

Chapter One

River Moon

It all began when Jakt asked her to dance.

Saira caught the ale on his breath. She held no interest in Maystone's Dawning Festival. Not this year. She had just returned from the river, where the sky glowed with Solu's last pink cast, cold grey ready to steal the colours of day. Beneath the steel blue twilight, and over perfect stones shaped by the Ivory's smooth current, the path flown by life and spirit rippled and murmured from northern mountains to the southern seas. In the lower depths dwelled a darkness that could not wholly be explained by the approaching night, as if the river possessed a shadow. She heard her father's words: *The river is good. Her fingers of spirit carry the sun. We must tend to her bed of rock and sand. Without her story, the world would fall into the time before the light of first day lifted the darkness.*

After another long dawn-to-dusk shift in the rice river crop, with little to show, her worn muscles ached for bed. Jakt intercepted, arms crossed, a formidable post on the forest path. His bloodshot eyes bored into hers, cold yet eager, holding a secret. He swallowed as though his mouth were dry, parted his lips to speak, closed them again, and finally managed, "Well? You comin'?"

Despite the late hour, Saira was not afraid. If needed, Fenox would show up, as he always did, to keep her safe. Her pet mayguar—the villagers reviled him with whispers of “baledog”—carried a bite much worse than Jakt’s bark. Fenox was fond of nocturnal patrols, long forays into the hills on the other side of the river.

She remembered Jakt as a clumsy boy, tumbling over moss-coated rocks, with a tongue that spoke far too often, taken far too seriously by most. The past seven years, Jakt’s role had shifted from childhood friend to awkward acquaintance, and now aloof stranger. Why this sudden interest in her? She brushed the hair from her eyes and peered up at him.

“I’ve never seen you dance.”

Jakt shifted on his feet. “The river moon is high and full. We’ll do the two-step.”

“Why me?”

He averted his gaze. Was he thinking of a reason or simply embarrassed? She could not tell. Her face flushed with empathy. He probably had no one else to ask—or got turned down, a likely possibility given Jakt’s churlish reputation. Fewer than a hundred souls called Maystone home, and only a handful of those were adolescent girls. This was Saira’s first invitation to dance, except from her father, in all of her seventeen years.

Her sight crept past Jakt to her house: a square set of cedar walls enclosing an elder fir. Her house, but no longer home. She wanted to walk through that threshold, hear her father mumbling over his legends and maps, see his wizened smile one last time. One night he sat beside her bed, wishing her sleep blessed by the river spirits. The next morning his body lay still and quiet, his breath of life returned to the currents. Both her parents were gone, her mother lost during childbirth, and the mystery of her past buried with Wilton.

Since her father's passing, nearly a year ago now, she always returned to a house bled dry of hope. Every night, he taught her history of people and place, or how to wield numbers and words. In her grief, her father's carefully composed lessons lay forgotten as she consumed all his letters and charts: births, crop yields, tradesmen, dolphin sightings, marriages—and deaths. But musty parchment possessed none of the magic of his sea dragon stories and gryphawk myths. She longed for his whimsical words.

She heard the floorboards creak in the wind, pulled by the swaying elder fir whose tremendous trunk served as a central support column. Her ears were keen, despite missing her lower lobes. *That's the way you were born, sweet Saira*, her father had told her in his gentle manner. Her well of sorrow grew deeper in remembrance.

Jakt stared at her. "Well?"

"All right," she said. *Dancing might do me some good.*

She expected him to offer his hand, and was relieved when he did not.

The twilight forest sprung alive with sound. A mosquito buzzed by her ear, crickets chirped amongst the snake ferns, and horned Veditl toads croaked all the way from the Ivory River. Her friendship with Jakt had ended on those shores. No one else dared to be seen with her. *Bad luck charm*, Saira overheard the villagers whisper. *Outsider. The swamp, that's where she belongs.* When she asked her father, he shrugged and told her a small village often carries small minds.

Then, three years ago, Jakt caught her bathing in the Ivory. She was fourteen. He no longer teased her the way he teased boys. He stole glances at her, his gaze sliding down her slim figure when he thought her attention was elsewhere. In spite of her flat chest, green eyes and

dark hair—Maystone women varied from blonde to earthy brunette—his curiosity became bolder by the day. She was scrubbing cedar sap from her clothes when his voice startled her.

“What is *that*?”

With her shirt lifted he could see her stomach, and the triad of belly buttons above her waist. The disgust on his face, the way a child stares at the skinning of a cara, sent her running home. Her father instructed her never to show those three marks to anyone. So surprised by his forbidding tone, she did not question him. From then on, she took care to be discreet. Jakt ignored her, walking past Saira as though she were a spirit he could not see, and never spoke another word in her direction.

