

The Tainted River

by

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Chapter One

Shadows in the River

The river followed the furrows of the land, the water hugging the larger rocks with an embracing current, only white at its roughest edges, while gliding over the deeper stones like liquid glass. Boulders stood stubbornly in place, grey sentinels rounded with time. A murmur rose above the bed of pebbles and sand, the natural music endlessly played by an infinite number of flowing instruments. The top layer served as a hazy mirror, reflecting the tall firs that bordered the far side, and yet within the lower depths dwelled a darkness that couldn't wholly be explained by the approaching night, as if the river possessed a shadow. Green weeds refracted grey underneath, the immersed plants undulating like long, serpentine flags. A few pools had formed near the water's boundary, intruding upon the land and swirling occasionally when some of the main current managed to overflow into their calmness. There was an intermittent breeze, as though the wind fought against the water flow, gave up and blew with it for a time, and then put up a resistance once more. Carried on the air was the faint scent of a moonbear which had ambled to the shore in false hope of catching a prized fish, the omnivore resigning himself to the berries that had made its diet for most of the summer.

Sitting comfortably on a smooth rock, Saira put her hands in the water, letting the

cold flow between her fingers. The river felt distant, unfriendly. With the passing of winter, the waters were rising with the rains, and would soon be warm enough for children. The Ivory River was wide, but not deep enough to pose any danger to a people that relied on its constant current for their survival. This late in the evening, under the light of the full moon, Saira had the river to herself.

Today the town was celebrating the coming of spring. The dawning festival had stretched through the day and would carry on until next morn's sunrise. Food, singing, dancing, drinking...she had come here for a respite. The festival was wilder than ever, despite the soured river crops and poor yield this past season. Their reliance on land traders had placed many frowns onto otherwise jovial faces. But the revellers took this as an opportunity to put their woes aside, at least for now.

It was the first dawning festival without her father. He had passed away a week ago. His last words to her were, "Sleep well, my dear Saira, and in the morning we'll rise with the sun." But he never woke. Thero, the village elder, decreed it to be old age. As a child, she had always worried over her pet mayguar dying, but never her father, her mentor and beloved companion. She missed coming home from working the fields to his smile, missed listening to his stories of vast, distant cities he had visited, mythological in their dimensions, and she missed their daily dialogue of which traders had passed through town or the latest dolphin sightings.

Saira stared at the currents. She knew them better than anyone in Maystone. The river had no beginning, no end. It flowed onward, an unending snake slithering through the lowest levels of land, hungry for the ocean.

Saira's long auburn hair dangled just above the sinuous surface. Her body was

slender, long arms and legs having made her adolescence awkward. She was tall for a woman in Maystone. A finely-featured face held eyes from the sea, but her soft innocence had aged years in a short few days. She lacked the lower lobes on both ears. “You were born that way, my dear,” her father had explained.

As she made her way home, hoping to skirt the remaining festivities, Saira recalled the first time her father had taken her to the river’s edge. She was four. The rushing water had fascinated her. Now it ran cold, without spirit.

“The river is good.” She heard her father’s words, solid and warm. “It carries more than food, people and waters. Spirits also glide along its currents, keeping safe those that tend to her bed of rock and sand.”

At her father's funeral, grey clouds overhead holding the threat of rain, she had overheard two townsmen speaking. They had just placed the final stone on her father's gravesite—one from each villager, Saira doing the last—after lowering his still body into the ground, freshly wet from being dipped into the Ivory River to receive a final blessing from the water spirits. Thero gave the divine rites, and Saira felt tears well but not fall, frozen in the corner of her eyes. Too many people were present. She was on her way to a quiet section of the river where, alone at last, the freshwater had received her salty tears, when her father’s name made her stop and listen.

“Wilton was a fine man. Honourable, honest and wise. But the cause of this curse must be removed.”

A second voice answered the first. “Will we not honour his final wish? Will we betray the heritage of the eldest?” As Saira wondered what that wish might be, she recognized the speaker's voice as Goust, and his companion Thero, two of the town

council of four, of which Wilton had been the longest-serving member. Her father only conversed with them at meetings or when he needed names or dates for his record-keeping. Thero and Goust were standing behind a small copse of trees and, perhaps due to their age, were speaking louder than most. Saira could clearly hear them.

“The influence Wilton Lhee had is no more.”

She didn’t like how they referred to him in the past, hating them for dismissing her father so callously.

“When he was alive, he managed to keep her hidden. Now the risk has risen to too great a height. The choice has been taken from us.”

She heard Goust sigh. “I don’t like it. He was one of the four, and the town historian. What position is more venerable?”

“It does not matter!” Thero insisted. Goust raised a hand, looking around to ensure no one was near. Saira crouched down. “We have no choice. She must be removed. The people will follow our lead. It is only a matter of properly shepherding the flock.”

Saira suddenly realized they were referring to *her*. She was the risk. But she didn’t know what Thero and Goust were talking about. How was she dangerous? She pressed herself further to the ground. Grass blades brushed her arm, and a rock embedded itself into her stiff, outstretched palm. Saira missed the next few exchanges, struggling to grasp the meaning behind their words.

“Who should replace Wilton on the council?” were the next words to reach her ears, and she couldn’t bear to hear any more. Stumbling down to the river, she drowned her sorrow and confusion in its waters, her face soon wet with tears.

Now, on her way to the far side of town where her three-room house lay wrapped around the majestic trunk of an oak, she kept to the bordering fir trees. The tall, silent sentinels helped camouflage her passage. This was a common route for her, only squirrels and birds populating the path. Neither was present in the current darkness, the moon's full light—the first of May, marking the coming of spring—struggling to filter through the tangle of branches and reach the forest floor.

The faint sounds of revelry hurried her step. A handful over a hundred people called Maystone home, mostly scattered among small cottages and farms that made their owners a less than modest living. Each person knew and played their role with pride, comforted by the knowledge of their place in the community, a community Saira had never fit into. The air held a certain coolness, though the lack of wind made her loose layer of clothing warm enough. Only she and her father knew of this trail hidden by trees on one side and the base of Adam's Hill on the other. And perhaps one other—

“Hello, Syrup.”

Jakt stepped out from behind a tree, squarely blocking her path. Lost in her thoughts, she nearly walked right into him. Startled, Saira backed up a step, smelled the ale on his breath, and backed up another.

Jakt didn't move. His broad shoulders looked imposing in the dim light, his silhouetted frame having filled out considerably since his skinny childhood. His trunk-like arms hung loosely at his sides, a light-coloured tunic and pants offering little contrast to his pallid skin yet to be bronzed by the summer's sun. He had a funny look on his face, and a smile that hid a secret.

“Are you coming to dance around the stone? I was hoping you would be my

partner. I've been looking for you."

Saira found that odd. She couldn't remember the last time he had spoken to her. Perhaps he had failed to find someone to dance with, a likely possibility given Jakt's churlish reputation and that Maystone had more men than women their age. But the fact he had confronted her here, and that he didn't particularly like to dance even with the aid of drink, made her doubly suspicious.

"Cara caught your tongue, Syrup?"

That was another thing. He hadn't called her by that name in nearly five years. Back then, she liked to press her whole body against a tree, stroking the rivets in the bark with her fingers, certain she could feel water moving up the roots to the leaves, feel the sun's energy within the wood. Jakt had suggested a tree to her—they had played together often those days—and she happily embraced the trunk, only to find it flowing freely with fresh sap. How he had laughed at her while she washed in the river.

Saira realized she had been standing there, mute, for too long.

"I'm tired. I'd rather go home." She started to go but Jakt shifted slightly to the left, just enough to prevent comfortable passage between him and the nearest tree.

"Ah, come on. You'll have fun. Everyone's there"—he didn't realize how unappealing a proposition that, and his next remark, was for her—"even Barad and his friends." Saira had had a childhood crush on Barad, and had regretted telling Jakt, having to deal with his sullenness for weeks afterward. Sensing her unease, Jakt frowned. "The dawning festival is tradition. No one should miss it, least of all you. There are still reasons to celebrate. We'll do the hop-step together, just like old times."

Just like old times. From ten to thirteen they had been almost inseparable. Being

outcasts had brought them together. For reasons unknown to her, Saira had never felt fully welcomed in Maystone. Most tried to avoid her without appearing to do so, while the elders openly scowled at her, conditioning her to keep aloof. Fenox, an unusual breed of dog and her pet since birth, garnered just as many wary glances. Jakt had always been clumsy, and had a big mouth from a young age. He said a lot of crazy things, which most people took far too seriously. The only two that understood him were Saira and, even more so, Jakt's older friend, Marek. Due to his age, Marek had to work in the rice fields more often, leaving Saira and Jakt time to play. When Marek met a tragic end, caught in a river current during a sudden monsoon, Jakt was devastated. His good-natured teasing turned spiteful, and his playing became too rough. He had lost the one person in the world who understood him best, and Saira didn't know how to handle death—then or now.

At fourteen the awkwardness emerged. For her because she was more flat-chested than the other girls, for Jakt because he seemed to have feelings for Saira, feelings that weren't reciprocated. There was also what Jakt had seen when she was washing the sap off in the river, something her father had told her never to show anyone.

She instinctively put her arm across her stomach.

“What do you say, Saira? Will you come with me?”

Jakt had never been good at sounding genuine but she relented, figuring it would be easier to lose him in the crowd than here amongst the towering but still trees. She could wait for Fenox to come to her rescue, yet he could be miles away on one of his nocturnal patrols. Maybe a dance or two would be good for her. Jakt didn't speak as they made their way to the celebration.

The air became heavy with smoke as they reached the place where the firs had been cleared, the only structure a monolithic rock from which Maystone drew its namesake. The dark grey stone jutted from the ground like the head of a giant arrow shot through the earth, emerging at the village center. A dozen bonfires had been lit around the perimeter, the children taking delight in finding kindling to feed the flames. The firelight reflected off the rock surface, the shadows of the dancers passing over four lines of white painted vertically from its top to base, one on each side, symbolizing the descent of the rivers from the mountains.

The great stone had been brought here by the town founders the day before spring two-hundred and thirty-two years ago, and the following evening the first ever dawning festival took place. Or so the tale went. Saira's father had always been a reluctant believer in the story, five men and five women transporting a rock the size of a small house all the way from the Nether Mountains in the northlands in less than ten days. But the legend lived to inspire the strength and perseverance of the people in their village. In that, her father believed.

Lanterns hung from high branches overhead, decorated with the red vines of flameweed, the only plant able to resist the heat that burned at the wicks' tapered edges. Like sunrays the vines dangled above the heads of the revelers, signaling the arrival of the warm season.

Music drew Saira into the gathering. The three wood instruments were mostly drowned by a dozen percussionists, half of which consisted of young men using sticks and logs as makeshift drums. No one seemed to care if they kept to the rhythm. A few people smiled at the sight of Saira, nodding their heads in greeting. She and Jakt joined

the score of other couples dancing, the men wearing hemmed shirts, the women in flowing gowns with draping petals of red and white which rose in a splendid circular display when they twirled. A few toddlers were brave enough to run between the swiftly moving legs of their elders, giggling as they went and picking themselves up when they fell, no less determined to join in the dance. She saw little Timal, the six-year-old she had recently befriended by the riverside, laughing as he scampered by her.

The strangeness of having Jakt's right hand just above her hip quickly faded as they stepped into the dance. One, two, three—hop. One, two, three—hop. Around and around the maystone. After awhile the dizzying movements carried her mind away, spinning her back to childhood. She and Jakt were friends again, simple and innocent, and her father was watching her from the side with wise eyes, smiling and sharing in her joy. For the first time since his death she felt free, her sorrow forgotten.

A song rose from the crowd, raised by a single voice and joined by everyone after a few words, the tune rising up like a symphony of birdsong at daybreak.

The spring has dawned this finest of days
to bring the sun and wash the rains
fields of rice grow ripe with grains
sparrows sing songs—a thousand names!
to herald heat and harken flames
from mother light with burning rays

The moon does shine in skies so bright
High up! The lanterns' starry night
don't fret of autumn's turning sight
or winter's cold embracing light
boulders to pebbles: river's might!
waters so full: diviner's right!

The river flows with waters clear
the spirits swimming deep and pure
white clouds above will be the mirror
for mountains topped with icy fear

their thawing snow feeds rivers near
 Yes! Spring in Maystone now is here!

A great cheer marked the end of the song. This was a short singing; there were dozens of verses, all of which her father had committed to heart. His primary role on council was to record all the important affairs in Maystone—births, marriages, river levels, tradesmen, crop yields, dolphin sightings, and deaths—a duty he performed diligently each day. With a pang of guilty remembrance, she pondered who had recorded that on the second of May, five hundred-and-thirty-three years after the arrival of Solu, Wilton Lhee had passed on, returning to the currents of time.

A murmur rippled through the celebrators. Three figures in blue—the colour of the council—made their way to the maystone, the crowd parting for their passage. They reached the rock and each placed a hand on a white line, the fourth spot remaining empty. A solemn quiet settled over the crowd, a respectful mourning for Wilton and a reverential prayer for the arrival of the season of green. Saira spotted Thero and Goust, and thought for a moment they were staring at her—or was it Jakt? Thero stepped forward to address the gathering, blue robes billowing behind him. His gaunt face lacked its usual paleness, flushed by the flames.

“People of Maystone, heed these words. Spring has returned, and with it the waters of fortitude and fortune. The stars bless us with Lhoran’s light, Johan beams from the face of the full moon, and the river grows ever so wide. The time of the turning has past, the shadow of winter only a memory. Let us rejoice at the dawning of the New Day!”

A cheer swelled from the crowd, alongside cries of “By the light of Lhoran!” and “Blessed is the maystone!”

Thero raised his hand for silence, and his people dutifully obeyed.

“Alas, dark have been the days of late. The spirits of the river have been replaced by shadows, last autumn’s crops turned sour by the tainted waters. Not a single river dolphin has been sighted this year, and where there are no dolphins there are no fish. Hope lies in extracting the offending root so that the rest of the tree may survive. Once removed, the bark will be thick and the leaves many.”

He paused, slowly and deliberately surveying his captive audience.

“I ask you now, each man, woman and child, to answer this question in true speech. Should you know of any presence detrimental to our community, any person who has caused Maystone harm, raise your voice now.” Another pause. “The council beseeches you to act for the good of the divine.”

Saira’s chest tightened. Would Thero look her way? He didn’t. If anything, he seemed to avoid her as his gaze settled over the crowd. She felt movement beside her, and turned to see Jakt glance at her as he stepped forward. She had seen that look before, in their childhood when he was feeling sheepish about some unkind deed he had done. Jakt’s expression took on a stern quality as he shifted to face the council directly.

“I have something to say.”

All eyes turned to Jakt, and he looked uncertain. Thero motioned for him to continue.

“I have something to say,” he repeated, more forcefully.

“Go on, my son.”

“I know of a traitor, a tainted soul in our community. One that bears the mark.”

Saira flashed to the memory of washing the sap, her stomach briefly exposed.

There were three depressions where there should only be one, a triangle of buttons on her belly. She hastily pulled her shirt down, looking up to see Jakt, mouth agape, staring at her in surprise. Saira ran home to her father for reassurance. Perhaps Wilton had said something to Jakt, because he had never spoken of it. Until now. Saira's stomach churned and anxiety gripped her.

"Who?" Thero's voice boomed. "Who bears the mark? To which name does this tainted soul belong?"

Jakt didn't look at her. "Syrup," he said.

The people gathered exchanged confused glances. Jakt turned and stared at Saira, his eyes filled with a deep hatred.

"Her!"

Like a wave receding from the shore, those closest to her retreated. Saira stood there, bewildered. Vulnerable and alone, she backed up a step towards the surrounding trees. The wave of people regrouped and surged angrily towards her.

"She's the one!" someone shouted. "She has brought this darkness upon Maystone!"

"I saw a shadow in the river today."

"She was by the river!"

"She's not one of us. She came from outside!"

There were more angry cries, swelling into a resentful roar. *"Her!"* Not once did they use her name. She searched for a friendly face but only saw fury and contempt. The sea of accusing eyes overwhelmed her, and she instinctively gripped the outline of the sunstone in her pocket. Her father had given it to her when she was five, saying it would

always keep her safe. The sunstone felt hot through the thin fabric of her pants. She released her hold as Thero positioned himself at the front of the crowd, letting his presence bolster their conviction. Saira saw Jakt staring at her over Thero's shoulder, and she shook her head, asking "Why? Why?" Maybe Jakt heard her amidst the cacophony of judging voices, or more likely he read the words from her lips as she did with his response, a secret communication they had used as children.

Marek died because of you.

Thero turned his back to her and raised his right arm, fist closed, indicating he was about to pass the judgement of the council.

"For 232 years our village has been strong. To continue we must cut the diseased root from the tree that is Maystone. With our people pure, we will once again be blessed by Lhoran's light. Now, at the spring dawning of our 233rd year, let us be cleansed."

He faced Saira.

"Your ties to this community are cut. You must leave Maystone, never to return." As one the group moved away from her.

"Take your baledog with you."

She had heard that name before. It was what the villagers called Fenox. Her father had told her the proper term was *daman*, a guardian animal born when she was born.

A low growl alerted her to Fenox's presence. He was standing by her feet, his black fur raised around his hackles and dark yellow eyes glowing fiercely in the reflected firelight. Fenox resembled a medium-sized dog, though his body was lower to the ground, not because his legs were that much shorter, but because his torso was slender

with a feline liveness. His snout was also narrower, tapering to a point like a ferret's. A single stripe of silvery hair on his arched back divided the dark fur in half, stretching partway down his cat-like tail. Padded feet possessed razor-sharp claws, and he bared two rows of short but vicious fangs.

She was soothed by his arrival, like the time she had wandered into the forest and stumbled across a family of tarns, the protective mother lowering her three horns before charging. Fenox had made a charge of his own, nipping at the tarn's heels until he succeeded in distracting the maternal-driven tarn, giving Saira time to find a low branch and swing herself to safety.

Something struck her side. Fenox snapped at the air in response. Saira saw the small rock bounce off her shoulder and hit the ground. She looked up. It was Barad. He was encouraging others to find rocks, aided by his charisma and the desire of the group to act as one. She saw little Timal. Only yesterday they had been skipping stones together in a lagoon next to Ivory River. Now he was reaching for a rock, his face twisted by distrust. She couldn't bear it.

"Get out!" yelled an anonymous voice from the crowd.

But Saira had already fled into the forest. Hot tears burned her cheeks as she ran.

Loud voices followed her through the dark, and her toes caught a root, sending her flying. She hit the ground hard, landing on her stomach, the impact forcing the air from her lungs. She couldn't breathe. Her chest felt empty, hollow. She tried to lift herself up but fell back to the ground, her strength gone.

Then Fenox was beside her, nuzzling her cheek for a moment before nipping her shirt above the shoulder and urging her forward.

Saira pushed herself to her knees with determination. Anger coursed through her. She got on her feet and, despite Fenox beckoning her onward, stood resolutely to face her pursuers. This was her home. They couldn't make her leave. "You have every right to be in Maystone," she heard her father saying. "Don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise."

She found a small clearing, defiantly standing where she would be most visible. Distant whispers became heated shouts, and a hazy glowing light coalesced into the angry flames of a torch. Shadows scurried across the trunks of the firs. The fire-bearers were all men. Saira stood firm. Putting her hand into her pocket, she ran her thumb over the sun carved into the smooth stone, feeling its warmth run up her hand.

"There she is!"

The glint of metal caught her eye, and she realized they were carrying more than fire. Cudgels, scythes and cutting knives gleamed in the torchlight, reflecting their sharp edges.

No! She wouldn't leave. She would stand.

The grim expressions on their faces, and the curses they screamed at her, too hurtful to bear, questioned Saira's resolve. Fenox was pulling on her pantleg. The men advanced until she could feel the fire on her skin and see the hatred in their eyes.

She turned quickly and disappeared between the trunks. Saira ran until she reached the river. The moon shone on the water, a rippling light atop the current. She followed every familiar upstream curve and bend until she came to the place her father had told her never to go past.

Saira remained there a minute while Fenox drank from the shore. Endless thoughts rushed through her mind. Who was she? Where had she come from? What had

her father not told her? One thought rose above the rest. She was leaving her father behind and all his life's work. Whether the villager's deserved them or not, she realized those records belonged to Maystone.

She stumbled on, tripping, falling, but always returning to her feet, following the winding waters deep into the night.

-nervous fidgeting of ear? (to introduce missing lower lobes)

Chapter Two

Unexpected Meetings

Jed ran as hard as he could. His chest burned as if he were breathing fire. He stopped, leant against a tree and gasped for air.

“Let’s stop already!” he yelled, breathless.

“Not yet,” Calden called back.

They ran on. Jed felt his leg muscles tighten to the tautness of a bowstring. His knees nearly buckled with each hurried step, the close-knit trees meaning his feet more often hit a root than solid ground. A pain dug into his side like a knife slowly sliding towards his stomach. He excelled at stealth, not stamina, and when he doubled over, hands on his knees and face redder than a ripe apple, Calden allowed him a breather.

“Did you see the look on Roundbelly’s face when he saw me?” Jed said when his chest stopped heaving. “I was sure his head was going to explode.”

Calden grinned.

“I’ll have your head on a pike in the sewer! That’ll be the day. I’d like to see him lift something more than his own girth before making such a boast. This is what—the tenth time we’ve lifted from his caravan? Roundbelly needs to spend more on sentries and less on food if he hopes to outwit the likes of us.”

Calden wasn’t listening. He was looking back the way they had come, peering between the trees.

“I don’t think we’ve lost them. We should keep moving.”

“Brother, you worry too much,” Jed said as he sat on the low curving branch of an

arbutus.

An arrow thudded into the skinless tree, inches from his head, violently shaking the slender trunk. Long before the arrow shaft stilled its wobbling Jed and Calden were gone, rejuvenated by their bodies' flight or fight response.

Roundbelly was being more persistent than usual. They had been on the run for over an hour, the forest floor dappled with light from the rising sun. Jed didn't know how to explain Roundbelly's stubbornness; perhaps it had more to do with jealousy than the jewels stuffed in his pocket.

Roundbelly's wife hadn't immediately screamed when she woke up to Jed rummaging through her personal coffers. He and Evelyn had met before during his previous raids. This time, when Roundbelly left the wagon for an early morning release, Jed couldn't pass up the opportunity. He didn't know what Evelyn—tall, elegant, and curvy in all the right places—saw in her oversized husband. The trinkets he had freed from her possession probably provided the answer. In any case, she had stolen a few smooches from him before making her demand.

"Give me back my mother's necklace."

"Why should I?"

"It's an heirloom. If you don't give it back, I'll scream."

Jed pulled her in for one more kiss before obliging, at which point Evelyn broke her promise.

"Help! The thief is in here!"

Calden was waiting for him outside, and called him crazy for even attempting such a heist. But fortune favoured the bold, and the fortune the emerald pendant he had

removed from Evelyn's necklace would earn him made it all worthwhile. He caressed the gem's cold, flawless surface. No woman, no matter how warm her touch, could match its beauty.

He motioned to Calden to find camouflage in the canopy. When a low branch presented itself, which led to further branches suitable for a swift ascent, Jed swung himself up and reached the highest spot that could bear his weight quicker than a tiger-striped squirrel. The new leaves of spring provided ample cover. Calden had perched himself in a majestic maple several trees over, serving as insurance should one of them be spotted. His long legs made him the better runner, though his height made it more difficult to keep himself concealed. The great maple's branches and trunk wore moss like a coat, its epiphytic ferns, along with the predominant firs in the area, indicating water was likely nearby.

At fourteen Jed had taken the orphaned Cal under his wing. Nearly a head taller than Jed, Cal was the quieter of the two, and perhaps the more moral, if honour lived among thieves. Three years separated them, and they might seem like a mismatched pair, except they shared the same father, the same hate. Where Jed's hair was short, brown and curly, Cal's was longer, darker and possessed a hint of a wave he had acquired from his departed mother. The half-brothers maintained different personalities, though their profession was one and the same. And they both bore a set of deep brown eyes that carried a pain from much younger days. Their clothes were plain, simple tunic and pants, one with a stain on the elbow and the other with a hole in the knee, both of which had occurred when they still belonged to their previous owners.

It didn't take long for one of their hunters to pass underneath. Jed sat smugly in

the tree, watching the proceedings with full confidence. If his predator was a great cat, he was a turtle with an impenetrable shell. Or a bird of prey and he a cara in his den four feet underground.

Jed frowned when the man halted at the base of his tree. The black-haired fellow was milling around far too long. Had he left a print? No—something far more valuable. A ray of sun had crept through the network of branches and leaves, like a pick ever so carefully pushed through the tumblers of a well-constructed lock, illuminating the fallen item with a sparkle of green. Jed silently cursed to himself as the man picked up the emerald pendant. *Lhoran's light, how could he be so careless?* Now he felt like a wounded dolphin leaving a trail of blood for a river shark.

But his pursuer didn't seem intent to make the kill. The man hastily scanned his surroundings and gave a cursory upward glance before pocketing the prize. *Finders keepers*. Jed replayed his favourite refrain in bitter defeat. It seems they weren't the only unscrupulous characters in this forest. Troubled times led to dishonest deeds. [These were troubled times indeed.]

The concern of being caught momentarily forgotten, Jed's mind wandered to the unfairness of the situation. This simpleton didn't deserve the prize. He and Cal had tracked Roundbelly's caravan for days, waiting for an opportune time an hour before sunrise to make their move. Jed had planned for that emerald to fetch him enough coin for half a year's honest wages. That, or buy himself a jewel-encrusted belt. Then maybe Evelyn would change her mind about him.

Yes, that pendant should be *his*. For the amount of work he had put into acquiring it, he couldn't let it escape in the possession of one of Roundbelly's hired thugs.

Jed moved to a lower branch, all the while tracking the man with his eyes, the predator becoming the prey. He pulled a dagger from his sleeve, strategizing how best to carry out his ambush, when a morning bird let out a low but distinct call.

It was Calden. He knew Jed too well. The imitated bird-sound carried a clear meaning: *don't you dare!*

Cal was right. Some risks weren't worth taking, especially when pride was involved. If there was one thing he couldn't forgive himself for, it was letting something happen to his brother.

Sighing, Jed rested his back against the trunk and waited for the requisite time to pass. He still had a few rings and a couple of Evelyn's bracelets. But this petty loot would only content a novice burglar. Ah well. There was always the Baronstoke Palace. Sooner or later he would convince Calden to go for that gold.

Dropping to the ground like a cat with all nine lives, Jed and Cal walked east until the trees thinned and the ground hardened to the rocky shore of a river. They turned left and let the waters guide them north.

Cal tried to cheer him up. "We've had worse hauls. In Roundbelly's mind, you still have that emerald pendant."

Jed smiled. Cal was right. All in all, he couldn't complain. It was barely morning, and already he had had Evelyn alone, got some loot, gone for a run, and annoyed Roundbelly. The rings and bracelets would keep them going for the next few weeks, giving them plenty of time to plan their next enterprise. A good start to a good day.

He stopped. There was a woman ahead, staring intently at something on the

ground. She hadn't noticed them yet, the babbling voice of the river and a fir-lined ridge having hid their approach.

"Let's go around." The ever sensible Cal.

Jed had noted the woman was young and slim, which was reason enough to throw sense to the wind.

"I have a good feeling about this one."

"That's what you always say."

"One of these days, it's bound to come true."

Jed studied the woman. She lacked Evelyn's bosom, but made up for it with those long, slender legs. Although he couldn't see her face, she looked almost childlike, but as they got nearer he realized she was closer to his age, perhaps even older. Then he saw what the woman was staring at and Jed stopped dead in his tracks.

"What have you got us into now?" Cal muttered under his breath.

#

Saira was dreaming.

She was a creature of the night, a swift shadow moving through a world shaped by greys. But her senses weren't limited to sight. She could taste the dew forming in the pre-dawn air, feel the heat of a cara sleeping in its underground den. The wind rustled her fur, blowing back towards her tail, ensuring her scent wouldn't be caught by the prey she pursued. She had heard the soft thudding of sambar hooves nearly an hour ago, and had been in silent pursuit ever since. Many more minutes passed, the chase nearing its end, when all thoughts of sambar suddenly left her mind.

Five dark figures were gliding through the forest. Towering, ominous, ethereal.

Like ghosts they moved without sound, and like her they were on the hunt. One of them saw Saira, recognition dawning on his ashen face. It chilled her soul to see affinity in those eyes. Then all five of them turned in her direction, her skin crawling with the realization that she was now their prey. At a terrifying speed the quintet of shadows surged towards her.

Saira woke with a start. Her clothing felt damp. Perhaps a light rain had fallen during the night. She had slept next to a tree on a bed of rock, and her body ached with a stiffness brought on by running for so long and lying on so hard a surface. The massive trunk behind her provided some shelter, its protruding roots delving into the ground like the talons of a giant gryphon.

She stretched her limbs slowly, one at a time, before standing. Her legs felt more knotted than the bark of a weeping willow, and her arms hung listlessly at her sides, lacking the strength or motivation to be raised. But Saira's greatest pain was the deep emptiness inside her chest. She had lost her father, her friends, her home. The small, familiar world she had grown up in suddenly felt utterly foreign, its vastness threatening to overwhelm her. She had never been more than a few miles from Maystone. Where could she go? Saira tried to picture one of her father's many maps. Ivory River led to a large town, filled with thousands of people, more than the leaves on the tallest tree. Baronstoke was its name. Images of the cruel, accusing faces from last night flooded back to her. She had no desire to be around people anymore.

After a minute, Saira realized she wasn't alone.

Ten paces away, a man was lying on his back by the shore of the river, apparently asleep. He wore all black, with long hair of the same colour. His arms were crossed over

his chest, and leaflets from a skunk fern had been placed over his form. Was he alive? She stepped closer. His pale face looked strikingly familiar...

“Why’d you kill him?”

Startled, Saira whirled around. Two men, one of them wearing a boyish grin, stood on the small ridge above her. The taller one seemed uncomfortable, stealing glances in the opposite direction. His shorter companion flashed his teeth at her before eyeing the corpse.

With the full realization that this man was dead Saira fought a disorienting nausea, her head spinning and her empty stomach churning. Bile rose in her throat. She swallowed it back down. This [prone] body was an unpleasant reminder of the all too recent funeral of her father.

Steadying herself, Saira inspected the body once more. There was a gash on his neck. It looked as though the deep wound had been cleaned, but not in hopes of healing, for it was clear now there was no more breath in this man’s body.

Did they really think she had killed him? With her acute ears, Saira heard the tall stranger say “bale dog” under his breath, and she turned to see Fenox trotting towards her, his wet fur dripping. Her resolve strengthened by the presence of her *daman*, and the fact Fenox didn’t growl at the strangers—meaning they meant her no harm—helped Saira find her voice.

“I don’t know this man,” she said.

“I didn’t think so. Mind if we take a look?” Without waiting for a response, the two men proceeded to step down beside the corpse.

“An odd fellow, this one,” the shorter man said after a minute. “From Dareth,

maybe?”

They seemed to have forgotten about her, which couldn't have pleased Saira any further, when the talkative stranger looked over and walked straight towards her.

“Apologies for my manners. The name's Jed Trail.” He held out his hand, and she had no choice but to shake it. His fingers were dirty, though less calloused than a farmer's. “That's my brother, Cal.” Cal made only the briefest of eye contact.

She felt uncomfortable as Jed's gaze ran over her. Did he have any[manners]? “Might I have the pleasure of knowing your name?”

“Saira.” That's all he was going to get.

“What are you doing out here? It's not safe to wander alone, especially for a young lady. Strange folk are about these days.” He seemed to consider something for a moment. “Are you a River Walker?”

She knew the name, but couldn't fathom why he might connect it to her. Walkers were solitary guardians of the river.

“I'm a farmer.”

“I see. You've picked an odd place for it. Rice won't grow from these waters, and they don't hold any fish.”

“Why not?” she couldn't help but ask.

“This river has been tainted.” Jed made the statement as though it were common knowledge.

“In case you're wondering what I do, I'm an opportunist.” Jed smiled at her and held out his hand, just out of reach. In his palm was Saira's sunstone.

She felt her empty pocket and her face flushed in anger. Jed stood waiting for her

response. Saira looked to Fenox for help. He was still maintaining his apathy towards those strangers, but had gone a distance away to the north and was staring back at Saira over his shoulder. Fenox wanted her to follow. As it turned out, she didn't need his help.

"Ouch!" Jed exclaimed and dropped the sunstone. It rolled to her feet and Saira quickly scooped it up. Jed was rubbing his hand. The air sizzled with burnt flesh.

"That's some rock you have. Anyway, I wasn't planning on keeping it. I don't deal in stones."

Served him right, she thought. As a child, Saira had had similar experiences with the sunstone. Like the time she had dropped it into the river. Saira hung over the shore, helpless as it disappeared down the current. A minute later it swept up onto the bank beside her.

"We need to get moving."

"What's the hurry, brother? Roundbelly's probably halfway through his third breakfast right about now. And I think our new acquaintance here needs some—"

Jed's protest suddenly fell silent. Fenox was growling now, but not at him.

Standing on the far side of the river were the five shadows from her dream. Billowing black cloaks covered everything but white faces. She almost mistook their hair for hoods, straight dark strands falling to their waists. They were all taller than Cal, and each carried a long blade forged into a circle at the tip.

For a moment, Saira questioned whether the statuesque forms were real. She blinked but they were still there, her nightmare come alive.

"Friends of yours?" Saira shook her head at Jed. "I didn't think so."

Four of the shadows started to cross the river, moving as though the water were

no more an obstacle than air. The fifth waded into his knees and put his hands under the current's surface.

“Watch the water!” Cal called out.

Saira and Jed retreated up the bank. The river was rising, streaming around the corpse—this sixth was obviously a brethren of the five others—and lifting it into the current.

Saira's head swam. “What's happening?”

“I don't know. But Calden's right: we need to get moving.” Jed started at a run, and stopped when he noticed Saira was still rooted in place. “Are you coming?”

She didn't know what to do. On the one hand, she didn't trust Jed. He was a stranger and a thief. Yet despite his foolery, she had to admit he had acted friendlier towards her than anyone else this past week.

Saira trailed after her new companions, hoping she wouldn't regret putting her trust in them.

Chapter Three

A Dagger in the Belly

The day was getting more interesting by the minute. Cal looked unwell, though he never liked meeting strangers. Jed thrived off the excitement, wondering what the next bend in the river would bring. He didn't know what to make of Saira. She seemed hopelessly lost, yet her eyes held a fierce determination. Jed no longer held any fanciful ideas, his charm wasted on her. The baledog had given him a start. He had never seen a mayguar before; it looked more like a wild beast than a pet, yet Saira appeared to treat it as one. For the time being the baledog wasn't a concern, as it had disappeared shortly after they had taken flight.

There was no sign of their pursuers. The dark cloaks had reached their side of the river and then huddled around their fallen comrade. One pale white face, almost skeletal, had turned to stare at him before being swallowed by the distant horizon. They were far enough away for Jed to feel comfortable with their safety, so he turned his attention back to Saira. There was something about her... She kept behind them, and he stopped to see if she would pass. Saira simply halted several paces away, waiting for him to continue. He was about to try again, this time offering one of Evelyn's bracelets—the one without the sapphires—as a friendly gesture, when Calden shouted in warning.

