



Alan Baxter is a British–Australian author who writes dark fantasy, horror and sci-fi, rides a motorcycle and loves his dog. He also teaches Kung Fu. As well as novels, he is the author of more than fifty published short stories and has written narratives and dialogue for video games. By day (and night more often than not) Alan is director and chief instructor of the Illawarra Kung Fu Academy. He lives among dairy paddocks on the beautiful south coast of NSW, Australia, with his wife, son, dog and cat. Read extracts from his novels, a novella and short stories at his website — www.warriorscribe.com — and find him on Twitter @AlanBaxter and Facebook. Feel free to tell him what you think. About anything.

Books by Alan Baxter

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Obsidian
Abduction

ALAN BAXTER
ABDUCTION
ALEX CAINE BOOK 3



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*For everyone fighting a battle;
May you find the strength to never quit.*

1

Alex Caine woke to a soft creak in the floorboards of his old weatherboard house. From a fitful sleep he was instantly alert, tense, heart hammering. *Breathe*, he told himself as he forced the nerves to subside. Just Silhouette returning from a trip to the city to feed. She jokingly complained about the commute, but taking people from the small country town where they lived was far too obvious, so a two-hour each way journey once a month or so was a necessary hassle. The price of eating people and something Alex still struggled to come to terms with. But he loved her.

He glanced over at the clock and anxiety riddled his chest again. Three am. Far too early for Sil to be coming home. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, to gather himself, and images of broken chunks of an obsidian city flashed through his mind, hundreds, even thousands of people cast tumbling into the Void to blink out of existence, as if they had never been. Hundreds more crushed or maimed as Obsidian slammed back into the mortal realm. All of it focused through his consciousness and power, through the energy of the Darak stone embedded in his chest, a living part of him.

You saved thousands of people, Silhouette repeatedly reminded him.

But I killed thousands more. I've felt the Void. I know what I did to them! he would counter, the pain a black hole in his soul.

The intensity of the events never ebbed, even for a moment.

Alex centred himself. He was a warrior, a fighter against all odds. He remembered the words of his Sifu: *When the battle rages, put aside fear. Of course it is there, but you can make time for it later. When you fight, there is only the moment, nothing else.*

He opened his eyes, nerves barely steadied, and sat up in bed. The darkness was absolute, no streetlights for miles around his two acres in the valley, and no moon this night. But Alex had a preternatural vision that out-performed anyone he had yet met, arcane or mundane. He let that vision open, watched through normal space for shades and planes of magic, for the auras of any intruders and the magesign of their activity.

An aroma rose, sickly sweet and cloying. He had been to a seaside resort in England once, years ago, and visited a shop that made candy, sticks of rock with the resort name right through them. The smell there had been the same, intense, hot and sugary. Only this had a layer of something else over it, something oily.

The sensation of magesign in the house swelled. He slipped from the bed, quietly pulled on a pair of loose cotton pants and a plain T-shirt, a frail shield against the vulnerability of nakedness. Someone was in his house, doing magic. The 'sign swelled again and he saw the shades of some kind of searching spell, tendrils questing through the rooms, seeking. He gathered his own power, closed his shields, hid himself from everything, even light. Invisible in the darkness, he flexed his fists and waited.

A movement beyond the door caught his eye. Then another. At least two people stalked his home. The sickly stench grew thicker, the sensations of spell-casting stronger. He recognised the flavour of the arcane energy, similar to that which had pulled him and Silhouette and the others through to Obsidian just a couple of short months before. Silhouette had said it was Fey magic. A tremble moved through Alex's skin. Were there actual Fey here? Sil had promised this couldn't happen without plenty of warning. How had they slipped past the wards? After all the work Armour had done to protect him, desperate as they were for him to join them, why weren't arcane alarms going berserk?

And besides all that, the day before had been Lughnasadh, or Lammas, the thin day, when the Fey had power to pass between Faerie and the mortal realm. They shouldn't be able to threaten him now, and not again until the next thin day. Was all

of Armour's recent work for nothing?

