

WEST OF TIME

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Press: Brave New Books

Cover design: Radu Muresan

Interior design: Avadri

Theme-code: FMT

NUR-code: 334

ISBN nr.: 9789465547961

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WEST OF TIME

Penned by Avadri

ACT I
CHAPTER I

—

HEARTS IN THE MUD

Children hugging their guts like rusted blades. Limbs scattered where they once danced. Each innocent, ripped from this world by the Black Wolves. The townspeople of Vrede reduced from Holtland's life to corrupted corpses. There is evil in this world, and I alone shall purge it. And so, I, your King, beseech thee,

*Come into my arms, take refuge in my shadow
Come into my arms, shield yourself from the blinding light of evil
Come into my arms, silence the howls of the traitors in your hearts*

*Curse Breker, the traitor General, and all who walked with him
Curse Wülfhart, the Black Wolf demon, and all who defiled my rule and land
with him*

*Hail my blood, Holtwick V
Hail your one light in this wretched world
Hail Holtland Kingdom*

Hail, me

- King Holtwick IV, shortly before his sudden death

I'm talking to you, but you're not a part of this conversation, the Black Wolf said to the trader who leaned nervously on the counter.

Every patron of *Modderpad Inn* sat eerily silent—like mice—looking dead ahead with frozen eyes. *Modderpad Inn* itself was as old as it was simple.

Around the Black Wolf stood a band of thugs, eating other people's food and drinking other people's drinks. The malevolence of their looks squeezed the throats of the recipients.

One of them gave the innkeeper's corpse a few shoves with his boot.

Another one of the thugs hung his arm over a girl's shoulders and groped her breast while slamming back her drink. The thug swallowed the last of the ale. Nice tits, he said with a grin, spitting drink with every vowel. The girl sobbed, to which the thug slapped her. Shut your trap, whore! he shouted. Her cheek reddened from the slap and her face shook from fear as tears burned a trail down her strained face.

You can have her. Looks milky. Could do with some milk, the Black Wolf said with a gruff chuckle.

The gropey thug threw the tankard across the inn like a brick. The flying ale drops cut through the toasty air of the crackling hearthfire. He pulled his callused hand off her breast and spat on the floor. No. Have you seen her mug? Wouldn't even let Feike rape her, he sneered.

And he's not picky. Hear that? Whore? the Black Wolf scoffed.

She did not respond.

The Black Wolf turned to the trader. We'd like some milk. *Get. Us. Some.*

A bandit chuckled. Why're you asking a man for his milk?

The Black Wolf looked at him with a scowl. He grabbed some stray scissors and cut a new breathing hole in his neck. The bandit slumped like wet sand, sloshing on the floor in his own spurting blood with a rusty cough. The Black Wolf looked over his shoulder at his men who didn't care. He asked, Anyone else feeling funny? I'm hungry and I'm here to feed. I need me a good cunt and some beer, he concluded, after which he turned back to the trader. I need *GULDEN!* he barked, slamming his fist on the counter.

I told you that I HAVE nothing. Please leave us be, the trader pleaded.

Got a cart full of supplies outside, don't you, Christoffer?! We'll be taking that. Also, didn't fucking ask what you have. I told you to GIVE me your Gulden! Every last coin.

Why would you do this! Why would you attack us, Jo-

Christoffer's cheek gashed open with a murderous slap to which he fell on the counter. Don't speak my fucking name! You don't deserve it! he shouted.

Rubbing his gashed cheek, Christoffer pleaded through his mortified tears, Please. Just take anything. I have no Gulden. Please, leave.

Then I'll take something. I'll have to take something! The Black Wolf grabbed Christoffer by the hair and smashed his head on the counter, dragging him across, tipping tankards and plates over. Rude to leave customers empty-handed. You're a shit person! And an even worse merchant! The Black Wolf threw him on the floor and kicked his face in to which blood shot out of Christoffer's nose.

In the meantime, a thug walked to a young man sitting hunched over at his table in the corner, who looked straight ahead with the embers of indifference in his eyes—something else was slowly taking over. The young man's old black travel cloak draped over his upper arms and bunched up on the bench he sat on, partially hiding his black tunic, its laced collar loosely tied together. The sunlight bleeding in revealed a few cuts and nicks on his arms which had long turned to scars. His black trousers shone a brighter shade in the sun as the fabric crawled into his turn-down coffee-colored boots. Around his waist hung a black leather belt, his cape hanging against the sheathed sword.

Christoffer stood up deliriously. He let himself drop back against a wall and looked back-and-forth at a young woman and the Black Wolf, blood dripping.

The Black Wolf ogled the pretty young lady, and grinned. Ah, yes. Your Daughter. Still looks fuckable!

Christoffer's body traded his voice for a tremble.

Think I'll breed her. Need more men. Join me, Christoffer! We'll all be a Family again! the Black Wolf cackled.

Instinctively, Christoffer pushed himself off the wall and clawed at the air. No! Never! Not after what you did to us!

If you won't join our new Family, then I'll have to make do with my Son-to-be! She'll shit one out eventually. The Black Wolf walked up to Christoffer's Daughter and pinned her by the arm and choked her with his other hand. She resisted—to no avail. The Black Wolf forced his lips on hers and licked them and—
She bit him and spat in his face.

Feisty! Don't worry, I'll be truly GENTLE! The Black Wolf headbutted her unconscious to which she fell limp on the ground.

On the other end of the inn, the thug leaned on the young man's table—his breath heavy with onion and alcohol. Through his scarred lips, which bared his gums, he said, Oi, what you so moody for? He just needs a good fuck. Give me a swig of that drink will ya. I'm thirsty.

The young man didn't flinch. Instead, he stared ahead, his dark brown eyes washed out of any sense of interest. His knuckles were white around the handle of a jagged tankard with a bottom of ale left in it.

Are you fucking deaf?! The thug reached for the drink.

The young man flicked his tankard away.

Ah, okay. Okay. The thug punched the young man's brow open and smashed his nose with an uppercut. Still, the young man held onto his drink.

The Black Wolf let Christoffer's Daughter go to behold the smackdown. He lit a tobacco roll and watched it play out.

One punch to the young man's gut followed—it was one too many. He kicked the thug in his balls and the bench scraped back as he surged to his feet, and the thug swung in again.

The jagged tankard rammed into the thug's eye. A wet pop followed—his eye deflating, leaking eyeball brine like a burst pickle. The thug fell on the table, writhing in pain and screaming and scratching around his emptied eye socket while clutching his balls.

Sluggishly, the young man reached for his scabbard and drew his sword and drove it through the thug's torso into the table, cutting through his lung like old leather. After some airless gasps, the thug stopped moving.

Christoffer's Daughter came to, watching the fight half-conscious.

The Black Wolf spat out his tobacco roll.

The last two thugs ganged up on him.

The young man tried to yank out his sword-

A thug knocked him back and as he fell the young man's sword ripped out of the dead thug and the other thug swung his axe downwar-

The young man flicked up his sword and the thug's axe-arm lopped off and his eyelids pulled back in shock. His delayed screams arrived late to the pain—the pain that sent him running out of the inn while squeezing his stump as blood poured down the skin and over the ravaged, exposed bone. The young man kicked the remaining thug in the knee and ankle, knocking him down. Blood and sweat mixed down the bloody-nosed young man's face—growling as he stood up—using his sword as a cane.

