air was electric.

"Call of the *Kin*! Cry of the Clan!
Screams as they beg and plead
Beaten our foes, fall to their knees
Silence will fill the air."

"Enough!" bellowed Adeben as he swung back towards the Fog.

“Forward” he cried and stepped into the Fog. Behind him, if you had looked closely, there was a slight hesitation of those at the front of the line as they followed their Lord into the Fog.

The lament filtered through the Fog and it sounded impressive and intimidating and Blacken knew Yodaka’s singing voice immediately. The rest of the Clan joined in the chorus.

The verse rang out and they all prepared themselves. The Chorus was the sign they waited for

Thanks to Tigera they knew where the Hoard were and their approximate numbers, which came as a relief as he had expected a force at least two or three times larger. It also appeared that they did not have any type of fighting formation, again another advantage. By contrast, Blacken and his brothers had been well schooled in battle formation by their mother whilst fending off incursions to their territory or Borough. This basically worked as a unit of three and he had divided up his small force into four groups of three. They had also got to the forest before the Hoard had been able to move up and they had taken positions in the lower branches of the thick trees, thus giving them an advantage of concealment and hopefully surprise.

Blacken had to admit that Yodaka was the thinker in the family, How he had come up with the new plan so fast was a marvel to him and all he had to know was what he had to do and what was

expected. Keep my part simple, he had said to him and it technically was.

“One, select any seventeen Clan members he wanted (except their own family or the Twins...)”

“You expect me to take on the Hoard with seventeen Clan!” exclaimed Blacken.”

“No, I don’t brother, now listen” he said quietly.

“Two, take them aside and use the *Ka* to explain the technique of the three pronged attack, as quickly as possible.”

“Three, head to the forest and set up an ambush

Four, wait for the signal which would be the chorus of the Clan Lament.”

“Five, use the cover of the Fog to disrupt the advance of the Hoard.”

“Fog?” Blacken had enquired.

Yodaka explained that Tigera would use the *Ka* to summon a Fog to cover the top of the field and forest, disguising their true numbers and strategy. Because of the size of the Glamour he was asking his sister to do, it could not just be limited to the Hoard seeing it, it would affect everyone, Hoard and Clan alike

As they were leaving to go to the forest, Yodaka gave him two final instructions. Delay them as long as possible and don’t get yourself killed.

A sobering thought.

He shook his head to clear all thoughts and now concentrated on what was just ahead of him on the ground. He could just now start to make out

shadows of the Hoard and they were spread out as much as Tigera had shown. Very foolish and inexperienced *Kin* he thought.

Just as the first Hoard was about to pass under his hiding place, up the tree, he very briefly connected to his fellow Clan *Kin*.

“May the Goddess be with us this day. Strike fast, like I have shown you. Stay safe and watch for my retreat. Let’s go” he stated.

With the element of surprise, six groups dropped silently from the trees landing on their targets back. Now the good thing about the Front and Side attack Strategy is that it can be adopted for either Prey or Hunters. With Prey, because their eyes are set to the side to watch for Hunters, they get confused when attacked from the front and both sides at the same time. Sometimes it has even been known for them to freeze, not knowing what to do. When repelling or fighting other Hunters their eyes are set forward and tend to concentrate on the direction they are looking. This leads to a vulnerability if being attacked from the front and both sides at the same time, as they don’t see the attack coming until the very last moment, if even that.

The Tree Drop was just a variation on a theme.

Almost simultaneously as Blacken landed square on the Hoards back, flattening him to the ground, from both sides two Clan fighters darted in and raked several times at the back leg tendons, just at the top of where the leg meets the body. Results are twofold. In this case, your enemy, is incapacitated

and unable to walk. The usual resulting motion is for them to throw their head back in pain to cry out. This is their undoing.

Almost like this was a training exercise, the plan worked perfectly. As the first Hoards legs were cut he threw back his head to cry out and Blacken, sitting on his back, reached over with one paw and, impaling his claws into his targets nose, he yanked the head back further. Almost in the same motion, his other paw raked across the traverse jugular vein, as he had done at the Old Refuge House. He did not wait to see the Hoard die as the threat from this one was now over and another shadow was coming through the Fog.

The next ground attack maneuver was similar in its essence. Blacken charged straight at the next Hoard and coming out of the Fog like that, it had given him the extra advantage of surprise. He crashed heavily into him and even as they both hit the ground, his companions were already attacking from both sides.

Disable, Dispatch, nothing complicated, keep it simple

He spared a glance to his left and right and could see success from his fellow Clan *Kin* on both sides. No time to pat each other on the back as this Fog may last only a few moments longer before the Hoard Witch breaks the spell. As soon as they are in the open and exposed, Blacken needs to make the decision of when to fall back to the Barn.

By the time they had grappled with the third Hoard, the element of surprise had mostly gone as the Fog thinned quickly. This one had put up a bit more of a struggle and Blacken was a little dismayed that the kill had not been as clean as the previous two. As he looked down on the *Kin* with its life force spilling from its cut throat, he said to himself

“This is not right, I did not like what we did at the Old House and now this. This is against the *Kin* code” and it did not sit well with him. In fact when he looked down, he felt sick to his stomach. In the same way when he touched or was connected to the *Ka*, there was something dirty or foul about that as well, something dark, not like the way it was for his Mother and sister.

He touched the *Ka* again for the briefest of moments and called to his fellow *Kin*
” Let’s be away now.”

He turned and sped off towards the Barn.

As Nassor was slipping from this life to the Great *Kin* Field of the Holy Mother, his last image was of a large black stern face looking down at him, with just a hint of pity in those yellow eyes.

Chapter 16

“The little door at the back of the Council chamber, how do you know about that?” asked Hamani.

“Some secrets are not really secrets” he replied.

“That door has not been used for over thirty seasons” Hamani said.

“From what I could see there seems to be a small door about half way down the North field on the side of one of the furrows that run across the field. Is that the exit?” enquired Yodaka.

“I believe so and as I said, the last time that was used I was still a Youngster.” Hamani replied.

“Ok, I think I have a Plan that will work and keep the future of the Clan secure” announced Yodaka.

Carefully he laid out the overall Plan for them, then went back over in detail what everyone’s role would be. As he was finishing, he looked up and saw the birds had already moved a bit across the sky. He glanced at Tigera as he finished.

“A few moments longer” she said, as she caught his glance.

Blacken was first to respond.

“How can I hold the forest with such a small number!”

“As I said Brother, you and most of our role here is to delay the Hoard, not beat them back. Now I suggest you go as I have said and prepare your fellow Clan as quickly as possible” he said making it clear the conversation was over.

He turned to Jounka.

“No heroics Brother. Do the job and fall back as directed. If I get reports of you charging headlong into their lines without support, then you will have Mother to deal with” he said with a laugh and a wink.

Jounka sat staring at the ground.

“Jounka are we clear?” said Yodaka a bit more forcefully

Jounka looked up.

“I don’t like us being split up. We work best as a team, in fact the best hunting team the Clan has seen. And, I don’t like Mother and Tigera being on their own” he finished.

“They will have the Twins as escorts until they safe guard the kittens. I know it’s not ideal and it’s the best I can come up with. unless you have something better?” he stated.

Jounka opened his mouth for a second, then closed it and shook his head.

“Now be away quickly Brother and may the Goddess be with you”

“With us all” replied Jounka and turned away.

Both Blacken and Jounka had left Tigera’s small circle and they both appeared frozen in time to the four left connected.

“You have moments, Brother, I can’t hold it any longer” stated Tigera.

Longer than he had hoped for, thought Yodaka. His sisters power is almost growing by the moment.

“Save your energy little one and release us” said Yodaka.

And with that, Tigera let out a sigh and the world around them filled with movement. On both sides he saw his brothers suddenly in full flight down the side of the rise, heading to the Barn.

“Mother, Tigera, you need to go quickly and set in motion the Plan and be back here as quickly as possible. Lord Hamani and I will get the remaining Clan into place along the Rise” said Yodaka

“The main element of my plan hinges on you two being back here before the Hoard reach the bottom of the rise.” He stated frankly.

Jounka had organised his chosen Clan fighters into groups of three. He had done his best to instruct them in their families way of fighting in threes, with the frontal attack and then the two sided attack and they seemed to catch on quickly to this new way of fighting. He had told them that the Goddess would send a Fog, via his sister, to assist them and confuse the Hoard and not to be afraid. He had told them about Yodaka singing the Clan lament and finally he had told them of their escape plan.

He did not mention how the kittens would escape as Yodaka had pointed out that if any got caught, the less they knew the better the chances of the Plan working.

The Fog had descended and they had taken up their places at the gap in the Great Hedge.

“Hold then for as long as you can, no heroics and then retreat to the side of the Barn. Blacken should

then join you at some point. Watch for him coming either at the front of the Barn or around the back, depending on where the most Hoard were. Head down the North field as close to the Hedge as you can, keeping the Hoard away from the middle of the field” Yodaka had instructed.

Yodaka’ s lament drifted into the Fog and suddenly his concentration was completely on the task at hand.

“Steady” he sent out in *Ka*.

They all dropped onto their bellies and peered through the Fog, as Tigera said it would be at its thinnest there. About four *Kin* lengths, on the other side of the gap, he could just make out the shadows of legs.

“There you are “Jounka said quietly.

He started to crawl very slowly forward, being as silent as Blacken would be, which was an effort given his size. Then the Chorus split the air.

Their first attack would be silent, no *Kin* screams to alert the Hoard, he rose quickly and so did the twenty nine other Clan members he had with him.

They moved as one and hit the first line of the Hoard hard with the element of surprise and an attack formation alien to their enemy, their first kills came easily and now the element of surprise was over.

These Hoard were of the Feral Mountain Sept led by Farzan and Fog, Laments and surprises did not faze them at all. Jounka soon realised that.

When Jounka had hit the first Hoard head on, at pace, he had easily knocked him to the ground and he swore on the Goddess that he heard bones breaking under him. Jounka was easily twice this *Kin*'s size and probably three times its weight. Unlike his brother Blacken, Jounka took a more pragmatic approach to all this fighting. Kill or be killed was a simple mantra and if it was the Goddess's will, then so be it. When he had bowled over that first *Kin* he had not landed on its back and rather was on its stomach with their faces a whisker apart. Instinct took over and he bit and ripped as hard as he could at the throat of this unlucky Hoard. Unfortunately, in the heartbeat it had taken to rip its throat out, this Hoard had let out a loud scream, hence the surprise was now over.

"Up and at them!" Jounka cried to his fellow Clan fighters.

He charged the next Hoard and these Mountain *Kin*, if not very big, were supple and agile. The Hoard had attempted to side step Jounka, resulting in Jounka only managing to just knock him off his balance. His companions attacked from each side and this *Kin* ducked and dodged longer than Jounka had wanted. He again charged him full frontal and this time managed to get a good grip of the now struggling *Kin* and not before receiving a raking from his forehead to his chin from extremely sharp claws. He could feel the blood running down his face and it was now blinding him in one eye. Regardless he threw himself and the *Kin* to the

ground and received another raking down his soft underbelly. Luckily it had not done too much damage. As they hit the ground, again his companions had attacked from either side, targeting the front legs this time as that seemed to be where the most danger lay.

Once Jounka had his prey pinned to the ground, the outcome was a foregone conclusion and he used the preferred method developed by Yodaka. He managed to get one paw round to the *Kin*'s face and yanked his head back. At almost the same time he raked hard, quickly and with precision at the jugular vein, ending the struggle immediately.

Suddenly he was hit from the side.

So engrossed in this fight he had not noticed that the Fog was clearing quickly. It was now only a mist and he and his fellow companions were now visible and exposed to the rest of the Hoard now descending quickly on the Gap.

He rolled with the *Kin* who had crashed into the side of him, sprang to his feet and delivered a crushing paw slap across its face, catching the Hoards nose and lip with his large claws. He glanced around quickly. The Clan was quickly being overrun by the sheer numbers of Hoard now descending on them. He looked to his right, down the Hedge wall and saw four Clan members trapped by about twenty of the Hoard. In front of the four lay two motionless Clan members he recognised and now backed up against the Hedge were two female Youngsters, not more than a season out of

kittenhood, with the two Youngsters in front of them. With peripheral vision he saw the Hoard that had just barged him and he threw out a back leg with enough force to send it sprawling to the ground.

“Not on my watch!” his cry echoed around the Hedge and he took off towards the Clan fighters encircled by the Hoard, with his brothers words echoing around his head “If I get reports of you charging headlong into their lines without support....”

Mentally, he shook his head and said, well you’re not here Brother.

Quickly he was up to full sprinting pace and his size and momentum bowled over three of the Hoard. He spun kicking and throwing out his paws, connecting every so often with something. He bumped into another Hoard and sank his fangs into the soft part on the back of the neck and tore away fur and skin. He came to a sudden halt facing about a dozen Mountain Sept members with his four Clan fighters behind him.

“Come on then, fight me!” he screamed at them. In *Ka* he told his Clan fighters “Get ready to run!” From the view point of the Hoard now facing Jounka, they saw this huge *Kin* who had just threw three Hoard out the way, knocked over a couple more and had just tore off a huge piece of another. They looked at his face which now had a huge cut running down the length of it and was covered in blood. To cap it off, when he screamed his mouth

was dripping with Hoard blood and fur. Collectively, they all took about three steps backwards.

“Now!” Jounka said to the four Clan and at the same time he made a lunge forward which caused some of the Hoard at the front to actually turn and run.

But the lunge was a feint. The four Clan took off to his left, behind him, heading for the gap in the Hedge and Jounka suddenly turned direction before getting anywhere near the Hoard and followed them.

It only took them a few moments to get to the gap and as he ran he called out to the twenty nine to fall back to meet them. As the Clan arrived back, he tried to form them into the attacking three's and suddenly he realised that, having grouped five units, there were no more Clan coming back. Half of the defenders had gone.

A couple of brave, or foolish, Hoard ran at them and even though the defenders were in a bit of shock at their low numbers, they stuck to the plan and another three Mountain Sept lay on the ground before them. Jounka looked to his right and seen a large group coming up the side of the Hedge, far too many to hold he thought.

“Brother!” he reached out in *Ka*.

Chapter 17

Yodaka watched his two brothers run down the slope, calling to Clan members even before they had got to the bottom. He turned back to Mother, Tigera and Lord Hamani.

“Timing will be everything here, if this plan is to stand any chance” he said, almost to himself, than to the others.

“What do you put our actual chance at?” asked Hamani

“Well, unfortunately, at best I think we will lose at least half of what Clan members are here, worse case a handful will escape. But I am very confident that we will get the kittens away.”

Yodaka peered over the rise to see the Hoard were still moving slowly and steadily, up the field.

He spoke to his Mother and sister.

“Remember, don’t fight the Hoard Witch too hard. You need to give yourselves time to get back to the Barn or everything we sacrifice and we do here today, will be for nothing.”

“We could have a small issue” said Moldosa quietly

“What?” said Yodaka.

“I watched Tigera practice forming the Fog. If the Witch decides to disrupt that, rather than the duplication Glamour, I don’t think I could take over from my Daughter” said Moldosa.

Moldosa looked at her daughter and said

“She has surpassed my skill.”

The statement hung in the air.

Yodaka turned to Lord Hamani.

“I will leave you to organise up here” and with that he turned and sped down towards the Barn calling out, “Natsu!, Fugen! to me!”

Moldosa and Tigera sat at the base of the rise, their backs to the Barn, facing up the slope. Moldosa’s Glamour was hard and fairly straight forward. Just as Lord Hamani signals the Clan to rise from their crouching positions on top of the rise, exposing themselves to the Hoard, Moldosa will project another three or four copies of every Clan member standing there. From the Hoards perspective they will see the rise filled from one end to the other with nearly two hundred Clan fighters. In reality of course, with Blacken in the forest and Jounka at the Hedge, Lord Hamani and Yodaka had less than sixty Clan members able to fight.

Yodaka ran up from behind them.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“I need a little time to get the process started and essentially, yes” replied Tigera. Moldosa just nodded affirmatively

Yodaka sped up the rise and spoke to Hamani for a moment and then headed towards the right side of the rise and joined two Clan members waiting for him.

Tigera took a metaphorical deep breath and connected to the *Ka*.

She was on the edge of the great lake of *Ka* surrounded by the meadow, and now she did

something she did not usually like to do. Tigera again strode out into the lake until it touched her belly and sat down. She also did not expect the *Ka* to be warm and then she did not know what to expect anymore. Now she focused and pushed everything out of her mind, the meadow dropped away, the sky became black and merged with the mirrored lake now surrounding her. Concentrating, she pulled one single whisker thin strand from the lake. In her head she did this with her right paw, pulling more and more and throwing it into the air in front of her. The strand was horizontal in front of her stretching up into the black sky. Now she did it again and placed it next to the first one and in one motion started the next one. Soon she was throwing three, four then dozens of strands up at a time. Within a few moments the air in front of her was filled with thousands of these whisker thin strands. As she was still pulling the last few with her right paw, slowly she had already started pulling strands with her left Paw. She now took these and starting at the bottom of the horizontal stack, she wove the first one slowly horizontally across the stack. In, out, in, out the strand wove across in front of her. As she perfected the process and grew in confidence she started to speed up. Quickly she now wove forty or fifty at a time. Higher and higher she went until she realised she was at the top of the stack and in front of her now stood a huge wall of weaved *Ka*, like a blanket. She was done.