Silhouette's dread of the Fey disturbed him. She was hard as nails, old and powerful, for all her apparent youth and beauty, and she feared very little. But the Fey put her on edge. As a Kin, mixed blood Fey and human, she knew intimately the nature of the creatures. As a first generation Kin, rare even among her own kind, she knew perhaps more intimately than most, and if one thing absolutely terrified the love of Alex's life, it was the Fey. Utterly evil, she had called them. Was it possible some trod the boards of his home?

He searched his memory, tried to remember what he had lately read. He had thought it wise to learn all he could of the Fey, and Kin, and the otherworld of Faerie, but Silhouette scowled and shook her head, dismissing the majority of literature on the subject as simply the musings, mythology and misconceptions shared by humans. *Faerie is no fairy tale, Alex, she had said. It is evil and other and inconceivable and best left out of mind.*

But as Armour were so keen on him and Silhouette joining them since the Obsidian Incident, he had access to a vast of array of knowledge from their centuries-old archives.

He moved again, silent as an assassin. He tried to get a better view from the room, but the architecture worked against him. He needed to see more, plan a course of action, but doing so might give him away.

The Obsidian Incident. Such a toothless misnomer for the horror of what had occurred, the lives lost. They had given him a lot of time to deal with the traumas of the Incident, and he had tried to use that time to learn. Although often he had been too tired, unmotivated. He slept a lot, fell easily into black moods. PTSD, the Armour psychologist had told him. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

He had learned about the thin days. He and Silhouette had sat nervously through the previous twenty-four hours, wondering if they would have to fight or flee, use some of the new protective measures, but nothing happened. *The Fey may not come at all,*

Silhouette had said, though they knew better. There would be some attempt at retribution for the blow he had struck against them. But it had to be a thin day and they had planned for that with scrupulous attention to detail. How were the Fey here now?

Alex jumped as shades of movement shifted in the darkness near the bedroom door. Even now his mind was wandering, his focus weak. *Pull it together, for fuck's sake!*

He crouched and moved, watched an intruder's aura, their shades plain to him as they passed into the large bedroom. He could see shifts and colours of others in the hallway beyond, definitely more than two, maybe four or five. His heart hammered. The shades were like nothing he had ever seen, warping colours like oil on water, but all overlain with deep, dark shadows, black light masking the true nature of their psychic signatures. It hurt his mind to read them, made him nauseous as he tried to decipher intent.

The thick darkness of the night masked their physical presence, he had no idea what they looked like, and their slippery auras made it impossible to guess their shape. An enemy he had no idea how to engage. The one in the room hopped up onto the bed he had so recently vacated and crouched. He got the impression of a dog sniffing a scent. The claggy, sugary aroma filled the room as others hurried in, drawn by some silent signal.

Alex, holding his breath, moved painfully slowly towards the bedroom door. However well they saw in the dark did not matter as his magic rendered him completely invisible. His own shades were locked down tight, concealed in a shell of mundanity. If he could leave the room, perhaps he could get to his car and escape. Or head to one of the more heavily warded areas in the garden, his newly erected stone circle, ancient methods for modern protection. He would grab his phone on the way through the house, call Silhouette for advice, draw on the services of Armour. Anything was preferable to engaging with whatever prowled his bedroom. Even without Silhouette's warnings it was clear to him that these things were incredibly powerful, dangerous in ways

he could not fathom, and he desperately wanted to avoid any confrontation.

He took a deep, silent breath as he neared the door, drawing it into his belly, using his extensive training in *chi gung* to steady heart and mind. In preparation to slip out the door and into the hallway, he softly let the breath out again.

Sharp movement on the bed and the intense scrutiny of several beings hit him like a series of blows. Before he had time to even register surprise they were on him.

Alex cried out, all pretence of stealth become irrelevant, and thrashed around. He felt blows connect in the darkness, heard high-pitched squeals of pain and frustration as his Darak-enhanced strength and masterful technique delivered devastating attacks. But it wasn't enough. Even as some creatures fell away, others slammed into him. Sweet, sickly, oily blows rained down, struck his head, neck, body. Pain blossomed all over and something else, something arcane and malevolent, filled the room. No, it filled his mind. As he fought, some magic like he had never felt before infiltrated his very being and tightened about him like steel cables. It was similar to the enchantment the Autarch of Obsidian had used to bind him and his power, except instead of wrapping him up like a straitjacket, it wove tendrils of shackling through every fibre of his core. His chest pulsed and burned, the Darak felt incandescent against his flesh.