With a wide knife strike, Christoffer fell and the Black Wolf whipped the blood off his knife and the shaking patrons gasped and Christoffer's Daughter screamed as Christoffer's grip on his gaping neck slipped.

The Black Wolf hooked the knife into Christoffer's Daughter's shoulder to which she cried louder and he yanked her up and backed up against the wall, squeezing her throat with his other arm.

The young man got a good grip on his sword and walke-

The floored thug shanked him in the thigh and pulled him down.

In a blind back swing, the steel of the young man's blade tasted eye and bone as it wedged into the thug's face. The septum and the skin flopped on the floor as he wrenched the sword out. The crack in the skull split the head open further as it bumped the ground. With another downswing, he hacked off the arm attached to the hand which held the knife in his leg. Clenching his teeth, he pushed himself to his feet using the counter. Breathing heavily, his tightened eyes shimmered in the sundown light.

The hardened silence caught the breath of the patrons. They had to breathe so they took their leave, eyes glued to the floor.

The screams of Christoffer's Daughter dwindled to wailing, then sobbing.

The hearthfire crackled on.

One of us will be staying here! the Black Wolf shouted, tightly holding Christoffer's Daughter, squeezing her throat with his other arm.

Won't be me, the young man countered.

The Black Wolf bared his teeth in a foul grin. Then it'll be her, he said. He ripped out the knife and rammed it in her nec-

The young man's sword crashed into the Black Wolf's shoulder and the knife and sword dropped with a cacophony of clangs.

Christoffer's Daughter fell, clutching her neck.

With a grunt, the Black Wolf buckled over and picked up the sword and knife and escaped the inn, jumping through the window.

The young man limped out the door to chase him but he quickly realized that a limp won't ever catch up to a run.

The horses spooked and sped off with the cart.

The Black Wolf disappeared in the forest.

Spitting on the ground, he murmured under his breath, *dammit*. Returning, he saw Christoffer's Daughter crying silently and bleeding, her expression desperate in the face of her hopelessness. The young man hastily limped to the supply chest and rummaged through it, finding a rag and went bac-

He fell and hit the ground with a pain cry—immediately crawling to Christoffer's Daughter, he pushed the rag against her wound and applied pressure.

Christoffer's Daughter's cries stopped, her breathing slowed. She looked him blank in the eyes.

I'm Mitar. Your name. Tell me your name. Please, he said.

She breathed out but didn't breathe in, remaining nameless.

Mitar turned around and lay on his back on the floor. Grabbing the chopped hand holding the knife in his leg, he wrenched it out with a cry. Giving way to his exhaustion, he lay on the ground. The ceiling made him stare—until he yielded to sleep, between the Parent, and the Child.

Sloshing steps dragging through the bubbling mud cut through the pounding rain.

Mitar's eyes opened. He swiftly hid, taking a kitchen knife with him.

Two men entered Modderpad Inn.

Alright, where is that cunt? one of them said.

Already told ya, he ain't here, the other said.

Boss man told us to look! So, we look!

Look at this fuckin' mess. All over some Gulden.

One of the men lit a tobacco roll. Well, ain't the first time that peasant shit-heads are too dumb to liste-

A knife thumped through his neck and he fell—gurgling—cracking his chin and breaking his neck on a table on the way down and the other thug turned and struck, slicing only darknes-

Mitar slammed glowing coals on his face. The thug's skin discolored and whatever scraps of skin didn't scorch off, melted into his flesh. The gasping screams hoarsened his voice as he fell on his back. Mitar took the man's hand and pushed it to the ground and rammed the kitchen knife through it. Bones and tendons crunched, snapping like twigs. Screaming, the thug thrashed around, cutting his pinned hand further. Mitar hushed him, to which the man resorted to shaking and the occasional growl. He looked at Mitar, or what he could see of him. His singeing eyelids blinded his ash-riddled eye. The other eye could barely make out the details of Mitar's shadow-cloaked, pale face.

Where is he? Mitar asked.

Huh?! the thug asked.

Mitar punched his burned side. Where is he?!

C-camp. F-forest Camp. Beyond *Weemoed*.

Mitar swiftly killed him. For a spell, he did nothing. He shoddily mended his leg wound and took his leave. The moon, along with the sparse stars, kept him company on that muddy road. The rain had soaked him before he passed the handless thug's corpse that tried to run away earlier. Mitar didn't have shelter, nor did he seek it. Those in the inn who had shelter, no longer needed it. The mud pie road—cradled between the trees—flowed with the iron rain, carving the shattering lunar gleam with every rippling drop. Nocturnal winds raging in

between the rustling trees and branches hardened his skin and dried his tongue and lips. Thunder slapped the earth, giving Mitar a scare with every flash and bang. He stuck his tongue out for a few drops of drink. In those rivers of rain, he washed himself along that bending path—until his agony-riddled steps dried up, leaving grit to take the reins. Torchlight bled through a canopy of the night-veiled forest, drawing Mitar in like a firefly. The crunch of the blazing torch overcame the hissing, chaotic roars of the incessant downfall as he passed it on his way to a tavern.

It stood in a small settlement consisting of humble homes, a stall, and the tavern itself which he headed to. Some broken or old equipment stood weathered and unused, all over. Christoffer's cart stood in the stall, alongside the horses which were tethered to the stall's hitching posts. The infantine haze of dawn bloomed weakly—far, far away.

Mitar knocked on the door and it flew open and a man wielding a pitchfork hooked Mitar by the neck and swung him to the ground and he pressed the pitchfork into the wet earth, trapping him by the neck. Mitar raised his hands while a drop traced down his face, at no fault of the rain. Behind the man stood a pregnant woman in the doorway.

Who are you, dammit? Tell me, damn you! the pitchfork man asked.

...You knew them, right? Christoffer? His Daughter? Mitar replied.

What?

I said Christoffe-

I heard what you said. Tell me who you are, damn you! the pitchfork man interrupted, pressing the pitchfork in further, squeezing Mitar's neck.

I'm Mitar!

You with *them*?!

The Wolves? No!

How do I know you're speaking the truth?!

I killed some of them! Mitar shouted through the rain.

Must be his bandits you got, the pitchfork man said, his voice low.

Yes!

And the Black Wolf?!

He got away! Took my sword, too...

After a pause, the man pulled the pitchfork off—its tines scraped Mitar's neck—and powerfully stood it perfectly upright in the wet earth. He reached out his other hand. Folcmar, he said.

Mitar took his hand, and stood up. Mitar, he replied. He followed Folcmar inside who rested his pitchfork against the wall and closed the door behind him. The pregnant, pale-skinned wife, donning a white-brown nightgown, with her light brown hair tied back in a loose bun, stood inside—holding her large belly.

Introduce yourself, love. He's alright, Folcmar said. He turned to Mitar. Don't worry. She's just afraid... I am as well. Sorry for the rough greeting.

It's okay, Mitar said as he held out his hand. I'm Mitar, he added.

The pregnant woman shook Mitar's hand. I'm Adalmeer.

Folcmar stoked the fire. Sitting down in a chair beside it and staring into the flames, he said, Wolf and his men been houndin' us for damn decades it feels like.

You know him? Mitar asked Folcmar.