Until tonight.

Laughter, song and spirit interrupted her thoughts. The Dawning Festival welcomed spring, and the cure for bare stomachs and cold hearts. Many folks had taken ill. And not a single river dolphin sighting! Traders usually trickled through Maystone’s scattered cottages and farms every week; only one appeared this past month, on his way “as far south as my pony is willing,” pulling a wagon of brown pears and hairy red fruit she did not recognize.

An orange blaze beckoned them into the clearing. Four fires in all, huge bonfires around a towering stone, with flames that sent smoky columns into a clear dusk. Countless lanterns dangled from evergreen branches, a great circle of light, each handmade gift hung by flameweed’s fire-safe stem. The full moon hung low, larger than life, the herald of New Spring. Everyone was in attendance, wearing good colour and cheer, the men in hemmed shirts with blue buttons in front, the women beautiful in their long, flowing skirts that rose like lily petals as they swung and twirled in the dance. Saira felt self-conscious with her plainclothes and unkempt hair. Jakt took her hand, pulling her toward the celebration, and Maystone’s namesake.

The monolithic stone jutted from the ground like the head of a giant arrow shot through the earth, its dark grey tip emerging at the village center. Legend suggested otherwise. Nine pairs of hands brought the Maystone here, on a day 232 years old, the day before the first Dawning Festival. The village founders, five able-bodied men and four stout women, survived long-fanged jaber cats and deadly terals as they carried this stone—the length of an elder fir—down from the Nether Mountains. She found such a tale too tall. Even her father the storyteller proved a reluctant believer. But the legend served as a foundation for community, a story that linked every villager to another, told around bonfires from parent to wide-eyed child. In that, her father believed.

Jakt and her fell into the dance. One, two—hop! One, two—hop! Around and around the Maystone. The strangeness of having Jakt's hand above her right hip faded as she spun past bright faces flushed with joyous exertion. The younger children played teral tag, racing around adult legs and skirts, giddy with the excitement of the chase. Between dances she spotted little Nate, his tiny arms bursting with gathered twigs that he threw, with great fervency, onto a monstrous bonfire. He started to run again, saw her, and slid to a stop.

They had crossed paths, earlier in the day, on the shores of the Ivory, when the high sun hid all but the sharpest shadows. He had looked at her, uncertain, too young to disregard her but old enough to know he should. She paused from pulling weeds from the crop and smiled. Nate frowned at first, then grinned at her. She skipped a stone over a large, clear pool and he valiantly tried to do the same. Saira had never felt welcome in Maystone, an outcast in her own village. But Nate's smile, then and now, made her forget.

A single, resonant voice rose from the crowd. He sang the first few words alone, soon joined by dozens of others, until, like the symphony of birdsong at daybreak, every villager's voice quivered into vibrant song:

We dance for the Spring and the dawn of new days
 We sing for the sun that washes the rains
 We praise the moon with a thousand names
 While the river grows ripe with spirit and grain
 boulders to pebbles: Ivory's might!
 waters so full: diviner's right!
 Winter begone! let Solu shine bright
 To bless our waters with dolphin's flight!

A rapturous cheer rose from the crowd, and then, in some haste, the voices subsided. Fiddlers rested their bows and young boys fed their sticks—used to beat rock drums—to the bonfires. Three men in long, blue robes that billowed over their heels like folds of the late summer sky converged at the Maystone. Thero, Goust and Barad, the grey-haired council members, smiled at the crowd. At their backs, painted on the Maystone, flowed four sinuous lines of silver, one for each of the great rivers: the Talon, the Yellow, the Welling, and the Ivory. The fourth spot, where her father once stood, remained absent.

Jakt stood close to her, eyes on the council. Saira felt the heat of his body.

Thero raised his hands. The bonfires cast his long, ominous shadows every which way up the Maystone.

“Welcome, all. The Dawning Festival has arrived! The stars bless us with Lhoran's light, and soon Solu will turn short days long. We carry the pride of our ancestors, those who brought us to this sacred site 232 years ago. Dark times we have seen. Our crops have withered. The river carries disease. The spirits have gone silent. Yet the blood of our people remains strong. We will endure.”

He scratched his beard, and closed blue eyes ringed by wrinkles. “Sadly, nearly a year ago, we lost one of the council. Wilton is missed for his diligence and heart. Under his care, the chronicle of Maystone remained unbroken. Wilton served us with a dedication seldom seen before. Let us give thanks.”

Silence reigned. Saira closed her eyes, her heart heavy once more.

Thero’s voice cut through her reverie. “Now comes the time to summon a new man to the stone. Marek, as the fourth eldest Maystoner, will you come forth?”

