

# THE BLUE GUARD

## CHAPTER FIVE

**Jake entered a dark** room, the sliding door closed behind him leaving him in complete darkness. He reached for his watch and pressed a blue button on its side. The room suddenly became bathed in warm orange light. Once retrieved from the darkness the room revealed itself to be a large open room with a single round table in the middle. It very much resembled a scene from King Arthur except instead of having twelve chairs this table only had six.

There were other notable differences.

At the centre of the table was a globe of the planet Earth, which was constantly revolving as if a day were passing along its surface. There was sword lying on the table directly in front of one of the chairs; but only one. The other chairs did not have swords but the indentation of others was clearly visible on the table. Another significant difference was the location of the room. The surrounding walls had circular windows through which, rather than the city of Camelot, the beauty and wonder of outer space could be seen.

Jake approached the table and stood behind one of the chairs; the one with the sword in front of it. He pulled back the chair and sat at the table. Once he was comfortable in the chair he reached out with his right hand and held the sword's handle without moving it from where it lay. The handle of the sword suddenly lit up with a bright blue tint. The light quickly spread to the blade of the sword and then further into the rotating globe. The light began to leave the sword and transfer to the globe which was soon flashing brightly. But it was short lived as the light quickly left

the sword and the globe followed suit. Just before the light had completed diminished the other five chairs began to fill with various figures, all of them sitting at the table but not actually being there. It was a live virtual field bringing them all together; kind of like a really extravagant video conference meeting.

‘Good evening everybody. Thank you so much for attending this meeting at such short notice,’ Jake said, sounding a lot like a company executive. In a way this was quite fitting given the fact that the Blue Guard of Daedalia (UK) was the first of its kind and also the busiest. Jake always joked about it being similar to Heathrow Airport; sometimes it bit off more than it could chew and was on constant need of expansion and redevelopment. The other five people at the meeting were his equivalents in the various other countries that also had Blue Guards. However, none of them including Jake considered themselves as representing their nations. The Blue Guard was a completely separate entity charged with the preservation of humanity and a constant balance with the Aclarar. Together the six of them formed the Guardian Council, established almost a hundred years ago at the end of the First World War.

The other five members of the Council were Sirenum (Central Europe), Aonia (Far East), Tempe (Russia), Arsai (Australasia) and Oenotria (North and South America). Numerous other parts of the globe such as India and parts of Africa had applied for their own Council seats and Blue Guards but for the moment were simply given assistance by the six current members, who decided what course of action was to be taken based on a vote. For the time being the need for more Blue Guards was not strong enough and those countries which had applied had only reported minor incidents of potential Aclarar contact or accelerated development of powers in humans.

'This better be good,' the head of Tempe grumbled, 'I should be with my mistress right now.' The other members sighed.

'I assure you Mister Gradenko that this was worth the fuss,' Jake insisted. 'I believe that we have a serious development in Daedalia. There is evidence that Frequency 3.5 is expanding. At the current rate of acceleration we could have a surface breach within six months.'

'A surface breach? That is not an option Mister Phoenix,' the head of Aonia said, in a firm manner.

'I am well aware of that Mister Kodak.'

'What evidence do you have?'

Jake reached for a small console by the side of the table and began typing in some numbers. 'These are the data recordings from both Tai and Lazarus when they entered Oxford Circus Station last night. As you will see the readings indicate that the buffer which leads to the border that crosses over into Frequencies 3.9-3.5 has shrunk significantly. More alarmingly, as you will see from the recordings taken from their inbuilt armour cameras, the Mutes have also been quite busy down there.'

He sent the data and recordings over to each council member with the pushing of a button. They all took a moment to examine the information. Most of consisted of numbers and equations. The vast majority of what Tai and Lazarus had experienced had been in their minds. The only thing that the council could comment on was the mathematical equations and some of the sounds which the cameras picked up, most notably the raptor's screams.

'Raptors,' Mister Kodak said, 'Such foul things they are.'

'I still do not understand how it could be expanding,' Mister Versailles, head of Sirenum, said with slight alarm in his voice.

'It doesn't surprise me at all,' said Miss Sydney of Arsai. 'We could not expect Kyos to just lie down and die even with their last defeat. Mutes are relentless, you should all know that by now,' she said sternly. Unlike the other members, she was both young and quite attractive. Jake had always admired her courage at times of crisis.

