

Chapter 2

Beginnings.

Carridon Tyflos liked rain.

Despite being shin deep in a muddy forest, arms and legs drenched, he still liked the rain. It pattered against his oilcloth. Amidst the greenery here- the trees, the shrubs, the mud- the rain drew out that familiar scent, that earthy, aromatic petrichor. It suffused the air around him and he breathed it in deep.

What he did not like was this conversation.

"Look, ma," He interrupted, "I don't see your issue. If I can stay, why wouldn't I?" He ducked under a tree branch, "You're not gonna need my help any less, and things are good here."

Wrapped up in her oilcloth, his mother shouted back from ahead, voice blurred by the constant drizzle. "Because it'll be good for you, Carridon. Believe me, your father and I can survive without you." She barked out a laugh. "Why not just go? We know you could do great things."

He sighed, "No I've already told you, you don't. And for who? Not for you and not for me. There's no point."

"Listen, Carridon, fire forges the blade and-

He groaned

"-adversity forges the-

"Yeah yeah, okay." This was retreading old ground, "I get it."

They carried on in silence for a while. The rain continued to drum against the grass and leaves.

His feet sank into the marshy clods of earth and he felt the numbing cold as rivulets of rainwater rushed in. They'd been walking for a few hours now, towards Greatmount, and the clearing was now in view. His mother had paused up ahead to drink from her flask.

"You alright?" Carridon nodded to his mother as he caught up.

"Yeah I'm fine." She put her flask away, "Probably shouldn't stay out too long today. I'll let you decide where to go."

Carridon surveyed the scene.

They stood at the west face of Greatmount, its base a tawny green, and dotted with copses that shivered from wind and rain. It stretched far upwards, where lay a gradual gradient from grass to rock. Up above, grey stone melted into the flat sheet of clouds.

Scattered across its plains lay stony ruins: monolithic walls, now crumbling and mossy; collapsed archways, chipped and uneven. All had been whittled down by such rain. They stretched as far as the eye could see, disappearing into specks on the horizon.

"The Log? Been a while, and we could do with restocking poppies. Good Fire Eye there too, and they should be ripening."

He pointed to the eastern base, where a half sunken tower peak lay sideways atop a hill. The Log was one of the largest pieces, composed of a collapsed, arcing body and remnants of a spire, overtaken with foliage. It was a decent walk and would hopefully provide some cover.

His mother snorted, "Hah. Irony." She brandished her walking stick, "Sounds good though. Let's go."

And with that, she set off, marching unto the rainswept grassland and toward the tower. Carridon took a swig of water and followed.

This Carridon boy's head is bent down. It's difficult to see much of him. His figure and face were draped in the heavy cut of his cloak. I say "his" to the fullest extent of the word, for it was he who harvested the teag nuts in autumnal chill, he who laboriously pressed them for oil, and he who applied it to his cloth, over days and days of travail. It repaid his effort in kind, beading raindrops against its russet hue. The only other feature would be the large, wicker basket strapped to his back. He'd already collected some plants on his way here, small sprigs, tender blossoms, dark tubers and roots, which all lay dripping within.

His face..., well, he's still just a boy. An impression of a cheek and nose are barely visible beneath the hood. His face is not yet lined, not yet touched by grief nor woe, so I'll leave him alone to this little peace for now.

The pair approached a ruin. Carridon almost forgot they were coming upon it; It was a low, broken stub of a staircase beset by chunks of a pillar and a particularly tenacious bramble. A mossy wave was slowly making its way across the rock, amidst the small shoots of weeds. His mother stopped.

"Tell me, what's here?" She crossed her arms.

Carridon knelt down by the rock. The fresh scent of rain was stronger, and slender blades of grass brushed his face with dewdrops.

"There's a good patch of mugwort here." He combed through the thin leaves to get a solid look at it, "Seems decent enough, though it's got some wilting leaves on it. Should I get some?"

"You tell me." His mother was leant against a rock, head down.