Yodaka was now in position and looked down to his Mother and gave her a nod. Moldosa was now also filled with *Ka* and was ready to cast her Glamour. She looked at her daughter and watched for a few moments, her mouth dropping open slightly as she saw what her daughter was doing with the *Ka*. Very gently she reached out to Tigera and suddenly Tigera's eyes popped open. Even from half way along the rise, Yodaka could see Tigera's eyes shining bright yellow, staring up at the sky.

The Fog descended instantly
Lord Hamani looked at Yodaka and Yodaka nodded back to him. As the Clan rose to their feet, almost simultaneously Moldosa channelled and suddenly there was nearly two hundred Clan on top of the ridge.

Tigera counted two heart beats, as the Witch had punched a hole in the wall of Fog. This was just enough time for the Hoard at the bottom of the slope to see all the images of the Clan Moldosa was projecting. Then she filled the hole again. The Fog blanket now covered from the Great Hedge, both sides of the rise and all the way over to the Green Forest.

Within a few moments of casting her Glamour and a few heart beats after filling in the hole, she felt the Hoard Witch attacking her *Ka* connection. This was a huge relief as that meant the Hoard was doing exactly what Yodaka had predicted and planned for.

She could feel her connection being pulled apart and she was then reaching in and pulling more *Ka* to replace and patch what was being dismantled. She knew she was fighting a losing battle as this Witch was far more experienced than her. She tried to hold on just a bit longer and the effort was physically draining her of the energy she would need as the day wore on. Moldosa glanced over at Tigera and saw that she was now physically shaking with the huge amount of power that was coursing through her young body.

She said a small intercession.

“My Holy Mother and Goddess, please look after my daughter.”

With that she broke the *Ka* connection, turned quickly and headed for the Barn door, Natsu following at her heel. She stopped briefly to look back at her daughter who sat at the slopes edge. Fugen who had been sitting right behind her had moved a few steps back from where he had been sitting and was looking slowly from one end of the slope to the other, as if looking or waiting for something. Suddenly he jumped up and ran in front of Tigera now fully alert. Even at the Barn door the reason was evident to both Moldosa and Natsu as Yodaka’s loud voice sang out the Clan Lament. In a few moments the fate of the Clan would begin to unfold, thought Moldosa.

Moldosa ran into the Barn and expected to find complete chaos amongst the kittens, however

what she was met with stopped her in her tracks. The unexpected result of Yodaka singing the Lament was that all the kittens now sat staring at the doors mesmerised by the song that drifted on the wind.

“kittens” said Moldosa with little result. She then Channelled and enhanced her voice.

“kittens pay attention!” which had the desired effect and all heads and eyes now swung toward Moldosa.

“kittens, it is very important to listen to me and Natsu. We are all going on a journey together.”

“Is my mother coming too?” asked a little one at the front.

“All mothers and fathers will join us later and for now they want to see if you have learned to listen to what your elders tell you. So, this Journey has been ordered by Lord Hamani himself!” she exclaimed. Unfortunately this did not have the exact effect she wanted as a wave of excitement rippled round the Barn and kittens started running around jumping on each other.

“Settle down young ones” she tried with only a little success.

“Stop!” she boomed out across the Barn, which this time did have the desired effect and now all eye’s looked at her again. Now she had their attention they needed to move fast.

“Natsu has been chosen specifically by Lord Hamani to lead this expedition” she said.

Natsu had taken the diversion to move down the left hand side of the Barn and now stood at the back, in

front of the entrance to the back rooms and Council chamber.

“kittens” Natsu called.

Now all heads swung towards Natsu.

“You all want your mothers and fathers to be proud of you?” she asked.

Almost in unison, one hundred and sixty heads nodded in agreement.

“Now as part of this expedition we must all be completely silent and I will be telling Lord Hamani himself which kittens do this the best!

Now does everyone understand?” he asked.

Again, all the little heads nodded emphatically

“Now we have been given permission to enter the back rooms and the Council chamber itself!” This had the effect of getting some of the kittens a little excited and starting to jump and spin round.

Moldosa nipped it in the bud.

“kittens” she said in that motherly tone when the rest does not need to be said. They settled very quickly.

“Now let’s get started. I want to see if everyone can line up in two’s behind each other, the way the adult Clan members do when travelling” said Natsu.

There was a few moments when they all looked round at each other, then the ones closest to Natsu had got up and started to form a line, with a little direction from Natsu. This rippled down the hall and soon all the kittens were forming pairs and lining up behind each other.

Moldosa's ears pricked up and she spun quickly to face the Barn entrance

"We need to go now!" she said urgently in *Ka* to Natsu.

"Now kittens we need to move quickly. Lord Hamani and some of the adults will try to scare us by making lots of noise and screaming. This is to test how brave you all are!" Natsu said quickly, then disappeared through the door into the back rooms.

The kittens then moved quickly and orderly, much to the surprise of Moldosa. Just as the last two pairs were about to go through the door, with Moldosa behind them, they spun round. Calls and screams now filtered through the Barn door, loud and terrifying screams. Moldosa looked at them, gave a smile and a wink and they nodded their little heads, laughed and jumped through the door.

Moldosa stopped at the door entrance and again evoked the Goddess.

"Holy Mother, please look after my children and give them your strength when they most need it" And with that she too sped through the door.

High up, on top of the mountain, sat the Goddess. Before her stretched out the lake of *Ka* and in the distance the great meadow. She had been watching with curiosity what this young *Kin* was up to at the far end of the lake. Now she registered a second invocation by one of the *First's* offspring in a very short time. This was unusual. However, that would need to wait, as her attention was now drawn

to the Great Meadow and the sudden appearance of an unusual number of *Kin* that had arrived to be guided to the next life. In the back of her mind she recalled the invocation this Daughter of the *First* had said and found it a strange request. Something was happening and she needed to investigate. Quickly she descended the great mountain and bounded across the lake, leaving no mark or ripple because she was of the *Ka* and the *Ka* was her. She briefly stopped next to Tigera. Another Daughter of the *First*, she thought. That explains it. She now moved quickly to the Meadow. Let's see what's going on in the World with my children, she said to herself.

Chapter 18

The Goddess now sat in the middle of the meadow and looked around her. She had many names to different branches of the *Kin* and these names were called out to her as *Kin* ran round the field playing, chasing butterflies. Grandmare!, Bomma!, Mout!, Gottin! and many more. She refocused, there was a lot more *Ka* being channelled than was normal and she easily picked out the signature of one she recognised. Ah, she said to

herself, I see you Moldosa. Moldosa, she mused, that little thread of fate. She had started that one long ago, just thousands of fate threads she had started and managed. So, the conclusion of that one was now upon her, so she recalled the invocations Moldosa had sent her. Yes, my little chosen, she thought. I will look after your brood and they in turn will look after the Clan and you will become the *Kin's* revered Mother. She followed the thread and observed from on high.

Amaya was shocked when, for a heartbeat, hundreds of the Clan had risen on top of the ridge, then the Fog had descended instantly. She then knew that both were products of the *Ka* and luckily not many had actually seen it. Lord Adeben had bellowed for her and asked for an explanation, which she had supplied. He ordered her to clear a path through the Fog. So she had concentrated and pushed with all her might, only to clear a small path to the top of the rise. Lord Adeben had started strolling through the gap in the Fog then noticed the Clan shoulder to shoulder just before the Fog had closed in again. Unfortunately a large number of the Hoard had also seen the mass of Clan. The *Ka* that was making up the Fog was very complicated and extremely powerful and thankfully Lord Adeben had ordered her to disperse the Glamour that was projecting all the extra Clan first.

Then the Lament had started up and even she had shivers run down her back which made her hair stand up, even if only for a brief moment. Now she concentrated and easily found the *Ka* strand for the Glamour that was projecting the extra Clan members. She studied it closely for a moment or two. It could come in handy. Then she started picking at the weave that was holding it together. At first she faced a strong defense of what she was doing and for every three bits of *Ka* she disrupted the Witch Moldosa, put it back. She doubled her efforts and soon she was pulling the Glamour apart. Then suddenly she faced no more resistance and she dispersed the whole Glamour very quickly. She thought that was strange. Why had Moldosa just given up? However she now had to turn her attention to the Fog.

Lord Adeben had already led the Hoard into the Fog, up the rise and suddenly the screams and cries had started to drift down to her at the bottom of the rise. Just like a few moments ago she called the *Ka* and pushed forcefully against the wall of *Ka* she could see before her, expecting it to give way the way it did before. However this time it was like hitting a stone wall. In fact, it was so solid she physically bounced off it, landing on her rear in the long grass. She shook her head and looked around to see that no one had seen her and she found herself sitting alone in silence which was now punctuated with more screams coming from within the Fog in front of her. She jumped up and instantly

drew in a river of *Ka* and took a closer look at what now lay before her and, for the first time since she could remember, she was shocked and amazed. Moldosa's daughter had constructed something from *Ka* she had never see the like of.

The skill and the power she must be Channelling was enormous and Amaya did not think it was possible to hold that much *Ka*. In fact she knew it was not possible to hold that much for too much longer. The issue she had was she did not have time for the Daughter to tire and get weary from holding this much power. Hoard were dying inside that Fog so she needed to be clever rather than attempt to match the Daughters power. Now with renewed vigour, she looked closer and seen how the wall was made up of a weave of *Ka* strands all interlaced. Very clever she thought. For a heartbeat she thought what to do. She now focused all her *Ka* into a tiny strand, half the thickness of a kittens whisker, and used like a sharp claw to pick one single strand of *Ka* making up the wall before her. The strand came away after pulling with all her might and she quickly worked on the one next to it which came away with a little less effort. This was working, she thought to herself and now she formed a few more whisker thin strands and continued to work on the weave, moving out, left and right from the first two she had disrupted. Soon she was pulling the wall apart quicker and quicker.

Yodaka rose to his feet with the small number of the Clan now facing the Hoard and, for a brief heartbeat he seen the full extent of what now faced the Clan. Then the Fog came down sending shivers down to his tail. He concentrated and slowed his racing heart. He needed to focus and find Lord Hamani with *Ka* and join with him to enhance his voice. He found his Lord and mentally nodded to him before taking a huge breath and started to sing. The small number of Clan joined in the chorus and he hoped that, with the enhanced *Ka*, the sound had reached his brothers through the Fog. Just before the chorus finished he dropped back to the ground beside the two youngsters that he had formed the fighting three with as the Fog was thinnest at ground level and they would make out the legs of the Hoard as they reached the top of the rise.

Then, they came over the ridge like a flood.

From a crouching position, Yodaka sprung forward hitting the first Hoard that came over the ridge with a resounding crunch. Like his brothers, the first hit and subsequent kill had gone exactly like they had done back home with the two youngsters attacking from the side, like he had instructed them and that did not last long. Unlike his brothers, the ridge defenders were outnumbered by at least six Hoard for every Clan member and just as he had dispatched that first Hoard he was hit by two Hoard at once. He spun and rolled making sure to land on one of his attackers expecting the two

youngsters to attack the Hoards front or back legs and the assistance never came.

“Lord Hamani” Yodaka reached out.

“Wait” came the reply.

He felt claws raking down his back and instinctively kicked out both his hind legs, catching the attacker square in the chest and knocking him back over the ridge, such was the force. He jumped to his feet and went to make his way to where Lord Hamani was but tripped over something and fell face first into the ground. He again jumped up and looked to see what he had tripped on and seen the unmoving body of one of the Clan youngsters.

“There is too many” Hamani’s voice intruded into his mind.

“I kill three and they are replaced by four or more. I can’t keep up the transformation much longer” he informed Yodaka.

Yodaka was again hit, from the side, by two Hoard but even their combined weight was not enough to knock him fully to the ground and he lashed out with both front paws, connecting with one Hoard but missing the other. The other one now managed to sink his teeth into Yodaka’s ear and as he shook his head a large part tore away. Now he was enraged and he barely kept his senses about him, which could be his undoing. He retaliated slapping and knocking the young Hoard to the ground. Then he swiftly jumped on its back and carried out the well tested method of dispatching his prey. He looked left and right and seen the Fog was

dissipating quickly so he reached out to Tigera and Lord Hamani.

“Sister your work here is done. Join your Mother in the Barn as quickly as you can” instructed Yodaka
“My Lord, it’s time to retreat and hope my brothers are doing the same” stated Yodaka.

Almost as if it was planned, a voice shouted in his mind.

“Brother!” came Jounka’s cry.

“I am here Brother” said Yodaka.

“We can’t hold them, I have lost over half my numbers in only a few moments and they will pour through the gap very soon” advised Jounka.

“Thank you Brother, now fall back as we planned. Tigera will be letting go of the Fog in a few heartbeats so it will disperse quickly. Make sure they see what way you are going” finished Yodaka.

“Will do” was the quick reply from Jounka.

“Tigera, go now” commanded Yodaka.

“I am already in the Barn brother” retorted Tigera. Yodaka actually gave a physical smile at that.

“Mother, I am on my way” Channelled Tigera to Moldosa.

“Good, the kittens have nearly all gone into the back chambers and I will be following them, so hurry” informed Moldosa. Tigera picked up a little bit of concern and anxiousness in her reply
“Don’t wait for me. I will catch you up in the tunnel. I promise” replied Tigera.

Tigera knew that the Fog was buying them much needed time and when Yodaka said to go, he did not specifically say release the *Ka*, a small technicality. She had turned and sprinted towards the Barn doors as soon as Yodaka had spoken knowing what he was about to say. Halting before going in she turned and faced the rise. Despite the Fog, she could now start to make out forms fighting on the top. The Hoard Witch had attacked the Fog immediately and she had let her disperse enough to get a glimpse of the Glamour her mother was projecting on the top of the rise. Then she shut her out. That had the desired effect that Yodaka had predicted and the Witch had attacked mother's *Ka* spell. It was not long before she set her sights on Tigera's spell and Tigera knew it was impossible to stop her eventually pulling it apart, however it had taken the Witch just slightly longer to figure out how to do it than she thought it would. More vital heartbeats gained. She looked over her shoulder into the Barn, just in time to see her mother disappearing through the door to the back Chambers. She gave one last look up the rise and turned into the Barn, just as her brother instructed her to leave, and headed towards the rear of the main chamber. She paused for a few seconds and released what was left of the *Ka* blanket she had created to form the Fog. Then ran into the back chambers, heading for the Council room and the little door on the back wall.

Chapter 19

Lord Adeben headed into the Fog and started up the rise. The Fog was thick and he could hardly see anything in front of him or to either side where the rest of the Hoard should be. He reached the top before the rest of his *Kin* and braced himself for the attack to come, which it did not. He spun round in circles trying to peer through the Fog for Clan members to fight with and it seemed he was on his own. Then he heard the screams to his left and right and every so often he caught a glimpse of a small shadow in the Fog. He was going to charge and swipe his enormous Protector paws at those shadows when it suddenly occurred to him, were they Clan or Hoard? Lord Hamani had been even more clever than he had first thought. Frustration built quickly and he channelled to Amaya “Get rid of this Fog now! Our *Kin* are dying and I can’t do anything about it!” he screamed into Amaya’s head.

“I...need....to....concentrate” came the staccato reply from Amaya and she pushed Adeben from her mind.

He spun again and was now so confused he did not know what direction he faced. Did he face North towards the Barn or South down the field he had just come from. Just at that three shadows appeared in the Fog to his right running towards him. At last he thought and turned to face the fast approaching

shadows and steadied his feet, ready to swipe these *Kin* from the top of the rise. As they came close enough to be visible, he now knew these to be Clan *Kin* as he did not recognise any of them and they were much larger than any Hoard. Suddenly they broke round him like water passing a stone in the middle of a stream and despite his best efforts his wild swipes only hit thin air and Fog.” Fight me!” he yelled to their disappearing shadows.

“With pleasure” said a voice behind him and as Adeben spun round he was met with a huge paw that hit him hard across the head, knocking him off the top of the rise. He tumbled head over paw down the slope coming to an abrupt halt at the bottom. He immediately sprung to his feet to face the danger. Suddenly he noticed the Fog was getting distinctively thinner and he could make out far more *Kin* moving near him and it looked like chaos had erupted. *Kin* running back and forth and screams carried on the wind. One *Kin*, a Clan member, bumped into his leg and looked vacantly up at him with what was left of one eye and a face torn to shreds. He raised his huge paw and brought it crashing down on this helpless Clan member, putting it out of its pain for good. However, that small distraction was costly as Lord Hamani now crashed into his side knocking him off his feet. Hamani managed to land on top of Adeben and in quick succession landed three blows to Adeben’s face, one catching his nose and tearing a cut from

his left nostril to half way up his nose, before springing off him.