'I understand that you recovered the boy,' said the head of Oenotria, a large set man in a suit and white hair. 'What do you plan to do with him?' His name was Mister Liberty and he was not Jake's favourite by any stretch of the imagination. Unlike his political counterparts, Jake refused to be a lap dog to the United States, even if Liberty was not specifically a representation of America. As far as Jake was concerned the Blue Guard in the Oenotria region was effectively an elite wing of the CIA. Oenotria was never quick to help anybody else unless their own interests could be included in some shape or form.

'At the moment he is recovering in our medical wing,' Jake said giving Liberty a glare.

'It is amazing that he survived,' said Mister Kodak.

'A true warrior it would seem,' said Miss Sydney.

'But can we really trust him? He could be the end of us all,' said Mister Liberty with a cold, harsh but heavy tone.

'After what he did for us, how can you say that? He almost gave his life for Terra,' Miss Sydney said, slamming her hand on the table. It looked quite funny given that she was not actually in the room so to everyone else her hand simply went through the table and hit the table that she was actually sitting at in Australia.

'This is all rubbish! Can we get back to why Mister Phoenix called this meeting in the first place? My mistress's hands are getting cold without me being there,'

Mister Gradenko said with a wink towards Miss Sydney. She flinched and turned away.

‘Yes indeed Mister Gradenko, you are right, let us discuss the problem at hand in Daedalia,’ said Mister Kodak.

Everyone stopped talking and turned to listen to what Jake was going to say next. He held his hands together and clicked his fingers back. Taking a deep breath he continued.

‘Our Blue Guard teams are stretched almost to breaking point. Just recently we had a confrontation with the twins Pleasure and Pain. They are now more formidable than ever before. In short, I need assistance from all of you. Is there anyone you can spare and send over to us?’

There was an awkward silence as the other Guardian Council members contemplated whether they could help Jake or not. Already he knew that Liberty would not offer anything unless it was in exchange for access to Alex. Sydney had always been his friend but her Blue Guard was scattered over a wide area and were also very far away. The most likely candidates for offering immediate support were therefore Gradenko, Aonia and Sirenum.

‘Do you have any particular requirements?’ Mister Kodak was always reliable and was searching through his dossiers already.

‘Elementals would be ideal,’ Jake said. ‘But anything will do.’

Mister Kodak tapped into a dossier, ‘I have someone here who could prove useful. I will send you her file.’

‘Thank you,’ Jake said as the file reached his terminal.

‘I have a Cardinal that nobody else wants to work with. A great fighter but completely insane,’ Mister Versailles said, ‘Interested?’

‘Send over the dossier please,’ Jake said. The file came over almost before he finished his sentence.

‘I have one girl who you may like,’ said Gradenko.

‘Is she one of your girlfriends?’ Sydney asked sarcastically.

‘I wish!’

‘You are disgusting! Jake, I don’t have anything at the moment but will keep you posted,’ Miss Sydney said.

‘Thank you, I appreciate anything you have,’ Jake replied with a smile. He turned to Mister Liberty, ‘You’ve been awfully quiet over there...’

‘Any chance we can make a deal? You know we have some of the best Blue Guard units, but there is a price,’ Liberty said with a grin.

‘Always is with you,’ Jake said dismissively. ‘And the answer is no’

‘Don’t be silly now Jake. You know that the resources at my disposal are second to none.’

‘I said no Frank!’ The mention of his actual name made Liberty him squint. The others nodded with approval as Jake put him firmly in his place. ‘I thank the rest of you for your time and help. I will update you with further information as I get it. For now, I shall look at the dossiers and contact you if I am interested.’

‘I certainly hope that this does not escalate out of your control,’ Mister Kodak said.

‘This could simply be the start of something much larger,’ Mister Gradenko added.

‘Why do you say that?’ Miss Sydney said, curiously.

‘So often we expect the enemy to vanish for a long period of time. As time passes we become more relaxed and almost forget what being on edge used to be

like. Eventually the enemy becomes a legend, something we tell to our children on those cold winter's nights. Then without warning the enemy strikes when those who are meant to oppose them have lost the advantage.'

'Are you saying that you think this time it will not follow such a trend?'

'I don't think Miss Sydney, I am almost certain,' Gradenko said.

The remaining council members seem to shiver as Gradenko said those last few words. He was never a man who lived by hunches; when he felt that he knew something he was right nine times out of ten.

'So you anticipate that Kyos will strike us again sooner rather than later? That sounds like paranoia to me,' Mister Liberty said dismissively.

'Never underestimate Kyos,' Mister Versailles said in a heavy tone, almost like a warning. 'We have no idea how deep Frequency 3.5 goes. They may have hundreds, perhaps thousands of raptors down there.'