Carridon pulled out his knife from his belt. "No, probably not. I'm pretty sure no one needs it right now and our stock is good for the winter." He began to cut off the diseased leaves, "And of course, it's raining. So we can't dry it."

She nodded and motioned to the rest of the ruin.

"Alright, uhm, let's see," He quickly flicked over the other plants, "Some steppe grass, brushtail, hawthorn bush, king's fern..." The boy hopped over the staircase to look at the other side, "Oh! There's that gancrais here."

A hardy growth of the pale purple flowers were sprouting here, beside a stone. He remembered seeing this plant before now- they'd harvested some roots from it a summer ago, and now it had seemingly recovered, its gnarled, yellow-brown roots spreading outwards.

His mother walked around and looked with him. "Excellent. And?"

"It's around the right time to harvest it, I think. Autumn time, right? Cut off side roots, avoid the taproot. Old Alde still has that nasty cough so the gancrais can help with that and harmonising the other herbs. He'd probably also like the taste too."

"Perfect." She knelt down with him and patted him on the back. "Maybe my boy isn't the thickwit he thinks he is, eh?" Her voice had a smile in it.

Carridon let out a little laugh as he got out his knife again. "Maybe. Maybe."

He cleaned it against his cloak a couple times before sawing at the coarse tubers, tough as iron wood. His mother joined him with her own blade. Choose a spot, check it, and carve away.

Once they completed one, they'd toss the root in the basket.

It wasn't long before Carridon decided to stop. Had to leave enough for healthy growth next year. They stood up (his mother groaning slightly for her cramped muscles) to find the rain lightened to merely mizzle, though the sky, albeit brighter, remained a greyish slate.

"Should be enough for now."

She nodded, eyes already set on the tower. Carridon gathered the last of the roots, his fingers still tingling from the cold earth, and secured the basket on his back. A silent understanding passed between them. The time for rest was over.

The two waded through the tallgrass. It reached high, past his waist, and each step released small trickles of water down their cloaks. It was gentle.

Their walks often fell quiet, not because their words dried up, but because they'd spoken enough - they gave space for the world to speak. They simply breathed beneath the sunless sky, before the orchestra of rain and grass that spanned their world, and walked. It was a humble quiet, and it was good.

It was around midday when they neared the tower. The rain had slowly come to a halt, and patches of the cloud cover were thinning. The so-called Log loomed over them; its colossal body rested sideways atop a hill and bathed them in its diffuse shadow. It was breathtakingly huge, its ancient, once-circular body now collapsed inwards so only incomplete arcs remained. Now that they were closer, the individual blocks could be seen, each one over twice the height of Carridon himself, each one's seams adorned with relentlessly creeping moss and small vines. The hill wasn't too bad, probably a ten minute walk, but its surface was speckled vibrant red. Poppies.

His mother was sat on a rock, resting a little before the climb, and periodically sipped from her flask. Carridon considered the tower again. What was there again? There was a lovely willow tree somewhere within the ruin, a small group of fire eye (or brennoc) trees, and of course a tremendous span of poppies within and without it. He remembered he'd once clambered through those ruins when younger, tried to get as high as he could and, following the shock he gave his mother, was promptly convinced to come down with that familiar shouting (and swearing) that many concerned mothers have. He smiled a little at the memory.

"Carridon," His mother had adopted that unhealthily serious tone of voice, "We didn't finish our conversation."

The boy's insides cringed a little.

"Look, Aleth," It felt strange using his own mother's name. "I don't see what else there is to discuss. I don't intend to go soon. Alright, maybe, *maybe* in the future, after Cass has grown a little more, but not anytime soon."

His mother had not budged from the stone. Carridon made an exasperated motion to move.

"So eager to go to this tower, but hardly consider the other?" Her voice held a mordant edge, but broke into a gentler tone. "Come Carridon, sit and talk with me."

With a grimace, he strode over as bid and sat beside her. He waited for her to talk first.