Jed crouched instantly, pulling out a knife in each hand as he surveyed the situation.

Roundbelly had stepped out from behind a boulder next to the river, flanked by three men with short swords. Short and plump, his jewellery jingled with each step over

his gold-buttoned overcoat. He wore a grin from ear to ear, eyes gleaming brighter than the diamonds on his fingers. Greasy brown hair failed to hide the bald crater atop his head.

“Well well, if it isn’t the Pratchell boys.”

“The name’s Trail, Roundbelly.” Pratchell was his father’s name, and he would be damned if he carried that with him.

“And my name is Rendella. If there’s one thing you remember before they put your head on a pike, I’d prefer it to be that.”

“I don’t much care for what you prefer.” Jed had hidden his knives again, and had already planned how to disarm Roundbelly’s bodyguards. The terrain they were standing upon was rocky and uncertain, while his feet was on soft, sure ground.

“You might very well might, since there are nine of us and two of you.”

From atop the bank, five more men revealed themselves. Three held the hilt of sheathed swords. The other two levelled crossbows at them. Jed blinked and re-evaluated the situation. When had Roundbelly hired these thugs? He didn’t see the man who had Evelyn’s emerald. *His* emerald. Roundbelly’s guards were no more loyal than an insect to a flower.

“The short, ill-spent lives of the Pratchell boys has reached its end. I would call that a pity, but your pitiful existence to this point is beyond commiseration. Admittedly, I will miss the thought of you sleeping in the cold, living off roots and scat, with only your rags to call home. But the Emperor will have a nice cell for you. I’m imagine such a wild animal as yourself will adapt quite readily to a cage. Then again, Baronstoke has had its share of problems with thieves of late, what with the shortage of crops and all, so

perhaps there won't be room. Though I bet he can spare a pike or two. I suggest coming willingly. If you should so choose otherwise, I'm sure the Emperor won't mind me ridding his land of two commonplace thugs. Oh my...what do we have here?"

Jed didn't turn but flicked his eyes to the left. The short-sighted Roundbelly had finally spotted Saira, standing very still—and very slim several feet behind them. Cal was on Jed's right, poised like a heron hunting in the shallows.

"I see you are keeping more civil companions these days," Roudbelly remarked, stepping closer. His seven guards did the same. "Unfortunate for her to have fallen into such company. But I will free her soon enough."

Jed knew then what he had to do.

"Stay your hand, Roundbelly. She's with me."

"Attached to her, are you? All the more reason for you to be parted."

"Unlike some, I do not have to pay for my women. This is my wife."

Roundbelly considered this for a moment. "Hard to believe any woman would be so desperate to select a husband so low on society's ladder. But then, your father was a swine, and he managed to share sheets with your more than supple mother."

Jed almost broke. He pressed his hand against the dagger between his fingers, feeling the blade cut into skin.

"This impasse cannot last. My lunch is nearly ready, and you know I don't like to be late for meals. I wonder, when is the last time you ate? What was your last meal? You should have a full stomach when you're faced with Vedil."

"All right, Rendella. You can have the girl and I. But let Calden go. He has done no wrong against you that I haven't orchestrated."

“A fair trade. But you have any room to barter. And you still have my emerald.”

“You’re plainly mistaken, Roundbelly—on both counts. One of your former thugs has Evelyn’s emerald. Be assured, that pains me as much as you. On the other matter, gold does not buy love or loyalty, and people do not risk their lives for anything else. I can kill at least one or two of your men before I’m taken. Cal will take another. Ask yourself, are they ready to face those odds?”

Roundbelly paused for a second but quickly composed himself, not wanting to lose his—or his guards—confidence.

“She becomes my prize, and you the Emperor’s. And Calden goes free. Are we agreed?”

“By my honour.” He dropped his two daggers on the ground ahead of him.

“Whatever that may be worth. Guards, take him and the girl.”

“Jed,” Cal whispered at him. “What in Lhoran’s light are you doing?”

“Don’t worry, brother. I’ve got everything under control.”

Cal stepped back. Two guards grabbed Saira. She struggled and yelled but couldn’t escape. Anytime now, Jed thought.

Three men, swords glinting in the morning sunlight, stood around him while a fourth searched his sleeves, confiscating the two knives tucked above his boots. Then they jostled him forward, two crossbows pointed at his back.

Roundbelly looked over Saira like a farmer examining his cattle. “Don’t worry, my dear. You will find me a much more honest host than your previous owners. Then again, one man can only have so many mistresses. A prize such as yourself will catch a fair sum on the slave market.” Jed flinched as Roundbelly ran the back of his hand along

her cheek. Saira slapped his hand away. *Good for you*, he thought. “Feisty! You’ll be broken soon enough.” Roundbelly glanced at Jed. “Some of my men prefer other payment to gold.”

Jed was beginning to think he had made a terrible mistake. Roundbelly grinned like a baby with candy. His attention returned to Saira, fingers pushing her hair back behind her ears. Then his eyes shot open wide as though he had seen Vedil himself.

“She’s a *swen*!” he shrieked, stumbling away from her, hands outstretched as though trying to block her from his sight. His ankle twisted between two rocks and he fell soundly to the rocky riverbank.

Jed was just as shocked by the remark. But at that moment the baledog appeared on the boulder next to the river, yellow eyes slit in fury as he snarled at Roundbelly. Jed knew: as soon as Saira was put in danger, her baledog would be there to save her.

From out of nowhere the dark-furred mayguar pounced at the guard closest to Saira. A second later the man dropped his sword and ran, holding his mangled wrist against his side. Two of Roundbelly’s other men instantly fled at the commotion, having nothing further to gain by remaining.

Jed spun, pulled out the jewel-encrusted knife slid through his belt, and threw it at one of the men behind him. Then he fell to the ground and rolled, a crossbow bolt whistling by his head and thudding into the leg of a sword-wielding guard. The man screamed in pain just as the first felt Jed’s airborne knife strike his shoulder. Cal toppled the second crossbowman from behind, plunging a knife into his back.

Jed sprang to his feet and glanced toward Saira. She had picked up a sword and was madly swinging it at two far more able swordsmen. If she really was a *swen*, they

wouldn't hesitate to kill her. Despite only coming to the guards' knees, her baledog—hackles of silver above his arched back—currently kept them at bay. If two men were by her, and three had fled, that left four for Cal and him, minus the one his brother had already dealt with. No problem.

Jed spotted another bolt being loaded into a crossbow. Cal tossed a dagger Jed's way, and he had no sooner caught it than the weapon flew towards the enemy. The guard batted the dagger aside with his crossbow. The unloaded bolt fell to the ground.

“Watch out!”

Heeding his brother's advice, Jed twisted to one side and watched a sword burrow into the ground where he had just been standing. Cal ran headlong towards Jed, who dropped to his knees. His brother used his back as a springboard and crashed into Roundbelly's thug. Cal came to his feet with a nasty bruise on his knee and the guard's sword in hand.

“Not bad, Cal. My turn!”

Jed swung around his brother, picking up the sword and a rock from the ground as he did so. In one fluid motion, he threw the sword into the air and hurled the hand-sized rock at the guard who had survived his first two attacks. Then he leapt forward. While the guard ducked Jed caught the sword with both hands and smashed the blade through the crossbow.

The three guards stood frozen in place, bewildered by their antics.

“Best run along now boys.” Jed waved his hands at them, as though shoos a dog. “You don't want to be late for lunch. Then again, I don't see how you keep anything down working for a hippo with hair.”

“Jed...”

One of the guards had had enough. With unexpected loyalty, Roundbelly’s thug rushed at him, sword raised. Jed easily sidestepped the plunging silver edge and grabbed his assailant’s right arm with his own. He reached for a knife that wasn’t there. Sleeve, belt, boot—all empty. The guard gripped his right arm like a vice, his greedy eyes betraying the dagger in his free hand. Jed tried to kick him, but the man was too tall. His feet couldn’t find a grip.

Helpless, he watched the guard’s arm swing around...and the dagger sink into Cal’s chest.

His brother had stepped in front of the blade. Cal grunted. Jed felt his body slump like a drunk on New Moon’s Eve; Cal sputtered, sagged, and finally collapsed to the ground.

Jed roared. He twisted the guard’s arm behind his back until the sword fell from loosened fingers. Before the man could turn Jed drove the blade through his back. The other two men had already disappeared over the bank.

He found Cal still conscious. “Did we win?” he asked with a grimace.

Jed breathed a sigh of relief. He pulled back Cal’s bloodied shirt—mostly previous stains—from around the dagger, expecting to find a glancing blow. But blood flowed freely over his chest, the blade embedded between his lower ribs, right to the hilt. Shreds of cotton from his tunic mixed with peels of flesh. Jed stared in disbelief.

“How bad is it?”

Jed met Cal’s pleading eyes, but couldn’t give his brother an honest answer.

Chapter Four

Reflections

Saira held the sword like a club, wielding it without restraint. The two men glared at her, cruelty in their eyes and poison on their tongues. They spat curses at Saira, many of which she hadn't heard or couldn't comprehend. She didn't understand their hatred. Where Roundbelly had been repulsed by her, these two treated her like vermin, a wild animal in their midst. She saw movement further upstream, and looked to see Roundbelly struggling to unmoor a beached canoe.

"Parasite of purity!" One of the guards lunged towards her. "Die, swen!"

Saira yelled and stepped back, a sword licking at her throat. Fenox snapped at the man's ankles, forcing him to retreat. Locked in a stalemate the last minute or two—Saira's heart was beating so fast, she couldn't keep track of time—they slowly forced her towards the water's edge. She began to realize they weren't scared of *her*. Roundbelly's men couldn't reach her because of Fenox, while her *daman* was too quick for them to hit.

For a second her adversaries seemed distracted, peering over her shoulder. Saira took advantage and swung her sword in a mighty arc in front of her. They staggered back, then turned and fled from her and the river. Saira sighed, still invigorated by her strength.

She heard footsteps from behind and turned to see Jed running at her, brandishing a dagger in either hand.

"Stay away from me!"

Jed stopped short at the blade swinging wildly at him. "What's wrong with you?"

Put down that sword before you cut your baledog in half.”

Fenox gave Jed a cursory glance. Saira wasn’t so sure.

“You almost had me sold as a slave, and you’re asking *me* what’s wrong?”

“I saved your life, is what I did. Then and just now. Why do you think those two ran off?” His face suddenly changed. For the first time since they had met, he looked unsure of himself. Afraid, even. “My brother’s been stabbed. I...need your help.”

Saira looked past him and saw three bodies on the ground. One of them was Cal. “By the sun of Solu...” Her fingers felt numb. She dropped her sword and followed Jed.

Cal’s eyes were closed, and he wasn’t moving. His uneven breathing came in wheezes and gasps. A bandage was wrapped around his body and under his armpits, a red stain slowly ballooning underneath the dirty brown tunic. Saira saw one of the guards was shirtless; Jed must have ripped this off the back of one of the dead bodies she was trying to pretend weren’t there.

Jed squatted behind Cal’s head. “We have to carry him.”

Saira felt something hot against her thigh. “Wait. Let me try something.”

She pulled the sunstone from her pocket. It felt hot in her palm, glowing with an invisible heat. Seven years ago, when Jakt had cut his knee on the thorn of a spined maple, she had placed the sunstone on the wound. They had both watched in amazement as the skin sewed itself back together. Now, she struggled to hold back tears. She had healed Jakt, and still he had betrayed her.

“Take the bandage off for a second.”

“Saira, we don’t have time—”

“Do it or he’ll die!”

Saira didn't know if that was true. But she knew she could help. Jed hastily unwrapped the crimson-soaked shirt and she saw the dagger protruding from his chest. Dried blood and strips of flesh clung to the blade. Cal groaned.

"Why haven't you taken out the dagger?"

"If I do that now, he won't make it."

She started to place the sunstone near the hilt. "Okay. I hope this works..."

Jed grabbed her wrist. "What are you doing?"

She stared at him. Somewhere in his eyes was the same suspicion Roundbelly and his guards had shown, the same mistrust she had seen from Thero and the people of Maystone—her home.

"Jed, if you want your brother to live, then you have to trust me."

He looked at her, then down at his brother, and released his grip.

Saira pressed the stone's smooth side next to the dagger's point of entry. Cal winced as the sunstone seared his shredded skin. Jed wrinkled his nose, burnt flesh hovering above what sounded like hot coals being thrown into water. Cal's body convulsed and some of the blood cleared. His breathing became uniform as the skin reformed around the dagger. The weapon started to come out, pulled by an unseen force or perhaps pushed by the tissues being repaired on the inside. Jed snatched the weapon before it fell. Then the sunstone went cold.

She couldn't tell if Jed looked more astonished or relieved. "How did you do that?"

"I'm not sure. But I think he needs to rest." Feeling drained, she returned the sunstone to her pocket.

Jed put his hands under Cal's arms. "We need to go."

"Why?"

"Because your friends are coming."

Saira looked up. Five tall figures approached from down the river, gliding along the banks like shadows too dark for the sun's light to penetrate. Fenox growled.

Jed had a new shirt in his hands—she didn't ask where it was from—which he tied around his brother. Then they picked up Cal, Jed by his head and Saira at his feet, and started hauling him in the opposite direction. The strangers in black were quickly catching them up.

Jed cursed after a dozen feet. "This isn't going to work!"

"Why don't we take the boat."

"What boat?"

"The one Roundbelly..er, Rendalla has just upriver."

Jed stopped short. Putting Cal down, he suddenly produced a knife in either hand and sprinted toward the water. Roundbelly finally had the canoe afloat. Now, he stood awkwardly in the current, an oar in one hand, trying to get in without capsizing.

"Where are your loyal men now?" Jed cried. "Probably robbing your caravan as we speak."

Saira realized Jed held death in his hands. She let go of Cal and ran down the embankment.

"Don't kill him!"

Roundbelly dropped the oar and tried to run, but his left leg gave out. Saira figured he had sprained his ankle. Jed pushed him into the water. The canoe floated

downstream, getting caught amongst the shore rocks.

“Please!” Roundbelly cried.

Jed locked Roundbelly’s head under one arm and pressed a knife under his chin.

“Why does a swine like this deserve to live?”

Saira put her hands over her stomach, still thinking of Cal. “I don’t know. But if you kill him, I don’t see how the two of you would be any different.”

Jed must have decided he didn’t like that idea, as he let go a moment later. Before the portly man got very far, Jed yanked a gem-lined necklace from below Roundbelly’s triple chin. “This is for your cowardice.”

“That’s my father’s heirloom!”

“Which I’ve just inherited. Come on. Let’s get Cal into the canoe.”

They carried Cal to the boat and Jed sat in the back. “Hold on, bro. We’ll have you on the mend in no time.”

Saira found the other oar and took position in the bow. The shadowed strangers had stopped by the dead bodies of the guards. Pushing off, she realized Fenox was still on the shore.

“Wait! We need to go back for Fenox.”

“Who? Oh, you mean the baledog. He’s fine.”

“Don’t call him that. He’s a mayguar, as loyal to me as your brother is to you.”

“Believe me, I don’t doubt it. But it’s crowded enough with three. And anyway, somebody’s got to keep Roundbelly company.”

Fenox seemed content to trot along the shore. She spotted Roundbelly fumbling over rocks, swearing left and right as he tried to climb the bank. As her *daman* overcame

him, Roundbelly squealed and threw himself down, hands covering his face.

“Good dog! Don’t hurt me!”

Fenox padded silently by without so much as a sideways glance.

The Ivory River was wide here—stretching further across than most trees were tall—making for an easy upstream paddle. Saira turned her head from an east wind that sent smaller ripples scurrying up against the larger waves of the current. Lined with rock and brush, neither shore offered shade from the late morning sun. The odd tributary joined the Ivory from the west bank, mostly gentle creeks in search of the southern sea. *They must be heading north*, she thought, trying to picture one of her father’s many maps. *Towards Baronstoke.*

For a long time they didn’t speak. Cal moaned occasionally in his sleep, but didn’t seem to be in too much pain. Saira’s stomach grumbled.

“Can I ask you something?” she finally said. Fenox had disappeared the last half-hour, though she knew her *daman* could look after himself. Despite the lack of bends in the river she hadn’t seen the black-robed strangers since they set out.

Jed didn’t respond. Saira pulled in her paddle and turned to look at him. “What’s a swen?”

“That’s what we call selwyn,” he replied, not meeting her eyes. She turned back around. “Or rather, it’s the term others use. Is it true that selwyn ride giant turtles and can breathe underwater?”

“What’s a selwyn?”

From the absence of splash, she could tell he had stopped paddling. “You don’t

know?”

“You suppose I should?”

“Because that’s what you are. Although, I must admit I’ve never seen one myself. I suppose you’re my first.” He started paddling once more. “As you’ve gathered, most people don’t take kindly to swen—er, selwyn. They’ve been blamed for the rivers going foul. So it’s best if you keep your hair over your ears.”

“My ears?” She felt the jagged edge of her lower lobes.

“Yes. That’s a dead giveaway.”

She didn’t understand. Her father said she was born that way. He had only mentioned selwyn once, only to say they were misunderstood, and lived in a forest that grew on the water.

“Have you ever heard the story of the Tainted River?” Saira was quiet, watching the current embrace her paddle. “My mother liked to tell it. Long before men, the gods walked over Rivaria on legs that never tired. They lived forever, the stars were their playthings, and never knew poverty or war. The gods made trees grow faster than shadows at sunset, and could pile rocks into mountains in seconds. And so by their hand all the lands were formed.

“One day, the gods were thirsty. They broke open the mountains to release the rivers. They smashed giant holes into the ground that became lakes. However, some of the gods dug too far. Deep down beneath the dirt Vedil himself was imprisoned. The other gods told them to stop digging. But the greedy did not heed the warning. And so Vedil escaped and made them all mortal, and henceforth all rivers that flowed from that lake were tainted.

“As punishment, the sun hid away from them half the day, and Solu cursed those that had dug the lakes too deep. He made their ears droop down to their necks in shame, so they could be recognized by others. And their bellies were marked with the symbol of Vedil: three dots in a triangle. Finally, they were banished to live in the foul waters of the swamp.”

Saira didn't speak at first. “That's different than the one my father told me. But if I'm a selwyn, why are my ears short?”

“Someone must have cut them to appear that way, to hide who you are.”

Saira put her hands against her face. Her heart became heavy. Not because of Jed's tale, but because it meant her father had lied to her. Or at the very least, kept things from her about who she was and where she came from.

“You'll have to tell me your father's version sometime. But for now, my arms need a rest.”

Saira realized her oar had been sitting on her lap the whole time. “Sorry,” she mumbled, still lost in thoughts of Wilton Lhee. Was he even her father?

“Don't mention it. It should be safe to stop for a few minutes.” Jed paddled them to the far shore. Then he tended to his brother, putting a hand on Cal's forehead and checking the bandage.

Saira's belly groaned at her. As she stood, her arms and legs felt like logs left too long in the water. “You have any food?”

“No,” said Jed absently as he pried the jewels out of Roundbelly's necklace. “But for what you did for my brother, I think you've earned this.” He tossed her a purple-coloured gem. “He doesn't even have a scar.”

Saira caught the polished stone. “I can’t eat this!”

“Well, we’re fresh out of stale bread and dried dolphin. And I wouldn’t trust the fish in this river.”

Saira stared at her gift. A thousand stars sparkled within the glittering quartz.

“Wait...I can’t accept this.”

“Lhoran’s light. Why not? That amethyst came all the way from the Nether Mountains.”

“But this doesn’t *belong* to me.”

“And it doesn’t belong to Roundbelly either. Maybe you should give it to the slaves that dug it from the mountainside, but they ain’t around. By your reasoning, I’d be carrying nothing but the skin on my back. Shall I take off my shirt and boots? Believe me, their former owners don’t have much use for them.”

“For once, brother,” Cal mustered from the bottom of the canoe. Jed and Saira looked at him in surprise. “Keep your clothes on.”

“Ha! He lives! We’ve kept you out of Vedil’s shadow a little longer. Though that was mostly the swen’s doing.” Jed smiled at her. She still held the amethyst in her outstretched hand. “Look. It’s not in the nature of thieves to give. Consider it a token of gratitude, my good lady, because I’m not taking it back. So it either belongs to you or the river.”

Somehow, Saira didn’t believe him. But she didn’t want to argue anymore. She stuffed it next to her sunstone in exasperation and started up the shore in search of berries and roots.

The difficult ground didn’t offer much nourishment or respite for her weary body.

A few river ferns protruded between crevices, their fronds running snake-like over the lichen-clad rocks. To the east, the distant Hills of Haldor rose as overlapping outcrops of grey shadow silhouetted by the blue afternoon sky. The clouds had ignored the call for Spring rains, hovering over the horizon like snow atop an uneven forest of firs. Sarai found a small copse of dewberry. The immature berries soured her tongue, and she was careful not to pick any from the shadebushes that looked strikingly similar—except for the lack of thorns on their stems, and being deadly poisonous.

After a few minutes of foraging, a terrible thought suddenly crossed her mind. She ran back to the canoe. Jed was still there, conversing with his brother. Saira sighed. She wouldn't put it past him to just leave. That gem could have been a parting present—what she would do with it, she didn't know.

Is that what she wanted? To have them leave? She would be better off on her own. Fenox would find her. Jed and Cal were swindlers, low lives, bandits, dangerous enough in themselves, with probably even more dangerous enemies.

"Time to go." Jed started pushing the prow back into the river. "Your friends strike me as the persistent type, and I'm not keen to hear what they have to say."

Saira thought, *I could run right now*. But where would she go?

"This boat waits for no man—or woman, for that matter. Are you coming?"

Did she trust him? He seemed to trust her.

"Yes, I'm coming."

"For a second there," Jed remarked as she scrambled onboard, "I could've sworn you were going to pull a scarper."

"Was just thinking, is all. Where exactly are we going?"

“I know a place where we should be safe.”

The day slowly waned toward a clear, quiet twilight. The river narrowed and meandered, the current white against the bow. Swift waters drowned out the sound of birds returning to their nests and insects fluttering to find buzzing mates or warm-blooded prey. They passed only one other canoe, paddled by a man with withering limbs and despairing eyes. Jed explained that a few hours north the Ivory became a maze of waterfalls and ravines, all but preventing passage to Baronstoke by water. He said River Walkers used to guard these shores. But no longer.

As the sun descended over the plains of Farnley, western rays reflected off the crests of the current. The light shimmered and danced over the wrinkled river surface. Her father had always told her the coruscated water was Solu staring back at her. *Don't look at those reflections for more than a second or two*, she heard him say. *You can't help but cry if you stare at a god for too long.*

Now, she didn't know what to believe.

Cal was feeling better and even offered to paddle. Sarai wordlessly agreed. They crawled past one another in the hull, and she took Cal's position beneath the yoke of the canoe. Her muscles felt stiff, like fishing rope pulled too tight. Exhaustion collapsed upon her. The berries had only kindled her hunger. After hours of paddling against the current, she gratefully rested her head against the fire-scarred base of the dugout and promptly fell asleep. While sleeping, she saw the river from the shore, as though she were a river spirit gliding along the banks.

Hushed voices woke her. It was dark. The moon had started its ascent to join the

emergent stars. They were still on the water; the canoe rocked gently side to side, but didn't move forward.

Saira sat up. Cal and Jed had their oars across their laps, and were staring toward a kind of cottage on stilts, about fifty feet away and lit from the inside. The flickering candlelight fell through the floorboards in even rows.

"Where's Fenox?" She could hear the sleep in her voice.

"Haven't seen him for hours," Jed whispered back.

"How did we get here?"

"We turned awhile back onto a tributary."

"What's that building?"

"A lake temple. You know, for praying and other virtuous deeds I have yet to try."

Saira had never been to a temple before. Still woozy from being roused, her head drooped. She clutched the sides of the canoe for support. Moonlight rolled over the calm lake in a wide, rippling line of light, revealing purple Oriane blossoms; the outline of the dozen-petalled flowers glowed with an eerie radiance.

Something moved in the water beside her. She looked down. A dark shape stirred just under the surface. At first she thought it was a dusksnake, expert reptilian fishers that commonly hunted this time of day. Saira peered closer, and the slithering form swelled into the contour of a human-sized form. The tail she had seen belonged to something much larger, a scaled body with spines, arms and legs—

"Solu help us! There's a monster in the water!"

"Shh!" Jed admonished. "There's someone in the temple, and I'd like our arrival

to be a surprise.”

“I saw a creature right next to the boat! Like a snake with arms, but the size of a person.”

Jed glanced down. “There’s nothing there. You were still dreaming.”

“But—”

“Quiet, Saira. You’ll get to meet our host soon enough.”

As they paddled toward the river temple, Saira could only stare back at the invisible shadow beneath the water.

Chapter Five

Sanctuary

Aldon focused.

He sat cross-legged on the temple floorboards, several feet above the lake, yet held its waters like a sculptor with clay. Electric currents ran over his fingers. Water spirits danced around his robes, streams of warm cloud that whispered the divine in his ear. He didn't move, but his body felt like he were sprinting down a hill of soft grass, or swimming in the mist of a thunderous waterfall, or diving headlong through the air like a sun falcon after its prey.

Still, he searched. He was looking for the well, what his Uncle's book called *hlasa*.

Before now, Aldon was content to listen. The Divine Elders instructed all acolytes to observe the energy of the spirits, but never to reach for their power. That belonged to Solu, the Divine One. The Seven Scriptures were very clear. To take from Solu was akin to bargaining with Vedil. To be caught doing so meant being ostracized by the Divinists, and their influence stretched from the ocean to beyond the Dareth Mountains. Thus very few were tempted. And those who were didn't know how to find or control *hlasa*.

Then his Uncle had given him the Kantra. Had anyone else done so, Aldon would have turned them over to Caro Orsen, the Chief Elder of Baronstoke. But Uncle Garen was the man he trusted more than anyone. Where Caro addressed Aldon as a juvenile in need of constant guidance, his Uncle spoke to him as a brother; not afraid in his humble

wisdom to be wrong, to be vulnerable. Other Divine Elders told Aldon what to do. Garen merely suggested, always emphasizing the importance of choice. “Never let others decide for you. You are the one that lives by the choices made.”

So Aldon accepted the book.

“Be careful,” he remembered Garen saying in hushed tones. “Do not show this book to anyone. Only read its words when you are absolutely certain you will not be disturbed. You will find truth on these pages, secrets few know and fewer still have mastered. I will tell you more when I can. Until then, keep it close to your heart.”

The next day, his Uncle vanished. That had been two months ago.

Aldon couldn’t help but be worried, even though Garen wasn’t really his Uncle. His blood parents already had seven children; when he was born they put him into the priesthood, and he eventually fell under Garen’s care. He grew up among the Divinists, memorizing the Seven Scriptures and Nine Divine Rites by the age of five. Next month, on the eve of his twenty-eighth birthday, Aldon himself would become an Initiate of the Elders. Which would make him the youngest in all of Baronstoke to claim such a title.

Garen had raised Aldon as his own, educating him in languages, philosophy, arithmetic and history. As a teenager, they went for daily runs along the Ivory River. Garen was adamant that the body be as strong as the mind, which sometimes got him in trouble with the other Elders. In truth, Garen was Aldon’s only family. Aldon had never met his parents or siblings—they moved north of the mountains when he was still a babe.

His Uncle had often been away for months at a time; retracing the pilgrimage of Lhoran, the second disciple, through the Nether Mountains; venturing to the shores of the Omnia Ocean where he had seen great sea serpents surface from the waves; witnessing

the divine miracle of the changing of the current, when the silver dolphins migrated from salt- to fresh waters and reversed the flow of Welling River, flooding Solas Lake. But that was before Garen had gone blind.

His Uncle never told him how it happened. Five years ago, Garen had been the healthiest person Aldon knew. The following day, his eyes saw only black, and his body looked as though it had aged half a lifetime. Two more things happened after that: the other Elders avoided Garen as shadows avoid the sun, and his Uncle never left Baronstoke again.

Knowing his Uncle was missing and blind was too much to bear. Aldon felt powerless. When no word came after a few weeks, he became certain Garen must be dead. Caro didn't seem overly concerned. Suddenly Aldon found himself alone with the Kantra. He took a long sojourn from Baronstoke, having arrived at this Lake Temple just a few days ago.

Aldon knew the risks. Possession alone of such a book could have him publicly hanged; if the Elders felt merciful, they might banish him to the swen-infested Lorellien mangroves in the east instead. Either way, Aldon's present life would be forfeit. But this was his last connection to his Uncle, and he was determined to discover anything he could about Garen's past. This temple offered him the solitude to follow that path.

Now, Aldon centered his thoughts. He ignored the woman and two men in their approaching canoe. Water spirits tickled his skin under his robes and gathered his breath. They heightened his senses, allowing him to feel the wind rustle every Oriane flower in the lake, as though the petals and his skin were one and the same. He searched for *hlasa*, delving with his mind through layer after layer of shadow and mist. He felt like an

explorer in a cave without a torch, or a man caught in a blinding shadestorm. There was no direction to follow, no light to guide him. The Kantra spoke of opening yourself to *hlasa*, of not trying to capture the spirits but letting them enter the sanctuary of your mind. When that happened, you gained the power to weave the world with your own fingers.

But for Aldon, he always hit a block. There was always a hopeful distraction that led him astray, a rising feeling of exultation that vanished as soon as he tried to hold onto it. Every time he thought he had found the source of *hlasa* he woke from his meditation and found his hands empty.

Three days now. He felt his fists clench as frustration took hold. He had pored over the Kantra twice; still, no progress. Nothing new presented itself, only the same innocuous spirits that pranced around him and then returned from whence they came, fleeting visitors instead of enduring companions. There must be something more...

He pushed hard to find that something, gazing into the void of the lake with his mind's eye. Dragonflies rested on reeds that gently undulated in the moonlight. Skeeter bugs skipped over the water surface. Lily pads made floating homes for unfurled flowers and croaking amphibians.

He went deeper.

Tadpoles fed constantly on algae. Slugfish hunted for long-tailed larvae. A dusksnake glided through the water in search of unwary prey.

Wait...something was there. Something unexpected. A dark presence, one he had never come across before. Foreign, foul and far from its home. The shadow neared—

Aldon opened his eyes. The water spirits fled back into the lake.

He heard voices.

“...telling you...”

“...too dark now, we’ll fish it out...”

“...remember us for sure...”

“...are you listening...”

Aldon stood and the three intruders—*guests*, he reminded himself—stopped short. He recognized the two men immediately. Their sullied clothes had dark stains, probably blood. Hard to tell in the candlelight. Aldon wouldn’t be surprised, given their favoured profession. These two came into Baronstoke’s river temple every few months, pretending to be beggars. They never gave donations and were always in search of food offerings meant for the poor.

But it was unusual to see them here. With the tainting of the rivers, this temple had become all but deserted. No more swans swam in this lake, and the wings and head of the wooden entrance carvings had been crudely hacked off by looters such as these. Intended for quiet reflection, Aldon had helped build this temple a dozen years back. When his Uncle left for one of his regular excursions, he often said he was coming here for a silent retreat. But whenever Aldon came to visit, Garen was nowhere to be found.

And then there was the woman. The leaves caught in her hair and her plain-looking garb suggested she was from one of the outer villages. There was something strange about her demeanour. She looked hungry and out of place, and kept glancing behind her. He instantly thought of a legend told in the Kantra, of a woman who would cleanse the rivers.

“Evening, Elder,” said the shorter of the two men. Aldon faced him. “I go by the name Jed Trail. This is my brother, Cal. And Saira, my wife. We got lost in the backwaters, and are looking for sanctuary for the night.” He opened his mouth to say something more but decided against it.

Even without the water spirits around him, Aldon clearly heard Jed’s lies. “As my grey robes plainly indicate, I am not yet an Elder.” He sighed. *If thy neighbour is hungry, thou shall spare him some of your bread.* How could he ignore the first Divine Rite? “Apologies. I was not expecting visitors. My name is Aldon Kale. You are welcome to stay the night. There are a couple extra blankets, as well as some vegetables and rice. Please, help yourselves. May Solu shine upon you.”

Jed and Cal descended on the food like starving terals. In a matter of seconds Aldon’s rations were cut in half. He tried to stay composed. There must be a reason they had been sent to him. Saira eagerly grabbed some rice in a bowl and sat apart from them, pulling her hair down under her chin.

“Welcome,” Aldon said, sitting next to her. “I hope the food is to your liking.”

Saira nodded as she swallowed, and offered him a small smile.

“Where are you travelling to?”

She suddenly stopped chewing. “I’m...not really sure.”

“That’s all right. Many people are in search of new homes, these days.” He didn’t say anything for a time. As all the Elders were male, Aldon invariably found himself acting awkward around women. His locks of blond hair made him appear younger than his years. He caught her gazing at the thatched ceiling of the temple. The flickering light of the candles animated the faces sculpted in the polished wood. “The

carvings in the crossbeams are of Solu and his three disciples. The sun itself represents Solu. Johan's body is carved into the likeness of a river, where he was laid for his final rest. Lhoran is there in the moon, while Oriane has a dozen petals in her hair."

Saira's eyes filled with wonder. "I know those names from my father. I've never been in a temple before."

"Never?" Aldon couldn't fathom a life without faith. "I expect you come from one of the river villages. Maystone, or perhaps Bren?"

She turned quickly away then, her head down.

"I am sorry if I have asked something—"

"Excuse me," Jed interrupted. He lifted Saira much more roughly than Aldon thought appropriate, even if he *was* her husband, something Aldon genuinely doubted. "I need to talk to my wife."

They went and huddled in a far corner. But the temple was small. Even if Aldon chose not to listen, he still overheard most of their discussion.

"...leave in the morning for Baronstoke. I don't like the idea of water spirits reading my mind."

"You think it's safe?" Saira asked.

"Of course. Aldon is harmless. I'd bet your life on it."

"No, I mean the creature..."

"Even if you saw something, it wouldn't dare enter this place. The swans will watch over us. Isn't that right, Aldon?"

"Yes, my good lady," Aldon said. "Within these walls, you will come to no harm."

“See? What did I tell you. If it will make you feel any better, I have something for you.” Jed reached for something under his shirt.

“Another gemstone?” Saira inquired. “I didn’t want the first.”

“Something more practical. You don’t know when you might need to defend yourself.”

Aldon caught the glint of reflected steel.

“It’s beautiful. But I can’t accept this.”

“Well, I don’t see why not,” Jed said. “It didn’t cost me a single coin.”

“I don’t want to kill anyone.”

“Fine, have it your way. I’m actually trying to get rid of it. This thing has brought me nothing but bad luck.” At that moment one of the candles reached the end of its wick. The perimeter of light closed in.

He saw Saira shake her head. “Nice to know a swen is worthy of your trash,” she muttered. But Aldon didn’t hear her. He could see the hilt of the dagger. Jed held the weapon in his two flat palms, as though offering it to Solu. But it was the four rubies set deeply into the handgrip, forming a diamond shape, that made Aldon curse.

“Lhoran’s light! Do you know what that is?”

Jed didn’t even glance his way. “Yea, a bad luck charm. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to get some sleep.” He tucked the dagger behind his belt.