'Yes, but at the moment there is no way for the raptors to exist within our plain. Frequency 4 was created to prevent a blending of the worlds. Only two have been able to merge the two worlds and one of them is more than likely dead,' Mister Liberty said.

'What about the emergence of powers amongst the Terra populous? Is it not possible that Mutes could start to use their powers if they were already in Frequency 4? We do have records of people showing borderline level 1 abilities,' Mister Kodak said.

'Our Blue Guard agents are everywhere. At the first sign of emergence we can pinpoint a target within 24 hours,' Mister Liberty said dismissively.

'The world is a big place Frank,' Jake said.

'For god sake don't call me that Jake!'

'I agree,' Mister Kodak interjected, 'No first names please.'

'Very well Mister Kodak, I apologise.'

'Have you had any evidence that something in Frequency 3.5 could exist in our frequency range?'

'None so far Mister Kodak,' Jake said, lying through his teeth. 'Only the Shadow Masters are able to exist in different frequencies without being detected but as you know already they have no other abilities.'

'It might be a good idea to have one in your team; perhaps they will be able to see something that you cannot,' Gradenko said.

'I am already on it Gradenko,' Jake replied. 'I have just the man for the job.'

Miss Sydney looked puzzled, 'Isn't he retired?'

'I am sure that I can persuade him to come back for one more job.'

'Good luck Mister Phoenix', Mister Kodak said.

'Please, call me Jake. I don't like all these formalities.'

'Very well Jake, good luck,' Mister Kodak said reluctantly.

'Good luck Jake,' Miss Sydney said with a smile.

'Godspeed,' Mister Liberty said, with no genuine feeling.

'Have some vodka, it helps to clear the mind,' Gradenko said sarcastically.

'This meeting is adjourned. Best of luck Jake,' Mister Versailles said with a tone that indicated a deep rooted friendship and respect.

'Thank you my fellow councillors. Whatever Kyos has planned I am confident that we will all be ready. If they are preparing to attack us soon, they will find that they should have taken more time. Good bye for now,' Jake said as he turned off his video displays. The five councillors disappeared leaving Jake in an empty room with five cold chairs. He held the hand console and transferred the various dossiers to his



personal computer in his private room. Had he played his cards right in withholding the leeches from his fellow council members? Only time would tell...

Lazarus stood by his hospital bed, his body still covered in several bandages. Despite the slight discomfort he had this burning desire to do some stretches and practice some shadow boxing. He had never been one to lie down and rest even when he was injured. The two androids who were overseeing his progress found this all very amusing. DA06 tilted its head with curiosity whilst MA09 was busy clearing up all of the equipment it had used to patch Lazarus up. It turned and looked at him practising his moves.

‘What do you is quite illogical,’ it said dismissively. ‘Your body is not at optimum performance.’

‘That is exactly why I do this MA,’ Lazarus said as he stretched his shoulders. They felt very tight and quite sore. ‘There is no point practising moves when you are fully fit and not hurt. When you are out there fighting you are hardly ever at the peak of condition. By doing this I learn how to cope with the pain,’ he said as stretched his hamstrings.

‘But does your technique not suffer as a result?’

‘Sometimes it does. I mean I can’t do a perfect kick when my leg has been shredded by raptors. But in the heat of a fight nobody gets points for perfect technique. I prefer being effective rather than technically flawless,’ Lazarus said as he started to shadow box.

‘You are not like a human of Terra; your wounds will have completely healed within the next 12 hours. Is it not logical to wait and perhaps reflect on your previous encounter?’

‘What can I say buddy, I guess I just get bored really quickly. Besides, I don’t sleep much.’

‘Cardinals do not require the same amount of sleep as the humans of Terra,’ MA09 said in a very matter of fact manner.

‘That is true, I don’t think I have slept for three days...shit that hurts,’ Lazarus said as he swung his right arm across and felt the pain of the damaged muscles.

MA09 returned to its work. DA06 was transfixed on Lazarus as if it was studying his technique. Even though the android could not speak, Lazarus felt that it had an expression on its face that resembled an amused child. Perhaps one that DA06 would speak. Lazarus now moved on to practising his kicks. He accidentally knocked over one of the monitors sitting on one of the tables by his bedside. *If Doctor Ameen had seen that she would have gone ballistic*, he thought to himself and smiled.

Alex tossed and turned in bed as he struggled with bad dreams haunting his sleep. He clutched onto Preston without even realising. From the outset he looked like a little boy reaching out for the security of a cuddly toy. But inside his mind the reality was hardly that simple. This was not a simple nightmare; it was his mind trying to remember what he had lost.