"My boy," Her staff was on her lap, "The Tower would be good for you. The capital is the centre of so many people, so much opportunity, and the Tower marks the centre of the very capital." You have so much in you, so much potential and love, so much *we* didn't have, and we're *proud* of you for it. Proud enough to ask you to go, to leave and to see what the world makes of you, and what you make of the world."

She tentatively reached out for his shoulder and held it in those familiar, firm hands.

"We don't want you to leave. Gods, of course we don't. But we love you too much to let you stay."

He wanted to push away, to flinch, to argue, but that twinge in his heart stilled him.

"Remember Brann's boy?"

Her voice grew quieter, more flinching, more raw.

"That horse kicked him something terrible, shattered his leg, and bone rammed right through skin. He landed bad and got so much dirt in the wound. You were there when it happened. It was you who got pressure on quick and kept him warm."

She paused.

"When your father and I saw that wound...Gods. Mangle of black mud, blood and bone. It wasn't good. Didn't think we could save that leg. Truth be told, I wasn't sure if we could even save the boy. Such a bad break, and so much mud. Death from the infection or from the amputation. But *you*. You held fast. You washed that wound, set the bone back in, splinted him. You stayed with him, three full days and three full nights, watching over him, changing poultices and feeding him tea. And in the end, because of *you*, he lived."

She squeezed his shoulder. He did remember. He remembered the feeling of shoving a bone back through muscle, washing the same, bloody wound every day, staying awake to the boy's feverish ramblings and cries of pain.

"There is a greatness in you, Carridon Tyflos-"

He grit his teeth.

"-It makes me more proud than you could ever know. You are destined for bigger things than just our home. Go out into the world. Learn from the masters of Physica at the tower. Show the world what I have already seen."

She let out a soft breath.

"Their next year begins soon after this equinox festival. You can still make it."

He looked away from her. Across the grassy plains, the thick forests, the gentle hills. He knew that behind that tucked behind that mountain, it lay. Their village. His home.

"Why though?" His voice was hoarse. "Isn't... here good enough? Am I not good here?"

She exhaled slightly and put her arm around his shoulder.

"You are good here, Carridon. More than good, you're wonderful. But greatness is not comfortable. It is not kind and it is not easy. But I- no, we place our hearts on you. Because there truly is something great within you, something that you can help so many others with, far beyond just *here*."

The thin patches of cloud had finally been burnt off now and slanted slats of sunlight shone through. They stood like pillars.

Carridon didn't respond. Aleth held him a little tighter.

This was home. The thought welled in his heart with that bittersweet throb. His home, his people, his lands. Goosebumps prickled across his flesh as he breathed. This had been his world.

When he did speak, his voice barely broke a whisper.

"It's nice here."

"It is, son." She said no more than that.

Were there tears in his eyes? Sniffing, he slowly got up.

"Let's go, mum." He held his hand out for her, "Can't spend too long here."

"Alright, Carridon." She took his hand and stood, "Let's go then."

She began to walk up the hill. Carridon followed. He needed time for the words to settle, movement to clear his head. He'd decide tonight.

The path came back to him as they began their ascent. It was steep at points, flat at others, all made uneven by large rocks that had levelled the earth. He tried to focus on what was around him. Rugged little trees clung on around the hill, surrounded by those rings of poppies and ferns. They all bowed in the wind.

A ways up the hill, Carridon stopped by a particularly dense patch of poppy pods: egg shaped husks coloured a dusty green.

"Ma, I'm just gonna collect some poppies here, okay?" He'd knelt down, put his bag on the side, and scored one of the pods. A bead of pearly liquid seeped out.

"Yep, heard you." She continued to trudge onwards.

The distinct, sharply fruity scent of the poppy greeted him atop the palaver of floral and grassy smells. These would do good, they were always in need of-

The earth rumbled.

His head shot up. The grass seemed to shudder, the leaves shiver. There was a hiss, a hiss like a burning fuse, that ran sharp through the air. An earthquake? But there had been none for years, no warnings, and what was that *hiss*?

"Ma, MA!" This wasn't right. Something-

Something pierced through the clouds.