All too well... He tortures us. Chokes our supplies, harms us, robs us of our sleep... We're all that's left of Weemoed. Everyone's dead, or has fled to *Abdera*. Everyone's fleeing to the damn capital...

I tried to help, I really did. How'd you know of Christoffer anyway?

Recognized his cart outside. I heard some horse ruckus and went outside... It's done now. No going back.

Are we still safe? Adalmeer asked Folcmar.

Never were, love. Stay indoors. Even during the day. You are the most important. You and our Baby. He cannot have you again, Folcmar pleaded.

You said there's no going back. What have I done? Mitar interjected.

Not harming them kept them at bay. They got the numbers. They got 'em. They'll be coming, Folcmar said.

Not if I come for them first, Mitar replied.

You?

Yeah, me.

Fool.

What are you saying that for?

You already went for them. It cost two lives. The two lives of our two Friends left... Do you even know the girl's name?

I asked, but...

Scelta. Her name was Scelta. Christoffer was my last Uncle left. The last of our Family! Together with her!

I'll remember her, and Christoffer! I'm going to that camp of his and they won't hurt anyone else!

Folcmar stomped his thigh. Stay! HERE! You won't kill the Wolf.

Why?

You won't kill him. You won't... Stay here. You look dreadful.

Mitar's exhaustion hit him. His clothes felt stone-cold to the touch. There was an empty chair beside the fire. Mitar grabbed the head of it.

No, Folcmar said.

Sorry? Mitar asked.

You're not warming up here. I already took you in, you're not sleeping here. To the tavern with you. Folcmar rose and motioned Mitar to follow.

I'm not in the tavern?

Folcmar sighed. This is my house. He turned to his wife. Adal, love. Come.

She came over to him.

Folcmar gave her a forehead kiss and lifted her belly a little.

Her shoulders dropped with a deep breath. Thank you, honey, Adalmeer said.

Go to bed, Folcmar said softly.

Adalmeer put her forehead to Folcmar's chest. Then she departed upstairs.

Folcmar told Mitar to follow him to the common room, which he did. It was a connected building next to Folcmar's house. Walking exhaustedly through the door, Mitar found himself remarkably alone. A stoic man sat in the far corner, shadow-bit. He was short, buff, and had his blonde hair loosely gathered, tied behind the head. His beard framed his sharp jawline and sleep-deprived eyes, tightened by his scowl. He wore a faded blue tunic. Beside him, lay a hooded travel cloak folded in a quick and practical manner. At first glance, it appeared black. The flickering light quickly dispelled that illusion, revealing hues of the darkest blue. His sage trousers complemented his worn, tobacco boots. On his

belt hung an old mace. He didn't pay Folcmar and Mitar any mind, and kept staring at the table with disregard.

The hearth was recently stoked, warming the many vacant seats.

Kazmyr. This here's Mitar. He'll be staying as well, Folcmar said.

Kazmyr belted a low, uninterested growl.

D'you want ale? Folcmar asked Mitar.

Ale? Mitar asked back at Folcmar.

Yes, ale.

Yes... Yes. I'd like that.

Take a seat. I'll fetch some. After that, I'll see Adal to make sure she's soundly asleep. Then I'll stand watch from my house. If you need anything, don't ask. I'd like the both of you to leave as soon as the storm subsides. I'll give you that much.

Mitar took a seat at Kazmyr's table and waited wordlessly until the drink arrived. And with its arrival, Folcmar departed. A few swigs and the crackling fire did most of the talking. Once, Kazmyr stood up to stoke the fire again. It growled as its embers flared. Still, the pummeling rain and clapping thunder rang louder.

So, where you headed? Mitar asked.

Abdera, Kazmyr said.

Me too!

I will travel alone.

Why?

Once the storm has passed, I will depart. And, I must keep my own pace. I cannot do so with company.

Okay. Well, the roads will be safe once you go... I am going to that camp.

It is not your fault.

What?

It is not your fault, and their grief is not your concern.

Did you hear us?

Kazmyr only stared, scowling.

...Why do you tell me this? Mitar asked.

If Abdera is your goal, stick to it.

No. They took my Father's sword. It's what I've left of him, together with this pendant, Mitar said as he clutched it through the cloth of his tunic. I won't allow them to kill any more people.

Do as you wish.

I do as I *need*. It's the right thing to do... I'll go to Abdera afterward. What's your reason to go there?

That is not your concern.

Okay... farewell.

You are going? Folcmar asked you not to, did he not?

Leave me be. The storm will hide me, Mitar said with his voice low.

Kazmyr took a slow swig of his ale, and bade Mitar farewell with a nod—Mitar who got up off the bench and left.

Sorrow-sharpened, Mitar stalked the drenched forest. A weathered, large encampment eventually broke into sight between the trees. It consisted of old bone-white and viridian-green tents. Picking up a filthy rock, he sneaked up on a bandit and smashed his head in with a single blow. Taking the bandit's knife, he continued along the palisade line and squeezed in between a gap and huddled up against a tent in the camp. Two thugs sat around a fire to warm themselves against the dwindling rain. Tossing the rock a distance, the hard splash caught their attention. As they checked it out, Mitar backstabbed one of them, followed by a stab in the neck. The other heard it and cut Mitar's knife-hand open and tackled him to the ground and restrained him and quickly called for help. Every tent flew open as all the bandits came out to surround him, including the Black Wolf. With a heel stomp to the head Mitar was kicked into delirium.

Take his shit and bring it to my tent, the Black Wolf said.

Of course, Johann, a bandit replied.

Johann smashed the bandit's face in. It's boss for you! he barked.

The thug stood up weakly and he and the others tied Mitar up and blinded him and took his stuff and tossed him in an empty tent.

Biting dirt until his senses were restored to him, he rubbed the blindfold off.

A while later, Johann entered the tent and squatted down beside him. After a sigh, he said, You killed my men. Now, I can't just kill you. That wouldn't be fair. I must kill everyone now. Christoffer was a pain long enough. His bitch Daughter too. She's dead, right? Thanks for that! Johann cackled a little, after which he continued, You need to understand that this here region is my little circle of torture. I keep out worse, so I need freedom. You took that from me.

I'll take your life too, Mitar spat weakly.

Johann stood up and kicked him in the guts.

Mitar coughed from deep down, then he puked from the lingering ache.

Johann pushed his boot on Mitar's face, into his own puke. Shoulder's still fucked you know... Feike's men are coming. Had to send word, Johann said as he removed his heel. He pulled out his cock and pissed on him and added with a smirk, Just washing the puke and mud off for you. Finishing his piss, he stuffed his cock in his pants and knelt beside him and said with his voice low and his eyes

focused, *I'll use your sword to cut their heads off, right in front of you.* After that, they'll watch as I chop *you* up—small knife treatment. That, is where your life ends. Look where your little impulses got you, *you little man.*

Mitar silently lay on the floor.

Johann stood up and walked away. Grabbing the bandit posted outside by the collar he said, Keep him here for the tongueless man.

'Course boss, the bandit replied.

Once alone, Mitar rolled away and buried his face in the dirt, sobbing silently. *I screwed up. Just like with you, Breker. I'm sorry...*

Morning twilight rayed through the flapping tent entrance. And behind the opening of that tent lay the world's breath in wait—the world where Folcmar and his wife lay in the crosshairs of malevolence its long-reaching arm.