In his nightmares were images of people running for their lives as violent earthquakes and raging typhoons destroyed the land holding them on this Earth. Alex could feel their suffering as hundreds of lives were suddenly taken away into the depths of the after life. As the earth cracked open it revealed a river of lava overflowing underneath. The lava surfaced and covered the land with a blanket of smouldering liquid which conquered everything in its path. In all of this Alex was

simply an observer; he had no control over the environment. He prayed that this all of just a dream but something deep within him told him that there was some horrible truth to all of these images. Rather than images he had a sick feeling inside that they were in fact memories resurfacing. *Could this all have really happened?*

Standing near him, perhaps twenty feet away was his brother Sebastian. His eyes glowed two separate colours; his left was purple his right was green. He was donned in black armour which made him look much broader than he actually was. His long blonde hair flowed behind him. Strangely though, he did not appear as sinister as Alex had imagined at least not here in this moment. And he was not laughing at all the death around him; it was almost as if what he was looking at was inevitable and the wheel of destruction was already turning and he could do nothing about it. Alex looked down at himself and saw that he too was wearing black armour. And he was a sword in his hand, almost identical to Sebastian's. He turned to face his brother. His brother looked at him, their eyes locking. Sebastian screamed and charged Alex, his sword ready to strike him down. Alex lifted his blade and defended the incoming strike. Their swords sparked violently, a bright blue light broke free between the sparks and sent both of them flying back several feet. Sebastian did not hesitate to come back for another attack. Alex felt that he was not quite so ready to engage again. His brother was upon him; he defended poorly and fell to the ground.

All of a sudden everything switched to an image of total calm and serenity. Alex looked around and found himself in lush open woodland. He could hear birds in the sky and monkeys in the trees. Around him the woodland became denser and looked to be an endless maze of vegetation and tall trees. Looking at his hands he could see that he no longer had a sword nor was he wearing his black armour. In fact he was hardly wearing anything at all, simply a piece of material around his

genitals and buttocks and some makeshift boots. Reaching back he felt that his hair was tied back and his face was no longer covered in bandages. He must have looked like a skinny Conan; thank god he did not have a mirror to see how ridiculous he looked. But it did not matter for now. At least he was no longer watching people getting killed. More importantly Sebastian was nowhere to be seen. But Alex feared that he could be hiding in the surrounding forest. He definitely sensed that he was not alone. His heart began to race; his face had a trickle of sweat dripping down its side. *Who or what was out there?*

The nearby bushes began to move and Alex readied himself as best as he could to engage whatever foe was about to attack him. He held his hands out in front of him in a stance that he remembered to be a basic position of Thai Boxing. Somehow images and memories of his lessons of this martial art were surfacing at this tense moment. It must have been his brain switching to that raw instinct of self preservation. The noise in the bushes became louder; whatever it was in them was now coming out. Alex held his face in a strange expression which seemed to encapsulate fear and tension at the same time. *Come on you bastard*, he said in his mind as the bushes drew aside to reveal his nemesis.

It was Preston...

Alex was lost for words or any kind of reaction. Standing before him was the little stuffed penguin but now he was fully animated and walking like a living penguin. Only he was not actually a biological being; he was still the same stuffed toy but now able to walk with great fluidity.

'Don't look so surprised you fool,' Preston said. His sounded like a posh English gentlemen which Alex thought was totally out of character.

'Preston? I don't, I don't get it,' Alex said totally confused.

'You're not supposed to considering you have severe amnesia. That is why I am here. To help you remember all the things you have left in the darkness,' Preston said as he walked closer to Alex.

'Where are all my clothes?'

'I have no idea, this is not my design I assure you. I must say you do look quite formidable right now!'

Alex gave a reluctant smiled and then paused for a moment. Then he suddenly had a revelation, 'You're the first marker!'

'Bingo my boy!'

'Why do you sound so posh?'

'Why can't a penguin be posh, excuse me?'

'I-I don't bloody know, it just doesn't sound right,' Alex said, struggling for words.

'You don't seem too bothered about a stuffed toy walking and talking but you are concerned with how it speaks? Gosh Alex, you have truly lost it I fear,' Preston said, shaking his head and putting his flippers behind his back.

'How did Asad get you?'

'You chose him as the keeper of the first marker. You felt that no one would ever suspect that a little stuffed toy could possibly hold such important information.'

'Guess I must have been pretty smart once upon a time.'

'Indeed my boy, but don't flatter yourself quite yet. I am the first of many markers. Here you will learn the basics of self-defence and elemental manipulation.'

'This is a lesson?'