A glint of fire, right above them, hurtling, growing, coming right for them. The rumbling grew louder, shaking every plant into violent susurrations, and a screaming whistle filled the air.

"MA!" She was frozen ahead, staring up at the thing, "GET DOWN!" He lunged forward, muscles taut, running, reaching, shouting, *praying* that-

The world shattered.

A crack fractured the air, punching the air from Carridon's lungs and hurling him backwards. There was a moment of weightlessness, his heart lurching, hands flailing, and only a deafening whine pierced his mind before...

He hit the ground. Back slammed into packed earth, head whipped back 'gainst the ground; Chunks of rocks, dirt, and wood scattered across him.

He bled. The slightest warmth against his head and arms were the only indication he had. That terrible ringing echoed in his skull, throbbing with each heartbeat, filling his thoughts with only that mindless whine. His vision swam. He stared dumbly at the ground beside him, feeling something trickle down from his head.

It seemed like hours before he could think. He blinked twice as the ringing subsided- not gone, just only in his ears now. An agonising nail of pressure sharpened behind his eyes, driving deep into his brain, whilst rawer pains surfaced from the blanket of shock. His back throbbed with an intense ache, a fresh sting sharpened in a gash on his head, and his elbows had smashed against rock, a broken, stinging battle-lost of skin against stone. His breathing was ragged.

The sky was too bright. Clenching his teeth, he rolled over to his side and ignored the little eruption of agony across his body.

Breathe. Just breathe for now. Stay calm. Stay focused.

The world tipped beneath him. He swore in his mind. He closed his eyes and swallowed his spit.

Ma.

Fuck.

His breathing deepened.

Okay. Get up. Get up. He roughly pressed his hands against the earth. The pain behind his eyes swelled. He shouldered past it.

Slowly, painfully slowly, he sat upright. He did not dare touch the wound on the back of his head. He could feel that sticky warmth oozing through his hair, dripping small droplets onto his neck. A dullness beckoned him, made heavy his bones, and draped him in that tender lethargy.

No. He could not rest. Get up. Get up get up get up. He needed to find her, needed to help her.

There was a large stone beside him. Using that, he heaved himself to his feet, stumbled, and nearly fell again. The ground rocked beneath his feet and blind spots overtook his vision. He steadied himself, keeping his eyes on the ground. There was a sickening sway in his head, a nausea that spread down to his gut and gullet.

Steady yourself. Breathe.

The whine in his ears lessened now, and he could hear his breaths: ragged, scraping against his voice, and coarse.

He lifted his eyes.

Debris littered the hillside. Fresh, black earth had been torn up, tossed aside, amidst crushed flowers, shattered stone and splintered trees- all hewn by the same, terrible impact.

He stumbled forward, one staggering step at a time, but kept his eyes forward. Find her.

His mother was just up ahead, slightly more up the hill. Her ragdoll body was flung against a tree. Carridon blinked and limped over quicker. Shit shit shit.

He fell beside her, frantically felt her mouth for a breath. It was there: weak, but warm. A wave of relief surged through him. Alive.

Her eyes were still closed. A more severe concussion then, worse than his for sure. Gently, he cradled her as he shifted her body off the tree and onto the softer ground. She didn't seem to have any severe cuts so this rest position should be best procedure.

Alive. The meagre word echoed in his heart. He wet his lips. Alive. That was good. He let out a grim laugh. More than good.

She was still breathing. He unclipped his cloak and draped it over her. That would do for now, at least, until she was awake and could communicate more.

He turned his gaze around him. They were right before the tower, where more debris lay, more shattered pieces of stone from the ruin. They were lucky that no large pieces had broken off.

What... had happened? What had fallen?

It must've hit higher up. Towards the top of the hill, centre of the tower. Carridon looked at his mother again. She was safe, covered, and there didn't seem to be any immediate danger. But the thing that fell- there was no telling what it was, or what it could do. Would it be better to stay, or to look ahead and check it out? What if there was more, or if it was some sort of beast?

He closed his eyes and rubbed his face.

"I'll be back soon." he whispered.