Driving his head and feet into the ground, Mitar pushed himself up to his feet.

He stumbled forward and fell. Pulling his knees under him, he swung himself back on his feet. With a swift motion he stood himself up.

Hey! a guard shouted.

Mitar fell on his bum as he turned from panic.

Oi! Who the fuck are you?! Get the FUC-

A large brawl broke out in camp. Every bandit jumped from their tents, armed to the teeth. Roaring battle cries carried by the whistling wind faded to silence as unstoppable flying fists dropped men like crumbling bricks. Bones cracked like dry branches and bodies hit the earth like stone. Johann exited his tent and shouted, You! What the fuck do you wan-

A heavy kick smashed him back into his tent. A few moments later, the attacker peeked his head in Mitar's tent. He was tall, wearing a sleeveless outfit of drab browns and reds. His sun-damaged skin wrapped around hard-earned muscle—the type you need to survive, not to thrive. Loosely waving neck-length, light brown hair and a rough short beard framed a tired and angry face, carved with crow's feet, subtle scars and scowl-wrinkles. He grunted, spat on the floor, and left. In another tent he rummaged loudly through a chest. There the fuck it is! the large stranger shouted. After that, he left.

When the confusion had settled down, Mitar crawled out until his head peeked out the tent. The cloth flapped against his face and he wrenched himself outside a little further to free himself from the cloth onslaught. Looking around, his chin got caked with a mud-goatee. The ice-blue sky hung the cold air out to dry. Blackbirds and Chaffinches sang their dawn song. No one conscious or alive was left to grant it ear—except for Mitar. Face down, he rested a moment to hear the birds out. Crawling to the thug who lay dead in the mud—illuminated by the stark nascent sun—Mitar kicked him. The thug did not move. Rolling to the thug's sword, he cut his wrists free, then his ankles. Standing up, he shook the excess mud off his clothes, and wiped his chin.

The largest tent sagged like a gutted animal. Mitar's boots squelched as he walked up to its tarp entrance. With a heavy breath he stepped in—the tent was pathetic and empty. Johann lay barely conscious—like a defeated drunk—over a crashed table. Orders on scrolls with a black broken beeswax seal lay torn and crumpled in between the rubble. Some old bedroll lay scattered on the ground. There were no trinkets or any other personal possessions. Pulling his sword from the remains of the destroyed table, he bent over and picked up the scabbard, belted it, sheathed the sword, and walked away.

A faint cough caught his ear and stopped him. Turning, he saw Johann standing up deliriously, laughing. You forgot your pendant, he croaked.

Mitar clutched his tunic, and didn't feel his pendant. He drew his sword and walked to Johann.

You're the real fucking dead-

Mitar sliced his head and chest open with one blow.

Johann fell over like a rake.

Mitar snatched his pendant and slipped it over his head and looked at it—bewildered and puzzled. He tucked it in his tunic. He felt safer with it there, and left the doubts given by Johann's last words in that awful camp, taking no sense of victory with him as he passed the corpses and the unconscious men. Once out of the camp, every quickening step away from it throbbed his heart and hastened his run—numb to the thigh pain from his stab wound. Clearing the forest and emerging onto the large, wide road, he turned a corner onto the grounds of Weemoed settlement. It was calm, and peaceful.

Kazmyr readjusted his scabbard belt and walked past him.

Folcmar stood vigilant, holding his pitchfork like a posted guard would his spear. Mitar, leave him be, he said.

Why?! Mitar asked.

His Mother is ill. It is why he travels to Abdera. He found a cure far away in the Ériu Isles. He needs to get it home to her. Go, Mitar! Men stalk the forest!

No! Mitar shouted. He ran after Kazmyr. Wolves are coming, he said.

I know, Kazmyr said.

Why are you not staying? They need our help! They'll die!

They are not my concern.

Mitar stopped. You're a coward and nothing your Mother said farewell to!

Kazmyr turned around. After a pause he said with his voice low, Do not speak of her. She is my priority, they are *not*.

They *are*.

Kazmyr walked back and stopped in front of Mitar. They do not deserve my help before my Mother, he countered.

Do you know why I'm heading to Abdera? The man who raised me, Breker-Kazmyr colored surprised. *The General?* he thought.

No, not the damn General. I can hear you think it. Just the same name. Wolves killed him. Mitar spat on the floor. Wasn't nothing I could do about it. He asked me to flee to Abdera and to find a man whose name I couldn't catch, and so I did. Took my Father's sword and pendant and left him. He *died* defending *my* escape. I won't leave anyone else to die unless I have no other choice!

That is *your* choice to make.

Mitar pointed at Kazmyr. And yours too! What world will your Mother find? Who will she see when she wakes up? Her Son? Or someone who leaves helpless people to die?! Mitar took a firm step forward and held his ground, staring Kazmyr down, continuing with his voice grave, I can see you're a kind person. You went across the entire *Nieuwevaert Continent* to find a cure. Don't sacrifice yourself getting it to her!

A group of Black Wolves ganged up on the settlement from the other side. They destroyed the cart and torched it, and surrounded Folcmar. Feike sends his regards! one of them shouted horribly.

Both of you! Leave! NOW! Folcmar screamed as he held his pitchfork firmly, keeping the prowling Black Wolves at a distance.

Adalmeer's cries of fear from inside the house were heard outside.

Mitar furiously drew his sword. Will you help us?! he asked Kazmyr.

Kazmyr looked back-and-forth at Mitar, Folcmar and the approaching Black Wolves. He looked back at the road going north, to Abdera, to home, after which he hung his head, clenched his teeth—and drew his old mace. YES! he shouted.

And all three charged headlong into battle.

Hacked and pierced bodies aired themselves on the sun-hardened ground.

Mitar lay on his back, catching his breath—his sword next to him.

Kazmyr stood still while breathing calmly, his mace hung on his belt.

Folcmar sat against the wall of his house with his head buried in his arms—his pitchfork still in his hands.

Adalmeer came outside to stand beside Folcmar, rubbing his hair. Thank you, men, we are indebted to you.

Mitar gave a double thumbs up.

Mhm... I, must depart... Kazmyr sighed.

We did it. Mitar rolled around and pushed himself up.

More'll come. You should've left us. If Johann comes... Folcmar worried.

He won't, Mitar reassured.

Adalmeer stopped rubbing Folcmar's hair.

Folcmar lifted his red-eyed head up. What? Why won't he? he asked.

I killed him, Mitar said.

Folcmar shot up and pointed his pitchfork at Mitar.

Kazmyr clutched the handle of his mace, sharply keeping an eye on Folcmar.

Folcmar shouted, Why?!

He was going to kill you?!

He wouldn't! He is my-

BROTHER! Johann shouted, interrupting Folcmar, leisurely walking into Weemoed with his arms wide, *holding Christoffer's and Scelta's heads*. An ugly, deep cut ripped across his face and chest, looking like shredded red metal.

Mitar and Kazmyr stepped back and flanked him, weapons drawn.

Don't! Folcmar shouted as he shot up with his pitchfork, to which Kazmyr and Mitar refrained from attacking. Brother... Folcmar said low.