With a roar he used his elemental specialty and drew heat from every corner of the house, agitating together a huge ball of radiant flame to burst out from him and incinerate his attackers. If he burnt down his house, he was past caring.

In the sudden, glaring orange glow he saw twisted faces and thin hands raised. His heart double-thumped in terror at the cold, broken shape of the things before him even as they squealed and fell away, wreathed in tentacles of twisting flame. But it was not enough, there were too many, and the magic continued to tighten about him, the blows returned. His bedclothes and curtains crackled with licks of fire, casting an orange dancing

light through the room. The long, sharp, gangly creatures were quick. Uncanny, sticklike, jerky movements as some batted out flames and others wrapped a glistening, oily rope around and around him. His shouting and thrashing grew more contained. Their elongated, hollow, dark faces, the skin a deep green-black like the thickest algae scum of a darkened swamp, shifted slowly from concentration to some twisted semblance of joy.

As some beat out the last of the flames, one leaned forward, its eyes a flickering amber in the dark-again room, and hissed something. Its breath was the heaviest, sweetest, most nauseating thing Alex had ever breathed in and darkness covered his mind like a hood.

2

Claude Darvill studied the lie of the bones on the scrap of black canvas and scowled. He knew he was missing something but could not place what and his frustration grew. The reading was confusing. Tendrils of volcanic smoke drifted snake-like around the dark grey rock he used as a table for his tools of magic. His breath steamed in the frozen air. With a noise of annoyance, he gathered the small, yellowed bones in his fist again, once more whispered the incantation. He let his questing mind free, sent his desires out into the aether and cast the skeletal pieces across the rough black material. They fell exactly as they had before, far too accurately for any hint of chance to enter the reading.

‘Fuck.’ Squatting, Claude rubbed his hands together for warmth and stared.

‘Perhaps something interrupts the result?’ a small voice behind him suggested.

Claude didn’t take his eyes from the divination. ‘You think, Sigmund?’ His voice was heavy with sarcasm.

‘I just meant ...’

‘I know what you meant.’ Claude stood suddenly, making Sigmund take an involuntary step backwards. Claude smirked. He enjoyed how much he scared the small Icelandic ‘tour guide’. The man came highly recommended through a mutual friend, but this fellow was an obsequious and annoying little toady. Darvill had no time for such people. He turned his gaze to pierce Sigmund’s blue eyes, wide under a mop of curly blond hair. ‘I find things, Siggy, you understand that? It’s what I do and I’m fucking good at it. No one, in fact, is better at it than me.’

Sigmund nodded, playing nervously with the hem of his jacket.

‘Of course. But I was just going to suggest that perhaps it might be worth figuring out what is interrupting the magic rather than simply trying to force your sight in spite of it.’

Claude frowned. ‘Hmm. Perhaps you’re onto something there.’ His admission was grudging, but genuine. If the source of the interruption could be found, and circumvented, the divination would be clearer.

‘Is there a ward of some kind, perhaps, preventing your sight?’ Sigmund asked.

‘No. Something more ... physical than that. And the read I am getting is contradictory somehow. There’s a misalignment about the result I can’t see through. That fucker Alex Caine — how I wish I had the means to kill him — told me my father died in Iceland. That *he* killed my father here. He promised to take me to the site, but Armour kept us apart, sent me away. Caine would never have kept that promise anyway, the bastard. But I feel my father somewhere nearby. I’ve spent months tracking his psychic signature and I know I’m close. So close I can almost smell Robert Hood’s foul fucking aftershave. If Caine killed him here, there should be some trace of that death, some echo of his mind ending. Maybe even some fragment of physical evidence, however tiny, however inconsequential.’ He balled his fists. ‘There should be fucking *something!*’

He crouched again, stared at the scattered bones of ancient crows, imbued with the magic of shamans centuries dead. These were his most powerful tools, his most accurate, and they told him he was right on top of what he sought. But nothing anywhere near confirmed that.