‘Not quite, more like a refresher course. You designed this world so you could hide the elementary aspects of your Cardinal and Patriarch abilities. Once you pass this test it will help you reach the next marker.’

‘Why couldn’t I just have made one marker with everything in it?’

‘That would be so easy and convenient wouldn’t it? But what if your enemies found it first? They could steal all your memories and abilities and leave you to ponder in the dark. Everything would have to start from scratch; you would not be ready to fight again for years. This way you can do it in a fraction of the time. Well, that is the idea at least.’

‘Has this marker thing ever been done before?’

‘I do not know the answer to that question. Even if Lazarus, Donya and Tai had markers they have not told you or me about them. I suspect they must have some kind of memory recall system.’

‘Knowing Lazarus he probably hasn’t bothered,’ Alex said, pausing for a moment. He was amazed that he had suddenly remembered that he knew what kind of person Lazarus was. He had yet to be reacquainted with him and yet he knew that Lazarus was very anti-markers. He felt it was cheating in a way.

‘Indeed, I am sure you are right. Now let’s get started shall we?’

Alex looked around at the dense woodland and began to remember what this test was. ‘There are three warriors stalking me. And somewhere deeper in this forest there is a small tribe led by a chief. He has the second marker.’

‘Very good Alex, it all seems to coming back to you already. This whole dream is awakening dormant memories which you transferred into the markers. Once you pass this test you will one step closer to knowing.’

‘How do I begin?’

‘Ah! You forget that part. Quite simple really: pick me up. I will become your chosen weapon and leave you to start your journey.’

‘That easy?’

‘Yes, but do hurry, I think they are drawing closer now,’ Preston said, looking over his shoulder.

Alex reached for Preston and picked him up. The stuffed toy instantly became a long wooden staff which had metal tipped ends. Carved into its centre was a name written in the language of the Aclarar. Alex could somehow remember what it said: *Janus*.

All of a sudden a warrior, dressed in minimal clothing, covering only his genitals and suitable for life in a warm lush forest, charged Alex from the surrounding forest. His face was covered in blue war paint covering everything but his lower jaw. In his hands he was carrying an axe. He raised it over his head as he ran towards Alex. He was now only ten feet away. Alex drew his staff forward and waited for the warrior to come closer. Then at the last moment he strafed across and smashed the warrior in his lower back as he ran past. The blow snapped his back in two and caused him to collapse to the ground. Barely alive he struggled to breath. Alex drew back his wooden staff and brought one of the metal ends crashing down onto the warrior’s head, killing him instantly. Blood sprayed out of his skull and onto Alex’s body.

The test had begun...

Alex quickly ran into the forest. He now remembered where he was. This was Tierra the land of the earth Patriarchs. It was here in the lush forest lands that the Aclarar had first felt the primitive nature of the human mind which lived in Frequency 4. For a long time they had pondered over the future of the two peoples. They

considered the primitive people of Frequency 4 to be their distant cousins; some saw these cousins as creatures to rear and nurture, others saw them as an escalating liability that if unchecked could grow out of control and one day lead to the end of the Aclarar. Of course the truth, as it always seemed to be, was somewhere in the middle of these viewpoints.

Tierra was where Alex had been initiated into the Cardinals after passing the test. Here he learnt their fighting style known as *‘The Killing Strike, Waiting Snake’*. It was a defensive technique which relied on reacting to your opponent and waiting as you gauged their movements, strengths and weaknesses all the while preparing to deliver a destructive attack which would render them useless. As Alex ventured deeper into the forest his mind started to refill with those distant memories. The forest began to become more animated. He had not noticed before whilst meeting Preston that certain elements of the woodland were missing, most notably the moist feeling of the surrounding air and the warm breeze which flowed through the trees. There was also that wet smell that seemed to follow when heavy rain had fallen over rich vegetation. Now both the wind and the smell of the forest were reaching Alex’s senses which meant that his body was fully reacting to the memories he had stored within the first marker.

The sound of broken twigs caught his attention a few seconds later. He could feel that someone was nearby, most likely stalking him from behind. A slight change in the wind around him made him duck instinctively. As he did so an arrow shot past over his crouching head and went flying into a nearby tree. The second warrior was using long range attacks to try and soften their prey. Judging by this tactic Alex knew that the warrior was most likely a woman. The people of Tierra were skilled archers but it was the women who were more skilful. Another arrow shooting by left Alex with



no doubt that the warrior was good. He ducked into cover behind a large tree. Getting closer would be critical and if he charged the enemy this would surely be accomplished. But he would have to be on his toes to dodge the projectiles. Estimating the distance between the two of them plus the speed of reloading Alex quickly calculated that his enemy was about thirty yards away. At full pace he could cover that distance in two seconds meaning that there would only be one shot coming his way. If he could dodge that shot he would then open the way for some closer quarter fighting.