Johann tossed the heads on the ground. I'll add all of yours to the fucking pile. Make a nice campfire, he scoffed. Looking at Mitar, he said, Cut deeper next time, kid... Johann breathed in, refraining from speaking. Turning his bloodshot eyes to Folcmar, he drew his sword and feigned an attack to which Folcmar stabbed air as Johann circled him in a dash to his back-

Folcmar struck his pitchfork back wide, shredding air as Johann dodged it.

Adalmeer backed up to the wall while holding her belly.

Mitar and Kazmyr gave each other a nod and dashed toward-

NO! This is *my fight*! Folcmar shouted, to which the men stopped with a kick in the ground.

Mitar's hand—clutching the pommel of his sheathed sword—shook.

Leave the steel... Kazmyr said with his voice low.

Indeed! Johann shouted.

Leave Brother. Leave us! And don't come back! You can *live*! Folcmar barked.

You don't deserve to call me that. No *longer*! Johann charged in for a scrappy bout with Folcmar, who masterfully caught and deflected every strike of Johann.

Mitar beckoned with a hand gesture for Adalmeer to come to his side, to which she slid along the wall of the house-

Johann's sword thrust through the cob wall, right beside Adalmeer's head which stopped her dead in her tracks. *No you won't*, Johann said gravely, as Folcmar charged i-

Johann donkey-kicked Folcmar's head and ripped the sword out and sliced Folcmar's head open and shouted, We BATTLED next to each other.

Folcmar rolled away, hand on his head, shutting one eye against the dripping blood and said, And now you point your steel at US! Your *only* Family. Why?! Folcmar jumped in with his pitchfork raised and thrust-

Johann fell back to dodge it and viciously swung his sword-

Folcmar elbowed Johann's sword away and mounted him and punched away at Johann, who blocked his strikes.

Adalmeer broke free from her paralysis and cried out, Stop, please!

You *took* my WIFE! You *dump* your kid in her! Johann shouted.

Mitar took a step back, raising his furrowed brows, maintaining his vigilance.

Kazmyr's scowl tightened.

When you lost yourself, we found each other! Folcmar barked at Johann.

Johann sank a knife deep into Folcmar's shoulder and pushed him away and stumbled himself to his feet. Gripping his sword he barked, I sacrificed everything for you! EVERYTHING! My life! All I needed to do was to keep it up, to

keep worse out. What do I get in return? WHAT DO I GET IN RETURN?!
Everyone betrays me!

No one asked you to do this! You could have stayed! And look at what's left!
Everyone's dead or gone! All that's left is what YOU have DONE!

Kazmyr and Mitar stood statue-still, eyes darting, watching every move.

Johann jumped back and pinned Adalmeer's throat tightly against the wall
with his forearm.

She froze.

The men stopped.

Johann, if you do this... Folcmar threatened.

At least you stopped calling me Brother! That's a right step on the wrong
path! And there *is no going back*, Johann said.

STOP! Folcmar shouted.

Johann roared and raised his sword and Adalmeer screamed and Kazmyr and
Mitar and Folcmar lunge-

*Johann's steel furiously cleaved through Adalmeer's belly—all the way to the
spine.* Johann tried to yank the sword out of her spine and guts.

Folcmar fell like rain, paralyzed from the blow on his beloved.

Kazmyr got to Johann first—trashing half his face off with a jump and a mace
slam. The meat chunks of his face hit the ground before Johann did—Johann
was dead before he caught up. So was Adalmeer, and her Baby-to-be.

Folcmar's eyes had turned matte. He stopped blinking. Looking at his hands,
he turned to his wife and crawled to her, over Johann's corpse. He tried pushing
her belly back together. Some weakly formed limbs snapped as he did so. He let
it go, and held her lifeless cheeks. Adalmeer's eyes hung blank. Folcmar whis-
pered, *We need the fruits and the bread, Addy. Shall we get them? The fruits?* His
hand shocked away, then he looked and pointed at Mitar. You did this, he said.

I-I can-

YOU! DID! THIS! You had to interfere! You! Folcmar interrupted Mitar.

I wanted to help! Mitar said.

Help your own Family!

I don't have any! Not anymore.

No surprises there... maybe, you'll find some someday. Don't lose them, like I lost mine, *to you*. *Demon*. Folcmar waved Mitar off with a grunt, and pulled Johann's head on his lap. After a breath, he said, Come, Brother... maybe in Balor's arms we can all be a Family again. Please. Balor, guide us... He grabbed Johann's knife from his belt, and put the tip to his own chest. Please leave. Let the world see our pain. Don't bury us, he said. He pushed the dirty knife through his heart, breathing his last, stammering breath, looking deep into Adalmeer's frozen eyes.

The wind carried their hair like the grasses. The sun warmed their heads. Some flies already joined in.

Mitar took a step toward them, and reached out—breathing shaky low gasps.

Kazmyr stood still, and looked away. His chest collapsed ever so slightly.

Mitar put his hand to his face and sobbed quietly.

Kazmyr grabbed Mitar's wrist and pulled his hand away from his face. Honor them, he said.

...Honor 'em how?

Intentions do not matter to outcomes. Their lives have ended, yours has not... Kazmyr took a step north, turning to the path forward. Abdera awaits, he added.

Just leave them here? Mitar asked.

That *was* their request...

Mitar gave them one last broken-eyed look, then made for the horizon with Kazmyr—looking nowhere but ahead. The wind in their backs lifted their chins. Mitar swallowed his sorrow and made pace. His back straightened and his eyes narrowed to that which lay ready.

The wake of the past rumbles, the efforts of the present cut it free. Wide and visible is what is left, narrow and forthright is the path. May the blessed trailblazers carve the widest wake, for the downtrodden and the seekers to follow.

ACT I
CHAPTER II

—

ANGRY RIVER THROAT

The large dirt road kept their tired legs on the go. A great river raged parallel to Kazmyr and Mitar, with just a small stretch of forest between them and the river. The riverbed stones channeled the musical water into its roaring stream. Mitar took the lead of the walk, his head heavy from the sun. Kazmyr was just a pace behind, gushing sweat. Mitar muttered about the heat. Kazmyr only gave a growl in reply—sometimes.

Out of the horizon, a watermill rose into view. It stood sturdy on a moss-slick natural stone base. On it, rested a brick wall, holding up the second and third floors, consisting of dark oak beams wedged in place and nailed down sturdily. Years of hearth smoke blackened the thatched roof, and it hung like a dark storm cloud. The spinning waterwheel thumped like a distant heartbeat as it slapped the angry river. A humble stair of weathered planks led from the second floor to the ground floor. Next to the base of those stairs sat a man, who was as old as dirt, on a stool, smoking a small pipe—a cane resting on his lap. His relaxed face was one of great frustration or crankiness. In contrast, he wore a subtle earring on which hung a violet and royal-blue flower petal. Next to the watermill, stood a humble house. The surrounding grounds had a shoddy fence lining it. It was guarding mostly grass and dirt and hard-to-kill crops.

See that? It's a mill or something! Miller probably has some food or drink, Mitar said. No answer came. It took some time for Mitar to notice he heard only his own steps. Turning back, he saw Kazmyr standing still. After a moment he asked, Kazmyr, are you okay? D'you need a break?

Kazmyr's head swung, then his body. His mouth dropped. He collapsed.

Mitar ran to him and rolled him on his back.

Grasping for comprehension, Kazmyr's dazed glances closed only on the air of confusion. The world tilted and Mitar's voice split, vanishing with the crunching dirt under fading boots.