Aldon hunched his shoulders and stared down at the floorboards. Yet after a moment he squared himself. He wouldn’t keep silent. Not this time. Aldon wasn’t an assertive person. He followed what others—namely, the Elders—told him to do. But the fact Jed was trying to give this dagger to Saira made him stand. He thought of his Uncle,

and the time Garen had stood up to Caro when he thought a judgement was unjust: a mother of three being hanged for blasphemy. Five words spoken by her would orphan three boys under ten. Garen knew it wasn't right, and he hadn't remained silent.

"Where did you get that dagger?" Aldon felt his voice shake.

Jed had already pulled a blanket over himself. "What does that matter?"

"I would like you to answer me."

Jed made snoring sounds, his back turned to him. Aldon stormed towards the thief and yanked the blanket off.

"I said, where did you get—"

"Listen to me, spirit sniffer." Jed had sprung to his feet and was right in Aldon's face. Aldon took a step back. "Gods and spirits are your business. My jewels and knives are mine. Let's keep it that way."

Aldon felt his face go red. Not even Caro had spoken to him this way. "If you won't tell me..."

"Look, Cal! Aldon must be blessed indeed, to have Solu shining from his cheeks!"

Saira was watching him carefully. Aldon took a breath. "I'll tell you what that is."

Jed sniggered. "Please, regale us with a bedtime story."

"You stole that dagger."

"Lucky guess," Jed said offhand, lying back down. "Then again, everything I have once belonged to someone else."

"No, I'll tell you how I know. The rubies in the hilt. There are four of them

arranged in a diamond. More important, they form two red triangles. What you carry is a chrak, an item forged by the Lord of Shadow himself.” For once, Jed remained quiet.

“You can’t give it to someone else, although you can certainly try. But you won’t escape it so easily. You can’t throw it away. You can’t drop it into the river. No, not with Vedil’s shadow within that blade. That dagger can only be stolen. Just as you stole it from its previous owner—thus freeing him from the curse—so too will someone with ill-intent have to take it from you. And for as long as that chrak is in your possession, misfortune will follow your every step.”

Jed pushed himself onto his elbow with one hand and scratched his head with the other. For the first time, Jed looked at Aldon with something other than contempt. Yet a moment later he waved his hand curtly as though dismissing all Aldon had said.

“I applaud your imagination. That’s quite the story. But I’m a free man, and no one holds anything over me. I can get rid of this dagger anytime I like.”

Saira interjected. “Okay. Then toss it into the lake.”

Jed shrugged. “It’s too valuable. But thank you for your concern, Elder-boy.” He put his head down on the temple floorboards. “It’s a long haul to Baronstoke tomorrow. So I, for one, am going to dream of the maidens of Valei and the coffers inside the royal palace. Good night to you. And if I have a cursed night, then you’ll know you were right.”

Jed closed his eyes, and Aldon decided to call it a night as well. They were one blanket short, so he offered his to Saira. She thanked him quietly and then went to lie down in the furthest spot from all three men. Aldon blew out the candles and settled down on the floor of the temple.

In the middle of the night, when the stars shone their brightest, he thought he heard a splash. He brushed it off as a slugfish or lilyfrog. Several minutes later it came again, louder and closer. Aldon took a candle and explored the entrance. Jed's canoe—stolen, in all likelihood—was tied next to his raft.

Clouds veiled the moonlight, casting a dim shadow over the surface of the lake. He waited, listening. The gentle ripples of the water quietly murmured in his ears. After a few minutes, Aldon decided his imagination had got the best of him. He went back inside, snuffed out the candle, and promptly fell back to sleep.

Chapter Six

Vedil's Curse

Jed woke first. The lake reflected the morning's first rays, bright and clear. He was eager to get started. If they kept a brisk pace, they could reach Baronstoke in two days.

"By Vedil's shadow..." he muttered under his breath.

He couldn't believe he had been shown up by an acolyte. Worse yet, it had happened in front of a woman. A young, pretty woman he had just met, even if she was a swen. Yet Jed couldn't help thinking about his dagger. Aldon had called it a chrak. Ever since he had swiped it from Darrin—a scoundrel that didn't deserve such a pretty prize—his luck had gone foul. None of his and Cal's raids had gone over well. He had dropped Evelyn's sapphire, bumped into dark-cloaked strangers, and his brother had been stabbed...

Was Aldon telling the truth? Of course he was. That was the curse of being an Elder-boy. Jed had to admit, he couldn't just throw the chrak away. Those sparkling rubies held his eyes and stayed his hand. Whenever he had a *need* to throw the dagger, when it wasn't a conscious act but rather one of life and death, he inevitably found himself picking it up again. And he never had to use his sharpening stone, for the blade never chipped or dulled. Nevertheless, he still found himself honing the perfect edge every night.

Cal stirred, his forehead wrinkling as he stretched his eyes. "How do you always wake before me? I don't understand it." He yawned ferociously.

Saira was still dead to the world. Her blanket twitched every few seconds, as though she were wrestling with a nightmare. Jed shook her shoulder.

“Time to go.” Saira jerked awake with a start. “From the sound of things, you’re just as keen as I.”

She looked at him strangely, as though she had just been somewhere else entirely. Jed snapped his fingers in front of her face. She blinked and shook her head in surprise. “What...where...?”

Jed laughed. “Not the morning type, I see. That’s okay. If you need a jolt to get started, we can always toss you in the lake.”

Aldon had stirred from his own corner, and now stood awkwardly behind Jed, as though he had something to say. Jed beat him to it.

“Thanks for letting us crash. I’m not one to overstay my welcome, so we’ll be on our way.”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. You travel to Baronstoke, do you not?” Jed nodded half-heartedly, busying himself by checking his knives. “I have decided to come with you. That is, if you will allow it. The roads do not provide safe passage these days, even for an acolyte.”

Jed was already shaking his head, a dozen reasons to reject Aldon dangling on the tip of his tongue. But he stopped himself. Aldon might be an annoyance, with his spirit talk and goodwill towards others, but an acolyte could help them get through the gates of Baronstoke. Cal and he had a reputation there, and not the kind the emperor would bless. So they had to be more creative every time they passed the armed—and armoured—guards, electing for caravan stowaways the time previous. But with Saira along, it made

things more difficult. For some reason, much like the chrak, he didn't want to get rid of her just yet. And even though Cal was seemingly, and remarkably, fully healed, he wanted his brother to rest in a safe place. They could shack up with Waryn for a week or two, which would give them time to devise plans for their next raid.

"All right. You can come. But don't weave any spirits over me. I mean that. My knives can't cut through them, but your own flesh is just as soft as mine."

Aldon looked confused. "You don't understand. The water spirits don't—"

"Hey! What did I just say?" Jed stepped quickly toward the moored canoe.

"Okay, everyone! To the shore!"

Cal and Saira joined him in the canoe, the two brothers paddling. Aldon followed in his raft, poling himself slowly behind them. They drifted through fluid fields of Orianne blossoms, violet petals still open and vibrant just after dawn. A Divinist superstition explained why that was. Something about being open to both Solu and Lhoran, who were the sun and moon, or some such nonsense.

The shoreline was only a score or two strokes away. He spotted an animal pacing on the water's edge. Jed recognized the silver on black.

"Your baledog looks agitated."

Saira raised her head. "Mayguar," she grumbled at him, still half-asleep.

"Right. He must be missing you."

"That's strange..." she said, her words trailing off.

Jed looked back at Aldon, who stared stoically forward as he stabbed his long bamboo pole into the floor of the lake. He had covered less than half the distance of the canoe. What would Elder-boy do if he found out Saira was a swen? Hopefully it

wouldn't come to that. No one hated selwyn more than Divinists. Aldon shifted his gaze, watching the baledog with a good deal of consternation.

"Hey, Elder-boy!" Jed yelled back. "I'm still alive! Guess I was right about that chrak after all."

The canoe suddenly stopped. Jed peered ahead. There weren't any reeds. He dipped his oar into the lake, reaching in futility for the bottom.

"Cal, what's going—"

The boat shook from side to side, gently at first, and then the canoe pitched violently to the left as a long black arm came over the edge. Saira screamed. The creature's head surfaced, like a teral's face but with dark, scabby scales instead of fur. A set of long, razor-sharp spines arched down its back. It had a hold on her leg and was pulling, trying to capsize both Saira and the canoe.

Without thinking, Jed launched himself at the creature. He had the sense to put his oar in front of him, and the wood collided with crusty reptilian skin. The creature changed its focus to him, snatching the oar in its clawed, webbed hand and snapping the shaft like a twig. For a moment the two of them struggled for balance—Jed in the canoe, the creature trying to keep its grip on him—and then Cal batted it over the head with his oar. The creature fell back into the water.

"Go!"

But Jed didn't have to give the order. Cal had tripled his paddling pace, and Saira was using her right arm to push as much water behind them as possible. Jed still had half an oar, and the canoe soon carved a triangle into the sandy shore.

The three of them scrambled out. Fenox sniffed at Saira's feet, checking to see if

she was okay.

“Help!”

Jed looked back. Aldon was standing in the center of his raft, trying to keep balanced as the turbulent waters around him frothed. Cal was moving into the trees. Jed made to follow—he had no allegiance whatsoever to Aldon—but one glance at Saira told him he had to go back.

Sighing, Jed pushed the canoe out from the shore.

Cal called after him. “What [in Solu’s name] are you doing?”

“Something I shouldn’t.”

Cal splashed beside the canoe and jumped in, asking nothing further. Both of them had knives at the ready. They paddled straight for Aldon, who was using his bamboo as a balancing pole.

“Bend your knees!” Cal yelled.

Aldon took his advice but slipped, falling backward near the edge of the raft. Waves swelled outward from underneath. The Elder-boy had dropped his pole but still clung to the raft’s cross boards. They had almost reached him when Aldon spoke.

“I think it’s gone. I saw it swim over there.”

Jed followed Aldon’s shaking index finger to the west. The waves were dwindling into slender ripples, the jostled lily pads settling back into tranquility. He was just thinking to himself that the creature was indeed gone when the canoe rolled over, plunging him headlong into the lake.

The cold hit him first. His skin burned, his clothes glued to his arms and legs like flowing sap to bark. He found the surface and shook the water from his face, treading in

place. Cal was at the other end of their capsized vessel, trying vainly to flip it right side up. Jed swam back toward the canoe, pulling a knife into hand. He was reaching for the inverted prow when something very solid and sharp cut into his ankle. The next moment he was under.

At first, he couldn't see anything. He kicked with his free leg, but the movement was in slow motion. Then Jed found himself staring into a set of blood red eyes. The monster had four limbs attached to a lizard-like body, scaly and lean with a slithering tail. Except no lizard grew as large as a man. Its face was now only a few inches from his own. A forked tongue flicked between jagged shark teeth. The creature's eyes slit as its jaw opened fully, revealing a cavernous palate of hungry fangs. It held him by his right ankle and left arm. He felt like a rat coiled by a venomous snake.

It lunged for his neck. He pulled his head back and thrust his knife forward. The blade dug deep into its throat. Those red eyes bulged, black blood muddied the water, and then Jed was being pulled. Up, up, toward light and air.

"Jed! It's all right. It's gone."

Jed didn't realize he had been flailing his arms, frantic to get out of the water. He let his body go limp. Cal tugged him onto the raft with the help of Aldon, who had somehow reacquired the bamboo pole.

"Whatever you did, that creature didn't like it. You okay?"

Jed felt his legs and arms where the creature had seized him with a vice-like grip. His sopping wet clothes were torn, the skin underneath scratched but unbroken.

"I'm fine." He stared out onto the lake. Between the purple flowers, a hazy line of diffusing black veered off in the opposite direction. Within a few seconds, the rippling

trail vanished. Cal sat with him as Aldon poled them to safety.

“What *was* that?” Saira asked when they were all on solid ground.

“I don’t know,” Jed answered. “But we’re getting as far from the water as we can.”

“I’ll tell you what it is,” Aldon said. “A raelisk.”

Cal scoffed at the comment. “Raelisks aren’t real. They’re used in bedtime stories to scare kids into behaving.”

“Obviously those stories did not work. I’ve never seen one before either. But try telling your brother they aren’t real.”

Somehow, the Elder-boy now looked very different to Jed.

“Lhoran fought raelisks in his journey across the Nether Mountains,” Aldon continued. “Legend says they were once dolphins that lived in the ocean, but were banned from the seas by Solu after they knocked over too many fishing boats. But raelisks are never supposed to leave the Nethers. This is a sign. If the lake temple is infected, then it is only a matter of time before the taint reaches Omnia...” Aldon’s countenance suddenly changed again. He was afraid. Fear churned in his brown eyes. “I need to tell the Elders.”

Jed had nothing to say. He led the four of them—and Saira’s mayguar, who charted its own path—into the forest of pine and fir. They needed to get to Baronstoke.

The dagger remained clutched in his hand, the one he used to stab the raelisk. He looked in disbelief past the darkly-stained blade to the heavy hilt. It was the ruby-encrusted chrak.

“Damn you, Vedil,” Jed cursed. He wiped the blade on his tunic and slid the

razor-sharp blade behind his belt.

Chapter Seven

Hunted

Saira's life felt like an unwelcome dream. One from which, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't wake. Digging pain made her eyes water, like a toothed knife carving the bone of her sockets. The enormity of yesterday's events hadn't made her realize until now that she had seen people *die*. Roundbelly's men. Not like her father, who was old and passed away peacefully in his sleep. But men who had years before them, time enough to make a home and family. She saw Cal stick a knife into a guard's back. The light had fled from his eyes, his spirit released back to the river. It made her sick. Just moments ago, Jed had almost drowned right in front of her. She didn't know why, but for some reason that affected her even more.

As they moved through the thick trees, the pounding in her temples worked its way down to a dull throbbing at the base of her skull. Occasionally, sunlight filtered through the thick canopy of needle-like leaves to dapple the right side of her face. Sweet pine offered little solace; the scent reminded her of home. Bristled cones covered the sun-flecked forest floor, making each step uncertain.

Another monster crept into her mind: the raelisk. Raised from the world of nightmares. Jed's complaining offered a welcome distraction.

"What a worthless canoe. I'm freezing."

"You're alive, brother. Count your lucky daggers."

"There's one I'd rather not. Lhoran's light! How can a forest like this carry such a fast wind?" He picked up their hurried pace even further.

Cal kept with his brother, while Aldon trailed behind them all. Fenox kept away more often than not, returning for a brief nuzzle against her legs before venturing off on a solitary course.

Meeting Aldon had given her some small hope. He was honourable, kind, and spoke from a place of truth; qualities her father had treated with the utmost respect. Yet after this morning, he became aloof. He seemed suspicious of Fenox—and her, for that matter. Had he seen her ears? She didn't think so. But why be friendly one day, and distantly sullen the next? Well into afternoon, she had only managed a single conversation.

“Have you always been a Divinist?”

Aldon stole a glance at her and kept walking. “Always. My Uncle saw to it that I be brought up right.”

She didn't know if that were an insult directed her way.

“Does your Uncle live in Baronstoke?”

“Yes. Or he used to. My Uncle Garen is gone.” Somehow, that name was familiar to Saira. But Aldon seemed uncomfortable with the subject. “How did you end up with these two? And Jed's not really your husband, is he?”

“No. We only met...well, I guess it was yesterday. Seems so long ago now.” Her mind drifted to Maystone, the dawning festival and the stone thrown at her by little Timal. That seemed like another time, events that had happened to another person.

After that, Aldon didn't speak for the rest of the day.

They walked until twilight bathed their path in shadow. Saira gathered some wood. Cal had caught a cara and two young hares at sundown, which now sizzled and

hissed over a fire. She eagerly took her share. The stout rabbits sat nicely in her stomach, while the tougher meat of the longer, slimmer-bodied cara tasted of sinewy leather.

Jed went to sleep first, leaning against the knotted trunk of an ancient fir. Aldon stared intensely into the flames, his eyes infernos. Cal pushed the glowing coals around with a smoking stick.

“Have you ever been to Baronstoke before? It’s a zoo.” Unlike his brother, Cal spoke with a good deal less passion—and exaggeration, in all likelihood.

“I’ve never been to any town but my own.”

“From what I gather, that would be Maystone. I reckon you’ve seen the spawning of the salmon? Quite the sight, yes. A feast for the eyes and the belly. Imagine all those frenzied fish, fighting for every inch of space in the current. Baronstoke is like that, but with people instead of salmon and streets much wider than the Ivory.”

She took a long, deep breath. “What will happen to me there?” With Aldon in earshot, she left part of her question unspoken.

Cal put his stick down. He met her unwavering gaze. “We will keep you safe. After what you did for me, that’s the least of the promises I can make.”

She believed him, and a small trickle of relief flowed through her mind.

“My father died a year ago. I don’t have a home anymore. Are your parents still alive?”

Cal turned back to the fire. His eyes burned yellow and red. “My mother raised me until I was ten, down in Trent. Then a ship of foreigners docked, bringing a load of sugar, corn, spices, ceramics, furs, livestock, other goods—and the sheep’s plague. She was dead in two days, along with half the town.” He was silent a moment. “I survived.

Unfortunately, so did my father—*our* father,” he pointed at his brother. “Let’s just say I have Jed to thank for saving me. My father did not share in my mother’s gentle ways. Her kind heart never deserved such cruelty.”

The dying flames sputtered and the embers lost their colour. Saira looked at Jed, and then Cal again.

“For the last five years, Jed and I have survived on our stealth and wits.” Cal stroked his chin and yawned. “Now, I think I’ll follow my brother’s lead.”

Aldon went to lie down as well. Saira welcomed her own bed of roots and dirt. The daggers in her legs had made her long forget about her morning headache. It was only when she was drifting to sleep that last night’s dream suddenly flooded back to her.

Saira sat up with a start. The others were fast asleep. Jed snored loudly. Cal stirred to punch him in the shoulder and then returned to whatever pleasant dream he had left.

Saira wanted to tell Cal. But what could she say? He wouldn’t believe her.

She had seen the raelisk before any of them. Not just from the canoe, but from her *dream*. Except she saw it from the shore of the lake, where Fenox had been waiting for them. The raelisk had surfaced from the water, spines rising from its backbone like thorns from a speartree. In the moonlight, the dark form of the creature still shone black. And it had looked right at her, eyes blazing with the fury of Vedil himself.

That’s when Jed had given her a rude awakening. She had pushed it aside as fantasy. But now, she wondered. She remembered dreaming about the dark-cloaked strangers, and the next day they were there. Did she see things before they were to happen?

Lying back down, she closed her eyes and fell into a vivid vision of hunting a cara, digging through the earth to find the warren, and cornering her prey in its own burrow.

And then darkness.

The next day, rainclouds followed overhead. A steady drizzle turned to mist as the landscape shifted from evergreen to deciduous, the budding alder and maple leaves freshly green. Moss clumped on the north-facing bark, while splashes of lichen added colour to the thinning trees. The ground became rocky and firm, as though a mountain had once called this home before one of the gods hurled it in a fit of rage to the Greytops. The odd fern sprouted up here and there, some dangling from lower branches like spider legs, their fronds glistening with tiny puddles of rain.

We must be near the river, Saira thought.

The uneventful day led to a restless evening. Jed used his flint for the fire. The brothers were conversing in tones too quiet to hear above the crackle of the flames. Saira sat close to the burning wood, massaging the heat into her cold fingers. Aldon read from a leather-bound book, firelight dancing across the pages. He quickly put it away when Jed sat beside him.

“You’ve been awfully quiet the past two days. What are you reading there?”

“Nothing,” Aldon mumbled.

“Aren’t Elder-boys supposed to share all their worldly possessions? Whatever. Keep it to yourself. Probably contains words meant for sheep.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Jed smiled. “You know, to follow the flock. Stay in line. That way, you don’t

have to think for yourself.”

Aldon’s cool evaporated in an instant. “You don’t know the first thing about me or Divinism. But I can tell you, the Seven Scriptures explain a lot about you and your brother. Without spirit, there is no virtue.”

“No virtue?” Jed seemed to enjoy goading him on. Saira sighed and tried to focus on the smouldering fire. “If having virtue means living in insufferable boredom, I’ll opt for the wicked life. I count my blessings everyday that Cal and I weren’t raised to worship the water.”

“Having a warm place to sleep at night? Food to eat? A community of support? Terrible indeed.”

“Sarcasm!” Jed exclaimed. “I didn’t think you had it in you, Aldon. Even Vedil would be shaking in his boots, if he wears any on that clawed foot of his.”

Aldon only stared, eyes livid.

“So sorry. Have I offended you, oh divine one?”

“Only yourself. The Lord of Shadow would never shake at the likes of you.”

“You’ve met him, have you?”

“No, not in this life time or the next. You, however...”

“What?”

“You were meant to find that chrak, and soon enough—”

Saira threw a rock into the fire. A cloud of sparks and ash flew up.

“Enough, you two!”

Jed and Aldon both turned to her, for the first time that night thinking the same thing.

“All right,” Jed announced, moving next to a sheltering boulder. “Mother says it’s time for bed.”

On that, everyone agreed. Even the nocturnal Fenox settled down beside her. She was glad for his warmth, her inner clothes still heavy with rain. But just after her eyes firmly shut, in that transitory period between the worlds of colour and grey, waking and dream, she sensed him moving off into the night.

The new day brought the sun. By late morning, Saira already had a layer of sweat under her shirt. She was playing last night’s vision over in her mind. Maystone usually filled her dreams, with its surrounding river and trees. But now, horrors followed her into her sleep. The meandering, rock-strewn trail Jed led them down looked startling familiar. She had seen a vision of this very place, although it was darker in her dream. But it was the five figures on this path that compelled her to pull Cal aside.

“Cal, I saw something last night.”

“Last night?”

“Well, when we were all sleeping. Like a dream, but it wasn’t. You know the strangers that have been chasing us? I saw them on this very trail. We’re going to see them again today.”

“I don’t understand. How could you have seen them?”

She didn’t have time to explain, because Aldon and Jed were arguing again, this time over their chosen path.

Aldon’s face was red. “Where do you think you are taking us?”

“Can’t you trust me? I know a shortcut.”

“There is no shortcut over the Ivory. Not this close to Baronstoke.”

“None that you know. This will cut our travel time in half. We’ll be in Baronstoke by noon.”

Aldon flung up his hands. “Fine. Lead on. But we’ll end up right where we started.”

Cal shrugged at Saira. “We’ll be safe in Baronstoke. Let’s go.”

Their passage quickly narrowed into a path of vine-covered roots. They went single file, Saira holding onto trunks of stripping bark for support. She couldn’t see Fenox. The trees alongside the trail disappeared in short order, replaced by a face of rock whose expression grew longer and grimmer with each passing minute. When they could no longer see the top or bottom of the bluffs, Aldon had had enough.

“It’s only going to get worse. We need to turn back.”

“Come on!” Jed called back without slowing. “We’re almost there.”

The unmistakable rustle of moving water urged them forward. Saira thought she could hear falls.

The trail ended abruptly. An old creek bed intersected the forgotten path, plunging at a dizzying angle to the raging river below. Saira looked down at the Ivory. The wild rapids churned and frothed. The gully was sheer, a small trickle of water over the rocks making its passage even more treacherous. One misstep and they would plummet hundreds of feet to the boulders bordering the river below. Then she looked up: a flat sheet of precipitous stone widened her eyes, no summit in sight.

She saw Aldon behind her, straying a few paces from the edge. His looked pale.

Jed pointed across the cliff face. “This is where I used to cross.”

Fifty feet away, on the other side where the trail began again, Saira spotted an old, frayed rope hanging limply from a stump. Even when this broken rope-bridge spanned this creek bed, Saira couldn't imagine making such a perilous crossing.

"When's the last time you were here?" Saira asked.

"Ten years ago. We'll have to go back and around."

He blazed ahead before anyone could argue otherwise. Saira was happy to follow, and Aldon as well, by the looks of things. As they backtracked Cal kept scouting possible shortcuts up the steep slope. But he always returned shaking his head.

Jed stopped. Saira came up behind him. She saw the knife in his hand, and then the reason he had pulled it out.

Across the path, at the point where it widened enough to accommodate more than one, were five statues of shadow. As though yanked from her dream, they stood still as trees, tall and dark. The weapons they carried must've been concealed, for Saira could see nothing but their flowing robes and ashen faces. Black hair fell straight as a waterfall over their shoulders and chest.

Cal flicked his eyes Saira's way. Aldon gasped from behind.

"The Untainted," he whispered, as though he had to speak the words to believe it.

Without a noise, the five moved forward as one.

"Run!"

Behind her, Cal fled in the other direction. Saira followed.

"What are we going to do?"

"I don't know," Jed yelled at her back. "Go!"

She ran as fast as the untrustworthy trail allowed. Stealing a glance behind, she

couldn't see the chasing shadows. Aldon struggled in front, clambering on all fours over a particularly hazardous section.

"Hurry, Aldon!" Cal said as he leapt by the acolyte.

Aldon stood. Jed scratched at Saira's heels.

"We're gonna have to go up!"

She struggled to answer as she scampered over writhing roots on the cracking trail.

"Up? It's twice as steep!"

"We have to go *up*."

"Why!"

They reached the end of the path. Cal had already started up the precipice.

"Don't argue. Don't look down. Just climb!"

Aldon hugged the closest tree. Fear swam in his eyes. "Heights make me dizzy," he murmured, looking like he was going to be sick.

Jed passed them by, whispering in her ear. "Don't look at him. It'll just make it worse." Then, loud enough for everyone, "We can't stay here. Go up! Now!"

Jed began to climb.

Saira turned to Aldon, and did her best to put on a stern face. "Are you coming?"

"You go. I'll follow."

She wondered if he meant it. Then she remembered: he was an acolyte.

Saira turned to the plunging creek bed. The rock face stretched impenetrably upward. How could you climb a wall? She needed a rope, or something to hold onto—

"Find a grip in the crevices," Jed called from above. "Then use it as a foothold."

He was right. Cal and Jed were doing it. So could she.

Saira found her first hold and went from there. Trailing Jed's route, she didn't dare look down. Her fingers slid into hidden fissures and clefts, her feet finding jutting stones for leverage. She was surprised to find her confidence rising the further she went. Her initial anxiety turned to fevered exhilaration. The vertical rock no longer seemed so daunting. It was just a puzzle with carefully concealed answers.

Then she grabbed a root protruding over one of the flat faces of stone. The brittle wood snapped in her hand.

Saira's feet swung out from under her, dangling above empty air. She scrambled to find another hold with her right hand. Her fingers slipped over loose gravel. There was nothing to grab onto. With her feet scraping helplessly against sheer rock, she started to pant in terror. She couldn't move, too scared to even scream.

"You're all right." Jed's voice was calm. "Just put your foot under the broken root, and go from there."

She tried to take a deep breath; the surrounding air eluded her. Instead, she closed her eyes. The rock face inches from her nose seemed to shake, moving in and out as though the bluff itself was breathing. She steadied her mind and then squinted out at the impossible grey obstacle. With tremendous effort Saira lifted her leg and shoved her toes into the tiny crevice near her waist. She tested it once, twice, and on the third pushed herself up. Her right hand felt blindly over the surface and came across a shallow, angled ledge. From there, she kept moving, hand over foot.

A part of her wanted to check on Aldon, and see if the shadows were following them up the rock. What was it he had called them? The Untainted? But she needed to

focus everything on the ascent.

The sound of a large rock hitting another clattered overhead. She raised her eyes just in time to see a plate-sized boulder ricochet right past her head.

Jed cursed. "Watch it!"

"Loose stone," Cal replied. "We're almost there."

Saira tracked the tumbling rock with her eyes. It spun through the air, dislodging smaller stones as it bounced down the cliff. Then she saw Aldon. He clutched the cliff like an old woman grips a cane, his white knuckles trembling. But he was still moving. Saira kept going, and soon found a branch thrust in her face.

"Grab on," said Jed.

Saira held the lifeline in one hand, and balanced herself on the creek bed with the other. Jed pulled her to the top of a nearly treeless plateau. A wide-trunked, gnarled pine reached over the edge with a few leafless arms. Fenox sat in its shade. He looked at her sideways, like a cat watching a bird too far away to catch.

Jed chuckled. "Smart baledog."

As she stepped off to the side, her foot shook a patch of pebbles loose. Half a dozen fell over the edge, a few striking Aldon in the shoulder. He flinched like they were dagger blades instead of paltry nuggets, and held his body flush against the rock face. There was no sign of the strangers.

"Sorry!" she called down to him. "Just a little further."

Aldon craned his neck slowly, as though it took more effort than lifting a giant boulder with one hand. He looked at her pleadingly.

"What is it?"

“I’m trapped.” His voice quivered, almost breaking. “I can’t move.”

“Grab a hold of this,” Jed said, lowering the same branch.

“I...can’t. I’ll fall.”

“No you won’t. Just reach out your arm. It’s right in front of you!”

Saira put a finger to her lips. Jed rolled his eyes and walked off. She picked up the branch and laid flat against the cliff top, stretching her arm down the ridge.

“It’s all right, Aldon,” she said. He didn’t move. “Let me help you up. We’ve all made it to the top. There’s nothing to worry about. All you need to do is wrap your fingers around this branch, and I’ll do the rest.”

Aldon looked at her. In a painfully slow movement, he lifted a hand that looked more like a claw and grasped the length of pine. He started to pull himself up. Saira heard a noise from below, as though something was falling down the bluff.

“My book!” Aldon cried, reaching vainly for the departed tomb.

Saira suddenly felt herself being pulled over the precipice. Pain shot through her knees as she tried to dig them into the bed of rock. But Aldon’s hanging weight was too much. Her body flew over the edge. It took her a second to realize someone was holding her ankle.

“Forget about that damn book!” Jed shouted.

She felt Cal grab her other leg, and the brothers hauled both of them to the top. Aldon, gasping on hands and knees, peered back over the edge. She had never seen him so distraught.

Jed dusted his hands and grinned. “Told you my shortcut would work.”

Saira confronted him. “Can you please tell me why we had to go up instead of

down?”

“Sure. Let me demonstrate. Cal?”

Cal heaved a huge boulder over the ridge. The stone roared down the slope.

“I see. But your first rock almost took off my head.”

“And your pebbles almost knocked off poor Aldon. Now let’s get out of here.”

Chapter Eight

Baronstoke

Saira gaped at the house of stone. The bricks stacked higher than the boughs of the neighbouring oaks, which towered toward the cloudless sky. This, her first building, measured twice the size of the largest in Maystone.

Cal caught her staring. “This is little more than a shack. Wait for the city.”

“You mean we aren’t there yet?”

“Are you kidding? No, of course not. You really haven’t seen anything outside your little village, have you? We’re walking through the outskirts, home to farmers, rural-dwellers and other folk who prefer trees to stone. Baronstoke proper is still two or three miles from here.”

She shook her head. Cal’s descriptions of the city made her dizzy. People on horse and foot passed them every minute or two on the wide, dusty road. A few even stopped to tilt their heads toward Aldon. She kept checking her hair, ensuring her curls fell in front of her shoulders. Wouldn’t someone spot her the way Roundbelly had? Then again, Aldon still didn’t seem to know.

“You know how Baronstoke got its name?” Cal now walked beside her, with Jed trailing, leaving the brooding Aldon to lead them down the flat and well-trodden path. “A wealthy baron offered to pay for a perimeter wall. Ten feet high, three feet deep, built with only three breaks: the east and west gates, and the river temple. In exchange, the city had to take his namesake. Enough coin will change anyone’s mind, so the Elders agreed, and Blackmoor became Baronstoke. They put thousands to work, day and night,

hauling sandstone from miles away. Hundreds of slaves died, either from exhaustion or crushed by falling stone. But they finished it.

“To top it all off, there’s even a statue of Stoke in the town circle. But he has no head. You see, the disgruntled workers rebelled, alongside the families with brothers and fathers who had died making the wall. Under the harvest moon, they rallied in the circle and decapitated him. Some speculate the head is in the royal palace somewhere. Others say it was thrown into the Ivory and river dolphins carried it to sea. Stoke himself fled into Farnley somewhere. Yet the beheaded statue is still standing. No one wants to restore it, and those who remember *why* the statue is headless appreciate the sentiment.”

Saira tried to take this all in. “Is the baron still alive?”

“Old Stoke? No, he’s long dead. But they still call the city Baronstoke. I guess it’s true what they say: good or bad, a legacy is a legacy.”

Cal fell back beside his brother as the river came into view, and the wall behind. Saira had to turn her head to follow the stacked boundary of Baronstoke, which stretched out of sight in both directions. A huge dome rose behind the fortification, from which a white spire shot impossibly high toward the heavens, like the tallest and smoothest tree she had ever seen.

Jed slid his arm under hers. “Hold on to me as we go through the gate.” Somehow, she thought Cal looked annoyed. Jed pointed ahead. “That’s the royal palace. The emperor stays there. That is, whenever he visits from Roan, where he has an even bigger place. This one’s mostly for show.”

As much as Jed could irritate her, she was glad to have something to hold. Huge convoys of people were now going by. Some pushed carts holding an entire field’s worth

of crisp, red vegetables, others carried cages stuffed with clucking hens, and others still lugged dual buckets of water that hung from a pole carried over one shoulder. There were too many faces to hide from them all. Marching guards with vorpal swords. Brown-skins with scarves over their heads. Children running with miniature bows and arrows. A horse drawn carriage carrying a very proper looking couple rolled past in the other direction, the woman wearing a spotted jaber cat fur; on her right, herds of cattle with bells and sows with piglets wandered freely down the road.

Jed was unfazed. As they walked, he matched his step to hers. “You think Fenox will try to follow us into the city?”

Saira glanced absently back toward the tree line swallowed an hour ago by the horizon. “No. I mean, I don’t think so. He doesn’t like large groups of people. Can I go outside the walls to visit him?”

“Sure.” Jed seemed distracted.

They passed over an extensive wooden bridge with a snake-shaped balustrade. Dozens of thudding feet hid the murmurs of the Ivory underneath. Aldon stopped for a second at the rail, peering down as though he was searching for his own reflection in the current.

She felt Jed tense. Up ahead, the wall opened with an elaborate arch stretched over the gate. An intimidating creature had been sculpted into the top of the stone—a lion’s body with a huge eagle’s head. Its beak was wide, eyes full of malice.

“Not very inviting.”

“No,” said Jed. “Funny thing is, once you’re inside, they often want to keep you there.”

“I thought you said—”

“Keep quiet now. The guards prefer the strong silent type.”

Five sentries stood on either side of the stone gateway, dressed in some kind of armour with looped chains of metal. Half carried menacing-looking maces. The others held long wooden shafts that rose above their helmeted heads to a curved iron spearhead.

Jed maneuvered her forward, close to Aldon’s back. Saira realized why, as the guards nodded solemnly to the acolyte and only gave his three companions the briefest of glances. With the threshold behind them Jed’s body immediately relaxed.

“One thing I can grant you, Aldon. No one ever suspects the Elder-boy. There’s one advantage to being a spirit talker!”

Aldon remained quiet. He had done nothing but sulk since losing his book. Saira didn’t know what attached him so fiercely to those pages. But he wouldn’t speak a word to anyone.

Jed released his grip on her arm, and Saira suddenly found herself alone in the city. Gone were the grass and greenery, replaced by brick-walled and thatched-roofed houses with lean-to stalls out front. The buildings were built like trees planted too close, pushing against each other as their trunks grew in height and girth, the streets moving streams of faces. Voices clamoured over one another, like a hundred birds simultaneously singing discordant mating songs. She put a hand to her nose. The air smelled unclean, like animal waste or rancid compost. She couldn’t follow anything, because nothing stood still.