The next arrow shot past his nose as he peered round and narrowly missed his nose. Alex sprang forward in the direction of the arrows trajectory. As the surrounding land became a blur in that one second of full throttle he suddenly saw a figure in front of him. Sure enough it was a woman and quite a beautiful one as well. Her face was covered in blue war paint.

And she was ready for him.

She had cast aside her bow and drawn out two short wooden sticks. Alex charged into her and launched a combination of strikes with his staff. But the woman was equal to the task and parried his attacks. She forced Alex onto the back foot and used one of her sticks to force his staff aside before striking him across the face with the other. It was a hefty blow and Alex was off balance very quickly. He turned his body and regained composure within a few milliseconds to defend himself against her next strike which was aimed at his midriff. He then deflected the counterattack coming from her other hand and used his body weight to push her backwards. The weight on her wrists was evident as the sticks leaned back in her hands. Alex pushed her further back and could sense that he was winning. But it was at this point where he made the crucial error of easing ever so slightly. This was one of his

weaknesses when it came to close quarter fighting. Often he would get the edge and be on the verge of victory only to let it slide because his concentration would slip. His opponent would then use this against him and he would seldom recover from it.

Sure enough, his opponent knew this. She suddenly pressed against Alex's staff and then turned her wrists on top of it so she could now press down on it. In one quick motion she forced the staff down and greeted it with her knee. The staff duly snapped in two. She then head-butted Alex and then elbowed him in the chest before smacking her fist into his face. Alex started to stumble backwards but was just about able to defend against her next set of attacks. They now had the same weaponry more or less. Both of them attacked and counter-attacked. The woman was quicker but Alex was stronger. At such close quarters he got a good look at her. She had long black hair which was tied back. On her right thigh was a large tattoo of a flower and butterfly, coloured quite intricately and well detailed. It was at this moment that he remembered her name. It was *Callisto*.

Of course this was a memory of her and he had no idea where she was now but he remembered what she was like back then. She had always been a strong opponent of human and Aclarar co-existence. She did not trust Alex or his brother Sebastian. They were both primitive minds who did not know how to use the vast powers at their disposal. Having heard that Alex was ready for the trials to become a Cardinal of Tierra she had offered to be one of those he would have to defeat to earn his place amongst them.

'You fight well for a human,' she said with venom in her voice. Her breathing was slightly heavy; she was trying to stall for time.

'I am a fast learner,' Alex said confidently.

'It will do you no good Janus!'

'I will be the judge of that...'

'Do you really think that you can beat me?'

'For certain...'

Callisto paused for moment; there was no fear in Alex at all and it was something to be admired even though she despised him at the same time. 'You killed Asoka,' she said bitterly.

'He got in my way,' Alex said with no regret.

With a vengeful scream Callisto launched herself forward at Alex. Her attacks were wild and not well coordinated but the sheer speed of them almost overwhelmed Alex. He just about managed to draw her one step too close so that he get behind her and strike her across the back. The blow was so strong that Callisto dropped her sticks and fell to the ground. She was severely winded and could not gather herself before Alex kicked both sticks into the surrounding bushes.

'Yield,' he said firmly.

Callisto could barely string a sentence together, 'I will not...'

Alex paused for one moment and then smacked her across the face, knocking her out cold. She always was a stubborn one. But he could never kill an unarmed warrior; it simply was not an honourable thing to do. She was out of the picture, which was enough for him. He smelt the air and could sense in which direction he had to go. The surrounding jungle was now almost completely formed in his mind. The memories of Tierra were settling into his mind, finding their way back through the empty doors and corridors, filling his cerebrum with what it was missing. And as each of these moments came back home to settle so to did the skills that he knew deep down he had always had. Tierra had been the place where he had

painstakingly learnt the fighting style of 'the shatter strike'. It was the technique used by the Cardinals here and the one which he had had a natural leaning towards.

Now only one more warrior remained before he would find the second marker.

Alex continued through the jungle, narrowly avoiding a flourishing ant hill as he made his way towards where he knew his next challenger would be. Looking up he could see that the trees were hundreds of feet high and all connected by thick vines. These vines were not only used by the animals, they were also a source of intimate communication between the trees. Alex had been told that some of the most powerful Mutes of Tierra had been able to connect their minds to the vast knowledge and wisdom of the trees. But quite often it was so intense that they would forever be drawn by the vast network of minds and never find their way back to their bodies. The people of Tierra called this '*Mind Swimming*' and the point of no return was called '*The Plunge*'. The latter was seen as a sacrifice, it was when you left the world of the physical and gave yourself to the realms of the mind forever.