Mitar ran toward the old man, waving his arms wildly.

The old man didn't care.

Mitar stopped and ran back and heaved Kazmyr up and swung Kazmyr's arm over his shoulder, carrying him in a hastened step to the old man's house. Kazmyr stumbled along. As they closed in on the watermill, the old man rose

from his stool—pipe clattering on the ground. He walked heavy, his cane stabbing the earth like he had rocks in his boots, meeting them at the edge of his humble lot of land. Without a single word, he shoved both to the ground.

Kazmyr fumbled on the dirt until he could sit himself upright.

Mitar kneeled next to Kazmyr. That's quite the strength, old man! he said.

Git! Get out o' here! the old man shouted.

But, my Friend, he needs help!

Not my darn problem! Cross this fence and I'll smash yer teeth.

Sir, please! I'll work. Whatever! Please! He needs help.

Yer just goin' to take my stuff. Leave!

We'll only take your time and aid.

I don't work fer free.

Won't ask you to.

Not going to help.

Then just your advice will do... Just your advice. Or some water instead!

The old man eyed Kazmyr up and down. Then he walked straight inside the watermill and slammed the door shut. Inside, he settled by a grimy window.

Mitar cocked his head back and scrunched his brows.

Kazmyr, sitting on the ground, drew his knees to his chest, crossed his arms atop them, and rested his chin on his forearm.

What a tramp... Hey Kaz-

I have not rested for some time, Kazmyr interrupted Mitar.

Then rest, Mitar added.

There is no time, Kazmyr said. He pushed himself up and walked a few paces and leaned on the fence as his legs faltered again, and his eyes repeatedly shut themselves. He sat back down, against the fence.

You won't get there at this pace. Me neither, Mitar said.

I am not your concern, Kazmyr sighed.

Stop it with that nonsense. You're getting that medicine to your Mother, and I'm going to help. No exceptions.

Why?

It feels like the right thing to do, and it gets me in Abdera too... The old man's gone inside, I guess...

Him not helping is no crime. I am not dying... Simply tired. My exhaustion will pass—so will the day. Let us keep going. We will find a place to rest further down the road. Somewhere...

Head hung low, Mitar eased from kneeling to perching on the balls of his feet. A chair scraped loudly from inside the watermill, followed by a crash.

The men perked up their heads toward the watermill, then at each other. Mitar jumped up—Kazmyr pushed himself up. Both spared no effort getting to the door. Mitar got to it first and swung the door open and ran inside with Kazmyr following shortly behind him. The old man lay on the floor, grunting silently from pain in an even angrier expression than before. The men took him by the arms and helped him to a chair.

Old man, are you alright-

Stop callin' me that. I'd have helped myself up, the old man interrupted Mitar as he slumped in the chair. A senile tear leaked from his left eye, tracing his cheek creases. He drew a knife with his gnarled hand, holding it with a steel grip. Git! Yer not welcome! GO! he shouted through his grinding teeth.

The men gave him a short glance, and got up. Kazmyr gave the old man not a single look as he opened the door and waited for Mitar to follow—Mitar who said with his voice soft as he left, Good health to you, Sir... Sorry for interrupting your day. The door creaked shut. The waterwheel kept turning. The old man stared at the wall.

Outside, Mitar followed Kazmyr in silence. Some branches and leaves rustled in the forest, but the wind wasn't blowing. Both Kazmyr and Mitar simultaneously stopped and clutched the handles of their weapons. Scanning the forest, a distant hare dashed away. Trained on a single bush, Kazmyr called, Come out. We know you are here.

From the bushes came a bandit with a blackened eye and a swollen, broken arm—awkwardly holding a broken sword in his off-hand, aiming it at Mitar. You, you're from Johann's camp! he shouted.

What do you want?! Mitar said.

Where's your mate?!

Who?

That cunt who fucked us up. He's got some teeth to spit.

Don't know him!

Then I'll have to make do with you! The bandit stepped forward-

With a hiss of steel, Mitar and Kazmyr drew their weapons, stopping the bandit in his tracks. His breaths became heavier and his chest heaved from anger.

Everything you fought for is dead.

Fuck you! He pointed his broken sword at Mitar. They were my mates! You don't get to kill them and walk away. I'll fuck you up too! the bandit said.

You won't stand a chance. You're outnumbered and wounded, Kazmyr said.

The bandit ground his teeth, and pointed his broken sword at the men. This isn't over! He ran away.

Mitar and Kazmyr sheathed their weapons. They'll come back for the old man... Mitar worried.

He can handle himself, Kazmyr reassured.

How d'you know?

Kazmyr looked back at the watermill. He has done it so far...

Mitar breathed in to say something, but consigned to silence. Instead, he trailed Kazmyr as he left.

The door to the watermill creaked open. The old man peeked his head out, hands resting on his cane, saying just loud enough, You, the tired one. Need some beer, or rest?

Kazmyr and Mitar gave each other a brief glance.

Mitar looked at the old man for a breath or two, then requested, We both could do with some, Sir. If you'd be so kind...

Mitar, we need to keep moving, Kazmyr said.

You need to rest. You'll just pass out again, Kaz, Mitar said.

...Very well.

The old man beckoned them to come in which they did.

As they sat themselves down, the old man wordlessly went outside for a while.

Mitar ogled a frayed, washed-out painting of a river with a humble bridge crossing it hanging on a distant wall, and cocked his head back with scrunched brows. Looks a lot like the river here, doesn't it, Kaz? Mitar asked.

What? Kazmyr asked back.

The painting. There, on the wall.

Kazmyr turned and looked at it and turned back around again. Yes. Indeed...

The watermill kept running. The churning wooden beams were older than the both of them, yet showed no signs of age—other than their deepened color and compressed fibers.

The old man came back a good while later with three tankards of beer and slammed them on the table and sat himself down.

In the watermill, large, churning wooden beams moved larger rocks, pounding the grain to flour. Muffled thumping of the waterwheel clapping against the endless river stream sounded without cease.

Mitar took a thirsty gulp. This is good! he complimented. Isn't it good, Kaz?

Kazmyr nodded.

Got a small beer installation further downstream... There's bags o' grain up the stair to catch some kip, the old man said.

Kazmyr rested his tankard on his chest.

Mitar took a long swig of his drink. What's your name, old man? he asked.

Stop callin' me old man, fuckface. Name's Vincke.

Kazmyr softly put his tankard on the table and breathed out long and slow and slumped back in his chair.

My name's Mitar. His name is Kazmyr.

Where yer goin'? Vincke asked.

Abdera, Mitar said.

Abdera?

Yes.

Damn capital and its stupid spire. Everyone's flocking there because of the coming war and the Wolves! Cowards!

Why won't you go? Isn't it safer?

Safety ain't a worry for me. This place is mine. And I'd rather sit here and toss bandits and Wolves in the river than hear the squabble of city women... Everyone's goin' there nowadays. But why would you?

Sorry?

Why are you going to Abdera?

Well, I-

Ne'er mind. Don't care. Once yer rested, piss off, Vincke interrupted.

Okay... Mitar concluded.

Outside and high in the sky, the cloud sea was thickening.

Vincke sat cranky in his chair, staring outside, the million creases on his face cutting deep into his skin.

Kazmyr repeatedly dozed off.