“Come on, Saira.” Cal tugged on her arm. At some point her legs must have stopped working altogether, and she found it hard to get them going again. “We’re going

to a safe house. You can rest there.”

Aldon and Jed were arguing, but Saira couldn't concentrate on anything but the tumultuous road. She focused on following Cal. She worried about being stared at, being new and naïve, a stranger that looked out of place. But to Saira's surprise, everyone ignored her. Even those that turned their bodies to make room to pass did not meet her eyes. She felt unwanted, insignificant. Saira didn't mind at all.

As they moved down the main road, whose packed dirt felt harder than stone, she let her eyes wander. First she looked up, to ensure she hadn't left the land of her birth—yes, the sky was still blue. Sideward glances revealed three-storied houses next to piles of broken furniture, rotting fruit and other rubbish. Every space was filled. It made her think of weeds in an untended garden, whose beauty had been obscured by time and neglect.

A bell rang somewhere high and distant, yet somehow managed to thunder in her ears. Suddenly, like an incoming tide, the streets flooded with three times as many people. Wave after wave crashed into each other as they flailed their arms and screamed. Saira felt her heart race. She held onto Cal.

“What's going on!” She wasn't sure if he could hear her over the cacophony.

“The market just opened.”

She saw Jed throw his hands above his head, a sparkling purple gem in one palm.

“Amethysts, topaz, rubies, opal...I've got every jewel of the rainbow. All the way from the Nether Mountains! Genuine! No fakes here. Yes sir! How much will you pay?”

A dozen people huddled around him, bidding for their favourite item or price.

Saira frowned. That amethyst looked a lot like the one Jed had given her in the canoe.... Sure enough, her pocket had been emptied of the amethyst. He had left the sunstone untouched.

“Can we get out of here?”

Cal pulled her to the left. “Sure. I’ll take you to Waryn’s. Jed will catch us up.”

Sarai found herself in an alleyway barely able to accommodate one. Walls stretched up either side like shaved cliffs, hiding the afternoon sun. Left, right, left... Cal took her up and down so many twisting stone stairways she lost all sense of direction.

“Here we are.”

Saira didn’t understand. They had stopped at the end of a blind alley with a rutted brick wall. There was no door, let alone a window.

“You’ve done this before,” Cal said with a smirk. “You just have to climb to the top.”

He put his hands into smoothed grooves and scaled the wall in a matter of seconds. Saira looked behind her at the empty alleyway and then followed his lead.

On the top, Cal walked for a few minutes in a zigzag pattern over the neighbouring walls. Saira could see bare slate and thatched rooftops, and the grand wall in the distance. Cal stopped at a thick but tattered brown tarp. He pulled a corner of the canvas aside. She looked down into a dwelling enclosed on all sides by other buildings.

“Waryn should be home. He’s of the nocturnal variety.”

Cal and her climbed down a knotted rope, and Saira found herself in a dimly lit room of diversely depraved tastes. Rusted weapons and armour were heaped in one corner. Shelves upon shelves covered two walls, filled with all manner of items: flasks,

cutlery, cards, dice, locks, keys, chains. Above the unmade bed hung a knife-scarred painting of maidens bathing in a river; the voluptuous women wore far too little clothing to be called decent. One figure had been cut out from the canvas, leaving a black, jagged outline of the former body.

“If you want to live, I wouldn’t move.”

Saira and Cal both turned. But the voice had no speaker. Then a curtain shifted aside, revealing a grey-bearded man in a concealed alcove. He held a long, curved knife that resembled a cutlass in his right hand, and a disagreeable scowl on his face.

Saira was relieved to find Cal grinning.

“Still got it, you old devil. Trail and I are in town. We need a place to stay.”

Waryn ignored Cal. His eyes were on Saira. Wrinkles had permanently set on his square, grizzled face, his forehead’s deepest furrows emphasized by his receding hairline. Under his icy stare, her arms shivered with goose bumps.

“And who might this be? You know how I feel about uninvited guests.”

Cal laughed, though it sounded forced. “An innocent soul in a city of charlatans. She’s harmless. She doesn’t know Solu from Vedil.”

“As long as she’s quiet. But it’ll cost you a little more.”

“What’s that?” Jed appeared by the tarp, and jumped effortlessly down beside them. “Waryn, old chap! Have you forgotten the messes I’ve cleaned up for you? After all we’ve been through...”

“You know my fee, Trail.”

“For acquaintances and irregular associates, yes. But we’re regulars. Heck, we’ve planned half our raids with you. Don’t you have a family rate? You’re the father I

never had.”

“And you’re the son I never wanted.”

Saira’s head reeled as she tried to follow their conversation. She let out a sigh when Waryn put his cutlass away and lay sideways on the bed.

“I’ll admit, I do have a fondness for you boys. Not your average cons. How’d things go with Roundbelly? I heard he hired a dozen extra guards for his trip to Telford. That would’ve deterred most pocket pickers. But not my trail boys. Just don’t go calling me an Elder.”

“We wouldn’t dare serve up such an insult. As for Roundbelly, let’s just say I’m in a good mood. Today is payday.” Jed tossed a small sack onto the bed. Upon hitting the sheets it jiggled with coin.

Waryn lifted the tied bag, testing its weight. “That’ll cover five days—four if she stays.”

“By then I’ll have that amount tenfold.”

Saira grinded her teeth. She didn’t like to be ignored, especially when *she* was being discussed.

“This is where we’re going to sleep?”

Jed arched an eyebrow at her. “Sorry we couldn’t find a tree for you. They don’t do very well in Baronstoke.”

“But there’s only one bed.”

“I’m sure Waryn will be a gentleman and share his blankets.”

Waryn didn’t smile as he addressed her. His face reminded her of a scavenging teral. “Lucky for you, I don’t sleep at night.”

Saira couldn't hold his gaze. Those eyes spoke of a cruel mind hardened from a cruel life, with not the slightest trace of warmth.

She turned to Jed. "Where's Aldon?"

"We got him here, and he got us inside. So you won't be seeing him again. I'm sure he has temple business to attend to, and is glad to be rid of us riffraff." Jed sat on the floor and pulled out a sharpening stone. The smooth rock scraped against the steel of his ruby-encrusted dagger. Once again, she became invisible. "Waryn, what do you know of the Untainted?"

Saira bit her tongue. That was the word Aldon had used to describe the dark-cloaked strangers.

"The shadow cloaks? Just what the legends say. Cursed men who are ghosts by day. Taller than the tallest kings. They float on water—yes, you heard me—and tunnel into your dreams. Their swords are sharper than a gryphawk's talons."

Jed feigned nonchalance. "You're a nightstalker. Ever see one during your midnight forays?"

"No, you never see them in the cities or at night—at least, you don't live to speak of it. Vedil's servants keep close to water, sticking to the streams. They say that's why the River Walkers disappeared. The Untainted got them all. What makes you so curious? Most say talk of the shadow cloaks is Balderdash."

Jed shrugged.

"You don't want to cross their paths. If you're so keen, Mad Mirran is the person you want to talk to."

"The hermit?"

“Yea, over on the east side, a few miles out of town. He keeps records of everything, half of which might be accurate. But let me give you some advice. Cats have nine lives for a reason: curiosity gets you killed.” He eyed Jed sideways. “You know something, Trail. You could never keep things from me. That’s why I don’t mind having you around. So tell me, what...”

Waryn cocked his head abruptly. He spoke after a moment, his voice crestfallen. “Strange friends you are keeping these days, Trail.”

Jed’s sharpening stone stopped halfway down the edge of his chrak.

“Friends?”

“Yes. I hope you can tell me why an Elder-boy is on my roof.”

Every head tilted back. Through a break in the tarp she could see Aldon. He stood tall, eclipsing the sun and looking at once nervous and resolute. He had his hands clasped together in front of his robes, trying to appear calm. But his darting eyes betrayed an anxiety that quickened his breath and made his shoulders quiver.

Jed sprang to his feet. “What in Lhoran’s light are you doing here? Waryn, I swear I wasn’t followed. On my mother’s grave.”

“Trail, the man who leaves no trail. Or so I thought.”

“It’s not possible.”

Waryn sighed. “And yet there he stands.”

Jed glared up at Aldon. “I must be cursed by Vedil himself. How did you follow me?”

“We have to go to the river temple,” Aldon said in a shaky voice. “All of us.”

“You used those damn spirits on me! Didn’t you? Tell me the truth. You can’t

lie. How did you do it?"

"We are going to Caro Orsen, to tell him all we have seen." Aldon swallowed.

"If you do not, every Divine Elder will know of your misdeeds, and every city guard will be looking for you. Their orders will be to capture or kill—whichever is easier.

Baronstoke will never be a safe haven for you again."

No one spoke. They had never seen Aldon this way before. Then Waryn slowly rose from the bed. Saira sensed both Jed and Cal were on edge. She put her hand into her pocket.

"This I can't allow." Waryn gave Aldon a smouldering stare. "Jed, it's your responsibility. I do him, and you deal with what's left. Get him in the Ivory if you can. Supposed to be good cloud cover tonight." She saw Waryn holding his cutlass behind his back.

"Stop!"

Saira put herself between Waryn and the rope. The burly man looked at her the way a lion might regard at a mouse. Jed and Cal seemed to be frozen in place.

"I don't take orders well." His voice dripped with a barely contained rage.

"You aren't going to hurt him. You aren't going to hurt anyone."

"If only life were so easy." He stepped towards her. "Pain and suffering are the first two absolutes of existence. I'm sorry to be the bearer of such a drearily important lesson. And to think, you won't have the chance to learn the third and final certainty in life."

Waryn flourished his cutlass. "I'll make it quick."

He thrust his blade at her gut.

Saira yanked the sunstone from her pocket. She wasn't sure what she was going to do with a rock. But it was the only thing she had. The stone burned her fingers as she shoved it into the face of her assailant.

Waryn stumbled back in surprise, shielding his eyes. The cutlass clattered to the floor. A blue light had burst from the sunstone. The colour rushed from her fingers, transforming the gloomy room into a million reflections of Solu. Everything glowed with a thick, moving light, as though crystal water was flowing across every surface. The dice on the shelf blazed hotter than stars.

Saira blinked. Jed still had his dagger in hand. A fire seemed to burn through his fingers. Stunned, he opened his palm, revealing a crimson triangle. The rubies seethed red, the eyes of some great beast. Saira felt certain they were staring at her. Her stomach throbbed with a deep pain, like a creature were inside, trying to claw its way out of her womb.

She lowered the sunstone. Instantly, everything went dim. Waryn was crouched down, hands covering his face. The cutlass lay in three pieces on the ground. The shattered steel blade was coated in furry rust that crept over its entire length like fungus over a dying tree.

Jed had put his dagger away. "It's time we make our exit."

"I can't *see*!" Waryn bellowed after them.

"Keep the coin for your trouble!" Jed called back when they had all climbed out.

Aldon was a statue, an incredulous stare on his face. He looked at Saira. She met his gaze. If he knew she was a selwyn, she wasn't going to pretend otherwise. She couldn't hide what she was.

“Hey! You two!” Jed was already a dozen paces ahead. “In case you didn’t notice, we haven’t made a good impression. No one kills a grudge like Waryn. So move! Take us to that river temple, Aldon.”

Aldon scrutinized her a second further and then moved off. Saira’s hand tingled. She looked down. Her branching veins glowed residual blue. Had she really blinded Waryn?

Her heart heavy, she ran after her three unlikely companions. Saira felt her life swinging like a pendulum that was about to fall.

Chapter Nine

Caro Orsen

Aldon walked on unsteady legs. Following Jed into the thieves' corner had unnerved him a good deal. The enchantment was simple enough. He knew Jed would try to lose him in Baronstoke. So he weaved a tracing spirit over him when they had crossed the bridge just before the gate. But seeing Saira call forth such an enormous amount of *hlasa* sent wild shivers into the depths of his soul.

Saira was a selwyn. A *swen*. Sworn enemy of the Divinists. He didn't know what he was going to say to the Elders. But at the very least, they had to be told of the raelisk and the Untainted. These were all signs the Lord of Shadow had been awakened. Caro would know what to do.

Aldon reached the edge of the wall and climbed awkwardly down. Jed stopped him at the bottom, cornering him in the dead end.

"Keep your hands off me!"

Jed pushed him against the bricks. "I warned you about putting spirits on me. Do so again, and after I'm through with you Waryn will count himself lucky. This is your last warning. There won't be another."

"Leave him be," Saira yelled from above.

They both looked up at her. Jed let him go. "I'll follow you to the river temple, Elder-boy. But only because that's the last place Waryn wants to be. Blind or not, he never forgets a face. It'll take him awhile to send his cronies after us. And believe me, he has weasels in every nook, cranny and sewer."

Jed ran ahead with his brother. Aldon straightened his robes.

“You all right?”

It was Saira. What could he say to her? He couldn’t even believe he was standing next to a swen, what the Seven Scriptures called a parasite of all things pure.

“I’m fine,” he answered and turned away.

They meandered their way back to the main road. The market’s opening rush had dwindled to a small trickle of tardy shoppers, the midday heat sending most people into the shade. Until the evening market began, and chaos filled Baronstoke once more.

For the hundredth time, Aldon thought about losing the Kantra. His Uncle had trusted him with that tomb. That was the last thing Garen ever said to him. *Keep it close to your heart.* He vowed to search for the book the next time Caro granted him another leave. Maybe during his pilgrimage to the Snail Creek headwaters.

In the town circle, Jed playfully patted the severed neck of Stoke. “For good luck! We’re going to need it.”

Saira and Cal were walking together, harbouring expressions much more befitting their situation. The high sun cast short, sharp shadows at their feet. Aldon led them through the city to the perimeter wall, which ran alongside the eastern divide of the Ivory.

Aldon sighed in contentment as the river temple came into view, glad to be back at his sanctuary, his home. The temple rose like a flower growing out of refuge. Built right into the perimeter wall, the squarish structure vied against the royal palace as Baronstoke’s most elaborate creation. Much older, and although not as large as the palace, the grand sacredness of the temple was nevertheless evident in every detail of its design. The corrugated eaves were coloured a deep sky blue. But the underside held a

splendour unlike any other.

The roof was high enough that from this distance he could already make out the paintings beneath: a huge representation of the Nether Mountains with river dolphins swimming at its base. The divine animals were shown leaping upstream, fins shining silver, pushing the darkly drawn raelisk bodies back toward the peaks. Aldon wondered. Had the tainting of the rivers forced the dolphins out to sea? Were the river guardians gone, and therefore unable to keep the raelisk in their mountain home? Perhaps Caro would share the answer with him.

In the street, a crooked beggar held out a gnarled limb. Aldon waved a hasty blessing over his head and continued toward the two guards at the arched temple entrance. Then he heard Saira's voice.

"I'm sorry. I don't have anything." Aldon looked back. Cal was trying unsuccessfully to prod Saira forward. She was holding the beggar's hand in her own. "He needs some food or coin. Jed, give him something!"

Jed grumbled but tossed a silver coin into the eager hands of the beggar. He held up the prize as though it were the emperor's crown. Then he pointed at Saira.

"You! You are the one!" Laughing a maniacal laugh, the beggar stumbled down the street, trying to do a little jig on wobbly legs. Aldon allowed himself to smile.

The temple guards nodded to the acolyte, their gold scabbards glinting in the sunlight. They had known Aldon most of his life, and he passed them several times a day. Aldon ushered his three guests under the wooden threshold, the arch painted with water streaming down in overlapping rivulets. It felt like passing through parted falls.

Inside, the vast antechamber was vacant. Aldon let the wonder of the murals

overwhelm him, as they did every time he left Baronstoke for a more than a day or two. Solu had been carved and painted red on the ceiling, the sun shaped into his brilliant face. Huge arms stretched down either side. Veins flowed like rivers down their length, the palms open and bursting with white lightning. Water flooded from Solu's fingers and pooled in the blue paint on the floorboards.

He saw Saira gaping at the magnificent frescos. She walked toward the pillars of spirit, too wide to wrap one's arms around. Saira put her hands against the smooth, translucent surface and gazed upward to where the pillar met the thirty-foot ceiling.

"What is inside these glass columns? It looks like water."

"Yes," Aldon explained. She might be a selwyn, but there was no harm in her being familiar with Divinist traditions. "Acolytes have to undertake a pilgrimage before they become an Initiate of the Elders. To do so, they must travel to the headwaters of one of the seven sanctified rivers. There, a gallon of water is gathered and carried back, on foot, to this very temple, and placed in the appropriate pillar. In a few weeks, I myself will be travelling to the Greytop Mountains to complete my initiation."

She looked reverentially from one column to the next, the water bending the light and distorting the images behind. "Why is this one almost empty?"

Aldon saw the level had lowered below shoulder-height since he had last been here. "Ever since the tainting of the rivers began, no one has ventured up the Talon River. Those who have don't return. If the water in this column reaches the temple floor, the river will dry up and no longer flow from the Nethers. Come. It's time to request an audience with the Divine Elder."

Meditation quarters exited to the left and right, but Aldon led them straight

through the open doors to the next room. The grandeur of the antechamber suddenly faded in the face of the dazzling Ivory Hall. Huge tusks from jaber cats made up the ceiling in its entirety, arranged in hundreds of concentric circles. The strength of those great cats was passed on to the Elders. One continuous mural ran along the length of the walls, depicting Johan's struggle from floor to ceiling. The first disciple endured ridicule, starvation and finally death, refusing to denounce his Divinist beliefs. Thus he became the first divine martyr. The Seven Scriptures taught that nothing was more admirable. Four huge columns, painted in Oriane blossoms, rose around a center circle. Half a dozen stone gryphawk sculptures clung to each column, every individual feather carved to perfection, their beaks and claws splayed fiercely open.

Aldon stepped forward. Caro and another Elder were watching him. In the hall's center, a circle of glass symbolized the moon, and the importance of Lhoran. Through the transparent shield he saw the river waters flowing southward, toward Omnia. This is what gave the river temple its sacred quality. Although according to the Kantra, moving water carried the highest density of *hlasa* than even the ocean itself.

"Welcome, friends." Caro tilted his head in an almost imperceptible bow.

"Aldon, it is good to see you once more."

Caro and the other Elder—Aldon recognized him as Saul—both wore billowing blue robes. Clean-shaven and short-haired, they looked like twins with the exception of Saul being a few years younger, and Caro bearing the sun necklace of the Divine Elder. The golden pendant reflected light like a diamond, while long rays of slivered silver burst over his chest. Caro regarded him with a detached stare.

Aldon bowed deeply. "Divine Elder. Excuse the interruption. But I have dire

news that demands patience be put aside.”

Caro nodded. “Proceed, my child. Who are the guests you bring into the Ivory Hall?”

“These...friends of mine...have also borne witness to these foul sightings.”

Aldon turned to his companions. The two brothers stood to one side, relaxed and unruffled. Jed fidgeted with something under his shirt. *Should he tell Caro about the chrak?* Aldon didn’t know. It troubled him to even consider keeping secrets from the Divine Elder. Saira looked uncomfortable, eyes drifting between the Elders and back toward the chamber they had come from.

“I was at the lake temple when these three arrived in a canoe. But even before then I sensed a dark presence. The next morning, while paddling toward the shore, we were attacked.” Aldon tried to stand his tallest. “The creature was a raelisk. From studying the Seven Scriptures, I know their appearance as well as my own. I hoped to never see them outside of those sacred pages.”

Caro did not lose an inch of his composure. “Dire news indeed. Only yesterday, traders from Trent reported the mouth of the river has turned black. Gulls lay dead on the shore, next to fish washed up by the murky tide. I see in your eyes that you have more to share. What other news do you bring?”

“On our way to Baronstoke, we were chased...” Aldon trailed off. The very memory of the shadow cloaks made his voice tremble.

“Go on, my child.”

He swallowed. “It pains me to say we have seen an even greater sign that the Lord of Shadow has been freed. Near the Ivory, where the rapids grow angry, the

Untainted appeared on the trail.”

For the first time, Caro let emotion flicker across his face. Saul whispered something in his ear. Caro’s eyes remained on Aldon.

“How many did you see?”

“There were five, Elder.”

“And what happened?”

“We managed to escape by climbing a sheer cliff face. From there, I came straight to see you.”

“And well that you should.” Caro took Aldon’s companions into account, viewing them now as more than curious intruders. “Aren’t you the Trail brothers? Yes, your escapades reach even the ears of the Divine Elder. Have you anything to add?”

Jed gave an awkward bow. “No sir. He speaks the truth.”

“Which is something I never hope to question.” Aldon felt a shiver down his spine. Was Caro testing him in some way?

Caro’s gaze shifted to Saira. “Step forth, my child. Do not be afraid.”

Aldon held his breath. Saira took a few small steps forward, so she was standing at the rim of the glass circle. Her eyes fell briefly to the currents underneath.

“Speak the name given to you by the divine.”

“My name is Saira.”

“What town do you hail from?”

“Maystone.”

“I see. Pray tell, what is your father’s good name?”

Saira hesitated a moment. “Wilton Lhee.

Caro seemed to consider this for some time. “Tell me, does your father still live?”

“No.” Caro waited, his stoic face frozen. Saira shifted her feet. “He died a year ago.”

“My apologies, child. I ask these questions only for the sake of Solu. Do you remember if your father held any friends in Baronstoke?”

“No...well, perhaps one. That is to say, I remember my father receiving letters from someone here.”

“Can you remember the name? Think hard, my child.”

“I think so. He read most of the letters to me. They seemed to be very good friends. Gareth Kale, or something like that.”

“Do you mean Garen?”

“Yes! That’s it. Garen Kale. Do you know him, Elder? I would like to tell him of my father’s passing.”

Aldon nearly gagged. His Uncle Garen? How could Saira’s father possibly know Garen? He wanted to interrogate Saira further, but didn’t dare interrupt a speaking Elder.

“I do know him, child. Like Saul, he was one of my closest Elders. But once more, I must speak with regret, for only two months ago Garen was lost to the rivers of time.”

Saira’s head drooped down, as though a great sadness had come upon her. Aldon waited for Caro to reprimand her for such insolence. Lowering your gaze in front of the Divine Elder! Surprisingly, Caro spoke to her in friendly terms.

“Do not worry, my child. Their spirits are safe in the waters. I ask only for a little more of your time.” Caro turned back to Aldon. Now the Elder’s eyes held

something else, something fiery.

“You have done well, child, to bring me these tidings.”

“Divine Elder, if I may ask. Why would my Uncle know Saira’s father?” As soon as the words left his mouth, he realized what such a question might insinuate. He felt Saira’s eyes on him, but tried to face Caro unflinchingly.

“They were both of a similar kind. But that is not what we are here to discuss. Aldon, we know you have been manipulating the water spirits.”

He felt his chest tighten. Aldon’s heart began to pound and his breathing quickened.

“Do you not deny this?”

Aldon put his hands forth, as though making an offering. “Elder! I have only been meditating on the Seven Scriptures.”

“Dishonesty does not suit you. You have been studying from another text. Aldon, where is the book?”

“Which book do you speak of?”

Saul broke in, loathing written over his features. “Do not play the fool. You know the tomb all too well. The one your Uncle gave you.”

Aldon’s voice cracked. “I...do not have it.”

Caro’s arm suddenly shot up. Behind them, the doors to the antechamber slammed shut. Jed, who had been creeping towards the exit, jumped back in surprise. Aldon felt the *hlasa* spirit in the air, carried up from the currents under the glass floor, through Caro’s arm, and to the door.

“I am sorry,” Caro announced. “But none of us will be leaving.”

Aldon cowered under the gaze of the Divine Elder. “My poor acolyte. How could you have strayed so far from the current, and a future so very promising? Now you will never reach the level of initiate. Unless you listen carefully, and do exactly as I say.”

Caro quickly thrust his arm toward Saira. “I’m afraid, my dear, that that item will have to remain in your pocket.”

Aldon looked over. Saira had been reaching for the sunstone. Now, her body was locked in place, her arms strapped to her side by invisible cords. She gasped in pain. Aldon realized Caro had broken that most sacred rule, which the Divine Elder himself had taught him at an early age: never use water spirits to bring harm to others, unless they have brought harm upon you.

“Sven are not agreeable company, Aldon. I despise her very presence in this hall. Did you not recognize her for what she is?” Caro lifted a finger and Saira’s shirt rose above her belly, revealing a triangle of indentations. “Certainly you must have suspected. Saul, bring her here.”

The Elder stepped forward and roughly grabbed Saira’s arm. She tried to resist. But the spirits weaved by Caro held her tight. With great strain, she managed to push her body against Saul’s. The Elder threw her forcibly to the glass floor. Aldon noticed Cal and Jed hovering by the sealed door.

“Thankfully, you have done the right thing by bringing her here. She will be sacrificed to Solu, and her tainted blood will help purify the waters her people have fouled.”

Aldon looked between the Divine Elder and Saira. Although her body was still, wild fear swam in her eyes.

“Do not look at her! I am speaking to you, child. You have one chance to regain your standing. Return the Kantra to me, and your disrespect will be forgiven.”

“My Uncle told me—”

“Your Uncle was a fool, and a traitor. Where is the Kantra!”

Aldon’s body began to shake. Not with anxiety, but a rising, uncontrollable rage. Caro had violated the very rules he taught Aldon day after day, year after year. And he held no respect for his Uncle, Aldon’s mentor and saviour.

“Tell me how Garen knows her father.”

“Tell you? I do not answer to any demand, but those lain down by Solu himself! This is your last opportunity...”

But Aldon was no longer listening. He recalled reading in the Kantra how to turn the spirits against someone, and reached beyond the length of his fingers. *Hlasa* violently surged throughout the hall. Aldon sensed the currents connecting the Divine Elder to Saira.

Caro’s eyes bulged in fury. “What are you doing! Don’t make the same mistake Garen did. Think carefully, Aldon. Or all your life to this point will have been for naught.”

Aldon searched for the spirits, groping for them like a fisherman reaching blindly into the river for his catch. The water spirits tried to slip from his fingers, reluctant to be held. But he called them under his command, felt the spirits condense into solid *hlasa*. Then, with all his might, he wrenched the spirits away from Saira. Like the Welling River reversing its flow, the *hlasa* ran back toward its source, wrapping around Caro. The Divine Elder tried to speak but the spirits muzzled his voice. The wrath in his eyes

threatened to explode.

Free from the ropes of *hlasa*, Saira got to her knees. But Saul slapped her hard in the face. She bent over, covering her head in her hands.

Aldon looked down at his own two hands. *Hlasa* rolled between his fingers, swift and electric. The full extent of what he had just done hit him, and the world began to spin.

Chapter Ten

Release

Jed watched the proceedings with a growing dread. Aldon was in a serious kind of trouble with the Elders. Caro knew Saira was a swen, and demanded the return of some book Aldon's Uncle had given him. Despite Waryn's willingness to do away with a Divinist, Jed knew that touching an Elder would have the entire city after him. So his hands were tied. And with the doors shut behind him and Cal, there was nothing they could do.

The Elder named Saul grabbed Saira. She seemed to be paralyzed. They had put spirits over her! Jed shivered. He couldn't stand the idea of being so powerless, with no control. Then Aldon found his backbone and actually stared down the Divine Elder. Saira, suddenly free from the spirit strings, tried to stand.

Saul cuffed her in the cheek. She went down on the glass. Again she attempted to get to her feet, and Saul raised his hand a second time, closing his fingers into a fist.

Jed had been trying to keep his cool. When Saul first laid hands on Saira, Jed's fingers instinctively went for his knife. Too often growing up he had witnessed a similar scene: his mother on her knees, begging his father to stop. But nothing ever stopped Jed's father, pummeling his screaming mother with blow after blow. Jed watched through child's eyes, helpless and scared.

Now, like a splintering dam holding back blistering lava, his uncontainable anger burst forth. Rage boiled over, hot and full. Jed sprang like a jaber cat toward the Elder.

"Don't touch her!"

But the warning was useless. No sooner had the words flown from Jed's mouth when his chrak embedded itself in Saul's chest.

Saira screamed. The Elder stumbled to his knees and looked up at Jed. He watched the life slip from his eyes, like two full moons falling behind permanent cloud. Jed pushed the Elder aside and helped Saira stand. Her body shook with quiet sobs.

"You're all right. I'll keep you safe, one way or another. Cal! Break Aldon out of his trance! We've lost the city."

Jed retrieved his dagger and looked at Caro. The Divine Elder didn't move, or even look his way. Aldon had managed to give him a taste of his own spirits. But how long would those ghostly ropes hold?

"Aldon? Can you tie a knot in those spirit threads? We need to keep Caro off our tail."

The acolyte looked as though he had just woken from the deepest sleep of his life.

"Well, can you?"

Aldon nodded feebly. "I think so. But I don't know how long they will endure."

"Just do your best."

Jed ran over the escape plan in his mind. It all hinged on Aldon being noticed and Saira being ignored. "Okay, Aldon. We need you to lead us past the temple guards and out the east gate. Don't act any differently. Just pretend everything is as it should be. The sentries are like dogs—if you're scared, they'll know it. Cal, take Saira's arm and make sure she stays close and overlooked. If she's your wife, most will be less inclined to stare." Jed did his best to ignore the twinge of jealousy he felt. Strange—he had never envied after his brother before. Why should this time be any different? Saira was just

another girl. Then again...

“Okay, out of the temple, nice and slow.”

The double doors creaked open, and the four of them walked into the antechamber. Jed glanced back at Caro. The Divine Elder still looked like a child playing statue tag. This was probably the first time in his life someone had not only challenged his authority, but put him in his place. Jed didn't want to be around when the spirits lifted. If there was anything he knew about the Seven Scriptures, it was that the Divinists carried resentment for centuries.

As they made their way through the columns of water, their disfigured reflections made it appear as though dozens of doppelgangers walked beside them. Jed let Aldon go first through the temple entrance. The acolyte looked like a zombie as he lurched past the guards.

The sentries didn't object. After crossing the road, Jed started to feel getting out of Baronstoke would be a cinch. Then a voice boomed behind them.

“Hold it there!”

Jed's first instinct was to run. Nine times out of ten, that got him out of trouble. But he caught himself and turned slowly about. The guards marched towards them, hands on their golden hilts. Jed had hoped those swords were strictly ornamental.

“Get away from her!”

Jed looked at Saira. Did they know what she was?

“Leave her alone, you! Get back to the gulley you crawled out from.”

The guards weren't yelling at them. The beggar had returned. He was making a run for Saira. A bad knee made him hobble, the movement reminding Jed of a slave

whose ankles are held in iron shackles.

“I just want a blessing! No, not you, Elder-boy. Her! She’s the one!”

The guards muscled the wild-eyed man away.

“Wait! Just one blessing! Please...”

Jed sighed. This was why he never gave coins to beggars. You never knew what crazy attachments they would try to make. Saira looked shaken. He needed to get her some place they could rest. Hopefully Mad Mirran would be more accommodating than their previous hosts.

Jed continued up the road. With the late afternoon sun soon to set behind the high perimeter wall, more people returned to the streets. He shifted the dagger from behind his belt. The ruby-hilt protruded from his side, bright and red. He kept walking. But no matter how many shady folk he passed, not a single one so much as glanced at the easy prize. Aldon was right: he wasn’t going to be rid of this chrak any time soon.

The four of them stepped into the shade of the royal palace—three blocks west—and Jed’s nose led him north. Fruit vendors coloured the stretch ahead. His empty stomach groaned.

“Snack time, Cal.”

His brother handed Saira over to Aldon. Cal wandered to one side, scouring the stands selling apples, dewberry, rivermelon and other fruits of every imaginable shape and size. Finally, Cal narrowed in on a long stand with no customers.

“How much for these Oriane grapes?”

As his brother bartered, Jed finished a transaction of his own—for a much more agreeable price—on the far corner of the stand. By the end, his shirt bulged.

They found Aldon and Saira.

“Want some grapes?”

Saira shoved several down her throat at once. “Wait. There’s not enough for all of us.”

Jed smiled. “Don’t worry. Plenty here to go around.”

From under his shirt, he gave her a handful of dragonfruit. She dubiously examined the scaly pink skin with blunt green spines. Jed worried she would reject the stolen goods, so he tore open one of the fruits for her. Saira smelled the sweet white innards and, without a moment’s hesitation, bit greedily into the flesh. Jed laughed as her face brightened at the new taste.

“Good, aren’t they?”

“Only because there’s nothing else to eat,” she managed to assert between bites, wiping sticky hands onto her pant leg.

“Funny how scruples disappear once you’re hungry enough. Starvation does wonders for the soul. You should try it sometime, Aldon.”

“Actually, I fast for a week every year.”

“At last! Something we have in common. Except in your case, it was by choice.” Despite his mocking tone, Jed found himself admiring the acolyte. He had definitely underestimated this Elder-boy.

Several dragonfruits later, the eastern gate rolled into view. Jed reflexively slowed his step. Aldon, who Jed was certain had never once been questioned or manhandled by a guard in his life, strolled boldly forward.

“Hold up, Elder-boy. Something’s not right. Cal? You feeling that?”

“Not feeling, brother. I’m *seeing* three of Waryn’s thugs. Two on the roofs, and one minding that herb shop on the right.”

“Then there’s bound to be twice that number. Vedit’s shadow! I guess Waryn isn’t as blind as we hoped. I’ll have to rethink this. Sometimes, I wish no one knew who I was.” Jed turned them around. “Have we been spotted?”

“Can’t tell you, brother. But I’d be surprised if our presence has gone unnoticed.”

As they retraced their steps, he saw Saira looking anxiously from side to side.

“What are we going to do?”

“I’ll figure that out later. Right now, we have the Elders and the former head of the thieves’ clade after us. So we need to get somewhere no one else will go.”

“Wait,” Aldon broke in. “Waryn used to head the thieves’ clade? Why is he living in such destitute conditions?”

“He likes to keep a low profile. The less your underlings know about you, the better. That way, they can’t ask questions or decide to undertake a premature accession.”

Jed led them down the first available alley. What *were* they going to do? He turned every which way, acting as though he knew exactly where he was going. In truth, he didn’t know this part of Baronstoke. But he wanted to be somewhere he didn’t know, because Waryn was less likely to know of it.

“Here we are.”

They stood next to a vacant lot bordered by three tall buildings. Mountains of garbage filled the space: a table with one and a half legs, half-burnt books banned by the Divinists, and bedding that now served as sleeping quarters for rats. Flies buzzed over goat legs, fish vertebrae, and various, unidentifiable cattle parts. Rotten fruit and

vegetables were covered with furry mould, and from the smell of things the locals used this spot to excrete their own, very human waste.

Aldon held up his arm against the stench. Saira looked at Jed as though he had lost his mind.

“We’re going to stay *here*?”

“Until the sun is down and the moon is hidden.” He took them along one wall, stepping over a dead cat and something green that squished under his shoe. “Elder-boy, I’ve got a question for you. Does the river temple have any windows?”

“Yes,” Aldon said apprehensively, as if he thought Jed wasn’t someone he should share this with. “In the meditation rooms off the antechamber. But they overlook the Ivory ten feet above the water, and are beyond the perimeter wall. There’s no way to get in through them.”

“I see. Well, I need to get us some supplies. Stay behind this heap, so you’ll be out of sight. Cal, you keep a watch on things here. I’ll come back when it’s time to go.”