‘A physical barrier,’ he muttered to himself. He stood again, looked around. Nothing but grey-black stone and shale, desolate as the moon, covered with a layer of snow and ice. The snow lay thicker on the higher ground in the distance. It crunched under his booted feet even on the thermally heated ground on which he stood. Tussocks of hardy grass and scrub dotted the landscape, shifting in the cold breeze. Charcoal-coloured volcanic

ash covered a lot of the land despite the snow, far from the neat and civilised inhabited areas of the island. There was simply nothing here.

Assuming Sigmund would follow, not really caring if he did or not, Claude strode off across the rocky ground. Taller formations and hills off to one side caught his eye and he moved towards them. As he wandered in between, he muttered incantations of finding and echoes of old magic bounced back to him. He caught a hint of something familiar and paused, closed his eyes to concentrate. He sensed a tiny flicker of psychic signatures he recognised, wisps of old magesign. Alex fucking Caine and his Kin bitch, Silhouette. They had definitely been here, many months ago. Other powerful signatures echoed too, dark, malevolent. He was close and Alex certainly had not lied about killing Claude's father in Iceland.

A cave mouth yawned darkly from between two tall, leaning rocks and Darvill entered, flicking a torch on as he went. Someone had lived here, a monastic existence of utter simplicity. The few possessions were still in fairly good order, though dust and hints of ash covered everything. No one resided here now, but they had not too long ago. Could it be something as simple as caves getting in the way? Were his divinations being blocked by complicated cavern systems, confusing his seeking mind? Could plain rock be that obstructive?

Darvill's eyes widened and he turned from the cave. As he ran back the way he had come, he barrelled into Sigmund, knocked the slight man onto his arse. 'Out of the way!' Claude yelled.

He slipped and stumbled on the loose shale and ice as he scrambled to his makeshift table and stared at the crow bones. He gathered them in a shaking fist and rattled them between his palms, muttering slightly different words of magic. He cast them across the canvas and stared, mouth opening in shock and anger.

'Not caves,' he whispered to himself. 'Actual solid rock is between us. And he's not dead!'

3

Silhouette drove through the dim glow of false dawn, satisfied. Kin didn't need to feed often and, unlike so many of her kind, she certainly wasn't of the mindset that humans were nothing more than cattle. But she did enjoy a good feed and had long since come to terms with the requirements of her life. While the killing would never sit well with her, the feeling of a sated Kin hunger was unlike anything else. Her guilt was little different to the carnivore's empathy for the cow, but she tried to pick her victims carefully.

The highway heading south stretched grey and straight beyond the reach of her headlights, leading her back to the rolling green hills where she lived with Alex. She would never have considered herself a country girl, but he had shown her how idyllic it could be. And the city was only a couple of hours away. Sydney provided plenty of opportunities for feeding. It hadn't taken her long to sniff out the dens of iniquity populated by criminal and violent lowlifes who exploited decent people everywhere. Hell, every time she fed it was a public service.

She grinned wolfishly in the dim light from the dashboard. Tonight had been particularly fun, breaking into a closed-door poker game and playing with her food before eating. They honestly thought they had the upper hand. For quite a long time, considering. It wasn't until she actually shifted into her favoured panther-like form and took out the throat of the muscular bouncer by the door that anyone thought her anything but an unfortunate idiot who had stumbled into her own worst nightmare. How that situation had swiftly reversed.

She grinned again, remembering something Alex had said not

so long ago. *You're like some strange cross between Batman and Catwoman. Except neither of them eat the bad guys they bring down.* She glanced at the bag on the passenger seat, bulging with cash from the game and quite a few other items of value from the night's victims — watches, rings, necklaces and more. She preferred the Catwoman comparison.

There was something about thin days that made her hungrier than any other time and made the sating of that hunger more satisfying too. Something to do with her full half-dose of Fey blood, she presumed. The days made Fey power stronger and that must affect the needs of the Kin, first generation especially. Everyone knew the urge to feed was at its strongest on those days. Most Kin dens tried to manage it, insisting some members resist feeding to prevent too many deaths at once, which might risk discovery. It had been hard for Silhouette to avoid feeding until the dangerous twenty-four hours had passed, but she had certainly made up for it.

The last thin day had been the December solstice when they had been sucked through a vortex of Fey power into Obsidian. She sighed. That had ended well, all things considered, but Alex was still having trouble dealing with it. It had taken a terrible toll on him.