Alex could sense that he was now very closer. Brushing some bushes aside he could see an opening up ahead. Within a few moments he could finally see that the trees gave way to reveal some fairly bare land which suggested that many people had walked over it and reduced it to a collection of small weeds and flat open spaces. Looking further down Alex could see his next challenger. Standing at the other side of the barren land was a huge man. He was enormous both in height and girth, easily a foot and a half taller than Alex and four times as heavy. His face was covered by a large horned mask and he was looking down towards the ground. Both his hands were one on top of the other with his chin resting on top of them. It was only then that Alex realised that the man was holding a gigantic mallet; its titanic end

was jammed in the ground and bearing the weight of his upper body as he leaned into the handle.

He had been waiting for Alex.

As Alex drew closer he started to get nervous. The man before him was a terrifying prospect. He was a giant with a very serious weapon. Alex knew that the man before him was one of the elite warriors of Tierra. They were famous for being almost impossible to defeat and the reason for this was their almost impregnable defence and lethal counterattack. To make matters worse they also possessed some basic elemental powers. Alex was now only ten feet from the giant and felt that was near enough. He could sense that he was about to be spoken to.

‘Greetings young hopeful,’ he said in a slow, deep voice which had quite a lot of bass. He sounded almost as though his lungs and larynx were made of wood and the sound was emanating from the base and vibrating upwards.

‘Young hopeful?’ Alex sounded confused.

‘You wish to obtain your second marker do you not?’

‘I guess so...’

‘There is no guessing to it my little friend, which is why you are here and why I am standing as I am.’

It was at this point that Alex realised that the giant was standing in front of a bridge made of thick rope. The bridge was quite long, perhaps fifty metres and led to a place concealed in mist. Underneath it seemed as though there was a high drop but from his vantage point he could not be sure. The surrounding landscape gave ample room for a fight if that is what the giant was looking for but with only a few trees scattered around it would be very difficult to get cover. And in the open the

giant could easily crush Alex with the mallet. But at the same time there was a lot of open space to dodge the attacks and work out some way to counter them.

'I can hear your mind thinking of a strategy,' the big man chuckled.

'I know you don't I? Your name is Baqir...'

The giant's eyes opened, 'Yes it is. And you are Janus...'

'I am Alex...'

'No, you are Janus, one half of him at least; and each half, they are one and the same...'

'So, do you have the second marker?'

'I am afraid not. The one I serve is beyond this bridge and has your marker. I am the gatekeeper.'

'What must I do?'

'Simply get across the bridge little one...'

It sounded simple enough but Alex could sense that the giant was quite fast for his size. And his huge size formed a natural barrier to the bridge. Alex would have to draw Baqir away from the bridge and then make a run for it. But full sprint for him could be mere strides for the big man. It was all in his head at the moment; first he had to gauge the reality of all of his calculating. The mere fact that he was thinking like a Cardinal gave him some inner satisfaction. He also could remember Baqir; he was once one of the elite guards of Tierra and who had stepped down in order to train new Cardinals. His skills were impressive and his understanding of an opponent had served him well for many years. Looking at him now Alex could see that he was past his peak, his body was showing slight signs of ageing. But the loss of physical peak always gave way to wisdom and experience, both of which were

more meaningful in the heart of battle. As Baqir himself had once said, 'A bigger stick always matters, but the one who swings it matters even more.'

It was slowly all returning to Alex and he was smiling inside.

'So when do we start?'

'Whenever you want,' Baqir replied, as he raised his head and tensed his arms ever so slightly as he readied himself to engage Alex.

'I have no weapon,' Alex complained.

'Your mind will suffice...'

Baqir's words sent a small shockwave through Alex's mind. This was all part of the first marker's role to begin to unlock his forgotten Cardinal Powers. The longer he remained in the forest the more his body began to draw the energy from within. He was not learning them all over again; he was simply remembering them. He now knew that it would be key words and physical actions which would kick start his memory and open up the doors which remained closed inside his head. And Baqir's words had unlocked his inner energy, also known as his 'Chi'.

Alex felt the electricity build up inside him as his body began to vibrate. Static energy filtered between his fingers and he felt a rush of energy surging through his body.

'Your aura is building up,' Baqir said with a smile, 'Very good. Now fight me.'