Saira was already asleep, her head resting under her arms. Aldon leaned against a wall and closed his eyes. Cal settled next to them, resting his back on the seat of a broken chair lying on its side.

Cal looked up at him. “Not going to get some shut eye?”

“No rest for the wicked...” Jed muttered, and headed back out into the hazards of Baronstoke. *You can’t help it*, he thought to himself. *Like it or not, you actually care about someone’s skin other than your own.*

#

“Saira, wake up. It’s time.”

“What? Oh...I was dreaming.”

Jed pulled Saira to her feet. Her eyes shone a luminescent blue in the dark. “You seem to make a habit of that.”

“The shadow cloaks. They were waiting for me.”

“One thing at a time. It’s only a nightmare. Here, I’ve got some new clothes for you.”

Jed held out a brown, nondescript tunic and a matching pair of pants.

“Where...?”

“Don’t ask. Aldon, I’m not sure how you feel about losing the spirit robes. These clothes are nothing fancy to look at. But that’s the idea. This gives our pursuers one less reason to recognize us.”

Aldon put his nose to his sleeve. “I’ve already desecrated these. And I’m not sure I want to keep wearing these robes.”

Cal and Aldon changed next to Jed, and then the three men moved off to give Saira her privacy.

“Okay,” Jed said when they had all gathered in the dimly lit alleyway. “Here’s some bread and chicken jerky as well. Let’s go.”

“And where exactly are we going?” Saira asked, crunching her teeth on the stale bread, although any of them could have poised the same question.

“Why, to the river temple, of course.”

“*What?*”

“Trust me. And keep your voice down. I’m sure we aren’t the only nightstalkers out and about at this time.”

It took nearly half an hour of traversing back roads and empty lanes before Jed stopped them a ways down from the temple. The grey forms of the night guard were barely visible, shifting their lethargic legs periodically.

“This is how it’s going to work. Cal and I are going to loop back around, and approach the temple from the other direction. We’ll divert the guards. Saira and Aldon, you run inside and get to the windows. Drop yourself into the river—the Ivory’s pretty wide here, so the current should be easy enough to navigate in the dark. No—don’t argue. You two need to get out. Cal and I can handle ourselves. We’ll find you noon tomorrow at Mad Mirran’s. He lives a few miles east of the city, past the hill with a rock shaped like a gryphawk.”

Aldon persisted. “It won’t work.”

“And why not?”

“The acolytes and initiates *sleep* in the meditation rooms.”

Jed sighed. “You should’ve mentioned that before. But it’s too late now. Our plan remains the same.”

“How are we going to get past them?”

“Never underestimate the element of surprise. See you tomorrow!”

Jed left them at the mouth of the street, moving back into the dark of the alley. Cal wordlessly followed. After a minute they came out north of the temple. He looked back at his brother. Cal nodded.

“Hey, you guards there!” Jed moved into the open street, staggering forward like a gambler who lost the house and compensated with too much wine.

The sentries stirred, heads jerking in his direction.

“I want to see the Divine Elder. I’ve got a midnight snack for him!” Jed held out a half-rotted orange in a wobbly hand.

“Get yourself home, you scum. No one visits the temple after dusk.”

“But that’s peak time for remorse! Here, maybe you can deliver the message?” Jed threw the orange. One of the guards swatted the flying soggy fruit aside and started toward him, sword unsheathed. The blade glowed under the veiled moonlight.

“Hey, you’re going the wrong way! The temple’s behind you.”

The guard bristled. Jed put his head on his shoulder and let his eyes droop, waiting until the last moment. The guard was just a few paces away, reaching for him with a gloved hand. Like a coiled spring, Jed suddenly leaped forward. The guard’s arm missed him. Jed ran circles around the sentry, ducking under the now wildly swinging sword arm.

Cal sprinted out from the alley. At the sight of a second prowler, the other guard left his post, flaunting his sword.

As Jed twisted and turned just out of reach of the guard’s dancing blade, he spotted Aldon and Sarai slipping quietly into the temple.

Chapter Eleven

Shadow and Spirit

Saira's skin crawled. In the dark, the antechamber felt like a cave, the pillars of spirit huge stalagmites. She didn't like the idea of returning to the place where someone had tried to kill her. Her cheek still stung from Saul's blow. Aldon guided her slowly forward. She heard voices—was that the guards outside? Then someone passed right next to her. She jumped.

“What is it?” Aldon said in a frantic whisper.

“Sorry.” Saira suddenly felt very foolish. “Just my reflection in the column.”

They turned left. She could make out the hazy outline of an open doorway. The floorboards creaked; Saira cringed with each step. Without the sun, Solu's mural lay hidden overhead. Aldon moved next to the threshold. Abruptly, his body went still. She looked past his tensed shoulder and saw three figures in the next room walking straight towards them.

Her body shook. She looked at Aldon, not daring to speak with anything but her eyes. *What are we going to do?*

Aldon simply shook his head slightly. She could almost hear him say: *Don't move.*

Saira stood perfectly still. But she couldn't see how they wouldn't be spotted. They were standing right beside the door. These Divinists would paralyze her again, and sacrifice her to the river spirits. Goose bumps raced down her back. She could hear them speaking.

“Do you think we should wake the Divine Elder?”

“No,” another responded. “Not yet. Let’s see for ourselves what’s going on.”

Then the three brown-robed acolytes walked over the threshold, no more than a foot away from Aldon and her...and proceeded to walk directly past them. She blinked. What had happened? The three figures moved like ghosts toward the temple entrance. Aldon seemed to be in some kind of reverie. He must have somehow put a shadow over them. His eyes opened, and he looked down at himself in relief. Then he nodded to the room.

Saira didn’t question what he had done and followed Aldon into the unlit chambers. Pale light shone from three high, square windows, revealing half a dozen rumpled blankets on the floor. The room itself was unremarkable, and they hurried to the open window furthest to the right. Aldon locked his hands together and gave her a boost.

Saira squirmed through the small square, braced herself on the windowsill, and gazed outward. After the city, it was strange to see such a vast expanse of space. Up above, all but a few stars were hidden, while the eastern clouds gleamed in front of the waning moon. She could hear the soothing sound of the river underneath. But when she looked down, her eyes saw only black.

“I think it’s too far.”

“Don’t worry,” Aldon coaxed her. “Just keep your legs straight when you jump. Wait...they’re coming back to the room! Go!”

Saira threw her legs over the outside wall of the temple. Her fingers held the window ledge as she let her body drop down. Then her left foot found a grip. Saira realized she could climb most of the way down. She put her weight onto her leg and the

wood snapped. Her whole body fell. Down, down she went, terrified that it would be too far.

She almost screamed as she plunged into the midnight waters. The current wrapped her in a freezing embrace as she spread her arms to slow her descent. Air bubbles fled upward over her body. The underwater world was dark and murky. Kicking her legs, she pushed herself to the surface and gasped for air.

There was a splash behind her. After a few seconds, Aldon's head bobbed up above the current. "Hold onto the support beams!"

She could see them now. At least a score of columns held the temple above the Ivory. Saira swam toward one and put her arms around the wooden stilt, giving her legs a rest. Aldon clung to the other side. His wet blond hair stuck to his forehead in dark strands.

"This river is concentrated with *hlasa*. The spirits feel like a warm wind. I never felt it before yesterday, but I didn't know the right way to look." Saira looked at him questioningly. "Never mind. Those acolytes probably heard us hit the water. We should keep moving."

Saira was happy to follow his advice. In spite of Aldon's warm spirits, her muscles shivered uncontrollably throughout her body. Keeping her legs going helped keep the cold at bay. She moved through the chilly waters from one beam to the next. Saira found that she didn't have to compensate her movement against the flow—like Jed had predicted, the current was sluggish. At one point, she passed the glass circle of the Ivory Hall, and looked up at the place where Caro had questioned her. She recalled feeling intimidated. Saira didn't want to tell him about her father. Yet Caro carried a

presence at once commanding and charismatic, and she couldn't remain silent. Then his tone changed, and he spoke about her as though she were a child or slave that had misbehaved. It made Saira feel guilty and ashamed for the simple crime of being alive.

Aldon put his hand on her shoulder. "We need to swim through the open water." He pointed. "The bank should be about a hundred feet away. Can you make it?"

"Yes. I just wish Jed had another set of clothes for us."

Saira let go of the beam and swam fast and hard. About halfway she stopped, arms aching. Treading water, she caught sight of the steep riverbank, looking like the edge of a moat. Grey clouds billowed overhead, and she felt the first drop of rain. Aldon passed her, a dark form just under the current. Then she realized—Aldon was on the *other* side of her.

"By Solu!"

Aldon looked over at her. She tried to point at the shadowy scales that surfaced several feet away. There were at least three or four shapes rushing at her...

"Raelisks are in the water!" she yelled. "Get to the shore!"

Saira propelled herself forward, her legs thrashing madly behind her. She kept her head down in the water, not pausing for breath. Her arms burned with fatigue and her lungs screamed for air but she forged ahead. Something stiff yet slimy brushed against her ankle. She kept going. Then her leg collided into something hard, right below her. Saira kicked violently at the monster. It didn't move. She realized she was touching the bottom! Standing up, she raced for the shore, shoving the shallowing water out of her way with her thighs and then her knees. Rain crashed down on her.

Dripping wet, she tried to clamber up the slippery bank. Saira couldn't find a grip

in the muddy embankment and slid back down into the river. Aldon managed to get up first, digging in his heels, and pulled her to the top. Drenched, dirty and exhausted, she lay there for a moment beside him, her chest heaving.

She gave a start when something jumped onto her stomach.

“Fenox!”

He licked her face, the mayguar’s tail wagging like he was still a pup. Saira hugged his wet fur.

“Yes, I missed you too. No more cities, I promise.”

Aldon stood and helped Saira to her feet.

“Well, we made it. Now where do we go?”

Aldon peered into dark night, looking uncertain. She realized that Caro must have been like a father to him. That loss must feel like losing his heart and soul. But when he looked back at her, Aldon’s eyes were steely blue.

“Let’s put some distance between us and Baronstoke. Then we’ll find some shelter from the rain.”

Saira let him lead. Fenox growled once at the water and followed.

The road was deserted. Puddles dilated until they formed one continuous stream. Saira kept her eyes down. Sheets of water soaked her through and through, until she felt even colder than being immersed in the Ivory. They passed maybe a dozen grey buildings before walking into a corridor flanked on either side by a high wall. In the mist and shade, it took her a minute to recognize the blurred barrier as trees. Aldon led her under the sheltering conifers.

Without a word, the acolyte lay down under a Dareth fir and went to sleep. Saira

tried to find a patch of ground without any poking roots. After a minute, she gave up and settled for the driest spot, next to a trunk. Fenox slept next to her. His body's heat kept her warm. For once, Sarai's dreams were quiet.

The melancholy sky cried tears well into the night.

Chapter Twelve

Mad Mirran

Saira woke to birdsong. Opening her eyes, she looked up into the gently swaying, needled leaves of the giant fir. A red-throated warbler and spotted wren shared the same branch. She smiled at the familiar sight. Every morning in Maystone, this sound heralded the start of her day. It was something familiar, something comfortable. A silver-crowned sparrow chirped somewhere in the distance. She could almost imagine being back home, with Fenox under one arm. If she closed her eyes, her father was still there...

“It’s getting late.”

Aldon sat cross-legged on the bare forest floor. His tone was neutral. She couldn’t tell if he was annoyed or simply stating a fact.

“We should find this Mirran fellow by noon. Although I wouldn’t mind at all—or be surprised—if Jed and Cal didn’t show.”

“I don’t think you mean that. They got us out of Baronstoke.”

“And out of their hair.” Aldon sighed. “But you’re right—they did help us when everyone else wanted our heads. That’s not something I’ll forget.”

Saira tried to stand, but her knees gave out. “Give me a minute. My leg muscles need massaging.” Fenox yawned, showing two lines of sharp teeth, and then rubbed his head against her side.

Aldon looked at her with a detached stare. He seemed to be sizing her up, like a bear that’s stumbled across a new species, trying to decide if she’s enemy or ally.

Saira had dealt with that look ever since she was born. She met his eyes, but they quickly turned off into the trees.

“Thank you, by the way.”

Aldon didn’t blink.

“For what you did back at the river temple yesterday.”

“What Caro and Saul were doing was wrong. What they were doing to *you* was wrong, no matter what you are.”

“And what exactly am I? Tell me, if you would, because no one else has. Or are you too scared to speak the truth?”

He looked at her in surprise. “You don’t even know yourself, do you?”

“I know that I’m a selwyn.” She shrugged.

Aldon shook his head. “But do you know what that *means*? Selwyn are swamp-dwellers. They taint the rivers with their skin and foul the sky with every breath. Vedil lives in their souls, and the selwyn cause the shadestorms in Lorellien, to keep intruders out of their mangroves. All my life, the Seven Scriptures have taught me to despise what and who you are.”

“Well, I’m a selwyn, and I don’t do any of those things.”

“That’s what I don’t understand. I only wish my Uncle were still alive. He would know what was right.”

Saira thought of her own father. No matter the circumstance, Wilton always knew what to say. She gave her sore thighs once last rub and got to her feet.

“Let’s find this gryphawk rock.”

Farmers, traders, travellers and other folk kept the road active. After the teeming

streets of Baronstoke, Saira didn't feel intimidated. Fenox helped give them a wide berth. He sniffed the air occasionally, searching for a scent. Smoke billowed from stone chimneys, hundreds of cattle chewed stunted grass inside their pens, and oddly-shaped rice fields stretched to the south, divided by high banks, making them look like giant pieces to a jigsaw puzzle.

The sun was well on its way to noon when they turned up a small, hilly path. Aldon finally broke their lingering silence.

"When you were in the temple, you told Caro about your father receiving some letters."

"My father knew a lot of people, from many cities."

"But he never took you outside Maystone?"

"Never..." Only now, having seen more in the last few days than in her entire life, did she realize how strange that was. "He said cities were dangerous places for women and children."

"It would make sense. He would want to keep you hidden and safe. Was *he* a selwyn?"

"No. Although, I haven't given that much thought. His ears are like yours."

Aldon nodded. "And those letters, the ones he received from Garen—my Uncle. Do you remember what they spoke of?"

Saira tried to think back. Her father received a few letters every month. When she was young, Wilton would read them to her. But in her teenage years she got bored with that.

"There were a lot of letters. I remember Garen's, because when something

arrived from him my father always got excited. Although sometimes Garen wouldn't write for years. In his letters, he described the perils of the Nether Mountains and the flooding of the Welling River back into Solas Lake. He talked a lot about the Divinists. Now that I think of it, Caro's name even came up once or twice, although Garen didn't have many kind things to say. He also mentioned his nephew—I suppose that would be you, though it's funny he never actually wrote your name—but I have a feeling my father skipped most of those parts when he read the letters to me. Garen was proud of you being so dedicated and smart.”

“Can you remember any more?” Aldon's eyes held a quiet sadness.

Saira tried to think. And then she suddenly remembered.

“Yes! Another arrived after my father died. I opened it reluctantly, not wanting to intrude, but hoped I could find some solace in those words. I didn't know who Garen was, but he was the closest person to my father. So I felt a connection to him, somehow.”

Aldon waited expectantly.

“I read the letter three times. It was hard to make out a lot of the scrawled words.”

“My Uncle was blind.”

“Oh, now I understand. On the first page, he asked my father to write him again soon. Garen said to only use the fur traitor, since he could be trusted. Or to come himself, if Wilton could manage that. Your Uncle didn't know my father had been dead for nearly half a year. Next, he wrote about the Divinists a good deal. There were a lot of names. So and so was doing this. I can't remember much. He asked how Wilton's daughter was doing, and if she was still safe. I guess I've never really understood what

he meant until now.

“Then Garen talked about being found out, and not knowing what to do. He asked my father for advice. Should he go to the Nethers? Should he take his nephew with him? He seemed to be very worried. He wondered if his nephew had been with the Divinists too long, and wanted to take him away from all that—”

“What!” Aldon turned on her. He looked as though she had slapped him. “My Uncle would never say such a thing. How dare you!” His face flushed with anger.

“Wait...I’m sorry. I am not myself. To lose my faith is to lose everything.”

Saira already felt like she had lost everything. But she didn’t speak it. “Do you want me to continue?”

“Please.”

“All right. Garen wanted to take you away, but didn’t know how. He was scared of what Caro might do. Finally, on the last page, he talked about something called the Order.”

Aldon nearly bit her head off. “Do not say anymore! To speak of the Order is sacrilege.”

Saira looked at her troubled companion. “I don’t understand.”

But Aldon walked off in a huff, saying nothing further. Saira trailed behind, yet couldn’t help running over the last few sentences of Garen’s letter. She had memorized the last page in its entirety.

My heart is torn. Will the Order accept someone so close to Caro, someone who has been indoctrinated with all his lies? I suppose I have to take that chance. I must decide. Will you write soon? My greatest fear is for my nephew. Will he forgive me for

what I am? That's how Garen had finished the letter.

Saira watched Aldon's back. Despite his anger and suspicions, she felt bonded to this man. He was the nephew of Wilton's best friend. That tenuous link was the closest tie she had to anyone. Her father had been her world. With him gone, all she could do was pick up the pieces he had left behind.

Fenox trotted ahead. She spotted a hill with an unusually shaped outcropping of rock, high up on the right. "Hey! Is that the gryphawk?"

Aldon halted, looking up with blinking eyes as though coming out of a stupor.

"Yes," he said in a stoic voice, and led her off the path.

They passed beside the grassy knoll. The dark, jagged rock sat upon its summit, the head and beak staring to the east. The gryphawk's wings were furled, and one stone claw was raised to salute the sun. Saira wondered...what colour were its feathers? What kind of nest did this monstrous bird of prey live in? What did it *eat*?

"Have you ever seen one?"

"A gryphawk?" Aldon replied. "Only once, from a distance. I was on my way to Trent. I remember thinking I had never seen anything so beautiful. But I was terrified. Even though the bird was miles away, it still blotted out the sun. A horse dangled from one of its talons." She tried to imagine such a sight. Aldon stopped walking, and met her eyes for the first time since his piercing gaze this morning. "I want to find out what happened to my Uncle."

"I understand. And I want to find out who I am. Do you think Mad Mirran can help us?"

“He’s a hermit. But he used to be a lord, and was even invited to dine inside the royal palace from time to time. Then, about fifteen years ago, his wife and three daughters died. Caught in a shadestorm. Their bodies were never found. Since then, Mirran has lived alone, here in the hills. He pesters travellers for stories and writes everything down. His house is full of paper and ink. Some of what he records is blasphemy. The Elders mock him, but dismiss Mirran as an eccentric who lost his mind the same day he lost his family.”

Saira listened attentively. Her father had told her about shadestorms. She could almost hear his voice. *Imagine walking through a black cloud, so thick and dark you can’t see your own fingers. The fog rises and settles during the night and consumes every living thing it touches. Shadestorms come up so fast and swift that even the fastest terals can’t escape their fate: to be eaten by the very air they breathe. Oh dear. I’ve frightened you! Don’t worry, Saira. We live far from the home of those storms.*

She shook herself out of reverie. “How do we find Mirran’s place?”

Aldon looked around them uncertainly. “I don’t know. It should be around here somewhere. Maybe it’s on the other side of that bloodleaf.” He pointed to a wall of broad leaves with crimson veins. Bloodleaf possessed three-petalled, red flowers. But all parts of the plant were deadly poisonous to both taste and touch. A child in Maystone once lost her fingers after plucking the striking flowers. Saira knew that only Vedil wasps could pollinate those blooms. The tall, spined stems presented an impenetrable barrier.

Aldon sighed in resignation. “There’s nowhere else to go. Maybe we should loop back.”

“No, wait,” Saira said, stepping toward the bloodleaf. “Something’s not right. Why can’t I smell its pollen?”

“Bloodleaf doesn’t smell.”

“Yes it does. *Real* bloodleaf carries the scent of a dead body. The smell is so strong moonbears are never found within miles of a bloodleaf patch.” She stopped next to the tangle of red and green.

“It’s too dangerous. Let’s go sit next to the gryphawk and wait for Jed and Cal.”

“Aldon, it’s all right.” Saira plucked a red-streaked leaf off the stem and broke off the thorns with her thumbnail. Then she shoved it in her mouth. The blade was soft between her teeth. “It tastes sweet! This is sugarstem, a mimic plant.”

Aldon still wasn’t convinced.

“Look there! Fenox is walking through it.” The mayguar found a path through the jungle of bloodleaf as though it were a trading road. His nose poked at one of the stems. “He doesn’t mind one bit.”

“A mimic?”

“Yes. Looks dangerous, but is completely harmless. Let’s see if we can get through here.”

Saira pushed through the supple stems. The spines tugged at her arms and legs, catching her shirt. She pulled her sleeve free, tearing her already mud-stained garb. A minute later she burst free of the towering bush and found herself staring past a vegetable garden into a hidden vale. Water trickled between two jagged ridges, the stream small enough to step over. A ramshackle building leant precariously against one side of the combe, burrowing into a grotto.

“Fenox! Stay here. We don’t want to scare our friend.” The mayguar didn’t obey her, exactly. But he stopped where he was, body flat to the ground, looking back at her expectantly.

Aldon walked forward beside her. “Friend?”

“My dad always said its best to think positive. More often than not, what you imagine—if you think hard enough—ends up being true.”

The house-sized structure looked more like a glorified shack. Wooden boards and logs, nailed together haphazardly, formed three walls. The fourth was made of the ridge itself. There were no windows, and only a single, crooked door. Part of the building hid underneath the overhanging rock.

“Greetings, visitors! Welcome to my abode most humble. Are you interested in a cup of tea?”

It took Saira a second to spot the speaker. The short, stocky man sat in a chair outside his home, a pipe in his mouth. His head and face were bald except for a thin rim of grey hair worn like a halo. Mismatched clothes gave him a comical appearance; a blue patch had been sewn on one knee, green on the other. He put down his pipe, got to his feet and smiled contagiously.

“I hope you didn’t mind the sugarstem. The Divinists have made a fuss about me the past few years, so I’ve had some disagreeable types cut my tomato plants and pull up my carrots. Or maybe *that* was the rabbits?” His words came fast and uninterrupted.

“Very unpleasant business. The people that is, not the rabbits. They’re too cute to be pests. Rather tasty though, much better than stringy cara. Anyway, the bloodleaf look-a-like keeps all but the most—and the *least*, I gather from your presence—ignorant away.”

He stepped toward them with a limp, eyeing Aldon up and down. “Those are scripture eyes. You must be an acolyte. Maybe even an initiate. It’s the first, isn’t it? Yes? An acolyte out of his robes! These are strange times indeed. Very strange. Come in! Come in! You must be hungry. Your little pet is welcome too, if he doesn’t mind me. I’m sure you know it already, but being polite never hurts. My name’s Mirran.”

Aldon and Saira exchanged a glance.

“Don’t worry. I’m the sociable type. Can you believe that? You two don’t mean me any harm, that’s plain to see.” He stuck out his left hand.

Saira shook his arm awkwardly. “I’m Saira. This is Aldon.”

“And welcome you are! I always shake with the left. Helps me remember to use my good leg.” He rapped his fist on his left thigh. “Step inside! I’ll have tea made in a minute. If I can find my cups. Excuse the mess. I’ve never been the organized type. There’s still some rabbit stew. Was worried it’d go to waste. But now you’re here! Funny how that works.”

Mirran waddled quickly inside, lifting his right leg much higher than the left. Saira followed. She could see the stacks of papers and books long before she crossed the threshold. The doorway led to a library in sore need of a librarian. Mirran kept records as her father did—except his were in complete disarray.

The house was a giant room filled with columns of parchment and shelves of books, letters, maps, scrolls and all manner of manuscripts. Dragon head bookends had toppled over long ago. There wasn’t an inch of visible wall space. One corner held an assortment of pots and pans. A hammock hung near a table whose surface was inundated with texts. Empty ink bottles and feathered quills lay scattered on the paper-covered

floor. She couldn't go anywhere without stepping on something.

Mirran rummaged through a mound of thick volumes. "There's a couple chairs in here somewhere..."

He pushed over a leaning tower of hardcovers. The aftermath of the avalanche revealed a three-legged chair; its missing leg was supported by more books. Aldon sat on the shaky seat, holding the arms as though he would fall through any second. Saira found a stack of large tomes to sit on, their dusty fore-edges lined with gold. Fenox lay at her feet.

Mirran's round face brightened even further. "Ah! I suppose that works just as well. I have a bed too! But the hammock suits me. It's fun to swing at night. Haven't seen my pillow in two years. Drowned in documents somewhere. Oh, right. Tea! Mustn't forget that."

Instead, he brought out a pot of rabbit. The lumpy stew did not look at all appetizing. He handed Saira a spoon.

"Ladies first, I always say. Hurry! Eat up! Young people like you are still growing. Need to keep your strength up."

Saira reluctantly scooped a small morsel into her mouth. She bit into the brown, dreadful-looking goo, and her eyes shot open in surprise. The flesh was tender, the spices coaxing out its flavour. She wolfed down a full mouthful.

"This is good!" After a few more scoops, she handed the spoon to Aldon.

"Only the best for guests such as yourselves. I just wish it were still hot. But you don't seem to mind."

Saira didn't understand why he lived by himself, so far from the city. "Doesn't it

get lonely out here?”

Mirran’s forehead furrowed, as though a painful, long forgotten memory were struggling to resurface. “Not at all. The animals keep me company. And I keep myself busy with the garden and writing during the day, and the moon and stars at night. That is, if the clouds cooperate. I’m happy to be through winter. Nothing makes me smile like spring blossom—”

“The stars? What do you do with them?”

Mirran took her interruption in stride.

“Oh yes! Interesting creatures, they are. You can see a lot more out here than from inside Baronstoke. But then, you don’t strike me as city folk. Every year to the day, the stars reform the exact same patterns. In perfect time! Like the silver dolphins coming from the sea to spawn in the rivers. The bright stars are always bright, the dim always dim. Holds true for members of our own species as well, or so life has taught me. But I’m always prepared to be proven wrong. Rather enjoy it, in fact. Mistakes are the best teachers, if you’re willing to learn.”

He smiled at Saira. “You’re rather fond of gryphawks. A feather for your thoughts?”

Saira had picked up one of the quills. The huge, tawny-coloured feather mottled with brown rosettes stretched the length of her arm. “Tell me about them.”

“Very noble beasts. Stunning plumage. They migrate hundreds of miles away, maybe more. On wingspans fifty paces across—even bigger on females—they fly over the Dareth Mountains and descend onto the downs east of Solun Lake. This happens in mid-spring, when the sambar emerge from the forest with their fawns to feed on the fields

of green. Flocks of the usually solitary gryphawks feast for weeks before returning to their mountain home. They'll eat humans too, given the opportunity.

"I have quite a few of those feathers. Donated by generous travellers. Please, take one! But not that quill, if you don't mind. That's my favourite. I'll find a feather more suitable for you. Here we are! This is from an adolescent, or maybe the hindleg of an adult."

Saira accepted the delicate gift, and ran her hand over the soft side of the shaft. The barbs immediately fell back into place as her fingers passed. She tried to imagine the original owner of this treasure.

"Don't mention it," Mirran said before she could thank him. "What was I talking about before. Stars! Oh, yes. I've made a habit of recording every star that falls from the heavens. The Divinists believe these are gods coming to visit the earth. But as I've personally seen 12,304, I figure there might be some other force at play.

Aldon stirred. "Stars only fall in the summer, when there's no rain. The white streaks are Solu's light coming down to keep the rivers pure."

"Yes, my dear de-robed acolyte. That is what the scriptures say. Falling stars are certainly most visible during the summer. But in my observances, I have seen them every day of every season. Based on my numbers, and if clouds never obscured the night sky, stars would fall in the dead of winter just as often as they do on the hottest, clearest day.

"My oh my. I've been so excited by your arrival, I've entirely forgotten to ask why you've come!"

Aldon opened his mouth, but couldn't bring himself to speak the words.

"Cara caught your tongue? Something awful, is it? Very little surprises me

anymore. If you can manage to do so, consider me impressed.”

“We want to know about the shadow cloaks,” Saira mustered.

“Oh my. Cloaks of shadow! *That* I didn’t expect. The Untainted are dangerous folk. Well, you’ve come to the right place. I’ll share what I know. Knowledge is strength, after all. And there are far too many weak men in the world.”

Chapter Thirteen

Origins

Mirran rubbed his hands together. He looked like a young boy eager to tell a secret story to his closest friends.

“Have you ever heard the story of the Tainted River? My, that’s a silly question. Of course you have. But you may not have heard *this* version.

“As you both know, a river’s source is its most sacred site. One day, a man by the name of Barem decided to find the headwaters of every stream in Rivaria. Most were simple. The Veiled River flows from Solun Lake, Lanthalos trickles out from the mangroves, and the Yellow River gushes down from the western Nethers. Quite the sight, let me tell you! But there was one he could never find.

“The Talon River is what fills every lake of the land. Its current is swift—faster, in fact, than all other streams combined. So its source must be spectacular. A lost lake atop the Dareth Mountains? A spring from where the gods dug the deepest hole? No other waters flow as wildly and fiercely as the Talon. This made Barem even more determined to be the first to discover its origin.

“The Talon winds itself right through Vedil’s Horns. As hard as he tried, Barem couldn’t climb the slippery rock beyond those two twisted peaks of the Nether Mountains. He returned at the end of the hottest summer, the water levels their lowest in thousands of years. But the mountain was too steep. He returned with pick axe and rope, but the mountain was too brittle. So Barem gave up his quest and settled down in a farm near Valei.

“One day, a trader came by with an egg the size of a child. His crops had wilted from the heat, so he gave the man some shiny rocks he had acquired during his adventures in exchange for the egg, figuring it could feed his family for weeks. Sensible, wouldn’t you say? But the next morning, the egg hatched. A bird pecked its way through the shell, as naked as a newborn babe. It was already the size of ten roosters, and five times that by the end of the month. He raised the gryphawk chick as though it was his own child, feeding it mice, chicken and then pigs and cow. Until, finally, it was able to bear his weight. Then he flew on its back high up into the Nether Mountains.

“He rose above clouds thick and full to reach the top of the tallest mountain—and the beginning of the Talon. A vast lake filled the inside of the peak’s crater. Spotted deer with scimitars for antlers and grey manes of fur drank from the crystal waters. The surface was a perfect mirror. When Barem cupped his hands into the lake and sipped the liquid he felt ten years younger.

“Word of his success spread. Others tried to find this fountain that offered eternal life. They tunnelled through the mountain, dug steps right into the rock, even tried to put harnesses on full grown gryphawks! As you’ve probably guessed, none of them succeeded. But that didn’t stop them from trying.

“Near this time, the selwyn of Lorellien also found the Lake of Souls, as it came to be called. How they got there, legend doesn’t say. They knew the humans were trying to reach its sacred waters, and feared the damage they would cause. Already, the Talon had been tainted by too much digging. So the selwyn left seven male guardians in that crater, to protect the Lake of Souls from hands that would misuse its power. When humans started to disappear in the Dareth Mountains, all but the boldest gave up their

pursuit, and those were never heard from again.

“These seven selwyn have remained in that crater ever since. By drinking from the water, they have lived for centuries and protected the Lake of Souls from further trespassers. Eventually, they started to live in the water itself. Their skin became hard and scaly, and thus the raelisk were born.”

“Wait.” Aldon’s voice was hesitant. “The Untainted are actually raelisk?”

Mirran nodded. “The original Untainted, yes. Other male selwyn have taken up the cause to protect the waterways of Rivaria. They walk along their shores, much like River Walkers. Except these Untainted are able to control the current, and are attempting to regain the honour lost by their ancestors. But let me finish the story.”

Mirran looked at Saira and frowned. “Now where was I? Oh yes. The raelisk were born within the Lake of Souls. After being alone for a hundred lifetimes, they ventured down from the mountains. They followed the headstream to the Dareth Downs, their fingers clawed and toes webbed. These seven wanted to find their home, so long forgotten. But the selwyn had lived too long. Their very skin began to foul the waters. The raelisk stained what they had sworn to protect. For many years, the Talon became the Tainted River.

“Disgraced, the raelisk returned to the mountains. There they live in their disgust and hatred for themselves, never to leave and always to despair.”

Saira couldn’t keep quiet. “But we saw one!”

Mirran wasn’t fazed. “Yes, yes. I have heard reports of them coming south of Solun Lake. The question is, what is bringing them out of the Nether Mountains?”

But Saira had entirely different questions as she tried to piece everything together.

That raelisk she had seen—vile and reptilian—was her *ancestor*? And the dark cloaks were selwyn like her, only male. Where did she fit into all of this?

“Now would be a good time for tea, I think. Although I’m sure you have a lot more questions for me, which I’m all too happy to answer.”

Saira couldn’t bring herself to raise her voice. Aldon shifted uncomfortably on his chair.

“Mirran, what can you tell me of...” His voice faltered. “I want to know about the Order of Templar.”

“My, yes!” Mirran clasped his hands together in excitement. “Very few have the courage to utter that phrase. And an acolyte would be the last I would expect! Perhaps that explains your common clothes. But I won’t pry. I have just the book for you. Goes by that very name, in fact.”

Mirran disappeared behind a mountain of parchment. He burrowed into his books, tossing toms left and right. “Have to be careful! According to the Elders, owning this particular volume is punishable by death. Funny how that is. Banned books are usually the most important ones to read. Ah ha! Here we are.”

He emerged holding a small, bound stack of yellowed paper. The faded ink coloured the elegant script a dull grey. “Apologies for its condition. Without a cover, a book is harder to recognize. But the words haven’t changed. Brown robes, red robes, yellow and blue. Yes, it’s all here. Please, take my copy. Just don’t tell anyone where you got it. Better yet, don’t mention it at all.”

Aldon kept his hands at his sides. “To read that would be sacrilege.”

“Sacrilegious, or sacred? That depends entirely on your point of view. Young

man, I won't tell you what to believe. But I do ask you to ask yourself *why* you believe what you do. Have you thought of the reason the Divine Elder hasn't given you any book other than the Seven Scriptures? Reading this won't cause you to renounce your faith. That is *your* choice. You can choose to limit your knowledge, to follow blindly what others teach. But no matter how much wisdom an Elder may possess, you have to find truth for yourself." Mirran put the book by the door. "I'll leave it for you here. As always, it's your choice.

"Now, let me tell you a little bit about truth. I'm sure you've heard of the shadestorm. Yes? Some say the selwyn use it to keep people from their mangroves. The Elders claim it's a form of punishment. If you stray too far from the scriptures, the black fog will envelop your body and soul and take you to Vedil himself. Yet many innocents have lost their lives in the shadestorm.

"What is the truth? I can't say. I myself would have perished alongside my wife and daughters, if I hadn't received an invitation to dine with the Emperor in the Royal Palace. We were going to move to be closer to her family. Afterward, to her relatives I only became a reminder of what they had lost.

Mirran paused to sigh. His light-filled eyes drooped on his kind face.