The Fog was now clearing very quickly and by the time Adeben had risen to his feet it was mostly cleared. He now counter attacked Hamani by charging at him and managed to land two responding blows to the side of Hamani's head. Hamani fell back slightly and then launched his own attack again, this time wrapping his front paws round Adeben's neck and using this as balance to bring up both hind legs and furiously rake Adeben's under belly, causing fur to fly up and be caught in the wind. Hamani sprung back, fur now embedded in his claws. His breathing was now slightly laboured with the exertion and he braced himself for another counter attack from Adeben, however the fur on his back tingled and was raised on his neck as he sensed the Channeling of the female *Ka*. "Well did you miss me, Brother?" said a voice behind him.

Hamani spun round.

"Abayomi?" he said, confused and shocked.

He had only a second before Adeben hit him from behind, knocking him to the ground at the feet of Amaya. He landing on his back, knocking the wind from Hamani's lungs.

Both the great Protectors were now exhausted, not just from their efforts but also from using a large amount of *Ka* to transform into their huge size. A normal *Kin* Channelling only half of what they were Channelling for half the time, would have

succumbed to the Male *Ka* Madness. However being a Protector gave them more immunity and the side effect was to drain them of energy if holding the *Ka* for extended periods.

Breathing heavily, Adeben looked at Amaya.

“Brother? He said through gritted teeth.

“You have two heartbeats to explain before I”

Amaya cut him off.

“We have no time for this” she retorted “something is wrong. I cannot sense Moldosa, her Daughter or the kittens. You need to get to the Barn and find out what is going on now!” she demanded.

Lord Hamani groaned under Adeben.

“I will look after this one” she said, leaning down and peering into Hamani’s confused eyes.

With all the exertion of the last attack and holding the *Ka* for an extended time had now taken its toll and he now released the *Ka*. He looked up into the eyes of his long dead sister and shook his head several times. Was the Hoard Witch now creating the ultimate Glamour, showing him the face of his sister who had drowned when he was only a youngster before he became a Protector>

Amaya Channelled into Hamani’s head.

“Oh, how I have longed for this moment Brother”

Amaya hissed.

“Now you will pay for leaving me to drown and all the hardships I had to endure” she said moving down even closer to Hamani’s head, their noses now only a whisker length apart.

“Get out of my head Witch! You think using the image of my beautiful sister will distract me. In a few moments I will have recovered and once I can connect to the *Ka* again, I swear by the Goddess you will meet her without your head!” he growled. Amaya formed a *Ka* bubble around them.

“That day by the river, why did you leave me. Was it to get rid of me so you could become the Protector?”

“What?” Hamani stuttered.

“It was your idea to play by the Great River. It was your idea to send me out on that fallen tree to catch fish” she continued.

“Then when I fell in and was carried away, I seen you just standing there.”

Hamani’s head now spun. Was this Witch picking his mind for his locked away memories? No, he had learned a long time ago how to shut off parts of his mind that even with the *Ka* no one could access, another benefit from being a Protector. Now he was totally confused and suddenly he was flooded with so many emotions at once.

“Abayomi, is it really you?” he said with a quiver in his voice.

“Yes brother. Now you see it really is me and not a trick.”

Hamani still lay prostrate on the ground and turned his head slightly to his right. He could see the edge of the Barn but not all the way over to the doors, which lay further to his left, and then Blacken came into view and stopped for a second as he seen his

Lord. With all his might, Hamani pushed Amaya from his mind and very quickly Channelled to Blacken.

“Don’t stop, keep going, follow the Plan.”

And finally, he Channelled to any Clan that could hear him.

“Go now my children. The Barn is lost” and with that Amaya came flooding back into his mind.

“Even a Protector cannot keep out a true exponent of the Female *Ka*. Our power is more pure and powerful” she sneered.

Suddenly Hamani could not breathe. He opened his mouth and his lungs did not work. His chest began to hurt and he tried to cry out and nothing came from his throat. All around him it started to go black. Then suddenly the air rushed into his lungs and for the briefest of moments he sucked in the air, only to have that stop again. The tightness around his chest started over. Although this was all in his head, his physical body still reacted to the sensations and now all his legs began to jerk and kick and his claws were extending and retracting. He felt as if he was floating very quickly and tumbling head over paw, unable to stop himself no matter how hard he tried. This also had the effect of tiring him out and the pain in his chest got more intense. The blackness closed in around him again and he flailed his arms wildly. Like before the light suddenly appeared, almost blindingly, and the air returned to his lungs

“How did you find that Brother?” Amaya said rhetorically.

“That day I fell into the River, I was sucked under by another river, beneath the surface, one that was travelling ten times faster than the surface and found myself being dragged North. Just when I thought I would meet the Holy Mother, I popped up to the surface just at the big bend almost two fields further downstream. I saw you for the briefest of moments on the shore and did not understand why you did not come for me.”

Amaya paused for a second and looked at the ground.

“You were my brother, my friend and my guardian. Yet you did not move towards me as I was once again sucked under the surface and propelled downstream.”

Amaya projected into Hamani’s head.

Hamani saw her going under again, then popping up only to be smacked in the head by a fallen tree branch. She desperately threw out one paw and managed to grab it. With her last piece of energy, she hauled herself onto the branch, her two front paws over it and the rest of her body still submerged in the river. Now time moved quickly, day turned to night, to day, to night, to day again and then the river widened as it flowed North. Then on the third night the log began drifting towards the West shore and Amaya decided to take her chance as the cold had numbed her from the waist down. She was hungry and tired. As the log moved closer to the

shore she took her chance and pushed away from the log flaying her front paws with all her might. She went under twice on the short journey to the shore and eventually she reached the bank and sunk her claws into the side. She once again hung there half in, half out the water with no strength to pull herself up the bank. It was daylight before she attempted to haul herself up and eventually made it, collapsing on the soft grass. Time and images raced again. She was lost, alone and hungry and wandered to the foot of a mountain range where she found a cave to shelter in. Days raced to weeks and into months and years and all the time Hamani felt every emotion Amaya had felt. Despair, longing, sadness and finally anger which was aimed towards her brother. Over and over again flashed the image of Hamani on the bank. Why had he not come for her, why had he given up, why had he insisted she go out on the log? Now and again she came across a few *Kin* and asked about the Clan. They had a new Protector, the best ever seen, and under Lord Hamani they thrived and grew the Clan's hunting grounds. Oh, how handsome that Lord Hamani is and so wise etc. So that was his plan, Amaya stewed in her mind. Get rid of the oldest sibling so he could become the next Protector and Lord of the Clan. The resentment built and her anger had no outlet until one day she went to reach for the *Ka*, filled with anger, and she took in more than she had ever done before and there she found an outlet for that anger. Over the next few years she honed her

abilities and counselled passing *Kin*, as she had the gift of foresight, seeing what may be and not what will be. Only the Goddess knew that. Until one day she met a young Adeben. She saw a great Protector rally the Western *Kin* into the Hoard. She saw Adeben standing at the front of the Great Barn of the Clan with hundreds cheering him. That day she made up her mind to help the vision come true and aligned herself with Adeben. Hamani would pay for his deception and treachery toward her. Her years of isolation and starvation would soon be over.

Hamani looked up at his sister with a heart that was breaking and tears in his eyes

” How could I have known? Do you really think I would have abandoned you, I loved you!” cried Hamani.

“I stayed for a full five sunrises searching the river bank. Father sent thirty of the Clan up and down the River searching for you. For a full moon we looked and could not find you sister. Our Mother died with a broken heart” he sobbed.

“Well you did not look hard enough. Then you became Protector and then you and the Clan moved on and forgot about me. Well I did not forget about you or the Clan” she spat.

“Abayomi, I” but he was cut off by a piercing pain in his head.

Amaya had been pulling in the *Ka* and formed it into a needle thin shard and now she pierced Hamani’s skull with it. Instinctively Hamani reached for the *Ka* and threw up a wall which was

suddenly bombarded with sharp shards of the female *Ka*.

“Stop Abayomi!” he pleaded. But the attack just intensified.

Hamani now shook himself back to reality and the present. Immediately he transformed and instinctively struck out at Amaya connecting with her and sent her flying through the air and she twisted and landed on her feet, blood running from her mouth and nose.

“Ah, now you show your true intent” and with that Amaya launched another attack of *Ka* shards and Hamani just managed to deflect them. He moved toward Amaya but was suddenly surrounded by about forty or fifty Hoard. Fight mode kicked in and he spun kicking out and charged a group in front of him. He went right through them and never connected with them as they had disappeared just as he met them He spun again and the same group appeared again. He stopped suddenly, confused for a second, and then felt the sharp pricks of claws on his back legs. He kicked out again and this time connected with something, sending four or five Hoard flying high into the air and distracted he got hit by another shard of *Ka* which physically knocked him to the ground as he cried out in pain. Suddenly there were *Kin* all over him biting and slashing at him and he jumped up swinging and kicking and only connecting every so often. Things had moved so fast he had not realised what was happening. Then as he looked quickly around him,

surrounded by Hoard, he realised his sister had learned the Glamour Moldosa had used earlier. He was not connecting with Hoard because most of them did not exist. A shard from Amaya pierced his head and sent him spinning. The pain was real and excruciating and suddenly he realised he had lost sight in one eye. Now suddenly about ten Hoard landed on his back, biting and scratching, and he shook his huge body throwing them off in all directions. Now he tripped or was tripped and staggered nearly going down on his front legs. More Hoard appeared at his face and he swiped with one paw then the other. However he connected with only air and then immediately felt more *Kin* attacking his sides and back legs. but he was now off balance and could not shake them off. Amaya attacked again attempting to pierce Hamani's head in three or four different spots and he was ready this time and threw up a thin wall of *Ka* which dampened the attack but further drained his energy. Now he jumped up and spun round to face the more physical danger. However the sight that met him made him take a step back. Hundreds of Hoard now faced him and were slowly advancing toward him, circling round behind him on both sides. He now realised that some of this was his Sisters *Ka* Glamour and he could not tell who was real and who was not. He charged, swiping left and right and managed to connect with dozens of Hoard sending them flying into the air, all the time moving closer towards the Barn. He spared a glance over the heads

of the Hoard mass and could see Clan fighting at the far end of the Barn next to the Hedge as they retreated in an organised way, well as much as possible, and he thought this was his escape route. That glance was his undoing.

Distracted, Amaya hit him again from behind with the *Ka*, piercing his defenses and blinding him in the other eye. Now completely blind he tripped over the Hoard as they swarmed around him and he fell to the ground with an almighty crash. Immediately he was engulfed by Hoard biting and scratching.

Anyone looking over would only have seen Hamani's famous white tail as the rest of his body was now concealed by Hoard.

His energy finally gave out, cutting his ability to maintain his Protector form. Now the size of an ordinary *Kin*, the bites tore into his skin and trying, with the little energy he had, he could not escape the Hoard now ripping him apart. He mustered the last of his energy and Channelled

“Yodaka! I am done. I go to our Holy Mother. Save the Clan and protect the kittens!” and finally, with his last breath, he cried out

“Holy Mother I come!”

Chapter 20

Yodaka was on the far left of the rise and now he spun to look North at the scene unfolding before him. He had to hold his nerve for just a few

moments, knowing that at least fifteen or twenty Hoard were only two or three steps behind him. He was nowhere near as skilled as his sister and he managed to create a very small bubble that would afford him a few seconds of time to take stock. The South West corner of the Barn was just to his left and just further to his left was the Great Hedge and the gap in it where he could see Jounka had now come back through with a small number of Clan, hotly pursued by a large rabble of Hoard. He swung his view over to the far right and could make out the forms of two huge Protectors at the bottom of the rise, just in front of the South East corner of the Barn. From this distance he could not discern who had the upper hand and coming down the slope of the rise above them seemed to be hundreds of Hoard, so thick he could not even make out the green grass. But his search was not for Hamani and Adeben but for his brother Blacken who should have been meeting up with Jounka over at the Hedge. Time was running out. A few more heartbeats was all he had. Then he spotted him. Right at the far corner of the Barn, adjacent to Hamani. Blacken was crouched looking at Hamani. From a quick count it appeared he still had his full complement of Clan behind him but the Hoard chasing them would catch up to the stragglers within seconds. Suddenly the bubble ceased and Yodaka was hit hard from behind by countless Hoard and tumbled down the slope of the rise. In the short time it had taken him to tumble down the

rise, Blacken had already sprinted the length of the Barn and was passing not far in front of where Yodaka had landed. Their eyes met for the briefest of seconds.

“Hamani won’t last long” said Blacken, in *Ka*, to his brother and continued to speed towards the Gap in the Hedge. Yodaka simply nodded, not having time to respond before three Hoard fell upon him and he spun kicking and scratching at his attackers.

Blacken now concentrated on what was before him. Jounka was now almost level with him heading diagonally towards the North West corner of the Barn with what was left of his charges and that was not many noted Blacken. The slowest of Jounka’s three was now tripped from behind by a Hoard and was sent crashing to the ground.

“Keep going brother, we will give you some seconds to reach the Barn” Blacken called to his brother.

Jounka in full flight, and almost out of breath, said nothing but shot a quick glance to his brother and nodded.

“Straight at them” commanded Blacken.

Blacken gave a small surge to his pace and his troop slammed into the side of the advancing Hoard coming through the Gap. Well, slammed would have been the wrong way to describe Blackens movements. Just as he was a whisker from the first Hoard, he suddenly spun in a circle dragging his left paw behind him and with extended claws raked them across the face of the first Hoard. His

momentum carried him forward into the second Hoard, again now raking his trailing right paw across its face. It was as if he was dancing through their ranks like the silver fish jumping the waterfall. He came out of the spin and dropped low to the ground taking out the legs of another three Hoard as he continued forward, then sprung forward in the air landing his two back legs and claws in another's head before pushing off, taking skin and fur with him. Behind him his companions followed him into the melee and more from their larger size than any real fighting skill akin to Blacken, they momentarily halted the flow of Hoard down the gap between the Barn and the Hedge.

Yodaka watched for a heartbeat as Blacken sped toward the Hoard, streaming through the Gap, with what was left of his seventeen. He Channelled and called to the Clan.

“To me Clan, to me. The Barn is lost, head to the meeting point.”

With that he spun again and engaged four Hoard as they came off the slope. A Clan youngster joined him and together they scattered the four attackers.

“Go to the South West corner now “said Yodaka.

“I will stay with you” he replied without hesitation. Momentarily Yodaka's heart filled with pride at this youngsters bravery.

“What is your name youngster?”

“Pika” she said.

“I see you Pika” said Yodaka, which was a greeting of equals and respect and nodded slightly.

“I need your bravery over at the corner to steady the younger and less experienced *Kin*. Now be off with you friend.” At that Yodaka turned and faced up the rise.

Pika hesitated for a second.

“Yes, I can do that” she said and bolted off in the direction of the corner of the Barn. Yodaka waited another heartbeat or two and then turned away from the slope just as another ten or more Hoard descended on his position. Now he bolted at full speed towards the front of the Barn calling out to the Clan. Every few bounds he met a Clan member and sent them to the corner, telling them to stop for nothing. In the distance he seen a Clan member and called to him. Just at that he seen six Hoard crash into the youngster and he went down with the Hoard clawing and biting him. Yodaka said a quick word to the Goddess, turned and sped towards the corner of the Barn. The corner of the Barn was in chaos when he approached. The front of the Hoard, that had got round Blackens attack, now attacked the twenty Clan who had gathered at the corner. The youngsters discipline had now virtually left them and they did not fight in any semblance of a unit. Twenty he had counted quickly as he approached and for the first time his heart sank. He knew they would lose many Clan and twenty was only about half what he had expected to find here. Even before

he fully reached them he started shouting out orders.

“Get into three’s like we showed you!” he screamed at the top of his voice.

“Go back to back with the nearest Clan member if you can’t form a unit! Watch your Clan members side!” And with that last one he joined the fighting, knocking down two Hoard with his momentum. He spotted the young Pika and bounded over to her, spinning so he was back to back with the youngster. The Hoard adapted quickly and Yodaka noticed that although this Hoard were even thinner than the ones that had come over the Rise, they held themselves differently, more like seasoned hunters, and unlike the other Hoard they did not just throw themselves at the Clan. They seemed to be working in pairs, one snipping then backing off with the second one straight in so the attack was actually constant as they probed for any weakness. Quickly they had already managed to separate and pick off four of these youngsters, who did not realise what was happening.

“Blacken, I need to retreat with what’s left of these youngsters” he Channelled

“Go brother” came the quick reply.

“We can hold them for a few more moments. Join Jounka” he stated and was gone from the connection.

Yodaka Channelled to the remaining Clan.

“Fall back to my brother behind us, now” and with that the remaining Clan spun and headed down the

side of the Barn catching the Hoard facing them by surprise. The Hoard that had been facing Yodaka now turned towards Blacken and what was left of his troop.