All eyes turned to Jakt’s father. Marek, tall and grim-faced, strode toward the Maystone and took his place among the council. Most cheered, others watched. Jakt hooted and hollered his father’s name. For Saira, seeing Jakt’s father with the council sent a cold shiver down her spine.

“Marek, you are called to serve on the council until the end of your days. We welcome you to the four.”

Marek bowed his head, stoic, staring at the floor of the clearing.

Thero continued, eyes roving from one villager to the next. “Maystone must endure. Our village is like an elder fir, mighty and noble, whose leaves are ever-green. Yet for her heartwood to remain pure, every root must be clean. The diseased root must be cut. In this way, our village will prosper once more. Maystone must endure.”

The air became tense, the music and dance forgotten. The hairs stood on Saira’s arms. Her fingers instinctively clutched the smooth sunstone in her pocket, which, according to her father, would keep her warm even in the coldest nights. Thero’s eyes came to her and swept past. She sighed in relief.

“There is a tainted soul in our midst,” Thero continued. “This poison will crack our community apart. We cannot let this foul root fester. I call upon you, the people, to safeguard our future. Maystone must endure. If you know of one who bears the mark, speak now! Let our home be cleansed!”

No one moved. Saira clenched her jaw. She kept her eyes on the Maystone, did not dare meet the gaze of her fellow villagers. Her mind wandered to the hills she liked to explore, where she never got lost, even on the trails she did not remember. She knew every leaf and bird, as though they were brother and sister. Those quiet, placid memories helped still her anxiety.

She felt Marek’s eyes bore into her. And then Jakt stepped forward.

Thero nodded. “Jakt, son of Marek of the council, speak your truth.”

At first, Jakt said nothing. She could see his broad shoulders rise and fall as he breathed deep. He suddenly whirled and pointed at Saira.

“*She* bears the mark!”

A murmur ran through the crowd and the waves parted, leaving her alone in the center. Saira felt naked. She tried to look at Jakt. His face had twisted into something wicked, a rigid mask that hid the boy she once knew. The magnitude of his betrayal shook her body.

Whispers of rumour became shouts of certainty.

“I saw her by the river today!” yelled Nate’s mother. “She was speaking with the shadows!”

The angry tide swelled toward her.

“Go back to the swamp, swen!”

“Take your baledog with you!”

The low growl from her mayguar gave the villagers pause. She looked down at Fenox, returned from his nocturnal patrol, hackles raised and white fangs bared. He swivelled his ferret-like snout as his golden eyes shot from one villager to the next. A single silver stripe divided his dark fur in half, while his lithe torso made his movements feel feline. Her loyal guardian stood firm.

Thero's voice boomed, "Here, at the spring dawning of our 233rd year, let us be cleansed. You are hereby banished from Maystone. Take the shadows with you. Begone!"

Saira could not make her limbs work. Her body stood frozen, petrified into stillness. Something hit her side and Fenox barked. She realized someone had thrown a stone. Her eyes shot up to the sea of fervent faces and fell upon little Nate. Encouraged by his childhood friends, the five-year-old picked up a pebble, took careful aim, and hurled it Saira's way.

She turned and ran. Tears streamed down to her chin. Cries of *shadow-speaker!* and flickers of firelight haunted her steps. She ran to the river, to the one place that always brought her comfort. The light of the river moon shone in the current, streaks of white ripples that glowed with spirit. Her foot hit an errant root and she went flying. Saira landed hard, her knees bruised, and closed her eyes against the pain. The thrum of the Ivory filled her ears.

She did not want to leave. They had no right! Her father had told her never to be ashamed, to hold her head high. All of her father's records—she could not leave those behind.

Countless feet thudded on the forest path behind her. Saira rose and stood tall. Scythes, pitchforks, and cutting knives were gripped in tight fists. Others carried torches with bright tongues of orange flame. The greater threat lurked in the eyes of these men, in that smouldering fire that burned with hate and scorn.

Fenox nipped at her ankles. He scurried north along the riverbank. After a moment's pause, she stumbled after him. This was no longer her home. She realized, with great sorrow, that her father's writings did not belong to her. Whether the villagers deserved them or not, those records belonged to Maystone. The tight grief held in her chest loosened a little. She thought of the day he first took her swimming in the Ivory, held in the sanctuary of her father's arms. The cold water brought her alive with spirit.

Saira's slender feet sank into fine sand before she was forced to clamber between boulders that stood like dark sentinels on the riverbank. She halted at the boundary. The place where the Ivory slithered like a dusksnake and whitecaps marked the menace of the swift current. She had never trespassed these shores. Fenox glanced back at her, patient yet firm. She kept running. Long into the night she ran, always with the river, never far from the memories of her father.