"I have spoken to seven hundred-and-sixty-three travelers who have witnessed the storm from a distance. But I have yet to speak to a single soul who has passed through. Most reports indicate the shadestorm occurs at night, stays for one day, and is gone by the next. It has never been seen forming or disappearing. And neither does it move. If it ever formed over Baronstoke, the entire city would be buried in shadow. Some witnesses speak of seeing giant blue butterflies the day after a shadestorm, the flocks so thick it

looks as though the sky is made of moving wings. Others say gryphawks nest within the shadestorm. But there is one constant that holds true across all accounts.”

Mirran grabbed a pile of parchment from his bed. He flipped through the pages like a madman. “Every single person said the same thing. I have it all down here. Frequency, duration, time. The shadestorm only strikes during the new moon. Not *every* new moon, mind you. But only on the day of a new moon. What’s the moral of the tale? Only travel through Lorellien when you can see the moon.”

Saira was getting exhausted just listening to Mirran’s feverish speech. With every subsequent tale, the telling became even more frenetic. She wanted to share with him The Tainted River fairy tale her father had told her. But getting a word in edgewise proved more difficult than getting your foot in a closed door. Mirran finally offered her a chance to speak.

“I’ve been going on and on. I don’t get many visitors these days. May I ask you a question of my own?”

Saira nodded.

“Excellent! It’s about your mayguar. I believe that’s the right term. Can you tell me what you call him?”

“His name is Fenox.”

“I see. The reason I ask, is that mayguars always seem to travel with someone very special. When did you get Fenox? You’ve always had him? Ah yes, that would make sense. Yes, yes.” Mirran looked as though he was going to say something more [to her].

“I hate to be a rude host, but I have to ask you to leave. I’m afraid you may be in

some danger. Someone has followed you here. Living alone with the trees, one learns to recognize certain sounds.”

Saira thought of Jed and Cal. The sun had just past its zenith. “It’s okay, Mirran. Those might be our friends.”

“Unless you have befriended the royal guard, I doubt that very much. At least ten sets of armoured feet are trampling through the bloodleaf as we speak. Our tea will have to wait for another time. Can you climb?”

Saira looked at Aldon. He got to his feet. “What do we need to do?”

“Follow the creek to the second pool before the falls. There’s a rope ladder hidden inside a fissure in the ridge. Pull yourself to the top.”

Aldon bowed. “Thank you for your generosity, and your words.”

“What good is an old man if he lacks wisdom? Now off with you! Or else I’ll have to explain to the royal guard why I’m harbouring an acolyte in exile and a female selwyn.”

Saira gaped at him.

“Believe me, my lady, the pleasure is mine more than yours.”

Stunned, she stumbled after Aldon. He was sliding the Order of Templar book under his shirt. Saira stopped at the threshold.

“Why don’t you come with us?”

Mirran smiled, his cheeks swelling toward his benevolent eyes. “Many years have past since such a kind offer was proffered. But where would I go? These words are my life. Journey safely. You are fortunate to have such company. May Solu shine upon you.”

The last she saw of Mirran, he was madly flapping his arm from the doorway, like a child waving goodbye to his parents for the day.

Mirran's house stood at the mouth of the ravine. Aldon motioned for them to go inside. She followed the gentle current upstream, Fenox trailing at her heels. The creek ran over a smooth bed of stone, a paltry reminder of the magnificent powers that had carved this canyon into being a thousand lifetimes ago. It felt like walking through a ripple in Rivaria's crust.

After several bends, the combe tapering to half its width, falls materialized on the right side. The dribble of water clung to the bulbous face of rock as it followed gravity's pull. Aldon used the second pool—more like a puddle—to locate the rope-ladder inside a perpendicular crevice. He pulled it into the open. The criss-crossed rope dangled over the chasm wall. Surprisingly, Aldon didn't hesitate in putting his hands and feet into the swaying rungs.

Saira started to follow, but turned back abruptly.

"Wait! How is Fenox going to get up?"

The rope above her stilled as Aldon halted his climb. "Can you carry him?"

"He's too heavy. And anyway I'd worry about dropping him."

"Well, Fenox always seems to find you, one way or another. I'm sure he'll catch us up."

Saira watched the mayguar crouch like a cat to lap water from the creek. Then he began to backtrack.

"See? Let's keep going."

She made her way up as Fenox trotted out of sight. This climb proved to be

straightforward, more comfortable by the lack of harrowing pursuers. Saira gripped the rope with confident hands, making for a swift ascent.

“What’s that smell?” she inquired after they reached the top. The creek flowed upstream from the falls into a thicket of dewberry and pine.

“There’s smoke,” Aldon said, pointing back the way they had come.

Saira saw the growing column of smoke, like a thin, curling snake raising its head. As she watched, the white bulk shifted and swelled into a formless black mass that soon billowed toward the scattered clouds.

“Oh no!” she suddenly cried out. “That must be Mirran’s house. Should we go back?”

Aldon didn’t respond. He had spun around, eyes crazed. “Look out!”

Saira heeded his scream. Five dark cloaks were bearing down on them, their long blades like silver shards in the sunlight. She stepped back. Her foot went over the precipice. Terrified, she ran along the edge, scrambling on all fours as she tried not to fall into the looming ravine. A circle of shadow closed her off.

Three of the Untainted enveloped her. Saira felt her hair being pulled back, her arms roughly tied to her side. The dark cloaks smelled of wet earth, their breathing hoarse. She fought against them, but their fingers were like steel cutting into her skin. From the corner of her eye she saw a shadow swing a wide blade at Aldon. The sword connected with a *crack* and Aldon fell to the ground, unmoving. Then something was put over her head, and everything went black.

#

Mirran waited patiently for his new guests to arrive. He had been visited by the

royal guard before, and an Elder or two in the past. But never by the Divine Elder himself. Caro Orsen strode forward like he owned the place, flanked on either side by six fully-armoured men. The royal guard were monsters of metal, their only colour a few errant bloodleaf stems stuck in their joints and a splash of red adorning their plumed helms which—to Mirran’s eyes— sat on their heads like upside down tea kettles. The Divine Elder’s long, blue temple robes made it difficult to navigate the rocky terrain. Mirran chuckled at each of Caro’s missteps. He wondered how often the Elder stepped outside of Baronstoke. But mostly, Mirran’s mind churned over Aldon and Saira, trying to figure how an ex-acolyte came to travel with a selwyn. There was something he was supposed to give them. Or had he already?

“A full complement!” Mirran shuffled toward his thirteen guests with a smile. Which wasn’t difficult, because he smiled at everyone. “To what do I owe the honour?”

With Mirran being so short, Caro had no difficulty looking down his nose at him. “You will answer me swift and true. Have you seen an acolyte with a young woman?”

“No,” Mirran answered truthfully, for he couldn’t recall seeing a brown-robed acolyte with a human woman. “But then, my mind isn’t as good as it used to be. What day or week would they have come by?”

“This very morning.” Caro’s eyes held an inferno.

“I wish I could be of assistance. I do record the names and times of every visitor I speak to, though most of my conversations take place along the main road. Should I dig out those parchments? Your men must be hot inside those suits. Would they like to come inside for something—”

“Silence!”

Mirran shut his half-open mouth.

“Do you know who I am?”

“Yes. Your name is Caro Orsen.”

“I am the Divine Elder of Baronstoke. That is how I am to be addressed. Unless you can tell me what I want to hear, these heretical records of yours will be destroyed.”

For the first time, Mirran felt an inkling of unease. For himself, he did not fear life or death. But his work kept his spirit alive, like sunlight to the leaf of every plant. He found it hard to keep smiling.

“Titles do not make a man. As for what you want to hear, I can only speak the truth as I know it. To ask me to do something more is to ask a river to flow up a mountain.”

Caro glowered at him. “You have been warned before about spreading lies and dissent into the hearts of our people. For this crime, you should be imprisoned in the dungeons of Baronstoke for the duration of your remaining years.”

“Not many of those, I fear.” Mirran looked at the line of royal guard, searching the blank stares for some semblance of self-worth. Disappointed, he met the Divine Elder’s steely gaze again. “There are no lies within these walls. Although I do not claim to know *the* truth, all I have done is document things others and myself have seen.”

“The eyes can easily deceive.”

“Words most wise, Caro. Please come and see what I have found. Your eyes can decide for themselves.”

Caro glanced at the mess of papers and books at Mirran’s back. “I do not have time for your silly theories. The Seven Scriptures hold the one truth. Everything else is

blasphemy. Guards! Raze this building to the ground.”

Mirran didn't move. As the guards went by, he simply stood and watched Caro. The crackle of flame and stink of smoke didn't divert his gaze. Even when the heat of the fire threatened to blister his back, he did not turn. The Divine Elder's proud eyes didn't waver. There was a resounding crash. Still, Mirran stood in place. Caro, uncomfortable with his stare and satisfied that his work was done, gathered up his robes.

“One more thing before I leave. I recommend you use the remainder of your life constructively. Become a farmer or craftsman. Because if you are ever found spreading heresy again, you will be the one burning.”

Mirran blinked. “Then I am afraid I will only disappoint you.”

But Caro Orsen didn't hear him. Mirran had the feeling he did a lot more speaking than listening. The royal guard marched first over the hacked and slashed bloodleaf.

Mirran grimaced as he shifted on his good leg. Flames crawled over the walls of his house in undulating currents of yellow and orange. One side had collapsed into a heap of hissing logs. Huge waves of grey rolled out of the door, gathering on the roof into a flood of rising smoke. He watched his life's work, serving as kindling for one man's arrogance, and felt his heart break.

Slowly, humbly, Mirran walked into the blaze. Thick smoke choked him as he crossed the threshold. A layer of ash already covered the floor. Parchments curled up like a fist, their edges blackening and then disappearing into the belly of the ravenous fire. He watched books smoulder and burn, their knowledge lost in flame.

There was a sound like a tree being torn in two. Something hit him from behind,

and Mirran found himself pinned to the hot floor. Somehow, this seemed fitting. He was meant to die with his creations. All these pages were his children, their ink his inspiration. They would perish together.

He coughed. Then, within the maelstrom of fire and smoke, he caught sight of a rolled-up parchment. Of course! The Scroll of Five! *That* is what he should have given Saira and Aldon.

Mirran reached for the scroll but his fingers fell short. Putting his elbows underneath his rotund stomach, he tried to push himself up. The board on his back refused to budge. He was trapped. Smoke filled his lungs. His insides were on fire. Mirran gritted his teeth and shoved his arms behind his head, grappling with the plank. He found a hold. His palms sizzled against the baking wood but still he pushed. The board fell off his back with a thud.

Retrieving the scroll, Mirran hopped out of the house, his face numb with heat. He coughed out smoke and breathed in fresh air. His eyes watered. But he was alive.

An animal suddenly hurtled by, disappearing into the bloodleaf. It took him a second to recognize the mayguar. *Where was Fenox off to? No*, he reminded himself. *That wasn't the question. Where was Mirran off to?*

Ensuring his pipe was in his pocket, he set out to deliver the Scroll of Five. That was his new purpose. So while his house burned behind him, Mirran followed where the mayguar led.

Chapter Fourteen

Pursuit

Cal pointed at the cluster of acolytes and initiates moving toward the gate. “How about now?”

Jed shook his head. “Too crowded.”

“You said that’s what we wanted!”

“Changed my mind.”

Hidden in the home of a wealthy merchant—whose owner, conveniently enough, was away on business—the two of them had watched the east gate since dawn. The second-story window provided a safe vantage point from which to survey their escape from Baronstoke. Unfortunately, the odds were stacked against them. There were twice as many sentries; the twenty guards stopped to question every person who passed under the gryphawk arch, robed or not. Jed figured they could slip through during the busiest part of the day. Now, he had other ideas.

Cal looked antsy. “It’s getting late. Noon is fast approaching.”

“Patience, brother. Opportunity will present itself soon enough.”

Nearly three hours ago, they had seen the royal guard escort the Divine Elder through the gate. Caro spoke sternly with the gate sentries, and ever since movement in and out of the city had slowed to a crawl. The wide mouth of the gate constricted to a narrow channel. Cal was right—they needed to make their move. If the city guard didn’t find them, Waryn would; the thieves’ clade wouldn’t hesitate to dole out justice right in the street.

Jed studied the constant stream of people. The initiates looked disgruntled at being interrupted in their pilgrimage to prayer, or whatever it was they did all day. A fruit cart was stopped and searched, and several ladies of the highlords had to pull aside their veils. The guards had never been so thorough. Then Jed saw what he had been waiting for.

Way up the main street, a father and son led their respective horses toward the exit. The roan mares looked skittish in the crowds; they wanted to be outside. Beyond the gate, rolling over the eastern Ivory bridge, approached a carriage pulled by six white geldings and—more importantly—their saddles bore the diamond-shaped insignia of the royal court.

Jed looked between the carriage and the twin mares. Yes—the highlord would reach the gate first.

“Show time!”

Jed bolted down the stairs. Cal didn’t question him, chasing after Jed out the door by which they had entered. His younger brother had always been handy with a picklock.

“This is how it’s going to work, Cal. We’ll be making a four-legged exit on the two mares coming alongside us.”

“Those aren’t mares.”

“Whatever. They’ll still work. We hitch a ride on their backs through the arch. The highlord in the carriage will provide our cover.”

By way of response, Cal walked casually to the other side of the young roans, feigning interest in everything but that prize. The set of reins closer to Cal was being held by a child of maybe nine or ten. No problem for his brother. Jed watched the

bearded father out of his peripheral vision. He had the strong arms of a hardworking farmer; his kindly eyes would be his undoing.

About forty paces from the gate, Jed tapped the father's shoulder.

"Excuse me, sir. I think you dropped this."

Before the bearded man could reply, Jed pushed the few gold coin he had managed to pilfer from the merchant's coffer into his free hand.

The father looked down at his palm in surprise. "I think you're mistaken. I don't barter in coin."

"Consider it a gift for you and your boy."

"A gift for what?"

"Here's another." Jed tossed his last coin onto the ground. The man reached down. By the time he stood again, Jed was digging his heels into the horse's side.

"Hee-ya!"

Cal trotted beside him atop his own steed. Despite receiving more than fair payment, the father screamed after them. "Stop! Thief!"

Fortunately, his voice was drowned out by the clomping hooves and the commotion already in progress under the gryphawk arch.

"This is an outrage!" The highlord had just stepped out from his carriage. Jed saw a velvet curtain over the window of the open door. "As a member of the royal court, I demand to be shown respect!"

The closest guard apologized. "Sorry, sir. But we have orders from the Divine Elder to search every carriage."

The sentries spotted Jed and Cal bearing down on them and moved to intercept.

“You two! Hold up!”

By now, they were near a full gallop. The carriage-tied horses stomped their hooves.

“Veer right!”

Jed swung the bridle to one side. His horse reared its head and whinnied, but still obeyed. They tore past the geldings, the carriage separating them from half the guards. The highlord turned in surprise to see two roans about to trample him. The apologetic guard pushed him to the ground as Jed and Cal flew past. Another sentry made a grab for Jed. He kicked his stirrup into the sentry’s helmet. The man went down.

They passed the carriage and the last of the guards. Like a ship parting the sea other travellers fled to the roadside before them. Jed could still hear the highlord yelling at the guards.

“Mud! Mud on my breeches! I will have your heads!”

It was only after they reached the bridge that Jed recognized his horse’s thin mane of blonde hair.

He groaned. “These aren’t horses! They’re Farnley *ponies!*” If they were pursued by guards on horseback, they wouldn’t keep ahead for long.

“I tried to tell you.” The better rider of the two, Cal slowly inched ahead of him. “How much did you give for these?”

“Five guineas worth.”

“How much do we have left? I thought so. What’s gotten into you? You’ve changed, brother.”

“Don’t rub it in!”

Jed whipped his reins up and down and shoved his heels into his pony's flanks, but Cal still managed to stay in front. After a couple miles, having put all the farms and houses outside the city walls behind them, they slowed to a trot. A billowing pillar of smoke gave them both pause.

Cal motioned toward the distant, black column. "Where do you think that's coming from?"

"As a betting man," Jed replied. "I'd put everything on that beacon leading to Mad Mirran's. Or what's left of it. I think it's time we took the road less travelled."

Jed swung off the saddle and guided his roan south of the road, into an area of shrub far too short for his liking. The pony pulled at him until he let her munch on the sprouting grass.

"You need a name. What shall I call you?"

The Farnley pony neighed loudly.

"Feisty one, aren't you. How about Winnie?"

In response, the roan snorted in disgust.

"Okay, okay. That's no name for a noble pony such as yourself. How about Sonja? That's the first girl I fell in love with. I'll take your silence as a yes."

Sonja threw up her head and went back to her feeding.

"Brother, get down!"

Jed ducked behind the roan. The sound of a timed march reached his ears. Cal didn't utter warnings unless they were dire. He could see his brother crouched behind a dewberry bush. Jed had no such luxury. Sonja was his only cover. Standing beside her neck, he matched his movements to the pony's, shifting his body up whenever she raised

her head from the grass. She whinnied at him.

“Stop that, girl.” he whispered. “You’ll have us both found out.”

The measured footsteps faded toward Baronstoke. Jed, thoroughly tired of doing the half-body stretch, was glad to see Cal finally return to his feet.

“What’s the word?”

“That contingent of royal guard just passed with one Caro Orsen. Not sure what they were doing, but he looked very pleased with himself. Think we should find what kindled that smoke?”

“I think we should go wherever Caro is not. They didn’t have anyone else with them?”

“No, just the thirteen.”

“All right. I know another way into Mad Mirran’s. We’ll have to cross the road about half a mile up.”

Jed climbed into the saddle and patted Sonja’s yellow mane. “Good girl. You’ll be faithful, won’t you? Restore the honour to your namesake.”

“You and your women.”

Jed laughed while Cal shook his head. “Makes life a lot more interesting. I know there’s someone out there for you. Let’s go see if we can find her!”

The sun had passed its summit in the sky. This far out from Baronstoke there were few travellers on the road. But Jed and Cal kept to the surrounding hills.

Dandelions covered the downs, their tiny, yellow sunheads bobbing in the wind. Jed scratched at his sweat-lined collar. He hadn’t realized until now how thirsty he was.

Their ponies kept up a steady pace.

“Let’s find some water. I think there’s a creek on the north side.”

When they got to the main road, Jed noticed a man stumbling away from them. Stains of brown and red littered his torn clothes. One raised hand tried to cover the dried blood on his forehead. As they went by, Jed maneuvered Sonja to give the stranger a wide berth.

“Hey! Isn’t that Aldon?”

Jed did a double take. “Lhoran’s light! What happened to him?”

Aldon fell to his knees. For a second, he managed to hold up his head. Jed saw the nasty gash above his temple, a purple crater with a trail of crusty lava. Aldon looked at them as though they were ghosts. Then his neck bowed to one side and the acolyte toppled over like a tree without roots.

Cal dismounted and got to him first. “Let’s take him to the creek and clean him up.”

Jed nodded. “Just what I was thinking.”

“Help me put him into the saddle.”

“Stay here, my girl,” Jed said to Sonja. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Together, the brothers lifted the limp body. Aldon’s head dropped against his chest. Jed pushed up his chin. “Aldon? This is Jed. You know, the unscrupulous swindler. Who did this to you? Where’s Saira?”

Aldon only moaned.

They threw him over the rump of Cal’s pony. Cal hopped into the saddle and held onto Aldon’s prone body. The roan stamped her hooves but didn’t complain any further. Taking Sonja’s reins, Jed walked in front. Short firs shifted to pine as he led them north.

Sonja tread carefully as the terrain became rocky, the pine cones replaced by pebbles.

The sound of running water soon sang in his ears.

“Here we are! Not much of a creek, but it’ll do.”

Pulling him down, they placed Aldon next to the babbling brook. Cal ripped off a part of his own sleeve, dipped the cloth in the current, and began dabbing Aldon’s forehead.

“Someone hit him good. Probably Caro, for finding him out of his robes.”

Jed disagreed. “If Caro had found him, he would either be dead or in shackles on his way back to Baronstoke. I’m sure they have an extra cell in the dungeons for a deserter.”

The ponies lowered their heads for a drink, and Jed followed suit. He noted that the creek ended abruptly behind them, flowing under a lip of rock and out of sight. The current simply vanished into the ground. As he sharpened his chak, he watched the water drop down, an endless supply filling the bowels of the land.

“Where does this creek go?”

Cal shrugged. “It must join with the Ivory, underground.”

Jed tried to imagine a river running through the crevices of the earth. For some reason, the thought comforted him, knowing the pure fluid could persist underneath the surface, untouched by human hands.

Cal cupped some water and poured it into Aldon’s mouth. The liquid seemed to revitalize him.

“I think he’s coming around.”

Aldon sat up straight and jerked his head from Jed to Cal.

“What’s going on?”

“We were hoping you’d know more than us.”

Aldon lifted a hand to his face. He winced as his fingers touched the rinsed wound. His eyes ran slowly over the ponies and along the creek bed. He sucked in his breath suddenly, as though remembering.

“The dark cloaks...”

Jed waited impatiently. “What about them?”

“When I woke up the dark cloaks were gone. Saira was gone.”

Jed exchanged an uneasy glance with Cal.

“Start from the beginning.”

“We found Mad Mirran,” Aldon said. “He has more books and scrolls than I’ve ever seen. Mirran told us a story about raelisks and the Untainted. If he’s right, they’re one and the same—or at least, they used to be. The Untainted are selwyn that keep the rivers pure. Although I don’t understand how the dark cloaks can be *protecting* the spirit waters...”

“You can fill us in on that later. What about Saira?”

“We had to part company with Mirran earlier than expected. The royal guard were coming. To do what, I’m not sure. We climbed out of the ravine using a rope-ladder Mirran had hidden by the falls of this creek. When we got to the top, we saw all this smoke coming from Mirran’s place. That’s when the Untainted appeared.” Jed could see the pain behind Aldon’s eyes. “By Solu, they came out of nowhere. Saira tried to run, but they were too fast. I couldn’t stop them. They had some kind of spirit shield.”

“Hold on a second. Didn’t you say the dark cloaks are selwyn? They wouldn’t

harm one of their own.”

Aldon’s expression was grave. “You’re wrong. They treated her no better than an Elder would treat a swen.”

Jed understood. What were they going to do? What *could* they do? Saira’s fate was out of their hands.

“What a pity. She was a nice girl.” Jed stroked Sonja’s neck. Cal had a stubborn look on his face. “I know when it’s time to give up.”

“No, brother. You never know when it’s time to give up.” Cal helped Aldon get to his feet. His brother didn’t look at all uncertain. “And this isn’t one of those times. I’m going after her.”

Jed knew the reason for that. Saira *was* a pretty girl, after all. Aldon looked at Cal, and then met Jed’s stare.

The Elder-boy didn’t blink. “So am I.”

“And you call *me* crazy. How are we going to follow the dark cloaks? They move like shadows passing in the night.”

Cal began tightening his pony’s saddle straps. Aldon held his head high, as though he had woken from a long, restful sleep rather than a bump on the noggin.

“I know when I’m outnumbered, though I don’t recall putting our decisions to a vote.” Jed tucked away his dagger and sharpening stone. “Do you know what we’re getting ourselves into? Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” Jed grabbed the horn and pulled himself atop Sonja. “I’d offer you ride with me, Elder-boy—guess I shouldn’t call you that anymore?—but Sonja here is a one man kind of girl.”

Aldon inspected their steeds with disapproval. “Where did you get these Farnley

ponies?”

“Don’t pass judgement so quickly. As a matter of fact, I paid far too much for these two.” He put his mouth close to Sonja’s ear. “Except you, my dear. I’d pay a dozen diamonds for you.”

Cal took a final swig from the creek and then assisted Aldon in getting his foot into the stirrup.

Jed suddenly had a thought. “Hey, water weaver! Can’t you use the spirits to find her, like you did with me?”

Aldon looked back over his shoulder, his body bent across the pony’s side. “That’s not how it works. I have to place the spirit beforehand. Even then, the trail fades after an hour or two.”

“I bet it can’t hurt to try.”

“Maybe...”

Aldon furrowed his face in consternation, and then set himself down on a dry section of the creek bed. He closed his eyes and put his hands over the running water. Jed could see small whirlpools and eddies forming under his fingers.

A moment later Aldon abruptly opened his eyes, as though startled from a dream. He looked at Jed the way a cow looks at a fence. Then his eyes focused.

“If I’m reading the *hlasa* correctly, the dark cloaks are taking Saira east.”

“Toward Lorellien? That would make sense. Not much does, these days.” Jed didn’t know how he had gotten into this mess. Maybe the chrak had something to do with it. Three humans off to save a swen, and Jed Trail making honest payments. He swore. What was the world coming to?

Chapter Fifteen

Quava

Saira could only see black.

They had trekked for hours and hours, until the day grew cold and her knees felt ready to crumple. At first, despite being blindfolded, the going was relatively easy. The land was flat and the path smooth. Then a chill came over body, as though she had walked under a great shadow. The birds stopped singing, and there were no leaves to be rustled. A high wind moaned but couldn't be felt, and the air became heavy with water. She tripped over roots and rocks and was prodded by firm hands to clamber over jagged surfaces. They had a rope tied around her waist, held by someone she couldn't see.

The dark cloaks kept the pace brisk, only stopping long enough for Saira to catch her breath. They never spoke. She could always hear a current of some kind, and figured they must be following a river, certainly larger than the creek by Mirran's. From the slippery feel of the boulders they made her climb, Saira gathered they were headed up the bed of a mountain stream.

And then everything changed.

Even with the cloth wrapped around her head, some light managed to filter through, blurring her vision to grey. But it suddenly felt like the sun had simply vanished from the sky. There was no colour. Walls of rock seemed to close in on her. When rough hands untied the rope at her waist and ripped the blindfold off, she was greeted by darkness, whole and absolute. She shivered and lay down in a fetal position, hugging herself for warmth. The muscles in her legs throbbed with languid heat, yet goose bumps

swelled up her arms. Notched with stalagmites, the cave floor made for an uncomfortable mattress. *Better than last night*, she thought. She was too exhausted to cry.

Saira couldn't remember falling asleep. Her dreams sprang immediately to life. In shades of black and white, she moved along the banks of a winding river. Mountains loomed in the distance, their spires reaching beyond the cloud. Everything felt familiar, somehow, even though she didn't recognize any of what she saw. Then it hit her: this was where she had travelled yesterday at the mercy of the dark cloaks. It was as though her blind eyes had recorded her movements, and was now replaying the scene in her head. Except the sun was replaced by a gibbous moon. An ominous rock face, the stones jutting out like giant, serrated swords, was the last thing she saw.

Saira woke to an unbearable stiffness. Her legs felt like the gnarled trunk of a bristlecone pine, and her eyes opened to nothingness. A part of her wanted to return to her dream, to be able to *see* again. Sitting up required a world of effort. She tried to rub her aching limbs, but the muscles were far too tight to massage.

A woman's accented voice came out of the dark.

"You'll get used to the light."

Saira jumped. She wasn't expecting anyone to be so close. The voice sounded unusual, like it belonged to someone from the distant islands where jaber cats were kept as pets and men were ten feet tall.

"What light? I can't see *anything*."

"In the hours after daybreak, a faint ray manages to trickle through the cavern's corridors. For instance, I can see that, like me, you're a selwyn."

Saira put her hands on her knees, trying to see who was speaking.

“Are you one of the dark cloaks?”

The woman laughed. “To see the day when a female wears the cloak! No. I am a woman, such as yourself, bound by selwyn law to stay within the borders of Quasaria.”

Then the voice went silent.

“Why have they brought us here? Hello? I know you’re there.”

Saira might as well been talking to herself.

Footsteps approached from behind, swift and hard thuds on the rocky floor. She turned around, trying to orient herself. If what the stranger said was true, that should be east. She was right about her eyes adjusting to the light: Saira could barely make out the silhouette of three dark cloaks coming towards her. Somehow, knowing the direction and time of day brought her comfort, however small it felt.

Two of the dark cloaks held her arms in place. She didn’t struggle. She didn’t see the point. Then the third pulled out a knife and put it to her neck.

Saira screamed. “No!”

He raised the knife over her ear, grabbed a handful of hair and pulled, jerking her head to her shoulder. Saira didn’t understand. Then she felt the blade sawing through her auburn strands. She tried to break free. The other two held her tightly in place. The cutter yanked another clump of hair. Pain tore through her scalp. Saira closed her eyes and waited for them to be done. After an eternity of hands running over her head and falling locks of hair, they left her alone in the cave.

Saira bent over in nausea. She could feel her cut hair on her shoulders and lap. It had never been this short, not for as long as she could rememeber. Picking up a cluster of

severed strands, she stroked her fingers over their smoothness. She couldn't stop her tears, which formed and dropped as steady as water from a stalactite.

"Why did you cut your ears?"

That voice again. Saira wanted nothing to do with it. She turned away from the sound.

"That's why they cut your hair. So you can't hide who you are."

"I never cut my ears!" Saira answered through angry tears. How dare this woman try to justify what the dark cloaks had done to her. "That's how I was born."

"I find that hard to believe." Yet the woman's tone had changed, taking on a softness. "In which grove did you birth?"

"Grove? I was born in the village of Maystone."

"A *human* settlement?"

"Yes...until a few days ago, I thought I was human as well."

Feet scraped over rock. Saira wiped her eyes. She could see a large woman stepping carefully toward her, one hand on her stomach. Long dark hair fell over her chest. She was about Saira's height and at least ten years older, with eyes that shone in the dark.

"I must offer an apology. When I saw your lobes were cut, I thought you were one of the kedren—that is, a selwyn who pretends to be human. Quava is my birthname."

"My name is Saira. You are the first selwyn I have spoken to."

"They'll be plenty more, after they take you back to Quasaria. How many dark cloaks were with you?"

"Five."

“Five!” The woman chuckled good-naturedly. “Suddenly, I don’t seem so important. Only two found me wandering the banks of the Veiled River. That means all seven are here, together.”

Saira wanted to ask what significance that number held, but her eyes could make out more details now. Quava wore loose, brown clothing. Her long ears dangled over the edge of her jaw and down her neck, as though her lower lobes were elastic and someone had stretched them as far as they would go. Half a dozen steel earrings ran down their length, the silver studs smallest at her ear’s rounded end. She was sitting down, back resting against the cavern wall and arms crossed over her round, protruding belly.

“Oh my! You’re—”

“Pregnant? Yes. They’ve kept me here a week now. Usually, wayward selwyn are returned home immediately. I think, given my condition, they decided to keep me here. My mother always told me it’s best to give birth in a dark place. Less distraction, less fuss. Though once my child is born, they will take us both to the watergroves.”

Saira didn’t understand. “Why will they take you back?”

“Selwyn stay with their own kind. Humans are unclean. They dam the rivers and taint their waters. To be among them is to take on their impurity.”

“Then why did you leave?”

Quava was silent a moment, as though considering her answer and whether to share it.

“In my watergrove, to be with child and without a mate is not accepted. You are expected to survive thirty winters before bonding. The father was visiting from another grove. He knows nothing of this. When the size of my growing belly could no longer be

hidden, I was given a choice. Bond with an older man I did not care for, or leave for another grove. I chose to leave.

“For a few months, I lived on the waters.” Quava spoke proudly with confident words. “I could not stand the shameful stares I received from every face I encountered. So I made my canoe my home, moving from one day to the next, staying away from the groves. Then winter approached, and for first time in my life I came across the xarg.”

“What’s a xarg?”

Quava looked at her strangely. “No, you wouldn’t know if you’ve never been in the watergroves. How peculiar it must be to not know one’s people. Almost ten years ago, my mother was going to visit another selwyn settlement. Her boat was capsized, and she was taken by the xarg. The xarg never sleeps. She swims around the groves, larger than any rivercraft. Her shell is built like a hill, with scales the size of broad shields that not even the sharpest arrow can penetrate. Eight legs that shift from spiny claws to feathery fins keep her on constant prowl. The xarg’s huge head bears a resemblance to a snapping turtle, yet her beak is greater than a gryphawk’s, able to bite through the trunk of the thickest tree. Legends say she was put there to keep the selwyn in their groves, and to keep humans out of our sacred waters.

“Groves are built where the roots are densest, so the xarg cannot get inside. I tried to keep to the smaller waterways. But once the xarg found me, my life knew no peace. Wherever I went, she followed, searching and waiting. And so I came onto land. Fearing for the life of my child, I wore a hood to conceal my heritage, and have lived in and around these mountains ever since. That is, until the Untainted tracked me down and brought me here. In truth, I have come to enjoy my solitude. I want to follow the path of

my own life, wherever it leads.”

Saira pondered Quava’s last words. More than anything, she felt a kinship with that statement of personal truth.

“All my life,” Saira began, “I haven’t known who or what I am. It’s odd to hear you speak of humans as loathsome creatures. I don’t understand how we are so very different. Almost twenty years I’ve lived among them. Humans and selwyn seem more alike than swallows and wrens. My father is the only person that cared for me. I suppose he was human as well.”

“Being raised by a human.” Quava was shaking her head. “Such a thing I have never heard.”

Saira pushed herself to her feet. Stretching her back, she brushed off the loose hair clinging to her clothes. The strands fell to the dark cavern floor. She put her hands to her own hair, cut above her ears. It seemed sharp against her fingers. She felt naked, like a branch without leaves. Saira suddenly remembered her encounter with Waryn.

“I’m not going to let them blindfold me again.”

“The dark cloaks must be obeyed.” Quava spoke as though disobedience were out of the question.

“Obeyed? You sound like a child speaking of her father. Are you going to let them take you back to these watergroves of Quasaria?”

“I would rather they not. Living where the land is higher than the water has grown on me. But I do not have a choice.”

“No, you always have a choice. Others shouldn’t tell you where or how to live your life. I’m going to get us out of here.” Saira reached past Mirran’s gift—the

gryphawk feather—down to the empty hollow of her pocket. Quava must have seen the angst-ridden expression on her face.

“What is it?”

“They took my sunstone!”

Quava suddenly stood, faster than Saira thought possible, given her extra bulk.

“Why do you have a sunstone?”

“It was a gift from my father.”

“Your *human* father. No, that can’t be. A sunstone can only be held in the hands of a selwyn. But why would you carry one? Only males can touch the water spirits. [is this true?]”

Saira recalled what Caro Orsen had said about the spirits, and Jed yelling at Aldon for putting some onto him. Where were they now? That felt like another life.

“I’ve used that stone to heal and to blind.”

Quava walked up to her, eyes wide. Her breathing came in shallow gasps.

“Are you okay?”

Quava ignored her. “By the spirits! You are a syl. Do you know what that means?”

Startled by Quava’s outburst, Saira backed up and turned her head to one side.

“Only one is born every fifty years. A syl is a female selwyn sent by the water gods to cleanse the groves. My mother used to tell me the stories, but I never really believed them. The last syl died over a century ago. Her *daman* passed away, and then her dreams became dark.” Quava looked at her gravely. “Saira, where is your *daman*?”

“Fenox? I don’t know. He’s probably trying to find—”

“But you *do* have one.”

“Yes...” Saira was scared by Quava’s intensity. She seemed to be possessed.

“Then you should know exactly where he is.”

Saira frowned. “And how would I know that?”

“Have you never been told? You have the power to delve, to see what your *daman* sees. His vision becomes your own. It’s simple. All you have to do is close your eyes.”

Saira thought about her dreams the last few weeks. While she slept, the world moved around her. But it wasn’t her dreams. It was *Fenox*. With a start, Saira realized all those visions were from *him*. Fenox often roamed around at night, and she had seen whatever he laid his eyes upon. All those visions at night of the dark cloaks...they were from him.