Then Imbolc had come around, a time of renewal in the northern hemisphere of her birth. She lived on the other side of the planet now, so it was actually Lughnasadh that just passed. She had trouble getting her head around it. But still a time of change. They waited out the day and night, terrified of Fey retribution, but nothing eventuated. A few days a year of extreme vigilance was a small price to pay in the long run, and since Alex had truly committed the Fey anchor stone to the Void, it would only ever be those few days forever more. But the threat did nothing to help Alex's ongoing trauma with the events surrounding Obsidian.

Her thin day hunger, deferred but finally sated, made her feel strong. It was weeks until the next one. Perhaps she would wake Alex when she got home and they could celebrate the event. First

she would fuck him silly, then introduce him to some old Pagan rituals, a bit of Kin magic to help him refind his focus. Perhaps help him shake off his melancholy, if only for a little while. She knew his road to recovery was likely to be long and undulating, but she was determined to do all she could to ease the journey.

She pulled off the highway and onto twisting roads leading between the green hills of dairy country. A soft smile played at her lips as she thought of the different ways she could wake Alex to immediately dispel any annoyance on his part at such an early rousing. Dawn smudged the sky pink and purple, the hearty sun about to breach the horizon behind her, as she pulled along the dirt driveway of their house, and her heart froze.

The front door stood open in the dim half-shadow of early light. The ice around her heart cracked as it began hammering double time. The hairs on her neck rose. She killed the engine and braked to a halt twenty metres from the house. 'No, no, no ...' muttered under her breath. Maybe he was up early ... She knew it wasn't true. If anything, getting Alex out of bed before noon at the moment was hard, his mood lethargic and sullen. Something was wrong.

She slipped from the car and smoothly flowed into her feline form as her feet touched the ground. Her clothes melted into soft grey fur, her features rounded out. She dropped to four paws and padded low and stealthy through the shadows of hedges towards the house. A low growl rose in her chest as an aroma sent shivers of panic through her. The sickly sweet stench was unmistakable. Fey. It wasn't possible. *Shouldn't* be possible.

Anger and grief battled for primacy in her mind as she slunk through the obviously empty house. The sick-candy scent grew stronger as she moved towards the bedroom. There had been many Fey here. The soft early light showed damage and burn marks across the bed, carpet and curtains and Silhouette tipped her head back and roared. Alex had clearly fought, but he was nowhere to be seen. Barely an echo of his presence remained, buried in the horrible, overpowering remnants of Fey

manifestation.

Silhouette stood up onto her hind legs, morphed back to her human shape as she ran for the kitchen. She snatched up the phone and dialled with shaking fingers.

After two rings, the phone was answered. 'Sal's Pizzeria, can I take your order?'

'It's Silhouette. Put me through to the Commander right away.' Her voice trembled with rage and fear.

'May I take your order please?'

'Oh, fuck me.' Silhouette squeezed her eyes shut. There was protocol for a reason. 'Large thick crust, half supreme, half meat lovers, anchovies all over and a bucket of Coke.'

The voice at the other end became casual. 'Thanks, Sil. Sorry, you know how it is.'

'Sure, sure. The Commander, please!'

'Just a sec.'

There was a click and the most frustratingly lame smooth jazz hold music piped through. Silhouette tapped her foot, ground her teeth.

'Silhouette?' The Commander's voice was gruff and thick with sleep.

'They got Alex!' Silhouette cursed the high panic in her tone. She sucked a quick breath. 'The Fey, they've been here, there's been a fight and Alex is gone.'

'Sil, are you ...'

'Yes, I'm fucking sure! How did this happen? Yesterday was the day, not today!'

'Silhouette, take a breath, please. This is serious, but let's try to stay calm.' The Commander's voice betrayed no further hint of his sudden awakening. 'Now I don't doubt your assessment, but are you sure they've taken him?'

'He's not fucking here!'

'You're sure? There's no ... body?'

'What?'

There was a pause, then, 'Are you sure they haven't just killed

him, in cold revenge?’

‘How did they get him today?’ Silhouette demanded. ‘This can’t happen!’

‘I’m sorry, Sil, really I am. But search — make sure he’s been taken.’

Silhouette paused, teeth clenched in frustration. The Commander had a point. She started moving from room to room. ‘I’m looking now, but I can’t feel him.’