Jounka reached the end of the Barn and peered round the corner, looking along the North Wall of the Barn to the far East end. “One ray of hope”, he said to himself. There were no Hoard behind the Barn. He turned and looked up the West wall and could see a melee going on at the top corner. From here it was hard to distinguish who was Clan and who was Hoard until a distinctive grey *Kin* came crashing in from the left. Yodaka was unmistakable. He tried to keep his eye on him but there was too many other *Kin* in the way. One moment he was on the right then he would catch a glimpse of him on the left. The urge to charge forward and join in was almost overwhelming and several times he moved a step towards the fight and his companions, looking at him, also would take a step closer before moving back along with Jounka. Jounka now turned back towards the Youngsters and thought for a second, “I am not going to standby whilst our” he started and did not finish. “There! Look!” exclaimed one of the Youngsters. Jounka spun round and seen a group of *Kin* now running down the side of the Barn towards them. He could pick out Yodaka at the tail end. He looked past them and was surprised not to see them being chased by a large mob of Hoard. Instead he seen a

few watching Yodaka's retreat and the rest now angled over towards where Blacken was causing havoc in the Hoard ranks.

A dozen more Clan fell in behind Jounka, with Yodaka arriving last.

"Well met brother" said Yodaka.

"Well met, indeed" replied Jounka.

They now moved round the corner, out of direct view of the Hoard. Yodaka now concentrated his sight down the field towards the first large furlough that cut across the North field. He scanned for a second and then seen the top of a *Kin* head just poking above the crest of the furlough.

"Mother, Sister" he Channelled

"I am here brother" Tigera replied.

"We don't have much time, we are being overrun quicker than I thought. What's your situation?" he enquired.

"The tunnel narrows as you get near the exit door, so it's been slower progress getting all the kittens through. I would say we have well over half out and they are gathered between the furloughs with Natsu and Fugen" informed Tigera.

"Where is mother?" said Yodaka.

"Mother is still in the tunnel, behind the remaining kittens. She is encouraging the kittens through as it's very dark and oppressive in there and they are very scared now."

"You need to get the kittens you have moving down the field. Get Natsu and Fugen to take the first lot

and you and Mother can take the second.” He instructed.

There was a pause.

“They are fine” said Yodaka as he sensed Tigera channelling and reaching out across the field. He surmised she was searching for their brothers

“Just checking” said Tigera.

“See you soon at the bottom of the field and don’t wait for us. Get everyone through the gate and heading toward the Refuge House.”

And with that Yodaka broke the connection.

Yodaka now turned to assess the situation. In the brief time he had spoken to Tigera, the Hoard had now started to gather at the South corner of the Barn and looked to be organising themselves into an assault down toward their position. Blacken had organised his Clan fighters well and they had now started to retreat down the side of the Hedge but in an orderly fashion, if a bit slow for Yodaka’s liking. He looked back up toward the large group of Hoard and suddenly realised that they were not planning on attacking them but were going to cut Blacken off and trap him. His mind now raced with possibilities. He looked over to Blacken and back down the field toward Tigera and the kittens. They needed more time and there was only one reckless way to give his mother and sister that time.

He turned to Jounka.

“You up for a fight Brother?” he asked.

A smile spread across Jounka’s face like he had got the cream.

“Thought you’d never ask!” said Jounka laughing.

“We need to buy mother time to get the kittens away and Blacken is about to get swallowed up by that large group up there” he indicated to Jounka.

“Remember I said that thing about charging headlong into the enemy’s ranks?” said Yodaka.

“Yes” said Jounka.

“Well ignore what I said Please feel free to exercise your natural instincts!” he shouted to his brother.

Jounka turned to his remaining Clan for a second and all their heads turned to him.

Two heartbeats later Jounka took off heading straight toward the Hoard with his Clan fighters closely behind him. Yodaka turned to his fighters and said

“Well, what you waiting for, let’s go” he laughed and with that he led them after his brother.

Just as the Hoard were about to cut Blacken off, Jounka hit them at full sprinting speed, singing the Clan lament at the top of his voice. Soon more and more voices joined in until they all sang together, including Yodaka’s troop following up behind Jounka’s fighters. Again the Hoard faltered faced with this vicious counter attack by a small number of Clan. The noise was deafening and terrifying and as Jounka tossed two Hoard literally up into the air some of them started to remember the rumours of a family of three brothers, their sister and a Mother who was of the *First*. They knew that the revered Bomani and his party had been sent to watch this *First* Witch and her youngsters and they were never

heard of again. Whispers now started to spread across the Hoard mass.

“It’s them! The Witches sons!”

“They can’t be killed!”

“The Goddess protects them!”

“No, the *Ka* protects them!”

As Jounka and his fighters wreaked havoc in the front lines of the Hoard they actually started moving back and a small panic started to spread as the ones at the front started pushing back and tripping over their fellow Hoard. If we can just hold them for a bit longer, thought Yodaka, then Mother can get the kittens away and just maybe, no more Clan will die today.

But the thought was short lived as he seen a member of the Hoard running back and forth and seemed to be organising them again. Yodaka thought for a second and then Channelled.

“Brothers, we have fought well today but enough is enough. Let’s get our Clan out of here and back to the Refuge House. You know the Plan. We need to keep them away from the flight of the kittens.”

With that he Channelled again to the Clan that had followed him and instructed them to break off and follow him down the North field.

He glanced briefly at his brothers and figured they were instructing their fighters with the same message. Just as he turned to run, he seen Jounka break away and Blacken and his remaining troop spin and start down the side of the Hedge.

Chapter 21

Lord Adeben headed towards the Barn door, his head was spinning and not from the blows at the hands of Hamani and from the fact that Amaya had hid the fact that Hamani was her brother. Now was not the time to ponder Amaya's motives and he focused on what was at hand. He reached the Barns doors and barged his huge frame through them, nearly knocking one off its hinges. He looked around and was surprised that the Barn was completely silent. There was now about fifty or sixty Hoard in the Barn.

"Where is everyone!" he shouted, frustration now starting to take hold.

One brave Hoard approached.

"My Lord, it was like this when we entered" he said nervously

"Search everywhere, now" he commanded.

"Here my Lord!" shouted a Hoard from the back of the Barn

Adeben headed down the left side of the Barn to the back rooms

"What have you found" he asked.

"My Lord, whilst searching the back rooms we found a small door located in the last room that is lying open. There seems to be a tunnel beyond the door" he said.

"Show me" he said and they headed to the Council Chamber.

Adeben looked into the tunnel and the distinctive smell of *Kin* filled his nostrils. Very clever, he thought to himself. Was everything just a ruse to facilitate the escape of the rest of the Clan? “Down the tunnel now” he instructed his Hoard. He watched as about thirty of the Hoard now funnelled into the tunnel and was about to follow when he realised he was too big to fit in as he was still in his Protector form.

Adeben returned to his normal size, which felt good. He had been transformed too long and once back to his normal size a wave of exhaustion overtook him and he staggered into the back wall of the Council room. A few Hoard looked over but quickly put their heads down and continued to funnel into the tunnel. Adeben rested for a while and let the remaining Hoard enter the door before slowly pushing himself off the wall and following the last Hoard into the darkness. The tunnel soon became pitch black and he managed to catch up to the last Hoard and followed the tail in front of him. The dark did not bother him and it was close and oppressive and with all the *Kin* in the tunnel it was warm. The air felt thin and he had to control his breathing. The going was slower than he hoped as every second they spent in here was time the Clan had to escape. He was about to shout up the tunnel when in the distance he could see a pin point of light, which must mark the exit. Soon the light was filtering down the tunnel and he could now easily make out the *Kin* in front of him and he could see

he would be out of here shortly. The chain of *Kin* was now moving quicker as they approached the exit and within a few heartbeats he exited the tunnel into the bright sunlight, which made him squint for a few moments as his eyes re-adjusted again.

As he was adjusting, he heard shouts filtering to his ears.

“There they are!”

“Down there on the right!”

“Get them!”

“Over to the left, more Clan!”

It took a few moments to process what was happening. They had come out almost half way down the North field, slightly over to the right at the bottom of a furlough. He swung his head to the left as a few of the Hoard in front of him were looking over towards the Hedge.

He Channelled and slowed everything around him to about half pace so he could better assess the situation

There he seen groups of Clan retreating down the field, hotly pursued by Hoard. One group was hard against the Hedge and slightly further back up the field towards the Barn. He easily spotted their leader was a long haired jet black Clan member and remembered Amaya’s descriptions of Moldosa brood. This was Blacken. He watched for a few more heartbeats as Blacken almost floated over the ground then suddenly spun and danced amongst the Hoard closest to his retreating Clan, knocking at least three or four to the ground before turning and

continuing down the field. Also, over to his left near the Hedge another group were further ahead of Blackens group. They were already past the half way mark and he picked out the large shape of the one called Jounka. He was even larger than the reports had put him to be and no doubt would at least put up a good fight when he caught up with him. The last group on the left was almost level with his position and again the leader was easy to discern. Yodaka the Grey. Almost as big as his brother Jounka, but was leaner, and he also turned to face the Hoard following them, Adebén noted the muscular frame and sure footing of the *Kin*. No slips as he turned at full pace, his strength allowed him to grip the ground with large paws and claws and quickly he delivered devastating blows to those closest to him. Now his focus swung over to his right and ahead of him. There was a second furlough crossing the field, further down the field, which obscured his view. However, he could clearly make out the small forms of kittens walking in single file almost at the bottom of the field heading towards what looked to be a gap in the wall at the far end of the field. He could see a larger *Kin* at the front leading and encouraging them on. The assault on the Barn had taken too long and now his eyes were drawn to about twenty Hoard who had already reached the bottom of that second furlough. Good, he thought, still time to catch up with the main body of these escaping kittens. His eyes drifted up the slope and there he just made out three heads looking

over the top, looking back towards the advancing Hoard. The one on the left was easy to recognise as the flaming red hair set her apart as being Tigera, Moldosa's daughter. He assumed one of the other two had to be the Witch, so this could be over quicker than he thought and so much for Amaya's warning.

Moldosa, Tigera and Fugen had watched as the first Hoard had exited the door in the slope of the top furlough. Moldosa could also see that her Sons, were firstly still alive and secondly looked to be sticking broadly to the Plan. They were distracting the main Hoard mass and keeping them mostly to the right hand side of the field as they looked back up towards the Barn. Getting the kittens through the tunnel had taken far too long and Moldosa had hoped that most of them would already be out of the field and heading to the Refuge House.

“Mother” said Tigera.

But Moldosa still swung her head from looking down the field, to the Hoard now gathering at the door exit.

“Mother” said Tigera with a bit more urgency and force.

Moldosa's head snapped round sharply and she looked at her daughter.

“Sorry” said Moldosa quietly.

“We need a plan to hold these Hoard up or the majority of the kittens will not make it out of this field” Tigera said as a statement.

“What we need is Lord Hamani” said Fugen.

“Good point, where is he?” said Tigera.

Moldosa closed her eyes momentarily then looked up at the two faces staring at her.

“Lord Hamani is still on the other side of the Barn.”

She closed her eyes again for a moment then opened them, with a startled look on her face.

“Lord Hamani is under attack” she said quietly.

“I will go to him” said Fugen.

“Me too” said Tigera immediately.

“Wait” commanded Moldosa.

“I fear it’s too late, even with your gifts daughter. He is surrounded by hundreds of Hoard and I can feel he is also being attacked with *Ka*.”

At which point Moldosa dropped her head.

“We are in the paws of the Goddess now” she said as she stared up the field.

There was silence for a moment as the three of them watched the Hoard exit the tunnel. The Hoard did not seem to know what they were to do next and one or two even headed across the field to join the pursuit of her sons.

“What are the two most common things the *Kin* are scared of?” asked Moldosa

Fugen and Tigera looked at each other

“Well, I would say water and fire” answered Fugen

“Agreed” said Tigera.

“What are you thinking mother?” enquired Tigera

“Look” was all she said and indicated to the Tunnel entrance.

The last Hoard to exit suddenly shifted and standing there looking around was Lord Adeben.

Moldosa looked at Fugen.

“My revered Fugen, Son of the great Lima and sister to Natsu. Your job is done here. I need you to hurry the remaining kittens toward your sister and use whatever method required to get them to go faster. Tigera and I will hold up the Hoard emerging from the tunnel.”

“But” started Fugen and Moldosa cut him off.

“Your mother will have my whiskers if anything happens to you” smiling as she said it.

“Now listen to your elder and be off with you, now!” she said a bit more sternly.

Fugen bowed deeply “yes Revered Mother.”

He looked at Tigera and gave her an awkward nod.

“May the Goddess bless you both” and with that he tore down the field towards the last kitten.

“What was that?” said Moldosa with a raised eyebrow.

“Nothing” said Tigera looking down at her paws

“mmm” was Moldosa’s reply and then a small laugh

Moldosa Channelled and everything around them stopped.

“Right” she began “this plan has two parts. The first one I think is fairly straight forward. The second part I am not sure about. What I do know is that it will take our combined *Ka* to pull this off and if it

does it should buy enough time to get the kittens to safety. So here is what we need to do.”

The Hoard that had exited the tunnel now looked around them. They had come out of the side of this small hill and the Barn was obscured from their vision so it took a moment to orientate themselves. They could see the Clan retreating over to their left in three groups and before them, further down the field, another rise was obscuring most of the bottom of the field. A few had decided to charge off to join their fellow Hoard chasing the Clan and the rest decided that Lord Adebene had not sent them through this tunnel to join the fight over on the other side of the field. Most of the Hoard had now exited the tunnel when someone spotted the kittens snaking down the field. There seemed to be a collective decision made and the majority now decided to charge down the field towards these Clan kittens who were trying to escape. They reached the bottom of the next rise and started up the hill when suddenly a wall of fire, as high as the Great Hedge itself, sprung up right across the top of the furlough causing the ones at the front to fall backwards down the slope crashing into those behind. Adebene seen the wall of flames spring up and knew instantly this was another of the Witches Glamour's. As he started down the field he called to the Hoard “It's not real!, run through and attack the two Witches casting this *Ka* spell”

The Hoard at the base of the rise looked at each other, not convinced as they could feel the heat coming from the flames and hesitated.

“Move now!” shouted Adeben as he now speeded up his decent down the field.

Two of the Hoard at the front very quickly decided that they feared Lord Adeben more than the flames. They sprinted up the hill and closed their eyes as they ran into the flames. Just as they entered the flames the two of them were suddenly hurled back down the slope, crashing again into the others gathered there. Another three noticed that their fellow *Kin* showed no signs of burnt fur, all be it they now lay unconscious. They looked back to see Lord Adeben closing quickly and decided to launch themselves up the slope. The result was the same, back down the slope came the three Hoard to land crumpled in a heap at the bottom just as Adeben arrived at the bottom of the slope.

“Do I need to do everything myself!” he shouted at them and sprung up the slope and into the flames. He did not expect to be hit so hard by the *Ka* bolt that the witch had fired at him. It knocked him off balance and he tumbled down the slope towards the Mother and Daughter standing at the bottom of the slope. As he got up he got hit again, this time in his head, but not before he had figured out that the attack had come from the Mother, Moldosa, who was on his right hand side. He now drew in as much male *Ka* as he could hold and threw up a shield, just

in time to deflect the next attack. Now it was his turn to attack.

Chapter 22

The Goddess stood in the middle of the field watching all the young *Kin* arriving and running around. As soon as they realised where they were, she gave them a reassuring smile and comforted them for a few moments before she directed them down to the shore of the *Ka* Lake. However, she really was waiting for one of her special daughters. And then she seen a full sized *Kin* walking down the field as the rest of the *Kin* were like kittens here in the Great Meadow. The *Kin* approached the Goddess and looked confused to be here, which was always the case with new arrivals.

“This place looks familiar” said the *Kin* as she approached, looking all round her.

“This is your new home, Revered Mother” said the Goddess

“Revered Mother” repeated the *Kin*

“I have been called that before, somewhere, sometime” she said, again looking all around her. Now some *Kin* ran down the Meadow and as they past they called out happily.

Then another

“Mother!, Mother!” this call was different.

A *Kin* now came running down the field toward her.

“You should not be here, it’s not your time” said the Goddess as the *Kin* approached.

“What have you done to my Mother?” said the *Kin* as she approached.

“She is no longer your mother little one, she will be everyone’s Revered Mother” said the Goddess quietly.

Suddenly the Revered Mothers eyes opened wide and memory came flooding into her like a bolt of lightning. She looked from the Goddess to the *Kin* before her.

“You have to leave, now! You should not be here Tigera!”

“I am not leaving you mother” Tigera replied sternly.

Lord Adebén made a very quick decision on where the threat came from. Moldosa was stopping the Hoard coming through the Flames, her daughter Tigera was now conjuring. He glanced quickly down the field and could see that most of the kittens had already exited the field through the gap in the wall. Slowly he raised himself up and faced the witch, Moldosa, keeping his shield of *Ka* firmly in front of him. It was obviously too late now to stop the kittens escaping and he was determined that these two Witches would not leave the field today. He waited for the next attack to come, which it did with ferocity, actually rocking him back onto his hind quarters but he knew the time to strike was

now as Moldosa pulled in more *Ka* for the next attack.