“If you are willing, I will teach you to delve as best I can.” Quava’s enthralled stare felt uncomfortable. The older woman looked at her as Aldon did Solu. Somehow, that didn’t seem right. “Why don’t you try to delve?”

Saira agreed. Sitting down on the rigid rock, she closed her eyes and tried to relax.

“It’s no use. I’m not tired.”

“Tired?”

“Yes. I can’t fall sleep unless I’m tired.”

Quava was shaking her head. “No, no. You don’t have to be asleep. Just put yourself with your *daman*. Some syl could even delve with their eyes open. Please, try again.”

“I don’t know how!” Saira put her hands over her face. Her head still hurt from

the rough handling of the dark cloaks. “I thought those were *my* dreams.”

“In a way, they do belong to you. You and your daman are cut from the same cloth. Maybe pretend you’re dreaming. Sit with your eyes closed, and think of your daman.”

Saira sucked in a long breath. Letting the air out slowly, she placed her hands on her knees and tried to focus on Fenox. She thought of his long black fur and silver stripe, the way he padded silently on all fours, betraying no sound, and the warmth of his breath. Her vision was still clouded by shadow. Saira remembered all those times she had hunted in her dreams, chasing after cara in their dens. Darkness. Then she thought of the shades of grey in which Fenox saw the world, and a door opened in her mind.

“By Solu! I can see!”

Quava sighed excitedly. “Describe it to me.”

“I see mountains. Tall mountains, with no snow. The sun is shining behind me. Its rays are reflecting off a waterfall that drops between two boulders.”

Quava looked awestruck. “You really are a syl.”

“Wait...I can see three of the dark cloaks. They are halfway up one of the rocky slopes. I can’t see much more than that.”

“Tell your daman to go closer.”

“What?”

“Tell Fenox to move toward the dark cloaks, so you can better see their formation.”

Saira blinked her eyes. She felt dizzy, moving between that distant vision and the present one inside this cave. “What do you mean, *tell Fenox*? He’s outside and I’m

stuck in here.”

“A syl is never separate from her daman. You may be apart, even hundreds of miles. But like a river that begins from a mountain glacier, and flows through countless furrows and bends to finally reach the ocean, that water forms one continuous stream. The ice and the sea are always connected. So are you and Fenox.”

Saira still couldn’t comprehend the notion of *speaking* to Fenox. “How do I talk to a mayguar who I can only see with my eyes shut?”

Quava looked uncertain. “I don’t think you talk to him the way you and I are doing now. Imagine the way the moon speaks to the tides, or the sun speaks to a flower. Speak from your heart, as I do with my unborn child. Fenox will hear you.”

Saira tried to concentrate on her daman. She found him quickly this time, lapping water from a swift streambed. Somehow, she could feel the water in her own parched mouth, cool and refreshing. *Fenox*, she thought, *go back to the base of the mountains*.

His head lifted from the current, and he returned to where he had been when she first delved. The range looked daunting from his perspective. Fenox already knew what she was going to ask before she had spoken it clearly in her own mind. She could feel his reluctance. Something about the dark cloaks raised his hackles. But he went resolutely forward, testing ridges and ledges with his paws before committing his weight. Mayguars were adept swimmers, but very awkward climbers.

“Can he hear you? What do you see?”

Saira nodded, keeping her eyes shut. She didn’t want to lose her link.

Up he went, following a goat path that passed one precipice after another, the roots of firs desperately clinging to cracks in the rock. Fenox stayed close to every

surface he crossed. Saira's stomach felt queasy, moving so quickly over such heights. But she was too immersed to turn away. There were several perilous switchbacks and then her daman stopped and raised his head.

Saira's eyes saw what he saw. There was an opening, like a mouth on the face of the mountain. Two dark figures stood near the entrance, almost too still to be alive. She couldn't see any other way in or out.

"There are two of them outside," she said while keeping her eyes with Fenox.

"Ask him where the others have gone."

Where are the other dark cloaks?

Fenox shifted his gaze to the left, following the interminable length of the stream.

"He's looking south."

"Yes," Quava said. "To the lake, several miles away. The Untainted have many rituals and rites that require calm waters."

Now his eyes scanned the topmost mountains. Something was moving toward him—toward *her*.

"There's something else. Another dark cloak, carrying a dead mountain goat."

Saira shivered. "He's looking at me."

Even in her daman's world without colour, that piercing gaze embraced her heart with cold fingers. Those were the hands that had hacked off her hair. She knew that as well as the moonbear knew to hibernate in the winter. Saira shuddered and opened her eyes. Even without delving, she knew Fenox was retreating down the slope. She wondered if he could feel her emotions [just as she did with him.]

Quava put her hand on Saira's arm. "You should rest. But we have to get out of

this place. Soon. They do not expect us to resist, or to flee. That's why we have don't have knots around our ankles and wrists. We can use that to our advantage."

Saira sensed a change come over Quava. The pregnant woman had regained something. Hope, perhaps, or purpose.

"The dark cloaks don't believe in syl. They must not know what you are. Although they may suspect something, having found the sunstone on your person and seeing the mayguar. If the Untainted knew they had captured a syl, I can't imagine what they would do. But it would be a lot worse than cutting your hair."

"But I'm a selwyn. Didn't you say the syl were sent by the water gods to help our people?"

"Yes, but that is only a legend. Everyone believes in the Untainted. Their enclave is formed by sending the strongest male selwyn—in muscle and spirit—from the seven largest watergroves. They are revered as the humans revere their gods of the sky. The dark cloaks would see you as a threat to their dominance. They serve no one but their own will. I fear they will not let you return to Quasaria."

Saira suddenly felt very cold. "What will they do?"

"Turn you over to the human Elders, if you're lucky. But I will not let that happen. I will take you to Quasaria myself. With you as a gift, we will both be welcomed. But let us first wait a little longer."

"For what?"

"For them to feed us some of that goat, and for my little guy to stop his kicking. He's just as excited as I."

Saira looked down at Quava's bulging life. "Can I feel?"

Quava placed Saira's hand against her stomach. The skin felt tight. There was no movement except for Quava's breathing. And then a tiny foot thrust against her palm.

"Oh my! Is he really alive in there?"

"Alive and kicking."

With her hand over Quava's swollen stomach, Saira felt for the first time since leaving Maystone that she belonged.

"How are we going to get by the three dark cloaks?"

Quava shifted on her feet, arms draped across her baby belly. "With your help, of course. Now we best remain still. Someone's coming."

Chapter Sixteen

Crossings

The dark cloak threw a leg of lamb onto the cavern floor and left without a word. Quava grabbed the severed limb and, like a teral to a sambar corpse, eagerly dug her teeth into the entrails. Saira wrinkled her nose. She had eaten raw meat on many occasions, but never witnessed someone so voracious in their appetite. Then again, Quava was eating for two.

“They didn’t feed me yesterday,” the woman explained between bites.

After a minute, it was Saira’s turn. Gripping the thick, woolly fur of the lamb leg, she sunk her teeth into the exposed flesh, managing to wrestle out a mouthful of muscle. Warm blood covered her tongue. Her hunger dispelled any feelings of revulsion. The fresh food actually helped settle her nausea.

Wiping blood from her lips, Saira handed the leg back to Quava. Her mind drifted to the Untainted. She had never actually heard them speak, and said as much.

“The Untainted do not communicate with words. They use their hands.” Quava emphasized the point by making shapes with her fingers. “Imitating animal calls is also part of their language. So humans can’t overhear what they are saying. I think, in a way, the dark cloaks believe they are helping us.”

Saira ran her fingers through her hair, too short for a single tangle or knot. “That doesn’t justify their treatment of us.”

“No. Especially a syl. I’m ready to leave this pit behind. But I can’t do it without you. Saira, are you ready to call upon the water spirits?”

“I am ready. But how can I? I don’t have my sunstone.”

Quava spoke quickly. “You don’t need it. A sunstone only acts as a reservoir for *hlasa*, letting you carry water spirits miles from the river. But as long as you are near water, you have a source. Look up there.” Saira peered at the cavern ceiling, trying to see what Quava could see. “There is a faint trickle of water that follows the top of the tunnel. It doesn’t descend from the ceiling until you reach the outside.”

“I can’t see anything. It’s too dark.” The late morning sun had risen above the threshold for light. She stretched her arm toward the ceiling, but her fingers only met moist, viscous air.

“Believe me, there’s a trickle. It probably explains why the Untainted brought us here. They never go more than half a mile from moving water, because they lose their connection to *hlasa*. It’s the same for you. When you are next to a raging river, you will feel the water spirits the strongest. You said that you touched them before. What’s different? Besides the sunstone,” Quava was quick to add.

Saira tried to think. When Cal had been stabbed—when was that, three days ago?—she had taken out the sunstone and wished for his wound to mend. Again, with Waryn, she used the stone. Except her heart had burst full of anger. Neither the healing energy nor the blinding light had come from *her*.

“I think you’re wrong, Quava. I can’t touch the spirits. Both times, it was the sunstone.”

Quava remained unconvinced. “If you are a syl, you can wield the spirits more forcefully than any dark cloak.”

Saira didn’t have time to ponder that line of thought any further. The three

Untainted reappeared, no more than shadows in the weak light.

Quava went silent. As Saira waited for the dark cloaks to seize her arms, she found herself wishing Cal and Jed were here. Sure, those two irritated her as brothers would a sister. Yet that was exactly it—Cal and Jed almost felt like family, even if they were human.

To her surprise, the dark cloaks circled Quava instead. One of them prodded her forward with what looked like a sheathed sword. She moved slowly, her balance compromised by her sizeable girth. Another Untainted held out his palm emphatically toward Saira, as though he were telling a dog to stay.

Quava stumbled forward in the dark. “I don’t like this. I think they want to separate us.”

Saira concurred. But what could she do? Even though the dark cloaks were coercing Quava forward, they kept a good distance between themselves and her.

“I’m bearing a child and have no mate. They won’t dare touch me, lest their hands become unclean.”

The Untainted showed little patience with Quava, nudging and poking at her from behind. Saira was suddenly alone in the cave. She closed her eyes, trying to find Fenox. But her mind was racing. Her daman might as well be a star on a cloudy night. Quava had already been here a week. Who knew how long they would keep her here? Or maybe they didn’t mean to let her out, trapping her forever behind rock. If they knew she was a syl, what better way to keep her hidden from the world?

Saira couldn’t stay here. Groping in the dark, her hands found a sharp-edged surface. She followed the uneven wall. Was this the way they had taken Quava? She

didn't know. Her foot kept hitting rocks that felt like buttresses of steel-toed trees. Saira didn't remember the tunnel being this long. The cave soon filled with a warm, pale fog. She realized after a moment that she was seeing diffuse rays of light. A dull ache behind her eyes exploded with pain as the outside world met her gaze. She tried to block out the dazzling white, but there was no shield from the brilliant circle of light. From between her fingers, she could make out shapes in front of her. Stalactites hung from the roof of the cave's mouth like enormous fangs. She caught a glimpse of Quava's prominent silhouette, and then Saira's foot kicked a loose stone.

Ahead in the tunnel, a shadow turned, his face masked by the blazing sun behind him. Saira braced herself against the wall. The dark cloak came swiftly toward her. What could she do now? What punishment would they give for disobedience?

He stopped several paces away. Saira faced him, her heart pounding in her ears. The dark cloak's long, black hair framed a ghostly face. But now she could see it wasn't much fairer than her own; the contrast between dark and light made his countenance appear exceptionally pale. He held out an object toward her. She had to squint to make out the outline of the sunstone. That was hers! What was he doing with it?

A cold shiver crept over her shoulder. She instinctively put her hand there, expecting to find a drip of water on her clothes. Yet her fingers could not touch the spine-tingling feeling that crawled down her chest. Now there were more. The icy streams slithered over her body like a dozen constricting snakes.

She knew what was happening. Just as Caro Orsen had done inside the river temple, this dark cloak was weaving spirits around her the way strangler vines wrapped around a tree. Saira felt helpless as her arms pressed against her sides, as though the very

walls of the cave were closing in on her. She couldn't move. She tried to break free but her arms were rigid.

Another dark cloak appeared, brandishing the knife that had cut off the last vestige of her innocence. With the blade pointed at her center, he came towards her. The one with the sunstone raised his fingers as though they grasped an invisible mug. Saira gasped for breath as a hand made of spirit closed over her throat, forcing her head back. Somewhere very distant, she could hear Quava screaming. Saira willed her eyes to look down, but her neck felt like the trunk of a stubborn pine. She could only see the ceiling of the cave, and caught movement overhead.

Light danced above her, faint and transparent. The tiniest of rivers flowed along the roof of the tunnel, the one Quava had mentioned. This small current betrayed gravity in its search for light, clinging to the under surface of its smooth bed. Her mind followed the streamlet back to its source. Somewhere deep in the mountain lived a spring hidden in the innermost rock. That buried fountain pushed futilely through the cracks, only managing to form this trickle.

She focused on the reflections. Like stars, the sun's light sparkled in the still yet moving liquid. From that trickle of water a drop fell in front of her. One at first, and then another, until a steady dribble started to pool on the cavern floor. Saira's peripheral vision filled with the looming shadow of the Untainted. The foul breath of the dark cloak blew across her face, and terror swam through her at the thought of the knife. More than anything she wanted to push him away, but the spirits twisted her arms.

A sound reached her then, like thunder from far-off clouds. The rumble came from behind, growing in intensity as the prolonged howl of a shadow wolf. Her ears

roared. Water rushed past her, white and full in the tunnel. The flood reached from ceiling to floor, crashing into the dark cloaks as though they were sand ants being hit by raindrops. The tendrils holding Saira in place slid away like snakes faced with fire. She tore her arms from her side and felt the spirit surround her, surging right through her skin and into her coursing veins.

As fast as it appeared, the trickle-turned-torrent vanished. The tunnel was empty. A few more droplets fell onto her forehead, but the cave floor was as dry as a lizard under the sun. The sunstone lay flat in the center of the tunnel. Saira scooped it into her hand and hurried to find Quava.

The exit opened like a window to the sky. She found Quava beside the cave entrance, holding onto the rock face. The dark cloaks were gone. Saira expected to find Quava drenched and distressed; instead, the pregnant woman wore a radiant smile.

“I knew you could touch the water spirits!”

Saira stepped next to her. “I don’t even know what I did.”

“You washed the Untainted right down the mountain, is what you did. The deluge appeared all around me. It felt like being in the heart of a circular waterfall. Not a single drop touched me. The dark cloak who had just finished prodding me for the hundredth time was hit with a wall of water. One moment he was beside me, the next he was gone.”

Saira was trying to concentrate on Quava’s words. But her body still surged with electrifying energy, like a runner who has just finished ten hilly miles. She felt at once exhausted and as though she could do another ten.

“I see you got your sunstone back. I also think you’ve washed away any doubt

the dark cloaks had about you being syl. They will do everything in their means to put you under their power. I know a path, not far from here, that will take us to [Salos Lake]. From there, we can reach Welling River. We should make haste.”

[ensure there is a scene of them crossing the Welling River]

Saira agreed, yet her head reeled from the overflow of *hlasa*. The sunstone felt warm as she put it in her pocket. Quava led them along a ridge lined on either side by a sheer precipice. She moved in a slow but steady fashion, finding a stick to use as a cane and as a test for her heavy footfalls, and breathing out in regular, audible exhalations. Quava’s other hand remained protectively over her womb.

For Saira, focusing on her steps helped clear her thoughts. They had only gone a few dozen paces when she felt the threads of *hlasa* slip away from her. The spirits dripped off her body like a turtle emerging on the shore of a deep sea. A hollow fatigue niggled in her gut and her legs felt too weak to support her body, forcing her to her knees.

“Are you all right?”

She looked up at Quava. “I think so. It’s just...I suddenly feel more tired than I have in days.”

Quava nodded knowingly. “It is told in the legends that weaving the spirits takes a great toll. When you move too far from the source, and the link is severed, the water spirits can no longer hide your body’s pains. There is a place for us to rest, not far from here. You can regain your strength there.”

Saira couldn’t believe a woman who carried most of her weight around her waist was telling *her* they didn’t have much farther to go. Gritting her teeth, she got back to her feet, ignoring the muscle cramps that felt like daggers in her side. The two selwyn

continued together.

The central ridge looked like the backbone of some colossal creature, the smaller escarpments branching off like protruding ribs. Quava knew the easiest route, leading Saira past bluffs of bare rock. Black lines fell over their surface like dark tears, the rivulets formed by periodic rainfall and the algae that took advantage of this transient moisture. Clumps of moss filled most cracks, like green scabs covering a wound.

The trail soon wound its way through scattered patches of stunted elder fir. Quava paused every so often to catch her breath. The thin air was cool, forcing Saira to cover her ears with her hands. She ran her thumb over her uneven lobes, wondering: *who had cut them?* The unobscured sun quickly opened Saira's sweat glands. She itched as her clothes stuck to her skin. A valley roamed freely to the east, lined on one side by the Veiled River, the other stretching beyond the hazy horizon.

At one point they passed a dozen mountain goats. The herd stoically watched them go by; at their closest point, a large male at the vanguard stamped his hooves and lowered his spiralling horns in menacing fashion. Quava moved next to Saira, her eyes curious.

"I have only seen humans from afar, and have never spoken to one. The wisest grove keepers say there are a hundred humans to every selwyn. What do their villages look like?"

They were walking over relatively flat terrain as Saira considered her response, the shrubless land cut only by the occasional brook that babbled its way down a slender gully. Her body flushed each time they approached and crossed a brook or stream.

"My father kept many maps. Humans always seem to settle near the river. My

home village—Maystone—is very small, with houses of wood or stone. Other humans live in cities with walls and great towers. They seem designed to keep people out, even their own kind. The city dwellers are strangers to one another, and always in haste. Although it is odd to speak of humans this way. I don't know if I can describe them without also describing myself. In a way, I feel more human than selwyn."

Quava looked at her strangely, though didn't interrupt.

"Humans are very different from one another. Some are kind and generous, some value jewels more than water. I think most humans have two sides, and their environment brings out one more than the other. Not all follow the spirits. Many are godless. Those who work with *hlasa* are called Divinists."

"I have heard of these men," Quava said. "They can train themselves to touch the water spirits. With selwyn, very few are born with such a gift."

"I have a friend who grew up among the Divinists. Yet the Elders seem reluctant to let others to touch the water spirits. They call us *swen*. Human stories blame the selwyn for tainting the waters."

Quava frowned, as though the idea didn't agree with her. She didn't make any further queries.

As it turned out, most of the afternoon flitted away before they stopped for a respite. They had moved into the low, gentle slopes of the foothills, not far from the Veiled River and covered in spring bloom. Azaleas and fawn lilies sprung from a bed of grass, painting the lesser flanks of the mountain range purple and yellow; the huge swath of colour stretched as far as the eye could see.

Quava finally stopped on the leese of an arched hillock. Her breathing came

raggedly. Yet after a moment's rest she got up again and started to dig into the earth with her hands. Saira found a flat, smooth rock and helped Quava excavate a large jaber cat pelt. She brushed the dirt from the golden fur. Perfect round spots adorned the hide, the circles swelling into orange-filled rosettes along the spine of the great cat.

"I know these hills well. When I spied those two Untainted coming for me, I knew trying to elude them would only be an exercise in frustration. In fact, I didn't question giving myself up to them. I don't know why. But I *did* hide everything here. Although I never expected to be back this soon."

Quava unfolded the fur, revealing an array of diverse items. A stone-headed spear with dark blemishes marking its numerous kills; two horns from some large mammal; a carving knife; a water satchel; bits of rope tied together from fox tail; a leather from a small goat. Quava tucked away the latter. "For my little one," she explained. Then she exchanged the short-spear for her walking stick, and picked up a sheathed weapon buried amongst the other objects.

"This is called a tark." Quava pulled the blade free of its plain scabbard. The steel glinted in the sun, kept clean by attentive hands. "This blade was forged by my grove's best smith. It curves slightly, to resemble the claws of the xarg. The handle is a kora horn brought from the Dareth Mountains. I carved it myself." Quava ran her hand over the grooves of the finger holds. Then she thrust the blade back into its leather sheath and presented the weapon to Saira. "It would honour me if you accepted this gift."

Saira wordlessly took the tark. She held it carefully, amazed at how light the blade felt. Pulling the strap behind her back, she tied the scabbard around her waist.

"You look tired."

“Yes,” Saira answered, lying on a soft mattress of fresh grass. She closed her eyes, yet it wasn’t sleep for which she searched. Fenox also lay on the ground, though not nearby. A part of her simply understood he was a number of miles downriver. She didn’t understand until now why he hadn’t returned to her side. Her daman was keeping watch, letting her see where the danger lay.

From the mayguar’s eyes, through a network of thick reeds, she saw four dark cloaks huddle by the stream. Their hands moved quickly, fingers shifting between different symbols and shapes. One of them placed his hands into the water. A moment later, he shook his head.

“What do your delving eyes see?”

Saira opened her eyes with a start. “There are four of them, south of here.”

“How far?” Quava inquired.

“Far enough for us to be safe. The dark cloaks aren’t moving.”

“Then we can stay here, for a time.”

Saira nodded. She closed her eyes again, and this time didn’t hold back her fatigue. Somehow, her head had never felt a pillow as gentle and light as these green blades of spring. In the shade of the knoll, sleep fell over her like a blanket of morning fog over the Farnley downs.

“Saira. You must wake.”

Quava’s voice brought her back. The moonless sky still held blue, a dark enough shade to allow the brightest star to shine in the north. Something warm lay on top of her. She yawned and pulled away the jaber cat hide.

“What’s going on?”

“Something is not right.” Quava looked ready to move.

“Are you sure? In my dreams, the dark cloaks are not any closer or further than they were before the sun set.”

“At the moment, they are not my concern.”

Saira got to her feet and looked to the foothills. After the absolute dark of the cave, the twilight world seemed inviting. The rolling slopes remained still under her gaze.

“Did you see something?”

“No. But the animals have eyes in the night. Not long ago, their voices went silent. We should cross the Veiled River and head east to the Welling. From there, we can cut across the Lorellien plains. The dark cloaks won’t leave the waterways—they will have to travel dozens of miles to reach the Lanthalos River.”

Saira stretched her back and yawned again. Quava couldn’t help let out a sleepy sigh of her own, pushing her hands against her lower back. The round ball of her stomach stuck out even further than usual. There were circles under her eyes.

“Did you sleep?”

Quava turned away. “I rested.”

“But you didn’t sleep.”

“I will do without. You are a syl. Therefore, your life is more important than my own.”

Saira adamantly shook her head. “Don’t talk that way. My life is not more or less important than any other.”

“You do not understand.”

“You’re right. I do not understand why some are Elders and Kings, while others are beggars and poor farmers. But I do understand what my father taught me. Every life has inherent value. Do not treat me better than you would treat yourself. In my eyes, we are equal.” Saira held out the fur of the great cat. Quava seemed hesitant to take it back. “This is yours. You have already given me a gift. You have much more need for this than I.”

The older woman consented, taking the pelt and tying it around her neck with a cord woven through the saber cat’s eyes.

“You are not what I expected a syl to be. Thank you. Let us use dusk as our cover. There is a natural bridge only a few minutes from here.”

At first, the night was quiet. Quava took her away from the hillock and toward the sound of angry waters. A curve of the Veiled River soon entered her sight. They walked over a smooth, undulating section of stone. Saira didn’t understand why this rock wasn’t marked with bumps and scars.

“When I first arrived,” Quava explained, “high waters flooded this dried bed. I do not know if they will return next summer, or if the water gods have forsaken this stream. Now we have reached the bridge. Here, the water remains full and white.”

The Veiled River spanned thirty or forty paces. A natural dam of stone, fixed to both banks, funnelled the water into a short and swift falls at the river’s midpoint. The bridge consisted of a series of stalwart boulders arranged in a more or less straight line. Smaller waterfalls formed erratically at places where the current overcame the barrier. The water from the constant, central falls hit the south current with enough force to splatter the tops of the boulders with large, wet drops. To her left, the dam gathered part

of the north-facing water into a dark, silent pool.

Quava headed over the river. She leaned heavily on her spear, and Saira caught her legs quivering. Until now, even with the added burden of carrying new life, Quava had looked surefooted. But crossing the Veiled under starlight, on a bridge whose grey surface masked its damp, slippery sections, would give even a jaber cat pause.

Saira came up behind her, energized by the swelling *hlasa* spirits. "Let me help."

Taking Quava's hand, they continued together, taking small, cautious steps over the water-slicked stones. A wind blew from the north, following the current. Saira shivered at its cold touch. At the waterfall, a log had been placed above the plunging waters. Quava knew every rivet in the bark, using the knots as reliable footholds. Saira matched her steps, and had just moved back from wood to stone when the north waters overflowed, submerging the soles of her feet. She felt her body slide down toward the deep river below.

Quava held her hand firmly. The water receded. "Almost there now."

Saira lifted her wet feet onto the next boulder, and looked to the far bank. A shore of pebbles separated the river from a field of grass. They were only a dozen paces away when she heard a splash. She turned, expecting to see another outpouring of water over the dam. Instead, she found herself staring into the red eyes of a raelisk.

The creature had pulled itself onto the natural bridge. From the other side of the falls, it stood on two gnarled limbs, watching her the way a snake studies its prey before striking. A knot formed in Saira's stomach. As much as she feared the dark cloaks, they at least seemed to fit into this world. The raelisk was from another time and place entirely, a myth brought to life. Dropping onto all fours, it started toward them, its long

tail trailing behind.

Saira could barely speak. Her words came out in a raspy whisper. “Get to the other side!”

The raelisk advanced over the log like a squirrel along a fence. Quava had seen the threat, and hurried her pace as best she could. But she could only go so fast. The raelisk would reach them first. Saira swallowed the lump in her throat and turned to face the creature.

With its long, gangly limbs, the raelisk resembled a giant, four-legged spider. But the scales and spines made her think of a human trapped in a reptilian body. Knife-like spikes protruded along its sinewy back and down the length of its tail. Claws scraped on stone as it halved the distance between them, those blood red eyes never leaving hers. Its jaw stretched out from its face like a dog’s, and the raelisk brandished a yawning cavern of deadly, jagged teeth.

Saira reached for the spirits. *Hlasa* danced around her body like fire over wood. She packed the energy together, as though forming a ball of snow. When she couldn’t press any more between her hands she pushed the bursting energy against the raelisk. The spirits wouldn’t move. She tried again. It felt like pushing against the incoming tide of the ocean.

The raelisk was almost upon them. Saira thrust her hands outward. This time the *hlasa* fell through the cracks of her fingers like melted snow. She put her hand in her pocket, hoping to find a source. The sunstone was cold as death. What was going on?

“Use the tark.”

Quava spoke matter-of-factly, as though an encounter with a raelisk were

commonplace. Her calmness filled Saira's heart with courage.

Pulling the blade free, she held the edge toward the raelisk. It stopped a few paces away, contemplating how best to proceed. Every breath from its mouth sounded like a strangled growl. The creature's eyes glimmered, two perfect rubies in the dark. Saira couldn't stop her hand from shaking. But she stood her ground. This monster would not touch Quava.

The raelisk sprang at her, a fore claw flying for her face. Saira stumbled back. She tried to keep the tusk between her and the raelisk. Its claw missed her head, catching her sleeve instead. Daggers dug greedily into her flesh, scraping through elbow skin toward bone. With its grip she couldn't move. Her wrist refused to work, her tusk held in listless fingers. She could see the raelisk readying for another attack, its eyes slit and myriad fangs bared. Saira couldn't take another step without losing her footing. Now its other limb flailed towards her, reaching for her neck...

The raelisk jolted to a halt. Saira stared at its agonized, paralyzed body—then she saw the wooden shaft next to her body. Quava had driven her spear under Saira's arm and into the heart of this misshapen creature. The impaled raelisk, in a burst of violent shakes, tried to free itself, but couldn't dislodge the spearhead from its chest.

Saira knew what she had to do. She tore her arm from the raelisk's claws and grabbed the spear. Shoving the shaft to the left, Quava and her forced the raelisk over the edge of the dam. With an ear-shattering shriek, the creature fell from the spear and crashed into the waters below.

Quava pushed Saira's taut arms down to her sides. "It's done. I said I would keep you safe."

The raelisk didn't surface as they made their way to the shore. But Saira kept her tark in hand, even after they passed up the rock-strewn bank.

"Something happened out there. I couldn't hold onto *hlasa*. The spirits were unwilling."

Quava wiped her spear on the grass. "This must be why the dark cloaks haven't followed us this far. Just as king snakes are immune to the venom of rattlers, the water spirits have no affect on raelisk. That is the one blessing of their cursed existence. I've never seen one in the open before, only as shadows in the current."

"Are they selwyn?"

A disgusted look passed over Quava's face. "Selwyn? Whatever gave you such an idea? Raelisks are humans that drowned in Solun Lake, long ago. The water gods put a blight over that basin. So instead of joining the spirits, the doomed men grew scales over their skin and gills to let them breath in the underworld."

Saira remained quiet as they trudged over the starlit field. Mirran had told a very different tale. She didn't know who or what to believe.

"Eventually, other humans forced the cursed ones up Talon River, and into the Nethers. But the tainted waters have brought them farther south than they have ever been. We should stop a minute, so I can bind your wound."

She didn't understand. Quava lifted Saira's right arm. The cloth and skin around her elbow had been shredded by the raelisk. Quava rolled up her sleeve, tugging the fabric from the congealed blood.

"It doesn't hurt."

"The excitement of the hunt is still with you," Quava noted. "In the morning, you

won't feel anything but pain.”

Quava pushed the sleeve up to her shoulder, revealing rivulets of partly dried blood all around her joint. She cleaned the worst away with water from her satchel. “The muscle isn't cut. You are lucky. A syl is always blessed.” Then, after searching the grasses a minute, she came back with the leaves of a weed. Crushing them in her fingers, she placed the urine-smelling pieces into the open cuts.

“This will help it heal, and keep flies away. I think you can put the tark back in its sheath.”

As if in response, Fenox appeared below the height of the grasses. Burrs had caught in his fur, and a long wildflower stem dragged from his black tail. Saira bent down to greet him. He gave her elbow a few licks, then turned to sniff at Quava. She smiled broadly.

“To see a syl with her daman! I have felt no greater joy. Come. We should put more distance between us and the water.”

Saira rolled her sleeve down and put her tark away. Quava moved forward in her steady gait, a grey shape above the sprouts of spring. Clouds soon covered half the sky, shielding the stars. Fenox stayed close as they headed east toward Quasaria. Toward home.

Chapter Seventeen

Amendments

After two days on the road with Jed and Cal, Aldon grew a lot closer to understanding sibling rivalry. The brothers bickered constantly. Weren't family supposed to love other family? These two never showed it. As an only child, Aldon couldn't explain their behaviour. They acted like children, squabbling over who got the last sweet. So Aldon distracted himself with his book, and suddenly forgot all about the Trail boys. The words he had read an hour ago kept playing back, turning over in his mind again and again.

The Divinists were once called The Order.

Since leaving Mirran's, he had read through most his book. He wanted to throw it away. The dialogue within threatened to undermine his faith, questioning every truth upon which his life was based. Yet at the same time, he felt more connected to this text than the Seven Scriptures. This book didn't mince words. It simply explained, in clear and concise terms, the full chronicle of Divinism.

The Divinists were once called The Order.

Caro had never said anything about such a history. The Divinists had always been the Divinists, and that would never change. This book flew in the face of everything the Elders had taught him. *Lies!* he screamed to himself. *All lies!* But who was telling the truth?

The next paragraph read: *We now call ourselves the Order of Templar, to be distinguished from present day Divinists. Why did they change their name? Three*

hundred years ago, the Order discovered the Lake of Souls, along with the greatest concentration of hlasa in all of Rivaria. There was great debate over what to do with this source. Some wanted to harness the energy, others said it was best to leave it untouched. In the end, when no agreement could be reached, the head of the Order decreed—

The rest of the page was torn, now lost forever in the fire at Mirran's. He, Jed and Cal had gone back to inspect the rectangle of ash and soot. Only half a wall remained standing, the logs charred completely black on one side. Nearly everything had burned to the ground. Aldon rummaged through the cooled cinders, finding a scorched teapot and a single chair leg. No documents had survived. Neither had Mirran. That the Divine Elder would take such drastic action made Aldon all the more determined to learn what secrets he wanted kept hidden.

This coverless book held most of them. Unfortunately, it had seen a lot of wear and tear over the years, the cracked spine barely holding the thin tomb together. None of the pages had escaped at least one rip, smear or water stain. So Aldon still didn't know the reason the Order had become the Divinists, or why Caro—or Uncle Garen for that matter—had never discussed this change of identity with him.

And then there was the name of the author. *The Order of Templar*, written by Ellyn Lhee. That was Saira's last name. Could it be Wilton Lhee's wife? But Saira had never mentioned having a mother, human or otherwise.

He cursed himself for not letting Saira speak to him about the Order. And now she was gone as well. Garen's letter to Wilton might very well have told him where to find their enclave. Where to find his Uncle's friends. All those long trips Garen had taken...were they really what he had claimed? Or was he returning to the Order of

Templar? Was his Uncle not a Divinist at all?

The book *did* hint that the Templar had a hideout somewhere in the Greytops. He managed to convince Jed and Cal to go to the northern range of those coastal mountains.

“Mirran gave me this book,” Aldon had explained. “Saira mentioned something about the Order before she was kidnapped. Maybe that’s where they are taking her.”

In reality, Saira’s spirit trail went cold almost as soon as he had found it. East, is all he knew, and even that wasn’t certain. The Greytop Mountains were a little south. But Aldon worked best with clear objectives. Finding the Order of Templar would answer questions that, eventually, could lead them to her. Jed and Cal, having nothing else to go by, agreed without question [OR DOES CAL CONVINCED JED TO GO? This was already addressed when Jed & Cal found Aldon]. Which had brought them to Yelle, and their current predicament.

They needed a boat.

The sun breached the distant, cloud-covered Greytops as they reached the outskirts of the riverside town, two days after Saira had been taken by the Untainted. Aldon shivered, his clothes doing little to keep the cold breath of morning at bay. The Welling River would take them downstream, exactly where they wanted to go. Yet Jed refused to part with Sonja.

“The terrain is too dangerous,” Aldon argued, standing on the roadside next to Cal. “These ponies will only be a burden. We’ll end up walking more than riding.”

Jed stroked Sonja’s mane. “I made an oath to her. I don’t break my oaths.”

Cal laughed at his brother, bemused more than frustrated. “Jed, you’ve become far too attached.”

“How do you think it feels to be sold from one owner to the next, bullied around like a slave? My mother was a slave. She never knew what it was to be free. Bought and sold like an animal.”

“I know the story. But we’re talking about a *pony*.”

“She still has feelings.”

“You met her two days ago! I can’t believe we’re having this conversation. Fine. You keep her. Aldon and I will sell this one, and get ourselves a skiff. We’ll go on without you, and you can live happily ever after with Sonja.”

That gave Jed pause. Aldon had the sense that Cal didn’t often side with someone other than his brother.

Jed wagged his hand at them, as though brushing Cal and Aldon away. “I was only joking. Besides, I bet we can get a pretty penny for these two.” Then he leant forward, resting his head on Sonja’s roan neck. “Alas, my girl, it was not meant to be.” He spoke to her as though she were a maiden from Valei.