‘If they came for Alex, took him away, there must be something else at work, no? Fey are complex and evil, they operate on the bigger picture. If it’s not simple revenge, what are they doing? I know this shouldn’t have happened, but as it has, let’s reduce the angles and decide on a course of action.’

Silhouette shook her head, terrified that Alex might have been killed. ‘They know about the Obsidian situation; their ridesprite escaped Nicholas Haydon. They know Alex truly cast the anchor stone into the Void. It is genuinely lost.’ She shivered as she moved from the house towards the garden, searching. ‘You’re right, Commander. If they came, why didn’t they just kill him?’ A more horrible thought occurred to her. ‘Unless they’ve taken him somewhere to make him suffer ...’

The Commander sighed. ‘Perhaps, Silhouette. Keep looking. It’s morbid, I know, but make sure if you can.’ There was noise and movement on the other end. ‘Sil, hold on a minute.’ The Commander’s voice became muffled. ‘What is it?’

A conversation ensued and Silhouette took the opportunity to move quickly around the overgrown gardens. There was no trace of anything out of order. The Fey had obviously surprised Alex while he slept, there had been a fight and Alex had come off worst. She was relieved to confirm that his corpse didn’t mark the end of the confrontation, but it terrified her to think what that might mean. What did they want with him? Were they going to torture him for revenge? Had they abducted him to Faerie? But it wasn’t a thin day, so they couldn’t have gone back. Only on thin days could the Fey travel between realms.

Her heart tremored as the thought of facing Fey rose in her mind. But she loved Alex and she would go after him, even if it meant going where she least wanted to ever be. She would follow him to Faerie if she had to. But they *couldn't* have gone back today.

'Silhouette, are you still there?'

'Yes. Commander, what are we going to do?'

'Well ...' The Commander's voice was strained. 'Something's come up here, I have to go, but ...'

'More fucking important than this?' Silhouette was astounded.

'Silhouette, calm down. I have to go, but a team is on its way and they will conduct a full survey of your house and grounds. We will find out all we can about what's happened to Alex and we will act.'

Silhouette bit down on anger rising like a wave of lava. 'Commander, I'll go after him if I have to, whatever that entails.'

'I understand. And we'll help. A team is coming. Other things are happening, Sil, you know how it is. They always are. Hang in there.'

Silhouette breathed heavily into the phone, impotent and furious.

'Wait for the chopper, Sil. We'll sort this. It's what we do, right?' The Commander tried to inject confidence and authority into his voice, but Silhouette could hear his concern. And if he was afraid, she was beyond terrified.

'Okay.'

'I'll call you back a bit later.' He hung up without waiting for a reply.

The wait for the chopper was excruciating, but it gave Silhouette time to confirm there was indeed no trace of Alex anywhere near the house. She stood in the centre of the recently erected stone circle, supposedly a safe space for them to retreat to should the Fey set off alarms by arriving. The circle was an expensive and powerful construction, the rock imported from Scotland, the wards created by the best teams in Armour. As were

the other wards throughout the house. None of it had worked.

After Obsidian, Armour had really stepped up to ensure Alex's recovery and protect his and Silhouette's future. It was partly because Alex was valuable to them, but it had quickly become apparent that Armour genuinely wanted to help him as he had helped them. And they wanted him to join up full time, of course. Silhouette was glad for their new allegiance. But as she stood among stones that buzzed with magesign and ancient power, a deep sadness welled in her. All the effort had proven useless.

A thrumming rose through the hills and a sleek, black helicopter appeared over the ridge. She watched it descend on approach and eventually settle on the grass not far from the house. She remembered the last time a chopper had come from Armour. That had been the start of the whole Obsidian debacle. She wished Alex had never taken that job, but it was easy to wish in hindsight. She had encouraged it at the time.

Black-clad operatives hopped out as she ran, half crouched, to meet them.

'We have to know what happened,' she shouted over the rotor noise to the first of them. 'Please, any tiny clue.'

The dark-skinned woman nodded, gave Silhouette's shoulder a squeeze. 'We've got this. If there's anything to be found, we'll find it. We'll get him back. I'm Gwen. I know we're only supposed to use Jane and John Doe in the field, but we're all operatives together, right?'

'Silhouette.'