Mitar put his tankard of beer down beside the chair, on the ground.

Vincke raised his fist. On the table, dammit! Vincke commanded.

Oh-oh I-uhm, sorry. He swept up the tankard and set it on the old table. After a silent juncture, he rubbed his sword with his tunic. The cloth rustled and the sword squeaked. The pull on the cloth tugged his open collar down a bit further. The meandering sunlight caught the pendant's chain as half of the pendant itself crawled out from his collar.

Vincke twitched in anger from his periphery, blinded by Mitar's chain. He gave it a gander, and with it, his breath faltered. His wrinkles softened for an instant before tightening again. Grinding his teeth, he muttered something.

Sorry, sword reflection catching your eye? I am... quite the cleaner. Mitar sighed. That was a joke...

Vincke, anger-wracked, simply stared.

There's some grime in the fuller's inscription. You know what it means, Sir?

It's Vincke, little shit.

Sorry, Vinck-

Shut up. Let me take a look, Vincke interrupted as Mitar held the sword closer to his aged eyes. The inscription in the fuller reading,

M·I·B·S·I·M·T·L

Hmph... Fine sword. It's wasted on you, Vincke said.

Thanks. Do you know what it says? The fuller's inscription? Mitar asked.

...Where are you from, boy?

Mitar tucked his sword away. Slave farm. Far away, he said with his voice low.

Your parents?

Mitar ignored Vincke.

Vincke's chair creaked as he leaned forward and pointed a finger in Mitar's face. Don't get smart with me. Yer in my house. Yer goin' to answer, or leave.

Just messing with you, Mitar said. He finished his beer and gently put the tankard down beside his chair.

On the table! Vincke commanded.

Mitar quickly grabbed it and put it down on the table.

I like to keep a clean house. Now, yer parents?

...I don't know 'em. My parents. An old man raised me.

How was he? Vincke asked.

Kind of like you, Mitar elaborated.

What?

I don't know. You just... remind me of him a little.

What happened to him? This shit-for-brains I apparently remind you of.

Died. Killed by Wolves.

Alright... Why are you going to Abdera?

Thought you didn't care?

Answer the question.

He wanted me to. And I must find someone there on his request.

Vincke looked out the window. Well, I guess that's that then, he said. He stormed off his chair and limped laboriously to the door. In the doorway, he barked, I'm grabbing myself another beer. No, you can't have another. Stay here. He slammed the door shut behind him.

Mitar looked at Kazmyr. He was deeply asleep. After a relaxing slump in his chair, he looked outside, only to see Vincke trot off into the forest. Leaning his head toward the window, he eyed Vincke until he disappeared out of sight. Mitar

put his sword on the table and headed out and followed Vincke at a distance a big stretch into the forest. Beyond Vincke stood his beer brewing installation.

Out of range of any ear, or so Vincke thought, he leaked another tear or two and nearly smashed his cane to bits on a tree with a few swings. Every swing belted a weak scream out of him.

Mitar soundlessly sneaked closer.

Vincke put his forehead to the tree. *Why did he show up... him, but not you...* he shook his tears away and headed further into the forest, to his beer brewery.

Mitar looked downbeat at Vincke's defeated expression, and sneaked back.

Distraught made for demanding company. Mitar returned to the watermill. Kazmyr sat outside smoking a tobacco roll. Mitar grabbed a stool and sat down.

Do you wish to speak? Kazmyr asked after a puff.

It's nothing... It's nothing, Mitar said as he brushed his shoulder.

The waterwheel was busy killing the water as it churned endlessly. It had a long time to go. The soft crackle of Kazmyr's burning tobacco cut through the quiet. A windless cold hung—cold enough for every breath to feel fresh. The sky was white-gray, and the bleak and blue air fluttered like a translucent curtain.

Kazmyr dropped his half-finished tobacco roll. He patiently stomped it out, and stared ahead.

Mitar looked up at Kazmyr, then at what Kazmyr was looking at—it was the broken-armed bandit, who drew his sword.

Kazmyr remained in his seat.

Mitar surged up off the stool. Why did you come back?!

Not just *me*, the bandit said.

More battered bandits came out from behind the trees, gathering behind him.

Kazmyr rose, and took up his mace. Leave. There is nothing here for you.

There is nothing for us back at the camp. Your bitch Friend here said it too, the broken-armed bandit said. He spat on the floor, and continued after a beat, Everything we fought for is dead. But everything we're fighting isn't. We let the old man off the hook long enough. You can't fuck with us!

The bandits hopped the shoddy fence or walked through the entrance and ganged up on the watermill.

Mitar ran inside to get his sword.

Kazmyr charged straight at the bandits to kill them up close.

Inside the watermill, Mitar ran to the table and grabbed his sword and looked out the window to see Kazmyr barely keeping up with the incoming strikes. He ran back outside and shoulder-tackled the door ope-

The door broke off its hinges and Mitar fell headfirst into the dirt. He turned. A bandit stormed to him and swung his axe at hi-

Mitar stabbed the bandit through his neck. Mitar shot up like lightning and the bandit crashed like thunder. He reaffirmed the grip on his sword and valiantly fought his way through the murderous crowd to Kazmyr's defense-

A scarred bandit tripped Mitar—Mitar who saw the broken-armed bandit running in to strike Kazmyr's back. Furiously, Mitar hacked through the scarred bandit, cleaving his ankle off. Clawing at the dirt, Mitar stumbled himself to his feet and left the scarred bandit behind, who screamed gutturally into the void. And Mitar ran and jumpe-

Kazmyr twisted in a flash and shattered the broken-armed bandit his good elbow and Mitar sliced his shattered arm off clean.

The other bandits stepped back as they watched the screaming, broken-armed bandit run off—one arm poorer. He slipped and hit his head on a fence post, plopping unconscious to the floor. The mud colored red.

Vincke stamped in, the sway from his limp even greater, with his neck and face redder than all the blood. He floored a bandit with a simple punch and stabbed through his cheekbone with his blunt cane. A simple-faced bandit jumped him and cut up Vincke's shoulder. He didn't care—grabbing the simple-faced bandit by the jaw, ripping it off the joint as he pulled him and headbutted him to death with a single crashing of skulls.

The scarred bandit ceased screaming, lying dead on the hardened floor.

Whoever remained, turned to Kazmyr and Mitar—it was a quicker death. They could breathe again. And as their pumping blood subsided, the pumping river filled their hearts and ears.

Kazmyr caught his breath and wiped the sweat off his face.

...Better than the silence she left, that sweet river. Always has been, Vincke said. He sighed, and grabbed his pipe which was still on the floor. He rubbed it clean and murmured, *Sorry, honey. I shouldn't leave things around. I'll tidy up.*

Vincke? Mitar asked.

The painting in my house. I know you saw it. It ain't never been mine... My wife made it. She loved to paint, and said that if we would ever stop traveling, we'd settle on a place she loved. A place she couldn't explain. Only paint... We did it. She made this earring too. I always hated it. It looks stupid. I wear it every

day. Vincke looked at the river and its heedless rush. After a deep breath, leaning on his cane, he murmured, *I guess you're truly gone. But I'll stay. I'll protect our little place. Until it's time to leave.*

The broken-armed bandit rolled over, coughed up blood and laughed weakly. Fighting over some fucking dirt for a dead whore. Sounds like everything you're fighting for is dead too. Why don't you join her right now? Me and Johann will be waiting for you.