Moldosa and Tigera were connected with the *Ka*, they were intertwined, as Moldosa did not have the power alone for the attacks she was throwing at the Hoard and now Lord Adeben. She was pulling more and more *Ka* from her daughter, as Tigera was more powerful than she was and there was a danger Moldosa pulled too much and caused the fire wall to falter. She made a decision to sever the connection and spoke to Tigera.

“Whatever happens, keep the wall of flame going as its stopping the rest of the Hoard reaching the kittens. Natsu and Fugen nearly have them all away”

She then tried to sever the connection and they were too intertwined and this was a fatal distraction.

Lord Adeben seen a slight hesitation from Moldosa and sprung forward, with devastating accuracy.

“Sever our connection now!” cried Moldosa.

“What do you mean mother?” said Tigera as she looked over to her mother, just as the huge head of Lord Adeben, jaws open, descended encasing her mother’s head.

“NO!” Tigera cried out.

Lord Hamani knew the end was near and cried out to Yodaka with his final command. He resisted the best he could and fought on for longer than he thought he would be able to and soon the end came. He closed his eyes as the hundreds of

bites, scratches and tearing rendered him helpless. He prayed to the Goddess for the pain to be over before giving one final defiant roar with his last breath. The Goddess watched the events unfolding before her and the thread she had started so long ago was now coming to fruition. About two heart beats before Moldosa arrived at the Great Meadow, which in the Meadow of the Goddess could be two heart beats or two life spans, Lord Hamani appeared at the top of the Meadow. As he was a protector he was afforded two courtesies. He appeared in his splendid Protector form and secondly, he instantly knew where he was. The Goddess swung her head to her right and looked up the field watching as Hamani strode purposely down the Meadow towards her. He arrived before her and bowed deeply.

“My Holy Mother” he said, still bowed and looking at the ground

“Rise up my faithful and revered Lord Hamani” the Goddess said.

“Well met my Lord Hamani, you have been a faithful servant to the Clan and a credit to the *Kin*” she said.

“The honour has been mine most Revered Mother” he said bowing again.

“That title is not mine, Hamani. In fact, that title will pass to one who is about to join us here in the Meadow” she informed him.

Hamani could not hide the confusion on his face but dared not ask or question his Goddess.

“I see the confusion on your face and your manners are, as always, impeccable” she laughed.

“The Revered Mother will be joining us from the North field behind the Barn. I believe she is related to you in the distant past and is a descendant of The *First*” stated the Goddess.

Hamani actually took a staggered step backward, as the realisation of who the Goddess described suddenly hit him.

“No” the word involuntarily escaped his mouth.

“Do you not trust me?” the Goddess said..

He bowed deeply again.

“Forgive me, Holy Mother, I would never question what the fates have to bring to the Clan or *Kin*. If truth be told I had hoped that in my passing the Gift of the Protector would pass to Moldosa” he said.

“And who has said that it may not be the case?” she said more rhetorically.

“The power of the Protector can only be transferred a certain way. There are rules to whom that power and privilege may be transferred to and even I have to respect that rule, as it was given by someone higher than me” she continued, looking at Hamani with a raised eyebrow.

To many riddles for me, thought Hamani.

“Out of respect for you, Lord Hamani, I will allow you to observe what is to pass. However, you must do it out of sight” and as Hamina gave a final bow he faded and disappeared

I may not have set the rules and I can influence how they are applied, mused the Goddess.

As Moldosa stood facing the Goddess, she contemplated the last few moments.

She knew from the second she had thought up the plan to delay the Hoard and allow the kittens to escape what the outcome would be. And she had accepted her fate. Now her memories had flooded back she spun round to Tigera.

“You have to leave now!. You should not be here Tigera!”

“I am not leaving you mother” Tigera replied sternly.

“Holy Mother send her back please!” pleaded Moldosa.

The Goddess tilted her head for a few moments

“I did not foresee this” she said, more to herself

“The connection between yourself and your Daughter is very strong. Your *Ka* is intertwined most intricately” said the Goddess.

“And with your daughters new power, that connection is very powerful” mused the Goddess.

“I need to think about this for a few moments” she said turning and walking slowly down the Meadow.

“What new power?” called Moldosa after her
The Goddess wandered the Meadow with her eyes closed and reviewed what had transpired in the North field that day.

Yodaka was closest to Tigera and Mother when the flames had sprouted up. He allowed himself a wry smile as he marvelled at their

ingenuity and power with the *Ka*. He knew almost instantly that this was a delaying tactic as he could see that all the kittens had not left the North field yet. He knew his part as well and chose that moment to spin and face the Hoard that were chasing the Clan down the Field. He caught them by surprise and easily delivered blows to at least three or four of the nearest Hoard. Seeing this his companions stopped, turned and also counter attacked their pursuers stopping them in their tracks. Yodaka called to out to his companions.

“Well done! Now let’s” and he was cut off by the scream of Tigera.

“NO!” he heard her scream and he looked over.

Everything moved in slow motion. He saw the huge jaws of Adeben closing round his mother’s head and he suddenly spun and began sprinting. Adeben lifted her up and shook his huge head and his mother swung back and forward like a small mouse.

He was also now screaming “NO!” and moving too slowly to get to his Mother.

Then two things happened. From the left side of his vision he saw a blurred shape moving faster than he was and at the same time he saw a bright glow surrounded his mother for a fraction of a heartbeat. The blur was Tigera and he watched as she launched herself at Lord Adeben’s huge face.

Tigera watched in sheer horror as Adeben leaned down to grab her mother. Instinct took over and as Adeben lifted up mother and started to shake

her, Tigera sprinted with all her might and launched herself into the air. Filled with the power of the *Ka*, she flew four times faster and higher than was possible and landed square on Adeben's face. Tigera screamed and shouted and her paws and claws moved with extreme speed and force and she cut huge gouges out of Adeben's nose and cheeks. Still he did not release mother. Now she used the last of her strength and with all her enhanced *Ka* strength she swiped at Adeben's left eye and made full contact with her claws. Three of her claws now stuck in Adeben's eye and he brought up a huge paw and swatted her with a ferocious strike. That had two unfortunate outcomes, one for Tigera and one for Adeben. So deeply imbedded were Tigera's claws that as she was thrown from Adeben's face his left eye was ripped from its socket and was stuck on Tigera's claw. The force was so great that dislodged Tigera that it threw her high and far into the air, stunning her momentarily. Unfortunately, as she dropped back to the ground she was still semi-conscious and could not twist to land on her feet. Instead her head hit a large rock in the field and she was knocked out cold. The last thing she remembered before waking up in the Great Meadow was a searing pain striking her in the chest, right on her heart.

Yodaka seen Tigera being thrown high into the air and just as she was landing he was struck in the chest by a searing pain which knocked him over.

He staggered to his feet and looked around, half dazed for a heartbeat. Tigera lay further down the field over to his left, not moving, and he could see the crumpled form in the long grass of what he surmised was Mother. Anger welled inside him, anger like he had never experienced before, and all his senses came back to him instantly. He looked for the focal point of his anger but did not see it immediately. Then he looked again and he seen Lord Adeben was no longer in his Protector form but was now just an ordinary sized *Kin*. He was angry and his breathing was heavy and he did not run. Instead he started walking very purposely toward where he could see Adeben screaming in pain. Adeben and the Hoard now with him turned tail and started running back up the field, or rather Adeben was staggering up the field. Yodaka's natural instinct as the calm thinker now kicked in and his anger subsided slightly. Although he did not want to admit it or see it, he knew Mother was gone so he focused his attention on his sister. Now he moved quickly and was at Tigera's side in a few moments. He shook her and kissed her and she did not open her eyes. He leaned down and put his head on her chest and was relieved to hear the strong thumping of her heart. As he looked up he seen Jounka staggering toward them, with some youngsters in tow. Tears openly flowed down Jounka's face and he made no attempt to hide it or wipe them away. Jounka fell to his knees beside

Yodaka and Tigera and said with a quiver in his voice.

“Mother?”

Yodaka looked at him and shook his head. Jounka started to get up.

“No Brother, stay here. There is nothing you can do for Mother, she is with the Goddess now”

“Look to our sister, she needs our help now” said Yodaka as he bowed his head again and kissed Tigera once more on her forehead.

“My Lord, my Lord” said a small quiet voice.

Yodaka looked up and seen the youngster, Pika, looking at him. He was grateful she was still alive and gave her a smile.

“My Lord, the Hoard ran back up the field with Adebén and I can see now they are gathering to come back down again” she said

“What do we do?” she added.

Yodaka gave himself a shake and looked at Jounka

“Are you alright brother, are you injured? I saw you staggering.”

“Yes, I am fine, just a momentary pain in the chest as I was running over here” he replied.

“Do you think you could carry her on your back?” asked Yodaka.

Jounka looked down at the prostrate figure of his sister on the ground.

“To the mountains and back” he said looking Yodaka in the eye.

Yodaka give him a curt nod.

“Ok, get her away from here. I will buy us some time” he said and turned and sprinted up the slope to just below the rise and lay flat. That way any Hoard coming over the top would not see him until it was too late. Jounka lay beside his sister and three of the Clan gently rolled Tigera up and over his back. Tigera now lay across Jounka’s back, her head hanging over one side and her back legs dangling over the other. The three Clan had to help him to his feet twice and now he stood steadier. Jounka gave his brother one last look and turned and slowly began to head down the field towards the gap in the wall, where he could see the last of the kittens filing through. Two Clan flanked Jounka, to help steady him as he walked, Pika and the remaining youngster now turned and ran up the slope to where Yodaka lay.

Yodaka turned his head as they approached “What do you think you two are doing?” he whispered.

“We fight with you my Lord” said Pika.

“No you don’t, get back down the field now and I am not your Lord” he finished and turned his head away as if that was the final word on the matter.

“You can’t face them alone great warrior. There could be at least ten or more in that first group” replied Pika nervously.

“For the love of the Goddess, would you please leave now, or it will be you facing my growing anger” he hissed.

Pika gave a nod and she and her companion turned and ran back down the slope. She then called back up once more.

“We will let you know when Jounka is out of the field” and with that they made their way slowly down the field, glancing behind them every few steps.

Even before the youngsters had come up the slope, Yodaka had started letting the anger and rage back into his heart. Once they left, he looked briefly down to his left and could just make out where mother lay still in the grass. For the last while he had put all images out of his head, now he let them flood back in. Mother in the jaws of Adeben, Tigera crunching to the ground and his anger began to rise once more. He knew that even he could not fight ten or more Hoard, no matter how much bigger he was than them. However, he was determined that when he met the Goddess it would be on his terms and with his head held high as a defender of the Clan.

He peeked over the rise and could see that there was a small group slightly ahead of the larger group about to come running full speed up the South rise. He said a small prayer to the Goddess and let all his anger come rushing out of him, rising up to the top of the rise.

Suddenly he felt strange with all this anger pulsing through him and he let out a war cry to help startle his enemy. At first it started out as his normal *Kin* call and it suddenly became deep and so loud, even startling him slightly.

The first six or seven Hoard sprinted up the slope at full speed and as they crested the top they suddenly crashed into a wall of grey. The wall was solid like the doors of the barn and some of them hit it so hard it knocked them unconscious. At the same time, they were met with a wall of noise as a roar echoed up the field.

Pika heard Yodaka's war cry and then something else that was not Yodaka and it sent chills right down to her tail. As she turned, she staggered back at the sight of Hoard bouncing off a huge grey Protector standing on top of the Slope, roaring with all his might, mouth open, huge fangs glistening. Her mouth fell open as she witnessed the birth of Lord Yodaka, Protector of the Clan.

Chapter 23

Tigera was placed over Jounka's back and he headed down the field. The going was slow as the grass was long and the ground uneven against his paws. His first fall was not long after they set out as he took a step into a small hole that was covered by the grass. His front legs gave out and he went down on his knees. However, his companions were at his side to ensure he did not fall sideways or drop Tigera. They helped him up and he once again started the slow journey down the field. The gap in the wall at the bottom of the field was not far away and he had already either fell or staggered four

times, dropping Tigera once from his back. The muscles in his legs screamed in pain now with almost every step and he knew that once out of the field the ground became much smoother and it should be slightly easier to walk. He stopped for a second to get a second breath and looked up the field to his right. The Hoard that had been chasing both Yodaka and himself had rallied themselves and now formed one larger group and they now had found the courage to head down the field. He tried to look past them towards the Hedge to see where Blacken was but could not see him. However he recognised a few of the fighters Blacken had in the forest. They were flying down the field, tight against the Hedge but no Hoard followed them at this point. He quickly counted that the group only had about ten Clan in it, the couple of Blackens *Kin* and some that had stood with him at the Gap. They were already past the new mass of Hoard that had gathered together and suddenly they changed direction and headed towards his position. Bad mistake he thought. The Hoard had changed course too and were now angled straight toward Jounka and would cut off the retreating Clan. He did not have any more time to watch or think and turned and pressed ahead towards the wall and the gap that he believed would provide some safety.

Farzan was one of the oldest Hoard members. He was already past twenty six seasons, which for any *Kin* living West of the Great river

was an achievement on its own. Those *Kin* that identified themselves as Hoard very rarely lived past Youngster stage, as either hunger or injury normally claimed over half of their number before they had lived more than six seasons. He was regarded as an Elder amongst the Hoard and, true enough, he had lived a hard existence in the cold and barren Mountains. Lord Adeben had warned them that some amongst the Clan would not be the push overs they thought and he singled out three brothers who were apparently related to the *First*. Farzan did not really listen to *Kin* tails, and the such and he took note that Lord Adeben thought these brothers were a danger and also warned that these brothers were skilled hunters and would be bigger and stronger than most of the Hoard. Again he trusted in his Lord, however in his life he often found that things got exaggerated, like a giant *Rattus* believed to live near the river, which when they hunted it down was only a pregnant Dam. That all changed when they arrived at the gap in the Great Hedge. As the Fog had started to clear, on the far side of the Hedge, he saw for the first time the one Lord Hamani described as Jounka. He had watched as the biggest *Kin* he had ever seen, except a Protector, had tossed Hoard about like kittens. Even he was now wary of what they would face when they came through the Gap. They had also been told that these soft Clan would run like kittens when they see the Hoard numbers and that they were a bunch of Softies. He did not have to wait

long to find out how untrue that was. The small force that faced them at the Gap were well disciplined and fought with a style he had never seen before. They had formed themselves into three's and had an attack strategy that the Hoard could not have dealt with. If it was not for their numbers advantage, this whole expedition would have failed at the first attack. The second set back came once they finally flowed through the Gap. Boyed by the fact they had the Clan on the run they threw caution to the wind and did not pay attention to their right flank, a fatal mistake. Now he met another of the brothers described to him by Lord Adeben, the one called Blacken. Jet black hair flowing down his sides which almost hid his paws, he had hit them from the right. Farzan had truly never seen anything like it in his long life. This *Kin* almost danced in midair and he spun, kicking and slashing and had whipped across the hoard from right to left in almost a couple of heartbeats and not one Hoard had even managed to touch him.

It had taken him a while to rally the Hoard to press forward and he had gathered some more fighters that had come up the South field to bolster his numbers. However this had resulted in allowing most of the Clan to escape down to the North corner of the Barn where he could see the huge frame of the Jounka speaking to an unusually coloured *Kin*. This *Kin* was the grey colour of the bridges that crossed the River and it was easy to put a name to that brother, Yodaka. He was almost the same size

as Jounka and it was clear even from this distance that under his grey coat there was no fat accumulated from an easy life and rather the well toned body of an expert Hunter. Farzan quickly assessed the best course of action and decided that one is less risky than two. He called, in *Ka*, to the other Hoard arriving and instructed them to make their way down and across the field to cut off the retreat of Blacken and his small number of Clan. Too late he turned to see Jounka launching his ferocious counter attack with his small band of Clan followed quickly by his brother. He gave a shudder down to his tail. If the Clan only had about thirty like these brothers the Hoard would have lost hundreds in this assault, which would have surely failed. He now ran along behind the line encouraging and invoking the name of Lord Adebén and the Goddess to steady the Hoard and rally them to gather themselves. He could hear the rumours spreading through the ranks to the invincibility of these Clan.

“Look!” he shouted to his *Kin*.

“They bleed! One of your fellow Hoard has delivered a blow to these Clan. They are not invincible!” and slowly the Hoard began to gain in confidence.

The group fighting Blacken seemed to be making progress, all be it slowly, so he left them to it and concentrated on getting the main Hoard group formed up and moving forward. Just as he got their fear under control the Clan retreated suddenly down

the side of the Barn. He moved them forward with caution, fearing a trap by the two other brothers. However, by the time they had moved halfway down the Barn he could see that they were in full retreat down the North field. He split the Hoard into two groups. They then set out at full speed in pursuit of the Clan who had split into two groups. Each one of the groups was led by one of the brothers. The Hoard were smaller but that made them slightly quicker and they were more used to the rough ground than the Clan obviously were. They started to close them down and he looked quickly over his shoulder to see that Blacken and his band were now nearly surrounded and retreating very slowly behind them.