'I know.' Gwen gave a sad smile. 'I should warn you, opinion is a little divided on the situation here.'

'What?'

Gwen turned to the two men who had followed her from the chopper. 'You guys head out to the property perimeter and work your way in towards the house. I'll start inside.'

The two men nodded. They both had sour expressions. One looked at Silhouette with undisguised disdain.

'What's the problem here?' Silhouette asked as the men ran off.

‘The long-haired fellow is Dan. He lost two good friends during the Obsidian Incident, killed by escaping Kin. The skinny guy is Jack. He thinks Alex should have stayed in Obsidian and sacrificed himself along with everything there, left it all in the Void.’

Silhouette was horrified. Alex had met with several fairly bluntly stated opinions since the Incident, she understood the anger of people who had lost friends and loved ones, but to suggest Alex should have cast himself into the Void was unconscionable. ‘He removed the most powerful item in Fey history,’ she said, aghast. ‘Alex saved the mortal realm from the Fey ever getting a permanent hold here again.’

Gwen nodded, mouth set in a grim line. ‘I know. I’m on your side. You can imagine, the flight here was ... tense. But everyone’s experience of something like this is different.’

‘I need help here, not enemies in the people who are supposed to be my allies!’

‘They’ll do their job, I promise you. They’ve sworn as much themselves, don’t worry about that. Just don’t expect too much in the way of friendship. At least, not from them. Not now. They’ll come around.’

Silhouette watched the two men trotting out towards the fence line where Alex’s property backed on to broad, rolling dairy paddocks. ‘I’m glad *you’re* here,’ she whispered.

‘I am. Trust me, they’ll do all that’s required of them and I’ll do more.’

Silhouette nodded and led the woman away from the slowing rotors towards the house. ‘I’ll show you where he was taken.’

As Gwen set up complicated equipment in the bedroom, the unique Armour melding of technology and sorcery, Silhouette cursed herself again for leaving Alex. If she had stayed, perhaps they could have fought together. She racked her brain, trying to figure out what had happened. How it had happened.

Her phone interrupted her thoughts. ‘Hello?’

‘Silhouette, it’s the Commander.’

‘Oh, you’ve got time for me again?’

‘Sil, there are always a million things that need my attention, you know that. It’s just the nature of our organisation. But I am one hundred per cent committed to helping you guys. They there?’

‘Yes, setting up now. You couldn’t send a team who wasn’t glad to see the back of Alex?’ She heard the venom in her voice and regretted it. The Commander had been nothing but supportive, almost fatherly to them both since their return, but she boiled with rage, guilt, fear.

‘I’m sorry, Sil,’ he said. ‘Our numbers are thinned right now. Gwen is in charge and she’s on your side. The others will do their job.’

‘So she said. You really couldn’t find any others who don’t hate Alex?’

‘He made many enemies with his actions. Give it time. People will come to understand.’

Silhouette nodded, determined to not give in to her roiling emotions. She had never been as close to anyone in her many centuries of existence as she was to Alex and it scared her how much of an effect it had. But she was not some snivelling girl and she would fight to get him back. She intended to affirm that resolve to the Commander. ‘Any further ideas on how it happened?’ she asked.

‘Some ideas. What about you?’

‘It’s possible the Fey came through yesterday, when they could travel on the thin day. Their power is massively reduced if they’re trapped in the mortal realm on any other day and they can’t return again until the next thin, but it’s possible they planned exactly that to take Alex off-guard. Wait somewhere, come the day after we expected them. Even weak, if there were enough of them ...’

‘I thought the same thing. Our wards and alarms?’

‘Nothing as far as I can tell. It’s clear Alex was surprised in the bedroom. They came while he slept and he got no warning.’

‘Bastards. But why do it like that? If they could avoid the wards, why wait and trap themselves here until the next thin? Why operate on a day when they’re so weak?’

Silhouette stared through Gwen and the equipment at the foot of her bed. The bed she shared with Alex. ‘I don’t know. I get that coming a day late would catch him unawares, but not the risk of having to stay here.’ She took a shuddering breath. ‘But if that is what happened, they must be somewhere in this realm still and that means we can find them, right?’

‘I hope so, Sil. With any luck Gwen and her team will uncover some clues to work with.’