It only took a minute for him to crest the final stretch of the hill. Dead birds, sparrows and magpies, lay limp on the ground, their wings unnaturally splayed out like quarter sunbursts. Up close, the walls of the tower seemed impossibly huge, arcing up high into the sky and hiding half the sky. Dust hung lazily in the air.

It was close.

There was an opening to the right. He staggered towards it.

The tower was already half sunk and its inside had previously been filled with earth, decorated by a veritable mass of different trees, flowers and plants. All of that was gone now. Carridon stepped over obliterated pieces of mulchy wood and towards the centre.

A crater lay before him. It was large, about the width of a house, and many spans deep. Grassy ground had been upturned to reveal the blackened soil in a near perfect circle. And there, at the epicentre, the deepest point of depression, it lay.

A spine.

“What in God’s name...” He crept closer. Small stones and soil rolled down the edge of the crater.

It was a spine. Or to be more precise, a back. Skinless, pale-red muscles were twisted outwards in the form of a back, but torn off at the ends, and bony processes of the spine jutted out from down its centre. It was about twice the size of his own. Carridon walked over to it.

Layers of muscle had been peeled back on either side; He could see different depths of the striated muscles, white fascia, even some impression of ribs. But that was it- just a back. No rest to the body. It was flat against the soil.

Across all of its surfaces lay a long, uninterrupted, black mark. A sigil, of sorts.

It was curling, coiling, sharp, smooth, infinitesimally minute in every intricate corner to its being. It was like ink in water, and seemed to twist impossibly before Carridon’s eyes.

His heart was pounding in his head and his breathing had quickened. What in God’s name could this even be? Some part of a beast?

Waveringly, he reached with his foot and poked it. Nothing happened. Dead. That much was certain. With difficulty, he swallowed the stone in his throat.

Was there something beneath it? Within it? On the other side? He wanted to see more of it.

This tremulous curiosity overtook his heart.

Things were quiet now. It seemed safe.

He was wrong.

He reached out for it with his hand.

And the muscles melted into his fingers.

Fuck. FUCK. Carridon tried to yank his hand away but the massive weight of the spine anchored him down by his fingertips. Shit. What the hell was happening?

Its meat sank beneath his flesh with terrifying speed; some force pulled them together and it further fused with his bare arm. It was half gone already. A feverish warmth and alien firmness writhed up his forearm, across his shoulders, down his back, with foreign convulsions and twists. He screamed and stomped against it with his foot, to no avail.

The last sliver of muscle wriggled into his skin. He could still feel *things* within him, slipping and coiling over another like eels, like-

There was a lightning flash of pain across the back, like a thousand red-hot wires garroting his skin, like being whipped with glass and salt. It was like no pain you have ever felt. Knives carved up his lungs and pokers melted through his back.

Carridon Tyflos shouted and collapsed- the black borders mind and sight almost, *almost* swallowed him whole. But not quite.

There he lay, in the dirt once more, waiting, pleading, *begging* for the echoes of pain to dissolve.

He did not know how long he stayed there. But in time, the fire burned out and the agony dulled.

"Carridon! Carridon!" Her voice was faint, buffeted by wind, but loud enough for him. She'd been calling for a while now.

The boy groaned and lurched to his feet. He looked behind him. Empty.

With eyes shut, he drew a long, slow breath.

Fuck.

"Carridon? Are you there?"

Go to her first. Sort this out later.

He scrambled up the side of the crater towards her voice. "Yes, I'm here! I'm coming!"

Back through the opening, down from the tower, and towards his mother, who still lay beneath his cloak.

His back prickled.

"Carridon! Carridon," Her voice slurred slightly, an aftermath of concussion, "Are you alright?"

"Yes, ma, I'm alright. Don't worry about me." He sat next to her and held her hand, "Are you?"

"Carridon. Carridon," She repeated, as though comforting herself. She looked at him. Strands of hair stuck against her sweating brow, and her dark brown eyes, glazed with a sheen of shock, met his.

"Carridon. I can't move my legs."