Then the fire sputtered from the ground over to his right and the whole Hoard stopped in their tracks. He had seen fire on many occasions during the Hot season and this was certainly of the Clan Witches making. This especially spooked the youngster's in their ranks, with some of them actually turning and running back up the field. He thought and acted quickly.

“Hoard! Hear me now. This is no more than a Clan Witch trick, like the Fog” he tried to assure them. Luckily he then seen Lord Adebene running down the field towards the fire.

“See! Our Lord charges at the fire!. He will deal with these Witches the way he did with the Fog.”

He surmised it was probably Amaya that did that and the Hoard did not need to know that.

“Your enemy is within a whisker now, forward for Lord Adebén and the Hoard!” he cried.

Farzan had already seen the Hoard that had sprinted ahead being dealt with by Yodaka as the fire had distracted them. However the main body of Hoard had not seen this. He also seen, out the corner of his right eye, Hoard attacking the fire and being thrown back, some screaming in pain.

“Listen to me now” he shouted and all eyes turned to him as luckily he held their respect.

“Focus on what we need to do. Ignore everything happening around you as it could all be a trick!.

There is your enemy” he said, indicating the two groups that had followed Jounka and Yodaka. As luck would had it something was happening over where the fire was and Yodaka and then Jounka both sprinted over with only a couple of Clan with them, leaving the rest behind. Some of the Hoard seen this and they started down the field towards the remaining Clan. The remaining Clan were either confused or following orders and they did not run. Quickly they recovered as the leading Hoard approached and formed themselves into the formation of the fighting three. The Hoard had seen how devastating this tactic could be and now they hesitated and moved slowly toward the two groups. Some tried probing the groups but that did not end well for them. Then matters got worse as the two groups moved towards each other and formed a

larger single group and again the Hoard hesitated. This was taking too much time thought Farzan. He looked to his right and he could see the last of the Clan kittens about to exit the field. Movement to his far right caught his eye and he could see Jounka following them down the field. He seemed to be moving slowly and he looked to be staggering, maybe he was injured, he thought. Their luck might be changing.

He called out again to his fighters to rally them.

“Look, their mighty warrior flees the field leaving his *Kin* behind!”

“Who will follow me to chase the last of these Clan out of our new home?” he cried.

“Farzan!” some started to shout. He waited a few more heartbeats for more to join in the shouts. He did not want to waste the moment so pushed to the front.

“With me!” he shouted and slowly began advancing toward the Clan group.

Seeing this, the Clan collectively turned and headed down the field, angled towards the gap at the bottom of the field and the retreating figure of Jounka. Farzan called to the Hoard to give chase.

The Hoard, led by Farzan, now closed quickly on the retreating Clan. They were not far from catching up when he heard a huge roar coming from far up the field and never turned round as he had heard the roar of a Protector before and he allowed himself a quick smile as he imagined Lord Adeben was dealing with the Witches and Yodaka. As he closed

in he could see Jounka actually had a smaller *Kin* draped over his back and this was what was causing him to stagger down the field. Just at that Jounka stumbled and fell head first to the ground and this spurred him on to get there before he managed to get back up and escape. Jounka let out a howl of pain as he had hit the ground and Farzan let out a small laugh. He and four of the closest Hoard gave a final sprint, just as Jounka was rising to his feet, and now they were in striking distance of his back.

Jounka could now pick up the sound of the Hoard behind him and he doubled his efforts. Then he heard a roar like he had never heard before and this caused him to stumble again and pitch forward into the ground. Jounka already had a bit of a short temper and now his frustration and anger boiled over as he hit the ground. Tigera pitched forward landing hard on the ground before him as his chin hit the ground, causing his fangs to pierce his top lip. He let out an involuntary yell and now he heard the closest Hoard let out a laugh as they were almost on his position. He looked briefly at Tigera lying on the ground before him and that was the final straw. The anger boiled up from deep inside him and he rose to his paws himself and let out a mighty cry as he turned, standing on two legs, to face the approaching Hoard. He was now determined that if he and his sister were to meet the Goddess this day, he would not do it on his knees. He now looked down on about four little kittens

before him and they were unmistakably Hoard. He roared again and the roar was deep and the very air itself seemed to quiver. With two open arms he reached down and encircled the four Hoard, scooping them up in his huge arms. Their faces were frozen with terror. Like a Bear, in tales of old, he squeezed these four Hoard and dropped their lifeless bodies to the ground as he roared again. “Rally to our Lord!” cried the Clan that had been getting chased by the Hoard. “Lord Jounka, Lord Jounka” they sang. “Lord Bearskin!” one called and the rest took up the cry. Jounka spun to his right to meet the new Clan arrivals. Why are they so small? He thought. “Lord Jounka, Protector of the Clan, what are your orders?” said the group collectively as they bowed before him.

Chapter 24

The Goddess started thousands of threads or streamlets of time and fate. Some of them stretched back hundreds of generations, some only a few seasons ago. Some of these trundled on their own course and came to an end, some meandered around and joined other small streamlets to form small streams and some started small and grew as they made their way to the main river. The Goddess managed some and others she just started and forgot

about. One of her main responsibilities, however, was to manage the main river of time and fate. Now like any river sometimes it comes across a stone or boulder in the middle. A river or stream can split and flow round it and join up again or sometimes it creates two new paths. With the larger or more important threads, the Goddess can see them as they flow. She can see the path they take and what will happen to them and, more importantly, how they will affect the main river in the future. Now one of the things that even she cannot control is free will and chance and, over the millennium's, this has caused quite a few issues. Now she watched what was happening at the Barn and the North field and all those little threads and streamlet's were coming together nicely, or so she thought. Suddenly the picture began to change and she knew something had happened. Free will had been exercised and now the future gave multable possibilities. The Goddess concentrated and looked to see what had changed and it was not long before she found it. She gave a sigh as she seen one of Moldosa's children had exercised free will and made a different choice than he was meant to. The Goddess does not get annoyed like the rest of us. The best thing to say was that this free will choice was like getting a small thorn in her paw. Then something tugged at her memory and metaphorically she looked to her far right. Now a small smile appeared on her face. Yes she thought, another small thread she had started many seasons ago, for no real reason,

suddenly appeared on her horizon. That thread was now rushing and growing as it headed straight toward Blacken's own stream and she could see them colliding and joining. Let's hope there are no more of these stones in this river, the Goddess thought.

Blacken watched as the Hoard, to his left, started to chase down the side of the Barn, the Clan under the command of Jounka and Yodaka. Only three of the Clan he had taken to the forest had survived and he had picked up about six or seven stragglers from the Clan defending the Rise and a few of Jounka's Gap defenders. He faced another three Hoard who were probing their defense. The Great Hedge was tight to his right and that gave them protection from being attacked on four sides. However, as they counter attacked, retreated and counter attacked again, they only moved very slowly down the field and now some of the Hoard were getting in behind them and they now had to fight off attacks on three sides. "Buy the kittens time", Yodaka had told them all. That's what really matters now. He prayed to the Goddess that Mother and Tigera had managed to get the kittens organised through the tunnel and were now nearly at the top of the North field exit. The retreat was now going even slower and the Clan were slowly being picked off by the Hoard. Something was happening behind to his left. As he faced up the field towards the advancing Hoard they

all started to stare behind him, to his left. Whatever was happening was his advantage and he used it. “Everyone, counter attack up the field now!” he shouted to his *Kin*.

“Look!” one of them called to Blacken. Reluctantly he glanced over his left shoulder to see a wall of flame and allowed himself a rare smile.

“It’s just my Mother and sister scaring the Hoard with some *Ka* magic” he called back.

“Now, attack while they are distracted” he commanded.

As one, they now launched themselves at the distracted Hoard scattering them back. Now they all turned and did the same to the Hoard that had got round behind them but Blacken quickly realised that time was running out. The circle around them was closing faster again and the stench from these Hoard filled his sensitive nostrils, actually making him wretch slightly. His siblings called him “the nose”, amongst other things. As long as he could remember, his sense of smell was exceptionally enhanced. He could be lying down in the Bedroom and as soon as Dad took out the Shells in the Kitchen, that had the lovely fish tasting insides, he could smell them. This was even before he had opened them. The same with Rats nests, he could tell when the Dam was just about to give birth to a mischief or single pup.

Now the filthy stench of these Hoard filled his nostrils.

And then free will played its part and just like that, a new thread was formed.

Blacken was the smallest of the three brothers and bigger than Tigera. There were two things that also set him apart from his brothers, firstly, although he was bigger than Tigera he was actually the same weight or maybe even a bit lighter. The second was his paws and claws, which were even bigger than Yodaka's or Jounka's. This is what gave him the ability to be so sure footed as the huge paws distributed his light weight even more than other *Kin*. It also gave him the ability to be an expert climber and more importantly the ability to get back down again. No getting stuck up tree's for this *Kin*. As he had looked around he noticed something about the Great Hedge, which to all intense and purpose, was just a hedge. Yes it was ten times taller and four times thicker and it was just a hedge made up of lots of individual small trees and shrubs interwoven together. So, in essence, if he can climb any other hedge then he can climb this one as well, given the uniqueness of his huge paws and claws. It only took a few heartbeats to change Yodaka's plan and start a new thread in the Clan's fate.

"Listen to me Clan fighters" he said as they fell back from another counter attack.

"We must get out of here now or none of us will leave this field today. I am going to attack the Hoard closest to the Hedge and everyone is to put their heads down and sprint through the gap I will

create. Once through, angle towards Jounka's group and join up with them at the wall."

"But" started one of them.

"No time for buts, I am going now so get ready to move" he shouted.

And with that he took a deep breath and steadied his racing heart. He let everything fall away from his vision and focused on the five Hoard closest to the Hedge. It was well known he did not like touching the *Ka* and now he made an exception. He took in some of the tainted *Ka* and things around him slowed to around half pace. Now he surged forward, his huge paws barely touching the ground as he moved with lightning speed towards his intended targets. As he reached them he spun in the air and his hind paws caught the front three with a heavy thud, sending them sprawling to the ground.

"Now!" he cried to the Clan remaining, and with that, seven Clan members sped through the small gap pushing over the Hoard getting back to their feet. Blacken landed and swung out a huge paw towards the remaining hoard and as he was about to make contact, his legs were swept away from behind him. Seeing what was happening, the Hoard were coming down the field had reacted faster than Blacken had anticipated and now were on him. Blacken landed heavily on his face, causing his nose to bleed and for a heartbeat he was slightly dazed. These stinking Hoard will have to work harder than that, he thought, if they think they will get me. He rolled twice and sprang to his feet, now

facing at least thirty or forty Hoard that had formed a semi circle round him, with his back to the Hedge. He gave a wry smile and shouted “You want me, then come get me!” and with that he charged towards them. Only just before he got to the closest one, he suddenly spun completely round and sprinted towards the Hedge. The attack was just a faint to give him a run up and now he launched himself at the Hedge with four huge paws, claws out, ready to grab onto the side of it. He hit the Hedge about six or seven *Kin* lengths off the ground and stuck to it without missing a grip. He could feel the air from paws swiping at his tail behind him and he knew they could not reach him, and he concentrated on the job at hand. Don’t look up or down, he told himself, just look for the small gaps in the Hedge as he would normally do and start climbing. He started slowly at first but very quickly got into the swing of things and in no time at all was making his way up the huge wall of the Hedge. Behind him the shouts were getting quieter, more distant.

“I’m not going after him!”

“He’s mad!”

“Let him fall and break his neck!”

Luckily he was a light as he was or this climb could have ended in disaster. As it was, he was stronger than he looked and with the advantage of his oversized paws he was soon ready to pull himself onto the top of the Hedge. Just as he thought it would be, the top of the Hedge was almost solid and

it was easy to pull himself over the edge and stand up. He turned round and checked that no one from the Hoard had bothered to follow him, which they had not. Although there were still about eight or nine positioned below him, presumably waiting to see if he fell. From the top of the Hedge he now had a full view of the entire field and could see what was transpiring. He could see the huge wall of flames that mother and Tigera had thrown up, obviously to buy more time for the kittens to escape. He was full of pride. Although he obviously loved his mother, little Tigera was his heart and favorite by a long shot. They seemed to have a different bond to that of his brothers and he would give his life to protect his little auburn heart. Just at that, he saw the huge form of Lord Adeben jumping through the flames. He cried out “Run, Run!” but he was too far away for them to hear him.

Now everything went in slow motion as the nightmare unfolded before him. He saw Adeben reaching down and picking up mother, he saw from the corner of his left eye Yodaka starting to sprint towards Tigera and mother. Now he saw Tigera flying through the air, an impossible distance, and landing on Adeben’s face. He saw mother being tossed to the side and then a huge paw coming up and swiping at Tigera.

“No!” he screamed

“Not my little Heart!”

Then something hit him in the chest. He staggered backwards and over the far side of the Hedge, plunging down to the ground below, and then everything went black.

Chapter 25

Jounka looked down at the small *Kin* before him.

“What by the Goddess is going on!” he shouted, nearly deafening his fellow Clan members.

“The Goddess has blessed you, Lord Jounka!, you are a Protector! The Goddess favours the Clan. Now we have Lord Hamani and Lord Jounka!” shouted up one of the Clan.

Just at that Pika arrived and stared up at Jounka

“No, now we have three!” she exclaimed and pointed back up the field to the huge figure of Yodaka now bounding down the field towards them.

Yodaka arrived and stared at his brother

“You too?” was all he said, then carried on

“Get Tigera onto your back and get her out of here, brother.

Where is Blacken?” he had turned now to address the Clan members who had been with Blacken at the side of the Hedge. They looked at each other, no one wanting to speak up

“He attacked the Hoard, made a hole in their ranks for us to escape” said a nervous *Kin*.

“You left him there?” said Jounka.

“He told us to run and not to stop Lord Jounka. I thought he would be right behind us” the Clan member said, backing away slightly. Jounka was about to say something and his face darkened. “Brother” was all Yodaka said. Jounka spun round to his brother “I will go and get him, let them try and stop me!” said Jounka Yodaka put a paw on Jounka’s shoulder “No, brother, see to our sister. She needs you now” “I saw him” said a faint voice at the back. “Step forward young one” said Yodaka. “where did you see him?” “he was” and the youngster swallowed “he was on top of the Hedge” he said. Both Yodaka and Jounka scanned the Hedge “Where?” they said in unison. “He, he, he fell my Lords” stuttered the *Kin* quietly “over the other side of the Hedge” he finished. Yodaka and Jounka stood in silence for a moment, still staring up at the Hedge. “Brother” said Yodaka quietly. “Brother” he said a bit louder. “What!” snapped Jounka. “Our sister is now your charge, she is your priority now. Get her back to the Refuge House.” Said Yodaka quietly. “I will stay here and watch the Hoard and wait for our brother” he finished.

Jounka stood staring at Yodaka for a few moments, his breathing was heavy. Yodaka looked into his brother's eyes and spoke in *Ka* to him

“My heart is breaking as well brother but look around you at all these scared youngsters. They look to us to guide them and set an example. Take our sister home.”

Jounka did not answer but looked at his brother for a few more moments and then gave a slight nod.

“Come on, help me get my sister onto my back” he said to the rest of them.

Jounka lay flat on his belly and four of the Clan helped push Tigera onto Jounka's back. Once she was on he stood up carefully and walked a few steps and turned. He did this twice to get the feel of Tigera on his back.

“Ok, let's go” was all he said and turned to head along the side of the wall.

Yodaka watched as Jounka followed the wall to the end of the field where it meets the Green Forest, then Jounka connected to him

“I won't let you down brother.”

“I know you won't” said Yodaka.

“Now it's my turn to tell you not to do anything stupid, like try and hold the whole Hoard at the gap in the wall” Jounka laughed.

“No chance!” exclaimed Yodaka.

“Don't you dare leave me with a bunch of youngster and screaming kittens. First sign of movement you get your ugly grey face back here”

and at that Jounka cut the connection as the group disappeared into the forest.