Vincke walked to the broken-armed bandit, bent over and grabbed him by the collar, growling with his voice low, *You'll be waiting in the wrong place.* And you never fought for anything. You're going to your "Friends" now. *No one will think of you.* Vincke grabbed him by the neck with one hand—and *squeezed.* His neck broke. Vincke dropped him, and stared at the old forest.

...Do you need help? We can help clean up? Right, Kaz? Mitar asked.

Kazmyr gave a single nod.

NO! Vincke roared as he pointed at Mitar in particular. You don't deserve to be here! Walk into the next disaster! Drag you and your sorry legacy elsewhere! Vincke limped at them furiously, clawing at them with his cane.

The confused men backed away from Vincke's swings.

Abdera's your place! Vincke shoved Kazmyr off his lot and grabbed Mitar by the collar and threw him beside Kazmyr. Go north, you'll see *Luchtspeer* pokin' the sky. Leads the dead away, and the living to Abdera. Choose which path is yours. Now screw off!

The men patiently stood up. Mitar wanted to speak but restrained himself, and beckoned Kazmyr to join him. It was a silent crossing of the bridge. They looked back. It was a look of pity. One that Vincke did not return—he was busy slowly dragging bodies into the river, one after another. Once he was done, he stood alone by the riverbank. An angry tear dropped off his cheek. It washed away faster than rain.

He... came back.

ACT I
CHAPTER III

—

AND THE NIGHT WIND LISTENS

Through the thick trees, Sluimer Hill rose into view. The trees of *Mast Forest* took the brunt of the scorching heat. Stagnant shadows cooled Mitar and Kazmyr's sweating heads as their boots thumped on the well-trod path.

No rain could turn that trail to mud.

Mitar slapped some idle branches as he followed Kazmyr. He took a deep, open-mouth breath, heat fuming his lungs.

Reaching the foot of Sluimer Hill, they stood and gazed. The waving grasses alone were a remarkable sight, as the forest abruptly ended, thickly circling the hill—the hill that led their eyes upward with the direction of the wind, until their eyes drifted off toward a distant sun-aged-white spire spearing through the deep blue ether—Luchtspeer. Its lance-like body led to a pinnacle that scraped skies which no birds have ever flown, far exceeding the sparse clouds in height that did a poor job hiding it.

Mitar looked back at Sluimer Hill, then at Kazmyr. He nodded his head up toward the hill's climb.

Kazmyr shook his head, then resumed his route.

Mitar shrugged shortly and followed Kazmyr through the last stretch of forest which was awash with refreshing draughts and zooming insects.

The forest dispelled into grasslands and there it stood, that which gathered around the spire—Abdera. Carved boulder upon carved boulder, tied by lime mortar. Punched out in space, rooted on the land's edge where it meets the sea, Abdera waited for all seeking its embrace. Green plains—humbly rolling and flat alike—surrounded the steadfast capital. The king's castle, standing a great layer of earth higher above the rest of Abdera, clambered around Luchtspeer. Abdera's high walls affluently flew its bone-white and viridian-green banners and flags. Its size even in plain view beautifully big, a symbol of what the future of humanity could hold. Nothing of it being ahead of its time, yet a distinct marvel of engineering, city planning and infrastructure. Familiar yet dazzling. Electrifying yet terrifying.

Abdera was a city great in size—small compared to Luchtspeer.

Mitar stood stupefied as it was impossible to ignore.

First time seeing it? Kazmyr asked.

Mitar snapped out of it. Yes, he said. And Luchtspeer, it...

Quite a sight. Is it not?

Yes.

Mhm... Let us keep going.

Over *Blauwe Hoef Road* Kazmyr patiently traveled—Mitar less so—bathing in the scents of fragrant flowers and the easy babbling rivers, toward Abdera's great West Gate. It rose as imposing in its size as it was welcoming in its warmth—a threshold every first-time visitor was doomed not to forget. Passing stalled merchants and common folk—some traveling, some toiling—they stepped through the gate. A cloak of commerce, noise and bustle draped over their shoulders with their entry, laced with the stench of mud carried in from the outside world, and the musk of belligerent laborers. A great canal split the street in two, and veined off in every side street. Today, they kept to *Molenlaan*, the main two-lane street of *Westerpoort District*.

The duo wove between heavy hitters, women, playing Children, and stoic guards, amid a rolling street cacophony of the clatter of horse hooves, the patter of boot soles, screaming merchants and haggling cries of brokers and fair ladies blushing at courting calls of passing suitors. Some reddened their faces as they passed Kazmyr and Mitar. Many orange-white striped awnings hanging over the windows and shops and eateries and taverns their entrances and windows cloaked the streets in cool shadows—a sharp contrast to the old but pristine whitework lathering the edges of the buildings. Below, the briny smell of the canals entered their noses without mercy as the sun broke its reflections on the sloshing waters. Some people took a dive or two to escape the heat. They wouldn't come out cleaner. It was refreshing nonetheless. Walking on indifferently, Kazmyr repeatedly slowed down to let Mitar catch up as he soaked in the sights and sounds.

Keep moving, Kazmyr said. There will be enough time to take it in later.

In passing the end stretch of *Westerpoort District*, buildings, that rippled in height above them, zoomed sounds in their ears of movers that cursed the heat as they wrestled heavy loads with their steel arms, and the grinding of bricks sliding into place by builders. Or the scared sounds of painters who flinched at

spilled buckets—all the while blacksmiths’ old hammers rang against older anvils in a large forge. A calm, smoking man, resting outside the large forge on a stool, his back against a wall, eyed Mitar and Kazmyr as they passed. He did not greet them. A big sea breeze brushed the busy streets broadly, and fresh breaths were best enjoyed by booze-battered layabouts.

Come, it is not far now, Kazmyr said to Mitar.

I feel like I could walk these streets for days!

You will get used to it. Follow me.

Exiting Westerpoort, they entered *Kaai Central District*, where the great *Kooninck Square* lay. The mix of social standings of the square’s visitors caught Mitar’s eye most of all. The tradesmen and Abderians present were all there to buy and sell. Or steal. Or just to watch people go about their day.

A cherry-red drunk, enraged and reeking of booze, chased a sobbing boy across the square. The boy sprinte-

He crashed into something solid. For a moment, he thought the sun had vanished. Rubbing tear-streaked eyes, he looked up at a towering man, clad in spotless, shimmering white armor, rimmed with gold, which looked as indestructible as stone, and as bulky as an oak—viridian-green cloth peeking beneath. A viridian-green cape draping his shoulders framed long, shining black hair, a clean-shaven jaw, and a piercing gaze coming from emerald eyes set in a soundly developed face. His right hand rested on an immortal-looking white-gold hammer. On his belt hung a rod of the same material and the same pattern as the handle of his hammer. On the other side hung a stout chain, as dark as oil.

Halt, Child, he said.

Townspeople gathered around them.

What befell you, young one? the towering man asked.

The trembling Child couldn’t speak through his sobs.

The towering man—still as stone, his cape fluttering in the breeze—spotted bruises on the boy’s face.

The silence that fell was broken only by the wind which no one would recall.

Avert your eyes, Child.

The boy turned around, squeezed his eyes shut and covered his ears.