Alex charged forward at an incredible speed. Baqir took his hands away from his mallet and raised them on his sides. Then his eyes began to glow green. The ground underneath Alex's feet began to tremble. He jumped to try to keep his momentum. In mid-flight he threw his right leg forward and gave Baqir a vicious kick to the face. He then used his left foot to step onto the giants shoulder and launched off him in the direction of the bridge. But Baqir was wiser than Alex had first realised

and twisted his body backwards; grabbing Alex with one hand and throwing him back to where he had run from. Alex fell to the ground and smashed his shoulder on the open ground. *So much for an easy way out* he thought to himself.

Baqir grabbed his huge mallet and advanced towards Alex, who was struggling to get to his feet. The huge mallet came crashing down and Alex was only just able to roll across to avoid it. A blow from that weapon would mean instant death, that much was certain. Baqir readied himself for another strike. Alex was now on his feet now and as Baqir tried to smash him across from the side Alex flipped backwards. His body was now operating on a new level, like a Cardinal at level 2. Baqir went for another blow from over his head but Alex dodged it easily and then launched a flurry of kicks and punches at the giant's torso. The blows forced him to let go of his weapon and take defensive action. He was now blocking all of Alex's attacks and each time his forearms smashed into Alex's arms and legs it sent violent vibrations into his body. Alex knew what was coming next; Baqir was setting him up for a savage counter strike which would target his footing and leave him defenceless.

As the blocks became more and more aggressive Alex began to tire. Baqir suddenly caught him out with a powerful right hand punch across the chin. As Alex's body lost its balance Baqir then swept under his feet with his right leg. Alex was taken up into the air as if he was a tea cup which had just had the table cloth taken up from beneath it. He came crashing down onto his back. With what little energy he had left Alex rolled to his right and kept going. Baqir was stomping after him, the ground vibrating with every step. Alex was now getting very dizzy and knew that this tactic would not keep him alive for much longer. In a split second he sprung onto his knees and then his feet as the giant came thundering towards him. He then jumped back as high as he could and pushed his feet against a nearby tree. Using the tree



he sprung back at Baqir. His vision was totally hazy from the dizziness but he could just about make out the huge man in front of him. He kicked him across the face, so hard that it knocked his mask clean off. Baqir fell back slightly as Alex landed just in front of him. Alex clenched his fist and saw that it was sparkling with electricity. His Chi was now on fire. With his head still spinning and suffering from almost a total lack of focus Alex was now operating solely on instinct. He jumped up towards Baqir and landed an uppercut straight on his chin. The electricity surging through his fist shot into the big mans head and he went crashing to the ground.

Alex landed on his feet, his body still full of electricity. He shot lightning bolts from both hands and aimed them at Baqir. The giant was repeatedly shocked by Alex's newfound Chi until he was unconscious. Alex's head was now pounding as the dizziness and the use of his Chi began to take their toll on his body. He stopped his attack and fell to his knees. He opened his mouth and immediately vomited some blood and saliva. The release of pressure helped ease his head and his vision began to return to normal. Baqir was lying unconscious in front of him. Alex rose to his feet and darted past the fallen warrior towards the bridge. He grabbed the two supports holding the bridge firmly in the ground and used them to help regain his focus and composure. He turned back and saw that Baqir had not moved. He then looked ahead at the bridge. The mist was still there.

He stepped onto it, his feet still wobbling and his body exhausted. He staggered forward. Looking down he could see that the drop was very high, at least a thousand feet. There seemed to be a river at the bottom and what looked to be crocodiles swimming around waiting for someone to fall in. And that could quite easily be Alex if he was not too careful. The bridge appeared safe and seemed stable enough. But there were gaps and some of the rope holding it together looked

a bit dodgy. It was not the sort of place to take ones time. Alex fell back and held onto the sides of the bridge to keep himself from falling. He was beginning to see straight again and the nauseous feeling was going fast. This was his Cardinal healing factor coming into play finally. It had probably only been taken a few minutes but it had felt like hours.

‘Steady now Janus, you are almost there,’ a voice echoed from the mist. It sounded like a man but then the echo was a woman.

‘W-w-who’s there?’

‘You will find out soon enough, now hurry along,’ the voice said. It sounded friendly and kind. But it was also very slow and melodic. And there seemed like there were the voices closely following the other; a man and a woman. *Most strange* Alex thought.

He continued carefully along the bridge. Soon the mist consumed him and he could barely see a few metres in front.

But he was not afraid.

And as he regained his strength he started to move quickly across the bridge towards his destiny.