At this end of the North field the forest was not as thick or as wide as it was up near the Barn. It did not take long for the small group to weave their way through the trees to the other side and exit facing one of the huge corn fields that lay on this side of the forest. Jounka looked up to his right. Even with his greater height above the ground, he could not see all the way up to where mother had led them across the field and into the forest on the day they arrived at the Barn. He tried to look across the field to see if he could see any of the markers mother had pointed out and he could not. He had held out a little hope that he would be able to see the way they had crossed, as that would have saved them nearly half the time to get back to the Refuge House. Now he looked down to his left and he could easily see the trampled grass at the side of the corn field where the kittens had passed. The rest of his small group had already turned left and were heading along the side of the field. He set off behind them and at least the ground here was nice and smooth compared to the North field. They had picked up the pace, so he was now at a strong walking pace, as the other *Kin* were trotting along. He looked down the field and could not even see where it ended. It just seemed to disappear into the horizon and suddenly he understood why mother had learnt how to cross the field. Not only was the field so wide and exceptionally long, it was

notoriously where the corn rattus lived and although they were just slightly smaller than kittens, they made up in numbers what they lacked in size. It was well known that *Kin* had went into the corn fields and never came out again. It was without a doubt a dangerous place. They had been walking for some time now and Jounka was starting to get tired as keeping this form up was very exhausting both physically and mentally, well mentally was not quiet the right way to describe it. To maintain this form he was connected to the *Ka* and now he was beginning to see why Toms who tried to wield the power of the *Ka* like females could go a bit strange. The only way to describe it was like the taste of having eaten something that was off or rotten. He could feel the rottenness spreading slowly throughout his body. Gradually his mood was getting darker and strange thoughts kept popping into his head. One of the *Kin* had asked him if he was fine or needed a rest and he shouted at him for no reason, sending him scurrying ahead with his tail between his legs. He was weighing up what to do, as he now walked almost in a trance, when one of the Clan shouted that the end of the field was in sight. Thank the Goddess, he thought to himself, he knew he needed to rest and disconnect from the *Ka* very soon.

“Let’s stop at the end of the field for a short rest” he called ahead.

He thought his eyes deceived him because of the *Ka* madness that might overwhelm him and when he

looked ahead he could see the corn field disappearing into the horizon. It was not until he got closer to where the others had now gathered that he seen there was a small ditch, presumably to catch rain water, and a narrow path separating the field they travelled down, with the next field. He was glad, and it was lucky, that they were with some *Kin* from the 3rd Borough as they knew this land the best and travelled these paths between the fields.

Yodaka watched Jounka disappear amongst the trees and turned round, nearly tripping over Pika.

“What are you still doing here, youngster. Get yourself off to the Refuge House. If you hurry you can still catch up with the others” he said looking down at the small form of the *Kin*.

“I will stay with you, my Lord. No one should be on their own today” she said and walked over to the gap in the wall, sat down and looked back up the North field.

Yodaka gave a silent laugh to himself. Indeed little one, he thought, size does not determine wisdom he reflected. Yodaka walked over and sat beside Pika and looked up the field. For whatever reason, the Hoard had retreated back up the field to the furlough where mother had set the fire wall. For the first time he got an indication of the hoard numbers, as they were spread across half the field and nearly all the way up to the Barn. There was no way he could count them but he reckoned they numbered in

the hundreds, maybe as many as four or five hundred. Now the enormity of what faced them suddenly hit him and for the first time today he felt hope fade away. He sat down beside Pika and now the exhaustion hit him hard. The sick feeling he had pushed to the back of his mind now also came flooding back and he wretched several times. Finally, he became aware of the tiny connection to the *Ka*, that was obviously part of his transformation into the Protector, and he severed it. In the blink of an eye everything suddenly got a lot bigger and he looked around him as if seeing this place for the first time. Pika now stared at him and she said nothing, and it took a heartbeat to realise she was looking him in the eye at the same level, not looking up at him or he looking down at her. “How do you control it?” she said quietly, looking back up the field. He thought for a second. “You know, I actually don’t know. I just remember thinking, I need to protect Tigera and no one was getting past me.” They sat for a few moments longer. “Can you do it again, if you need to?” she enquired, this time looking him in the eye. “I, I really don’t know” he said and Pika could hear the doubt in his voice. “Well, I might be very young and if the Goddess seen fit to bless you then I think she will have made sure you can do it again” she said with confidence.

Yodaka said nothing and just stared straight ahead, looking up the field. The youngster had posed a very good question. What if the Hoard started moving down the field and he could not transform to protect the gap?. He cleared his mind and focused on his body, doing a mental check. He had some cuts and bruises but nothing major, maybe a few battle scars to show for the day's events. His sickness was clearing quickly now that he was detached from the *Ka* and his strength was returning slowly. As they sat and watched the Hoard, they now seen that more and more were going back up to the Barn and it was becoming obvious that a mass advance down the field would not be happening soon. The two *Kin* now settled down flat against the ground and set their heads on their paws, ready for a long wait. Yodaka's gaze drifted towards the Hedge and he reached out to Blacken but he could not find him. To be more clear, when he concentrated on Blacken he got nothing. It was like a blackness or wall which was different if he tried to search for Mother. When he tried that there was just emptiness.

Jounka now stood in the middle of the path separating the two fields looking along the path, to the East and towards home and the Refuge House. "Lord Jounka!" cried one of the Clan. "Lord Jounka!"

Jounka was not used to the name and just stood there looking around. Then it dawned on him they were addressing him.

“Sorry, whats wrong?”

“Get down before you are spotted!”

Again he stood there not understanding

“What are you screaming about?”

“No one except a *Kin* can see you in the Protector form. What if you are spotted by a Mom or Dad, or even worse by the Farmer. They will all come hunting you!” exclaimed one of the Youngsters. Suddenly it hit him on the whiskers what they meant and he dropped to the ground, nearly dropping Tigera.

They all now crouched down and looked around nervously, checking to see if anyone had spotted Jounka in his huge form. They sat there for a few moments and it appeared they had not been discovered.

Slowly Jounka, aided by the others, lowered Tigera to the ground. Now he concentrated and found the small thread connecting him to the *Ka* and severed it. Instantly he was back to his normal size, all be it still larger than any of the youngsters around him.

“Well that certainly puts the *Kin* amongst the rabbits” said Jounka.

“How are we to get my sister to the Refuge House if I can’t carry her as a Protector?” he asked, more to himself than to those around him.

They all looked at him and sat in silence again. He reached out to his brother.

“Yodaka.”

“I am here brother, are you alright?” he asked with concern in his voice.

“Yes, all is good. Well, except that we have a small problem” Jounka said slowly.

“Well out with it quickly brother” replied Yodaka, “I am on the path that separates the two huge cornfields on the other side of the Green Forest. The problem is that we are now further North than the path Mother showed us when we came here” he paused.

“Are you lost?, I thought you had some Clan who knew the way” said Yodaka.

“No we are not lost, we know the way. However, as said, we are so far North I am in danger of being spotted by others not of the *Kin*” he let that hang there.

“Oh” said Yodaka and Jounka waited a few heartbeats.

“What about Tigera” it suddenly dawned on Yodaka

“Exactly” replied Jounka.

“These youngsters are not big enough to help so I think we need to share the burden” Jounka said. Again silence.

“Any sign of Blacken?” asked Jounka quietly.

“None” was the one word reply.

“Have you tried connecting?” enquired Jounka

“Off course” was the curt reply from Yodaka. Silence again.

“Ok, Pika and I will make our way to you. The Hoard don’t seem to be making any moves to come after us so we need to use this time to get as far away from here as possible.” Yodaka had decided. “Ok, we could do with the rest until you arrive” and Jounka broke the connection.

Yodaka turned to Pika.

“We need to go. My brother needs me to help him with my sister” he informed her.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“They are on the path between the two North fields and Jounka can’t take the risk of being seen in his Protector form by anyone other than a *Kin*” he stated.

“Ah” was all Pika said.

They took one last look up the field and backed away from the gap. Turning they stood up and now started out at a quick pace with the wall on their right protecting them from being seen.

Chapter 26

Lord Adebén sat in the Council chamber within the Great Barn with his paw covering his bleeding eye. There was also blood seeping from a few nasty looking cuts, one down his cheek and one on the top of his nose and one near his remaining eye. Amaya entered the chamber and sat down in silence next to her Lord and did not say anything. She had already intercepted one of the Hoard who had been at the fire encounter and she had

connected with him via the *Ka* to find out what had transpired. There were a few pieces missing from the end of the story but she decided to wait a bit longer before asking Adeben what had transpired. Adeben had also given orders not to advance any further and to consolidate the taking of the Barn, he thought they needed to rest and celebrate and eat to take the focus off the fact that the Clan had been a far more challenging adversary than the Hoard had expected or been told they would be.

After a suitable silence Amaya spoke.

“I see you Lord Adeben, leader of the Hoard, Protector of the Westland’s and now Master of the Great Barn and its surrounding lands” she had her head bowed and looked at the floor.

He swung his head towards her and gave a small, sarcastic laugh.

“Look at me” he said with a reserved anger.

She did not raise her head.

“I said look at me!” he shouted.

Now she did raise her head and looked at him as he removed his paw briefly from his eye for a heartbeat.

“Are you calling this a glorious victory?” pointing to his face

Amaya thought there was two ways to handle this and decided that a mixture of hard truths and facts was the way, whether Adeben liked it or not. She took a breath.

“I tried to tell you how special this family are, I told you they could affect the outcome of any

endeavours and that I see them involved in your death. I see the mother and son together at your end” she took another breath.

“Because of the brothers fighting and organisation skills, we have probably lost ten times the numbers that we should have lost. This puts any further plans in jeopardy and now their status amongst the Hoard is almost god like” she finished.

“Well the Witch mother, Moldosa and her Witch daughter are of no threat now. I took care of that myself” he spat blood onto the floor.

“Let me connect, as something is not right” she said.

“Be quick” he replied.

Amaya connected to Adebén with the *Ka* and accessed his memory from the moment he exited the tunnel. She watched through his eyes as the events unfolded and his subsequent retreat back up the North field. She was silent as she concentrated now on her visions. Finally she spoke

“Yes, Moldosa is dead but I am not sure about the daughter. However this is more confusing, as what I seen has basically not changed and I don’t understand why Moldosa is still there at your end” She closed her eyes again.

“My sight is being blocked” she stated.

“You mean like earlier today?” enquired Adebén.

“No, this is something different, something more powerful. Perhaps the phrase blocked, is not accurate. You see with the sight, I can see possibilities of what may come. Nothing is certain

as free will and choice cannot always be accounted for. Now I can't see any of the different time threads, only this one" she said, with a confused look on her face.

"Well" he started.

Before Adeben could answer, they heard a commotion outside and a youngster appeared at the door.

"A Protector at the Great Hedge, my Lord!" he shouted.

Adeben and Amaya looked at each other for half a heartbeat and sprinted out of the room, following the youngster all the way to the Barn doors.

With Hamani dead they knew a new Clan Protector would rise but this soon was unusual. As they got to the doors they could now hear the screams of *Kin* coming from the other side of the Hedge and about five hoard ran towards the Gap in the Hedge. Just as they got there they were nearly run over by about fifteen Hoard running back through the Gap from the other side of the Hedge. Almost immediately, a huge black *Kin* shadow passed across the far side of the Gap from right to left, moving so fast it was impossible to make out any detail. The five Hoard that had ran to the Gap now approached it cautiously and peered round the South corner before going a few steps through the Gap and standing looking South. Adeben and Amaya looked at each other confused as everyone else was.

His head hurt, his body hurt and now there was a foul stench filling his nostrils. The foul smell tugged at the back of his memory, something had happened associated to that horrible stink, something bad. His chest hurt as well and then something came back to him, yes, he knew what it was. Something had stolen his heart, well not something, foul smelling creatures had stolen his heart and an all consuming grief welled up inside him and his eyes began to fill with tears. Then he felt a blow to his right side, followed by a scratch to his left leg and he opened his eyes and found himself face down. The stench was coming from these creatures around him, creatures that had stolen his beloved heart. Now his enormous grief began to change to anger. Why had they stolen his heart, why did they attack me now. Another three blows to his side sent physical pain shooting through his body and one of these creatures laughed out loud. His anger now built quickly and suddenly and he cried out with the pain as slowly he pushed himself from the ground. They will all pay, he thought to himself, for taking his heart and thinking it was amusing. He felt his body fill with strength as he started to rise and suddenly he sprung up onto all fours and looked around. These stinking creatures were small, he thought, as he looked down on them and that just meant he could take his revenge more easily. Instinct now took over and his movements were almost trance like to him, as he spun and danced in a circle and revelled in the feeling as his huge claws

ripped through four or five of these creatures at a time. He stopped for a brief heartbeat and looked at the carnage around him. The remaining creatures looked at him with terrified faces and he shouted at them.

“You stole my heart, now I will steal yours!”

And with that, these stinking creatures turned and ran up the field with a Hedge on their left side, leaving him alone for a few heartbeats. The grief came flooding back and suddenly he did not want to be there. He sprinted off in the same direction these creatures had taken and just as he was closing in on them they turned left and went through a gap in the hedge. He ignored them and ran faster passed the gap and continued following this Hedge up a small rise, to the top and down again, into a large field.

Adeben and Amaya stood at the Barn doors for a few moments and then Amaya said “You best be getting back to the Council Chamber” and she moved her head and eyes towards Adeben’s left.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to be out where everyone can see you” she said quietly. Adeben slowly and casually, looked over to his left and could see small groups of five or six Hoard talking and looking in his direction. She is right he thought. He tried to picture what he looked like with blood dripping down his face, multable cuts and a missing eye.

“Yes, I agree” was all he said and quickly turned and headed back into the Barn, with Amaya trailing behind him.

As they made their way down the left hand side of the Barn, Adeben spoke in *Ka* to Amaya.

“Shall we discuss what we just seen? A new Clan Protector this early after Hamani’s death is surely unusual and can I assume that’s another thing you did not foresee?”

“Yes, your right on all things. The fact that a Protector has appeared so quickly following the death of another is highly unusual. I have pointed out, that not taking care of Moldosa and her brood, like I said, has changed things, things I cannot see or are hidden from me.”

They arrived at the Council Chamber to find two Hoard waiting for them and they were shuffling about and looking nervous.

“Why are you here in the Council Chamber?” asked Adeben.

The two Hoard looked at each other, then nudged each other as if to indicate the other one was to speak. Finally one of them plucked up the courage “Lord Adeben, Lady Amaya, forgive our boldness and intrusion and we had news we thought you should know about immediately” he said nervously as he stood there looking from Adeben to Amaya.

“Well out with this news then” commanded Adeben.

“Another Clan Protector has risen!, We seen it for ourselves” he said.

“Thank you for coming straight to me. I appreciate your diligence and we seen this new Protector at the Gap in the Hedge and it looks like it ran off” he advised them.

The two Hoard looked at each other. Then one of them spoke up.

“My Lord, I beg your pardon but the Protector we seen was in the North field and then we watched as he retreated down the field to the bottom where the wall is. We then came straight here arriving only a few heartbeats before you because we used the tunnel to get into the Chamber.”

Adeben looked at Amaya, then said to the two Hoard

“This Protector you seen had long black hair, correct?” he enquired.

“No” they replied in unison.

“The new protector was grey haired and I believe he is one of the sons of the Witch Moldosa” said one of the Hoard.

“That’s right “spoke up the other one.

“We were in the group chasing this grey down the field, then he ran over to where the fire was. Then after you left, our group ran up the slope, half way down the field and suddenly a huge grey Protector appeared on the top and the first ones who ran up had run straight into this giant *Kin*. We then decided that you needed to know about this straight away” he finished.

Lord Adeben kept his composure and said to the two Hoard

“I thank you for bringing us this very important information. Please go into the chamber next door, I believe there is still some fine rabbit left over for brave *Kin* such as yourselves” he advised them
The two *Kin* bowed low and ran out the Council Chamber.

“By the Holy Goddess, what is going on here!” he shouted at Amaya, once the two Hoard had left the room

He turned to face her and for the first time he seen indecision in her face and fear in her eyes

“That’s impossible” she stuttered and started to pace the room.

“They must be mistaken, those silly *Kin*” she muttered to herself.

“Two Protectors, at the same time, ridiculous!” she continued.

Adeben sat down and watched as Amaya paced back and forth muttering, asking questions and answering them herself. His anger had not subsided, rather he kept it in check, as ranting and raving would not change or help the situation. Finally Amaya had slowed down her pacing and stopped muttering out loud.

“Amaya” no answer.

“Amaya” he said a bit louder and with a bit more force.

She stopped and looked over at him

“Yes, sorry, was just going over possibilities in my head.”

“Yes, I could hear them” replied Adeben.

“Why don’t you use your skills on something useful. Go next door, connect to one of the Hoard and see what they saw. Then we will know for sure, what is what” he said in a tone that was not a suggestion.

“Yes, good idea” said Amaya, still distracted, and she walked out of the Chamber.

Adeben set about cleaning his wounds and it only seemed like a few moments before Amaya came back into the chamber. He could tell by her face that it was indeed bad news.

“Well?” he asked

Her face had already given it away but she had managed to compose herself in the time she was away.

“Unfortunately they saw what they claim to have seen and we still cannot rule out the possibility that it was a Glamour by the Daughter” said Amaya. Adeben thought for a while.

“We must presume the opposite and imagine that there are now two Clan Protectors. If we presume this then we can plan our next moves appropriately and with caution” he stated.

“And if this is the truth, then there is nothing we can do about it. We will stay here and consolidate our takings. We now control everything West of the Barn to the mountains and the surrounding bountiful fields. Let the Hoard enjoy this victory, rest and fill their bellies. This is not over yet.” With that, he set about cleaning his wounds again.

Chapter 27

Yodaka and Pika made their way through the Green Forest and emerged at the edge of the huge corn field. They could see the trampled edge of where the kittens and Jounka's group had passed some time before. At least following them would not be too difficult in this terrain. They turned North and followed the edge of the field until they came to the path that separated the two corn fields and where Jounka had stopped and spoken with Yodaka. Now they turned right and headed East. Yodaka started to pick up the pace as he was keen to put as much distance between them and the Hoard and to catch up with Jounka, if possible, to share the burden of carrying their sister. The day had been clear and not particularly warm. However now Yodaka could feel the change in the air and he knew that his coat would soon be very wet from the storm that was moving in very quickly. The path seemed to go on for some time and he thought that it had not taken this long to cross the corn field that day with Mother and his brothers. He stopped running and turned round and he suddenly noticed that looking back he could see the path was not in a straight line. In fact, they had been gradually turning North.

“Do you know this land?” he asked Pika.

He then noticed that Pika had sat down and was breathing heavily. He then remembered that she was just coming out of kittenhood and was nowhere as strong as he was. She looked up at him still panting and said

“No my Lord, we are from” she took a breath “the 6th borough, I had never left our yard before coming to the Barn.”

The 6th lay South of the territory that he and his brothers hunted around the 5th borough and the Refuge House. Then what she had said suddenly dawned on him.

“Who did you travel to the Barn with?” he asked.

Pika put her head down and said nothing for a few heartbeats. When she raised her head he seen the tears in her eyes and she hastily tried to wipe them away, before answering.

“My mother and young sister.”

Yodaka waited and let silence fill the gap until Pika was ready to continue.

“We came up from the South until we met the Southern edge of the Green Forest. Then we turned North and headed up the side of the forest until Mother seemed to recognise a large fallen tree and then we turned into the forest” she continued.

“We had not gone far into the forest when it became very dense and hard to see as the trees started to block out the light. Then everything started to go wrong.” Again she paused as if thinking.

“In the blink of an eye, a Fog appeared out of nowhere and you could hardly see the end of your whiskers, never mind Mother and my sister. Then the screams started and I got scared so turned round and tried to run to mother and instead I hit a tree knocking me to the ground and everything went black.”

Pika paused for a few more heartbeats and this time she did not try to wipe the small tears that had been forming in her eyes.

“When I woke up the Fog had lifted. I could hear shouting in the distance and followed the sound through the forest. As the forest began to thin I came across the first dead *Kin* I had ever seen, so I started to run. But then I tripped over another *Kin* and then another.”

“Then I found Mother” she stated and put her head down again.

Yodaka now had his own tears forming in his eyes and he went over to Pika and very slowly and gently gave her a kiss on the top of her head.

They sat in silence for a few moments longer and then Yodaka felt the first of some little rain drops hitting his face. Looking West he could see it would soon get very heavy. Pika felt the rain also and stood up.

“We better get moving” she said.

“What about your sister?” asked Yodaka

“Never seen her since” replied Pika and with that she set out along the path.

Yodaka watched for a few heartbeats and thought everyone's lives have changed forever. He will make it his mission to see Adebena pay for all of the lost Clan and with that he set off after Pika.

The rain had caught up with them now and their coats were very wet. Yodaka was quickly learning to read the landscape around him and he could tell that after the path had veered North, it was now turning towards the South. He had been reluctant to reach for the *Ka* during their journey, not knowing if he could control it. The last thing he needed was to connect and suddenly transform into a Protector and be spotted by a non *Kin*. Tigera had been on his mind as they made their way along the path and suddenly he noticed that Pika was not beside him. Unknowingly he had been increasing his speed, in his desire to catch up to Jounka, and now Pika was a short distance behind him. He decided to stop and risk connecting to the *Ka* as the path had moved further away from prying eyes.

"Brother" he reached out.

"Yodaka" replied Jounka.

"Where are you now?" asked Yodaka.

"We are cutting across the field in front of the Refuge House."

"You made good time!" exclaimed Yodaka.

"Is Tigera awake then?" he enquired.

"No change" Jounka informed him.

"When will you be here?" asked Jounka.

“We are a lot further behind you than I thought. It will be a while yet and I expect it to be dark by then” replied Yodaka.

“Safe journey, brother” and Jounka broke the connection.

Yodaka turned round and Pika was just approaching, breathing heavily again.

The rain was falling heavy now and the light was fading. He looked around him and started to see some familiar sights. The path was now about to turn North again and just over to his right he could see a familiar old Oak, the one Mother had pointed out on the day they travelled to the Barn.

“Let’s take some shelter for a few moments” he said to Pika.

He left the path now and went through the long grass towards the old Oak. Its branches were thick and spread out some distance from its trunk. Once under they gave themselves a good shake to get the excess water from their coats and then sat in silence watching the rain and wind blowing past the outer edge of the branches. In the distance he could just make out the tops of the Green Forest and he swung his head to the left and again in the far distance he could just about make out the line of old trees stretching from West to East, following the path of the little stream. Now he closed his eyes and his senses stayed on full alert and went over the events of the day. It was his plan, after all and because of him many of the Clan would not be returning home. Should he have sent Blacken with Mother and

Tigera? Or should he have sent him with Jounka to the Gap. Had they left it too long to retreat and should they not have counter attacked at the side of the Barn?

“You did everything you could to save the Clan” a voice said.

Yodaka’s eyes sprung open.

“What did you say?” he said to Pika.

Pika looked at Yodaka.

“What?” she said.

“Just then you said something. Say it again” he said with a bit more force.

“I did not say anything, my Lord. Perhaps it was the wind” she replied.

Yodaka looked around him slowly and listened intently. He was positive he had heard a voice but, as Pika had said, maybe it was just the wind and his own thoughts. In any case, it had unnerved him slightly and he decided they had rested long enough.

“Let’s be on our way to the Refuge House” he said to Pika and with that he stood up, stretched and headed South through the long grass. It was not too long before other Markers began to come into view. He seen the wires overhead and then he spotted the big tower that was in the town. They were now on more familiar ground. The Corn field was on his right as they made their way through the grass, which was now becoming shorter as they travelled South. Finally they came to the last Marker, which was the big two coloured rocks and he turned West.

The light had almost faded but at least the rain had eased off somewhat now. He knew he was approaching the House before he even seen it as the noise produced by all the kittens was quite obvious. They need to get that under control as soon as they can, or it will attract unwanted eyes and visitors. The outline of the Refuge House came into view and he started to see the first of the kittens in the field in front of the House. He turned to Pika “I need to run ahead here and speak to my brother” he informed her and did not wait for an answer. He sprinted at full pace now, covering the ground he knew so well, quickly and easily avoiding the growing numbers of kittens. He vaulted the wall that faced the double doors of the House in one bound and made his way through the doors. Jounka had placed Tigera on the old sofa and sat beside her with Natsu and Fugen posted at either end of the sofa like guards. Jounka looked up and the brothers just looked at each other for a few moments before Yodaka walked over and gave Tigera a small kiss on her head. “What do we do now?” asked Jounka. “Well the first thing we need to do is get these kittens under control. I could hear them even before I could see the House and that could bring unwanted attention” he said never taking his eyes off Tigera. “I meant about our sister” said Jounka through gritted teeth. “In a moment brother. Natsu, Fugen.” said Yodaka.

“Yes my Lord” they said in unison as they came over.

“Firstly, go and gather any adults you can find. Tell them to gather groups of kittens together and supervise them. Tell them they have to make sure to keep the noise down. Use the backrooms and what’s left of upstairs to form sleeping groups as its getting late and if we get them to sleep then the noise will go down. Anyone who is ruffling their tail, tell them Lord Yodaka has commanded it” he finished.

The twins looked at each other, smiled broadly, then turned to Yodaka.

“It shall be as you say, my Lord” and they sprinted together out of the House.

“Now, let’s look at you sister” said Yodaka as he climbed up beside Tigera on the Sofa, throwing Jounka a halfhearted smile. He concentrated and reached out to her with the *Ka*. He got no response and that is what he expected, however what he was really doing was looking for a connection and there it was. He had already played over the days events several times in his head and had forced himself to also review the fight between Mother, Tigera and Lord Adebén. He had only seen the very end of the confrontation but he was almost certain that at the end. Mother and Tigera had been joined in the *Ka* to produce the Conjuring’s they were doing. He could now see a tiny slither of *Ka* emanating from Tigera which meant she was still connected to the *Ka* in some form, what that was or how it was working was beyond his knowledge. He suspected that the

reason she had not woken up yet had something to do with that connection. He was scared to try and do something in case he made it worse. They say that a sudden forced disconnection could leave a *Kin* without their senses and this often leads to *Ka* Madness or worse. He broke his connection to Tigera.

“Well?” said an impatient Jounka.

“I can see she is still connected to the *Ka*. What she is actually connected to, I don’t know” said Yodaka.

“For the blessings of the Goddess! Even I could see that. Don’t you think I tried to connect to our sister and could detect the small *Ka* connection.

Remember, you are not the only one who the Goddess has seen fit to bless today with the Protector’s powers Brother” he said with a snap in his voice.

“Sorry” was all Yodaka could say.

“The fact that she is connected to something is a positive thing, I believe. If she had suffered too much damage then I don’t think she would be able to maintain the *Ka* connection” he finished.

At this, he lay back down next to Tigera and closed his eyes.

For one of the first times in his life he said a prayer “Mother, Goddess, I implore you to look after your daughter and faithful Clan servant, Tigera. She is lost from us and maybe she needs help to find her way back. I don’t ever ask anything and this thing I ask with all my heart and my life, if that is what it will take to return her.” With that, he tried to settle

his body into a composed sleep state but the day's events would not leave his mind and again and again he replayed every decision, action and different possible outcomes.

Chapter 28

Yodaka felt that he had only just closed his eyes when he was awoken by a youngster tapping his head. He opened his eyes and judging by the lack of bird song and darkness outside, it was very early.

“The mighty Lima is coming!” said a very excited youngster.

“The mighty Lima!” she repeated and ran out the double doors.

Yodaka had only met Lima once, a few seasons ago, when she and her Band had stopped to use the Refuge house and had paid Mother a courtesy call. He remembers she towered over Mother and Lima was the largest female *Kin* he had ever seen, then and now. Lima's unofficial title was well met, the Mighty Lima was as big as Yodaka, now that he had just moved from Youngster to adult and her bad temperament was well documented amongst the Clan, with most *Kin* able to give an example of when she had slapped some male Tom back into place. He suspected that most of these were, in fact, just a retelling and embellishment of only a few occasions. However her fierceness and fighting prowess was not in question. He wondered how this

encounter would transpire as if the Clan had any hope of defending the rest of the Borough's, or even taking back the Barn, then Lima would undoubtedly play a huge part.

He could just make out a small commotion outside which signalled Lima was close. What was the protocol here?, he thought. This was all new to him, even though Mother had schooled them all in *Kin* and Clan history, etiquette and laws. He knew that Lima had refused a place on the Council at least three times. Even though she did not tie herself to a particular Borough, as the most senior Elder of the Clan it was an honorary membership she had been offered. So technically, Lima was just another Clan member, all be it a living legend to the Clan.

Quickly he decided to play the meeting down, given the gravity of the situation. He remained lying on the sofa with Tigera but raised his head, so it did not seem disrespectful. Lima bounded in through the double doors, a few of her pack at her heels.

“Where is this boy!” she shouted, more for effect as it was obvious she meant Yodaka, who was clearly in front of her.

Slowly Lima stalked towards the Sofa, glancing to her left and right to ensure she had everyone's full attention.

“What have you done, boy” Lima growled and not as a question.

Yodaka opened his mouth as if to reply and Lima continued, not giving him a chance to say anything

Lima swung her head round and shouted, to no one in particular

“And would someone get me the Twins!”

Without pausing she continued.

“So the plan was yours to defend the Barn with virtually no Clan. To what end?. Lord Hamani killed, dead Clan scattered around the Barn and fields and still the Barn is lost and the Hoard now control everything from the Green Forest to the Great River. Did you ever stop and think? Did you not just consider abandoning the Barn? Or did you want to play the hero and impress everyone?” During Lima’s rant, Yodaka stole a look at Jounka, who was now standing in the corner behind the open door.

“Breathe, Brother, we need her” Jounka said in *Ka* to Yodaka, as he could see Yodaka was starting to get annoyed.

“And don’t you dare Channel the *Ka*, when I am speaking to you Boy! You think your mother was the only *Kin* amongst us with an enhanced *Ka*? Any female with half her skills can detect when a male uses the sacred *Ka*” and she swung her head round and gave a stern glance at Jounka.

Turning back to Yodaka

“So how am I going to fix your mess? How am I going to make sure the Clan survives the coming Cold Season? I will need to beg and fall down before that horrid Lord Adeben, all thanks to your stupidity.”

Yodaka had tried to do his best to listen, however he thought the conversation would take a different direction from the berating he was now getting. For what? he thought. He had done the best he could, given the circumstances, and he had been thinking about it all day and night. A deep anger had slowly been building and he had even heeded his brothers words and now Lima was just going on too much for his liking. Afterall, where was she during all this carnage? He asked himself.

“That’s enough” said Yodaka quietly.

“What you say?” said Lima tilting her head.

“That’s enough is it, I will decide what is enough and when, Boy” spat Lima.

“I am saying you have made your point, as you see it” said Yodaka slowly and more sternly starting to sit up on the sofa now.

“You be careful how you speak to one of your Elders Boy. You think your big enough and bad enough to challenge me? If I were you I would just lie down again. What would Moldosa think of your behaviour?”

Oh whiskers, thought Jounka, that will do it.

Yodaka closed his eyes briefly, swallowed hard, and then slowly and deliberately started to climb down from the sofa.

“Don’t you dare even speak her name” said Yodaka through gritted teeth.

“We did what we thought was the best. Yes Lord Hamani is dead and yes the ground is soaked in Clan blood. My Brother is missing, my sister lie’s

here with her mind lost to us and my Mother is dead from defending our kittens from the Hoard and where were you? Where were you when the Clan needed you?" shouted Yodaka.

What Yodaka did not really notice when he was shouting was that Lima was now very small and as he leaned down to shout the final words into Lima's face he realised his mouth could have swallowed her whole. He had transformed and now Lima stood looking up at him with mouth wide open and eyes wide.

With anger and frustration Yodaka did something that virtually no living *Kin* had ever witnessed He Roared like the Ancient *Kin* of old.

It was so loud that Lima was knocked to the ground Yodaka took another step forward and roared again causing Lima to crawl backwards.

He roared a long third time and when he was done he looked down to see Lima prostrate on the ground in front of him. He now looked around the room and everyone in the room lay on their belly, heads facing the ground. He looked out past the doors and every *Kin* he could see was also flat to the ground and the silence was deafening. Yodaka looked over to his brother, who was the only one not flat on the ground. Jounka stood there with a grin on his face and just gave him an affirmative nod.

Well it was very early in the morning and the only living things up and about were the night creatures, who were getting ready to settle in for the

coming day, and a few *Kin* still out on the night hunt. Not even the farmers who got up early to milk the cows had stirred yet. The night was at what is called “the silent point” The normal night sounds had ebbed away and the bird song had not even started yet. Yodaka’s roars floated in the silence across all the Boroughs and all the way to the Great Barn.

Lord Adeben and Amaya slept close to the Barn doors. Adeben had insisted they sleep here and banned anyone from sleeping in the Barn Chambers. He said it would be good for moral amongst the Hoard. Adeben was a very light sleeper.

At the first roar his eyes opened. By the second roar he was already on his feet and by the third long roar he was fully awake and alert. Amaya had also woken on the second roar and by the third roar, she and half the Barn were now up and looking around them in confusion, remembering that virtually no one has heard the roar of a Protector. Instinctively they all knew what it was.

Amaya’s face was one of shock.

“We, we need to double the Patrols! Send more to cover the Green Forest! She said to Adeben, still half asleep.

“We will and not right now. You will set a panic and we will lose more deserters back to the mountains” he said very quietly.

“Steady your face Witch. All eyes now look to us and will feed off our reaction” at which point

Adeben gave a large yawn and stretch and nodded to a few familiar faces.

“They will come and not today” said Adeben casually.

“Do you think they will come to take back the Barn?” asked Amaya.

“I thought you were the one with the Sight. Can’t you see what is in store?” retorted Adeben.

“It’s not clear, since Moldosa’s brood still live” she said looking away distantly.

“In fact, there is something wrong. A strange shift in the male *Ka*” she said with a puzzled look on her face.

“But can you see the Clan coming back to the Barn?” asked Adeben.

Amaya closed her eyes and concentrated for a while.

“Still unsure and confusing” she said slowly.

“But given the Clan have just had their whiskers pulled off, I don’t see why they would risk it” she concluded.

“Oh, it’s not a matter of if they will come, it’s more a case of when will they come” he said looking out at the forest.

“Concentrate on finding that out” he said and started to walk away toward the Hoard, now awake outside the Barn.

“Why will they come, sounds like a bad plan” she called after him.

Adeben stopped, turned round, looked at Amaya and said, “Moldosa’s children will come. They will

come for a Reckoning” he said somberly, as he turned and continued towards the Hoard.

The end of Book 1

The Gathering