Sliding from his mount, he snatched the reins from Cal’s hands. “I can barter better on my own. You two reminisce about Saira some more,” he muttered and stormed toward the decrepit docks. Cal shrugged at his back.

Aldon appraised the dying town. He passed through Yelle at least once a year. Many of the ramshackle buildings, abandoned to rats and other vermin, their hollow windows peering into vacant rooms, were in a state of severe disrepair. The rooftops, most boards pilfered for firewood, were moist with moss. A few haggard-looking traders waved cara furs and mildewed vegetables his way. Aldon tried to ignore them. Without his robes, they pestered him for business far more than usual.

“Enough! We don’t want anything from you!” Cal finally shouted, sending them scurrying back to their hovels.

This road provided the main thoroughfare between Baronstoke and Trent. Yelle had once been a bustling fishing town; now, the salmon and trout had vanished, leaving only catfish and giant salamanders. Few would eat anything from the tainted waters. These days, Yelle served as little more than a rest stop for travellers.

Aldon bought some bread and dried sambar meat with the little coin he carried. Cal managed to find some fruit—Aldon bit into a browned apple, squishy but still edible. They sat on a wheel-less wagon with a broken hitch and shared their provisions.

“I’m not sure what’s gotten into my brother. Aldon, do you think we’ll find Saira?”

“I’m not sure. But I hope so.”

Aldon didn’t comment further. His thoughts still fell upon *The Order of Templar*, and all their mysteries. If only his Uncle were still alive. Caro had killed him—he knew that now. Garen had been a member of the Order, but lived in Baronstoke as a Divinist. As a *spy*. That’s the only story that made sense. When Caro found out, he blinded him. That way, Garen couldn’t leave. But he must have done something further. Caro knew about the *Kantra*, and at some point connected that to Garen. That explained why his Uncle had given the book to *him*. Garen knew Caro was going to kill him, and Aldon had lost what he had died for.

“We’re set! You’re not going to believe the deal I swung.”

Jed had returned, wearing an all-too-familiar boyish grin.

“Come on! Let me show you my Fuschia.”

Cal groaned. At Aldon's questioning stare, he leaned over and whispered, "His second girlfriend had that name. She left him for a baron."

The three of them ventured onto the docks. A few dozen fishing vessels were anchored alongside, half looking like ghost ships and the other half ready to sink any moment. A few had already done so, moored to the bottom of the riverbed, their mast heads bobbing just above the current.

Aldon walked carefully down the pier. Every plank felt loose, and every third or fourth was missing entirely.

"Hurry up!" Jed seemed eager to boast over his Fuschia. "We best get a head start before those clouds settle in. And here we are!"

Jed stopped next to the largest craft in the docks. Weather worn in a few places, the boat still exuded opulence. A thatched roof covered its entire length, threads of wood weaved meticulously through a curved checkerboard of thicker poles. This boat could sleep a score of men, with room to spare. But it was meant to carry far fewer, on far more luxurious terms. Aldon spotted velvet-lined chairs in the hold.

"You've outdone yourself this time, brother. Who did you hoodwink?"

Jed gave Cal a friendly slap on the back. "A fisherman by the name of Vik. See the faded diamond insignia there? We'll be sailing in style, on a boat of the royals! This belonged to a wealthy Lord, who had a castle on the banks of Solun Lake. But no one goes near there anymore. Strange creatures are coming down Talon River, or so Vik says. Raelisk, perhaps, but he wasn't clear on that. In any case, the lord sold it half price to Vik, who in turn sold it to me in exchange for Sonja and her sister. They'll be happy here, where ponies are worth more than boats."

Jed tugged at the thick rope lashed to the dock. “I can’t get this knot. Cal, pull on this end. Lhoran’s light! It won’t budge. I’ll knife it.”

Jed pulled out his chrak. He had sawed halfway through when a voice bellowed out from the start of the docks.

“Hold it there! Don’t move, Aldon, or I’ll have your head!”

Aldon recoiled from the irate man storming down the pier. Scowling fiercely, the stranger waved a tight-fisted hand in the air. But it was the angry mob behind him—and the fact Aldon had no idea who this was—that made Aldon’s mouth dry.

“Who’s that?” Cal said.

Jed didn’t look up. “That would be Vik.”

“You swindled me!” Vik’s eyes were for Jed. Aldon tried to hide his alarm, relieved the attention wasn’t on him. Full bearded with trunk-like arms, the veins bulged on Vik’s forehead. Although he was unarmed, his companions brandished everything from boards acting as makeshift clubs to rusted tridents; Aldon realized the latter were actually pitchforks with missing prongs.

Jed put on a placating look, palms held out flatly in front of him. “We had a deal, Vik. What’s the problem?”

“I’ll tell you the problem, Aldon. Or whatever your name is. I spoke to my cousin just now. He’s from Farnley. Those mares you sold me aren’t from Dareth at all—they’re full grown Farnley ponies, as weak as your skinny friend there.” Vik pointed at Aldon. Jed had obviously used a false name during the bargaining process. Why he had chosen *his*, Aldon didn’t know.

“Wish I could help you, Vik,” Jed said nonchalantly, continuing his attack on the

knot. “But a deal’s a deal.”

“Dangerous words to speak to a desperate man. Life in Yelle is cruel enough without lackeys like yourself making it harder. You know what we do to thieves and cheats?”

“Show them the errors of their ways, and force them to become Elder-boys?”

“We tie a stone to their foot, and drop them in the middle of the Welling. That’s what we do.”

Jed put his dagger away. “I suppose you want to give me my horses back?”

“Too late for that. The deal’s done, and this is how it’s going to work. I’ll keep your ponies, and you can have my other boat.” Vik pointed to his right.

Aldon had never seen a more dilapidated craft. The fishing boat, admittedly only slightly smaller than its luxuriant neighbour, resembled more a raft with walls or a giant wooden bathtub. Its naked mast stood at an angle above the splintered hull. There was no sail, no oars, no cover from the elements. A long pole and a hole-filled fishing net comprised its sole contents. The boat looked as though it had survived an unfortunate collision: the shattered prow dipped several feet lower into the water than the bow.

Jed changed his tune. “Let’s talk, Vik. I’ll throw in this dagger. Genuine jewels in the hilt. It’s worth this boat twice over.”

“No, I don’t trust anything that has passed through your hands. But I’ll tell you what. I’m feeling generous today. Take this bucket.”

Vik picked up the item hanging from the dock. Jed accepted the gift, a bewildered look on his face. “What’s this for?”

“To get on your hands and knees and scoop. She leaks more than a pregnant

mare.”

Vik’s companions laughed. Aldon sighed. He would be happy just to take this boat and be gone. Luckily, Cal was on the same page.

“Thanks for the bucket. We’ll be on our way.”

Vik glanced at Cal, then gave Jed one final glower.

“Are you heading up or downstream? Hold your tongue. I’d be inclined to believe the opposite of whatever you told me. But if you want my advice, you best beat these rainclouds. And don’t stop for anyone. Solu knows, you won’t find any trustworthy souls out on that current.”

Vik crossed his arms, waiting. Jed didn’t move, holding the bucket’s handle like a child with a disagreeable birthday toy.

Cal snatched it from his hand and hopped into the aged craft. The bottom boards creaked and moaned under his weight. Aldon thought of the apple he had eaten earlier. Overripe, and well past its prime. He and Jed boarded as well, and Cal used the pole to push them from the dock. The Welling River soon took them on our current.

“Are you happy with yourself, Jed?” Aldon couldn’t recall seeing Cal so upset. “You can add Yelle to our list. Is there anywhere left that doesn’t have a price on our heads?”

Jed sat near the bow, unperturbed. His sharpening stone raked along the edge of his chrak.

“I’m sure the people of Islington have forgotten all about how we borrowed their highlady’s tiara. And I bet there’s a remote village somewhere in Dareth that hasn’t heard of the Trail brothers.”

“That’s your name, not mine.” Cal threw the bucket at his brother. “Start scooping.”

“Lighten up, Cal. Anyway, it’s Aldon here the people of Yelle will remember. Isn’t that right, water weaver?”

Aldon shook his head. “Have you thought of using the truth? Maybe your brother wouldn’t be so mad, and we’d be in a nicer boat.”

“Nope. Too far gone for that. You said so yourself, I’m cursed by Vedil. My soul can’t be saved.”

Aldon wasn’t interested in another argument. He settled on a dry part of the hull and opened his book.

Jed wouldn’t leave it at that. “And isn’t that easy for you to say? Use the truth. Unless you’re a Divinist, making an honest living isn’t something most people can afford. But then, you wouldn’t understand that. Everything’s been spoon-fed to you. Truth doesn’t mean much when you don’t know where your next meal is coming from or where you’re going to sleep. If you had to decide between truth and hunger, truth and shelter, truth and a public hanging, would you keep to your vows?”

Aldon wanted to defend himself, to yell back that truth needed to be upheld whatever the cost. But he suddenly realized: no one in his life had followed the mandate of truth. Not his Uncle, not even the Divine Elder. Would he himself fall into lies and secrecy?

Aldon kept his eyes on the pages. “Perhaps you haven’t noticed, but I’m not wearing any robes.”

“It’s a good thing, too. You might start to appreciate the hard life. Now I best get

to bailing, or else this will be my first and last voyage with Fuschia. She's not as pretty as I imagined, but I'm sure she has other qualities I can learn to admire."

Resting his back against the crooked mast, Aldon ignored the brothers as best he could, losing himself in *The Order of Templar*.

Chapter Eighteen

River Riders

For the rest of the morning, blissful silence endured. Dragonflies kept them company, fleeing at the first signs of rain. Heavy drops fell just long enough to plaster Aldon's clothes to his skin, then softened to a steady drizzle, making the river appear as though skeeter bugs covered its surface. Jed kept the bucket employed.

The Welling turned dead east, moving the masked sun behind their backs. Aldon had seen this river, but never been on its waters, the deepest of any in Rivaria. Reeds lined either bank, the shores separated by twice the width of the Ivory. Their craft drifted along the slow current, Cal guiding them around the trickier turns. But for the most part the Welling rolled straight through the land, unwilling to twist or bend for any obstacle. This was the path of the silver dolphins, the guardians of the river. During their great migration, the current got pushed backward, filling Solun Lake to four times its size. Now, there were no dolphins, no River Walkers, nothing to protect these sacred waters.

Moving to one side, Aldon gazed over the peeling rail. The river's brown surface offered no reflection, the murky waters hiding their contents behind an opaque screen. He opened himself to *hlasa*. The water spirits felt weak, like a bowstring stretched too far for too long. Their threads washed feebly over him, limp fingers unable to grip. Sighing, he huddled once again over his book.

Between bouts of rain, he managed to finish reading *The Order of Templar*. Aldon devoured every word, voracious in his appetite for knowledge. It talked about dividing *hlasa* into four parts. Focussing on individual threads allowed the weaver to

master a particular element. For instance, the brown robes concentrated on the deepest spirits, the ones closest to rock and dirt. These were called Earth Druids. Similarly, Wood Keepers took their spirits from the roots, and Wind Speakers manipulated spirits near the water surface. The red-robed Singers of the Flame were the strangest to fathom. Their threads of *hlasa* originated from rapids, waterfalls, sharp river turns—wherever the most friction resided.

“What’s that?”

Aldon blinked, coming back to the world of damp clothes and leaky boats. Standing at the prow, Cal stared back the way they had come. The clouds now clung low to the ground, shrouding the entire length of the horizon. Aldon got to his feet, but couldn’t see what Cal was pointing toward.

Jed squinted his eyes. “How can you see anything in this fog?”

“I’m telling you, there’s something on the water, and it’s a lot bigger than us.”

“Maybe it’s a xarg,” Jed joked. “We’re close enough to the mangroves, wouldn’t you say? Of course...”

His voice trailed off. Like a gryphawk coming through cloud, a dark grey form materialized above the river. Its shape gradually sharpened as it cut through the mist, blurred margins solidifying into straight edges. Aldon could see the outline of a boat—a large boat, breaking waves as it stormed downriver. A carved, wooden horn of a sea dragon protruded from its bow. Now he could see its colours: three white arrows swayed in the crosswind, vibrant against the black rectangle of the flaccid flag. Aldon tried to remember where he knew that from.

Jed suddenly crouched down. “River riders. By Solu! I *am* cursed.”

Aldon scratched his head. “Where did they come from?”

“Riders come and go as they please. Too bad you don’t have your robes. Then again, riders treat everyone as equals. Coffers of riches or last morsels of food, they simply take whatever you have.” Still stooped low to the hull, Jed crept toward the front of the boat and put his hands on the prow. “Apologies, Fuschia, but I need to cut this maiden voyage short. Watch out for him, Cal. Keep things on the steady.”

Aldon didn’t have time to ponder what he meant, for the next moment Jed slung himself over the railing and slid into the water like an eel through the current.

Cal stabbed the pole into the water. Despite being the length of five men, he could barely hold onto its top as he scraped for the river’s bottom. Their boat began to slow.

“Why are we stopping?” Aldon asked.

“Because if we don’t, they’ll ram us. Riders play rough. When they board, don’t say anything. Give them a reason to cut you down and they’ll take it. If we’re lucky, I’ll give them my coin and they’ll pass us by.”

“How much coin do you have?”

“Not enough.”

Aldon had heard about river riders. Never seen in daylight, these freshwater pirates sailed the rivers by fog or night. Even when hundreds of River Walkers still patrolled the banks, the riders somehow managed to avoid being caught. The scarceness of rider sightings turned them into a legend. More elusive than saber cats, more difficult to spot than shadows in the night. They stripped you down to your long johns and left before you knew they were there.

The river riders emerged from the mist, their grey silhouettes taking on contours and colour. Aldon laid his eyes on the legends. There were six men that he could see, dour and ragged-looking. Half held short swords with serrated edges, the others hand crossbows levelled toward Cal and him. Their boat came up alongside, bearing the name Callandra, a rose painted through the letters. Side masts boasted wide sails, stretching well over the port and starboard rails. Yet they weren't sails at all, but rather a cross-linked mesh, the square holes too big to be used as fishing nets. Aldon saw it now: those webbed sails didn't carry Callandra forward—that was accomplished by a series of currently unmanned oars. Instead of catching the wind, they were meant to make the boat look bigger than it was.

The first of the riders leapt onto their boat with the ease of a frog hopping from one lily pad to another. One by one the others followed, lanky and lean, swaggering over the vessel as though it was theirs. A few eyed Cal up and down. But they all ignored Aldon entirely as they rummaged lethargically through Fuschia's barren hull.

“Strange place to be fishing.”

The black-garbed man—Aldon assumed he was the leader—had addressed Cal. A bandana covered his long hair but didn't fully hide the long, unsightly scar running down his forehead to the edge of his mouth, lips curled above a stubbled chin. But it was the callous, unwavering eyes that could easily belong to a shark that made Aldon want to jump off the boat after Jed.

“Well? You catch anything yet?”

Cal cleared his throat. “No, sir.”

“These aren't safe waters. You're running from something. But aren't we all,

these days?” The man tilted his head. “Captain Rowlen, at your disservice. River rider extraordinaire. Where exactly are you headed?”

“We’re on our way to the ocean, in hopes of finding untainted waters.”

The rider pulled a knife and threw it between Aldon and Cal. The blade thudded into the mast.

“You’re a long way from Omnia. Only disappointment awaits you there. What does your Blond friend here have to say for himself? He’s no fisherman. A housemaid, maybe.”

The other five men sniggered. One slapped a hand onto Aldon’s shoulder, giving him a violent shake. Aldon felt the heat rise in his cheeks. He held his arms to hide their trembling.

Rowlen stepped toward him, eyes piercing deeper than his dagger. “Cara got your tongue, Blondie?”

Aldon swallowed, and looked down at his feet.

“That’s a good boy. Exactly the kind of respect riders deserve. Panic and terror is the order of the day! Fortunately for you, there isn’t a scrap here that interests me. We aren’t going to hurt you. We’ll just free you from whatever burdens your pockets, as well as the object held so tightly to your chest.”

Aldon hadn’t realized he had been clutching onto his book. Its square outline showed through his shirt. He didn’t move. He tried to find *hlasa*, reaching out with his mind. But the spirits wouldn’t stick.

“Aha! The boy has some backbone after all! But you’d best hand it over, else I’ll cut it out from your shirt. I hate getting the blood of innocents on my knife. I can never

seem to get those stains out.”

Cal nodded to him, almost imperceptibly. Aldon reluctantly pulled out *The Order of Templar*. The captain snatched it from his hands and frowned.

“Just words? Not what I was hoping for. A strange thing to consider precious, Blondie. None of my men are the bookish type.” He tucked it under his arm. “Maybe I’ll keep it for the pages. My behind won’t mind having some softer wipes, and I’ve run out of Seven Scriptures.”

Aldon grinded his teeth. The thought of this man fouling that sacred text made him seethe inside. But what could he do?

Cal handed over his coin. The riders seemed less than impressed.

“Three silver? I don’t think that’s enough for passage. “What do you think, my fellow riders? Shall we hang them by their feet, and see what falls?”

Their collective voices swelled in raucous agreement.

“I can’t disappoint my men. Should we wait for our other boat to arrive, or keep the spoils for ourselves?”

They roared a second round of approval. Aldon thought to himself, *other boat?*

“Okay! String ‘em up!”

Thick arms held Aldon from behind, while fast hands wrapped a frayed rope above his feet. The cord twisted into his ankles. Pain shot through his legs. He felt his body being lifted, and then one of the men binding Cal raised his voice.

“Captain! Do you know who this is? It’s Jed Trail’s brother!”

Rowlen’s eyes shot open in surprise. “Well I’ll be the ass of a donkey. You’re one of the Trail boys. Col...Cod...Cal! That’s it! This changes everything.”

Aldon didn't understand. He craned his neck to find Cal. His expression looked anything but encouraging.

The rider captain leaned over Cal, bearing a malicious grin. "Where's your worthless brother at, eh? Still out-scumming the lowest of the scum? Or has he upgraded from robbery to battery? Like father, like son."

Cal spat in his face. "My brother has more honour that you'll ever know."

Rowlen didn't react. Instead, he slowly wiped the mess from his cheek and turned to Aldon. "Unfortunate company you have chosen to keep. This one doesn't at all agree with me. My men could use an extra oarsman. I'm sure you won't mind volunteering for a few days—no, let's make it a few years—to help appease my distaste." Then his arm flung at Cal, slugging him hard in the jaw.

A moment later a loud splash came from behind. All heads turned, except for Rowlen. His eyes remained fixed on Cal.

"Hold them!"

Two sets of hands shoved Aldon to his knees. He tried to right himself but was pushed again. His chest struck a broken floorboard, knocking the breath out of him. Someone lifted his hair and a cold edge pressed against his skin. He realized in horror that a sword had been put to his neck.

Solu, he prayed, please spare my life this day.

[Insert Saira chapter or two here?]

Chapter Nineteen

Misplaced Loyalty

Jed shivered. The deep waters of the Welling embraced the cold as well as the sun held its heat. He pulled himself along the port side of the Callandra, looking for a hold. But of course a rider's ship would never have easy access from the water; his year under Captain Rowlen had taught him that. A man thrown overboard wasn't meant to return.

Finally, his fingers fell across a notch in the hull. Not enough for a secure handhold, but enough to boost himself to a scupper, and then to the rail. Swinging his body over, he dropped down soundlessly into the boat. Jed spotted the water pump in the stern. He listened. Hidden from the view of Fuschia, he heard Rowlen barking insults at Aldon. Unless Rowlen was being really sloppy, Jed knew at least one sentry would be left on the Callandra. Therefore, silently dispatching whoever still breathed on this ship was his first order of business.

Moving stealthily along the perimeter, his trained steps betrayed no sound, even with the soaked leatherskins on his feet. He found the entrance to the ship's hold at the bow, next to two iron-hooped barrels marked with foreign letters. *Looks like Rowlen had been expanding his territory.*

Two voices came from the hold. With his chrak in hand, Jed forgot about the cold and went to go down the steep staircase when someone else started up. The oak barrels were his only cover, and too much in the open. Jed froze. He knew the man coming up

the stairs. It was Anders. Vedil's shadow! Of all the people, why did it have to be his closest mate in the riders? In a second, Anders would see Jed, and everything would be lost.

A boisterous cry erupted from the riders aboard the Fuschia. Anders turned as he reached the floor of the bow, curiosity taking him to the starboard side. While Anders watched the proceedings, Jed observed from a distance over his shoulder. The six riders had their attention on Cal and Aldon, who were both tied. The Captain said something to Cal, and he spat in Rowlen's face. What in Solu's name was Cal doing? Rowlen turned away, but Jed saw what was coming. He couldn't wait.

"Hey Anders!" Jed said, moving straight toward him. "What news does the river bring?"

The rider turned in startled disbelief. "Jed, is that you?"

"The one and only. Where have you been?"

"Me? I haven't seen you since Rowlen offered the Captaincy in exchange for any one of your limbs. Hey, what are you doing?"

His last word became a yelp as Jed broke into a run and knocked Anders between the boats. With the same momentum, Jed put his foot on the rail and bounded into the fishing vessel. When Anders hit the water the men carrying Cal released their grip. Cal hit the hull with a thump. Jed scurried past as they trained their weapons on him. A bolt whizzed by his ear. Rowlen yelled out "Hold them!" just as Jed pushed a dagger against his back.

"Give me a reason, and I'll gut you from behind. You taught me that, remember?"

Rowlen's body tensed, but he didn't shift. A book fell from under his arm. "I should've known. One bad Trail leads to another. How do you suggest we proceed from here?"

"Exactly how I want it to. Where's the rest of your crew, Rowlén? Can't keep those deserters from deserting?"

"Times are hard. I had to downsize."

Cal rolled over, twisting his body so he could see Jed. "Brother, there's another—"

One of the riders kicked him in the ribs. Cal grunted.

"Let up!" Jed called out. "Or I stick your captain. Leave this to me, Cal."

"You do realize," Rowlén said, no trace of fear in his voice, "that if you kill me, you are all dead."

"Quite all right by me. My life hasn't been going so well of late. I wouldn't mind a change of scenery."

"And your brother? You would surrender his life for your misguided vengeance?"

"This is about you and me, Captain. Being your personal escort to Vedil will be my final act of pleasure."

"I am no fool. You're bluffing."

"Call it, and you'll find out. Or tell your men to throw their weapons down."

After a moment, Rowlén nodded his head, and the five riders tossed their swords and crossbows to the hull. They all looked thin, faces pale with some waterborne illness. Cal untied his feet and did the same for Aldon.

“You’ve accomplished something for me today,” Rowlen whispered to Jed. “The riders now have a united hatred for you.”

“Okay,” Jed announced, “this is how it’s going to happen. Aldon, get your book. Can you pass me that bucket? Cal, take the pole, get inside Callandra, and prepare to push off. No one else move, unless you want to see your captain’s belly button on the tip of my dagger. That includes you, Anders. Sorry for the wet welcome, but allies of enemies can’t be trusted.”

Anders stood in the stern of Fuschia, drenched. He pushed back his dripping hair. “Good to know where we stand, my friend.”

Cal jumped across, helped Aldon do the same, then unmoored the ship. With the pole, he shoved Callandra downstream.

Rowlen raised his voice. “Strange that you have a knife to my back. I owe you much more ill-will than you can possibly harbour for me.”

“Are you still dwelling on that? Judging from your ship’s name, I imagine you are. You can buy a dozen more wives. Callandra chose me, I didn’t choose her. If it pleases you to know, that redhead made a habit of running off with other men.”

“That pleases me some, yes. It will please me more when I get to drag your body along the entire length of the Welling.”

“That’ll have to wait. And I’m very sorry, but I’m going to have to take yet another Callandra from you.”

Cal had the rider’s boat moving at a good pace. The narrower, better maintained craft drifted downriver faster than Fuschia. At the last possible moment, Jed threw the bucket over Rowlen’s head and pushed him toward his men. Sprinting to the prow, he

leapt right over Callandra's backside, falling and rolling onto her hull. Three bolts and three daggers thudded all around him.

"I always enjoy a good chase!" Rowlen yelled after him. "Especially when the reward will be so blood-sickeningly sweet."

Crouching down, Jed moved up to the aft, where he found Aldon and Cal. "Ha! He'll never catch us in that thing."

Aldon looked at him in shock. "You used to be a river rider?"

"I have a long list of irreligious affiliations. Want to hear the rest?"

Aldon only stared.

"They have another ship."

"What's that, Cal?"

"There's another rider boat, dead ahead."

Jed cut his celebrations short. The identical craft bore down on them, its prow bearing a huge narwhale horn. They would intercept the Callandra in less than a minute. "This just keeps getting better and better. I should've known—Rowlen likes his ship sandwiches."

Aldon looked confused. "I don't understand. How they did get on either side of us?"

"Think of them as turtles. But at the moment, that boat is the least of our problems. There's still a rider left in Callandra's hold."

Just then, they heard a splash off the port side. Jed went to investigate. Swimming with only one arm, the rider kicked desperately for the shore. His other arm clung to a gold urn filled with an assortment of jewels and coin.

“Apparently there’s more than one way into the hold,” Cal noted. “Where’s he off to?”

“Following in my footsteps,” Jed commented. “He’s opted for the rare rider opportunity of early retirement. Cal, go down and secure the hold. Aldon, I need you to do exactly as I say. If they ram us, we’re done for. We need to make them think riders are still aboard Callandra. When they go by, yell out the worst insults you can think of.”

“Insults?”

“Yea, you know. Your mother is a cow with the head of a boar! Or Lhoran’s light shines everywhere but your black hole!”

“I...can’t do that.”

“Here they come now. Say it like you mean it!”

The other boat held at least ten rowers, and another half dozen on top deck. As their prows intersected, about ten feet apart, Jed cupped his hands beside his mouth and bellowed with all his might. “You’re a sorry lot! When did the riders start recruiting nannies!”

“I see the teral got your face!” a man called back.

“Girls and gargoyles are all that’s left on the Callandra!”

“Who let the swen out of its cage?”

Aldon opened his mouth but nothing came out. A few of the riders started to point.

“Quick!” Jed insisted.

The words came from Aldon like a scared, timid child. “You smell like a gryphawk’s droppings!”

The oarsmen slowed their rowing. Jed heard the *twang* of crossbows being fired.

“Duck!”

This time, he didn’t wait for Aldon’s response, throwing both of them to the ground. Aldon groaned.

“You’re welcome,” he said, pushing himself off the water weaver. “I liked the gryphawk bit. But you’ve really got to work on your delivery.”

“Jed...”

“What is it?”

“You’re bleeding.”

Jed looked down at his arm. His shirt was torn just below his left shoulder. Blood flowed down to his elbow. When had that happened? He cursed. The cut didn’t concern him; it wasn’t very deep. He just hoped Rowlen had abandoned his habit of dipping all of his men’s bolts in dusksnake venom.

“Are you okay?” Aldon looked as though he had never seen blood before.

“With a little luck, I’ll survive—and so will you, if I can convince them to go back for their precious Captain. Here, take the pole. Keep us moving down the center of the river. We’re going to need the fastest current the Welling has to offer.”

Jed left the bewildered Aldon and raced toward Callandra’s stern. The other boat would be swinging about for full-on pursuit. What was he going to say? Judging from the ashen faces of the riders, and Rowlen’s most recent turncoat, morale was at an all-time low. So telling them their captain was stranded upstream—even if they believed him—would be akin to telling a slave to rescue their whip-wielding lord. How did one persuade a rider to choose loyalty over gold?

He stopped short at the bow. To his surprise, the other boat had made no effort to alter their course. Either they had seen the fishing vessel through the dense fog, or they cared even less than Jed did for Rowlen.

He turned at the sound of hurried footsteps.

“Cal! There you are. What did you find?”

“There’s no one else in the hold. We’ve got Callandra to ourselves.” His brother tried to hide a smirk. Jed knew what that meant.

“Rowlen left a little gift onboard, did he?”

“And then some. I don’t know where he went, but he’s got half the treasury of the royal palace stowed away in the hold. That’s the good news.”

“The bad?”

“He’ll never give up the chase, not for this bounty. You already took one Callandra from him, he won’t stand for it again. This one shines a lot prettier, if you don’t mind my saying. But let me ask you something, brother. Back on the Fuschia, would you have really killed Rowlen?”

“Not on your life. He’s still the captain.”

Cal laughed and threw an arm over his shoulder. “You never cease to amaze me.”

“So I’ve got us water wheels and ten lifetimes of riches. Can you forgive me now for whatever it was I did?”

“We’ll call it even. It seems like your luck is changing for the better.”

Cal shook his shoulder. Jed cried out in pain, his arm burning with an inner fire.

“What is it, brother?”

Before he could answer, a bloodcurdling scream rose from the front of the boat. It

was Aldon.

Chapter Twenty

Fire

In an instant, Jed had his chrak in one hand, his second longest knife in the other. Cal tore up the port side, with Jed keeping to starboard. Had his brother missed a hidden rider? Ducking under the side mast, Jed saw Aldon wildly swinging his pole at three creatures climbing over the rail. His mind tried to register what he was seeing.

Callandra was being boarded by raelisks.

Jed let the knife fly from his right hand. The small blade glanced off the scaly belly of the closest creature. Aldon rapped the pole on its head. That only enraged the creature. Eyes that belonged to Vedil himself stared at Aldon, telling of death and despair.

Jed knew any hesitation would be the end of them all. They couldn't let the raelisk get onto the deck. Charging at the raelisk perched atop the rail, he kicked at its leg. The creature lost its hold and fell back over the side, but not before thrashing a claw along Jed's ankle. He didn't stop to inspect the nasty gash on his leg—it was still his shoulder that burned. No time for that either.

Cal had found a crossbow. He fired two bolts at another raelisk, then hurled the weapon with both hands, knocking the wounded creature clear of the Callandra.

One more. This one had made it over the rail.

Aldon tried to sideswipe the creature, but it batted the pole out of his hands. That's all Jed needed. With its attention still focused Aldon, the raelisk didn't face Jed until he was upon it. A claw swung out at him. He ducked easily past the gnarled limb

and lunged at its twisted body.

His chrak dug between two scales, reaching deep into the scabby flesh. The raelisk let out a raspy shriek, like a hissing snake suffering from a cold. Its forked tongue writhed out between rows of jagged teeth. The smell of dead fish washed over Jed. With his dagger embedded in its chest, he thrust the creature to the edge. Its back hit the rail and the raelisk somersaulted into the water, taking the chrak with it.

He didn't have time to rejoice. His arm stung as though someone had poured lemon juice into his open wound. *Lhoran's light!* Jed thought to himself. *He was poisoned.*

But he couldn't dwell on that. On the starboard flank, seven more raelisks were climbing toward the railing, claws digging into the outer hull like a mountaineer with built-in crampons. For all he knew, there could be just as many on the other side. Too many.

Cal agreed. "Callandra has too many suitors. We have to abandon ship! Jump off the prow and swim like mad for the shore!"

Jed peered toward the foggy bank. "It's too far! We'll never make it. These things were born in the water. They'll overtake us before we surface."

Aldon mumbled something that Jed didn't hear.

"Speak up!"

"Fire," he repeated. "We need fire!"

Cal nodded. "Give me a minute. Brother, hold them off!" he yelled and scrambled down into the hold.

Normally, Jed would be happy to oblige. But all he could think about was the fire

in his shoulder, rendering his left arm—his strongest—useless. He tried to move his fingers. The weak and numb digits didn't cooperate.

Half a dozen raelisks were now on the deck, approaching from the stern.

"Can't you wrap some spirits around them?"

Aldon shook his head stoically. "The scriptures say, *raelisk fear no water or spirit, only that which burns.*"

"Just my luck. A water weaver who can't weave. Does it say anything in there about dusksnake venom?"

Jed counted his assets. Two oak barrels, a former Elder-boy, and an ex-rider with one working arm. Even with his chrak gone, the odds were still stacked against him.

He went to the first barrel. With only one good arm, he found it too hard to handle. He put his right shoulder squarely into the barrel. It toppled over. The iron hoops rolled easily over the deck.

"Help me with this!"

The raelisk, hunched on all fours, were less than ten paces away. Jed needed to turn the barrel round. The liquid inside didn't help its maneuverability. Aldon pushed against one end.

"Where are we taking this?"

"Starboard. There we go. Ever play bowl the boulder?"

"No..."

"Well, it goes a something like this. Heave!"

Together, they shoved against the wood staves of the container. The barrel rolled away from their hands as it took on its own momentum. Jed grinned as the leading

raelisk paused to consider the large cylinder flying towards it down the deck. With a bone crunching *clunk* the barrel rammed into its lower limbs, bending one joint backward. The raelisk crumpled, squealing in pain.

A moment later, five others moved past their injured companion.

“Jed! Catch!”

Cal appeared with two lit torches. Jed barely caught the one his brother had thrown. He waved the torch at the advancing creatures. The raelisks stopped to scrutinize the flames. A moment later, their eyes returned to the wielders of the torches.

“They’re still coming!” Aldon said behind them.

“I can see that! What do we do now? Well?”

“I...don’t know.”

Jed felt his chest tighten. Even with his good arm, holding the torch became too much.

“Here. Take my torch. Burn anything that gets too close! Aldon, help me with the other barrel.”

He and Aldon raced to the second barrel. Jed tried to push, but his strength was fading fast. Aldon did most of the work. They positioned it beside Cal, who waved his two torches in a kind of erratic fire dance, trying to keep the raelisks diverted.

Aldon was breathing hard. “What’s in this thing?”

“I’m about to find out.”

He pulled the cork from the barrel’s side. A clear fluid sloshed within. The sweet intoxicating smell was unmistakable.

“Orianne whiskey?” Cal asked.

“None other. Rowlen’s favourite. Time to put it to good use.”

Jed nudged the barrel over, spilling its contents onto the deck.

“Roll!”

Aldon kicked somewhat feebly at one of the iron hoops. That was enough to turn the barrel over twice before it rolled to a halt. Undeterred, the raelisks walked right by, their clawed feet still finding grip on the wet surface.

“You think roasted raelisk tastes anything like cara?” Jed asked.

“Only one way to find out!”

Cal hurled a torch behind the barrel. Flames sprang up instantly, orange, yellow and blue dancing over the surrounding deck. The fire crawled eagerly up the raelisks’ legs as though they were made of paper. In seconds, their bodies became a blaze of light and heat. All but one flung itself into the river. The last raelisk—damaged by the first barrel—couldn’t throw its burning body into the healing waters. Its reptilian form burnt to a crisp, leaving a mangled heap of charred limbs and steaming flesh.

The fire sprang over the first barrel. Jed’s eyes widened in horror.

“We’ve got to put that out!”

But that wasn’t his voice. His mouth wouldn’t work. He tried to form words with his dry, limp tongue, yet it felt like trying to bend a sword with his mind. He couldn’t speak. The world swam before his eyes, and the next thing Jed knew he was laying on the deck.

His vision blurred into indistinct shapes, as though he were trapped in a fog thicker than bonfire smoke. Delirious voices hovered somewhere above him. He caught fragments here and there.

“...need to find clear waters!”

“...north is a swamp...”

“...move along the bank...”

“...going to *die*...”

And then he found them too much to focus on. He passed through a door of shadow and his perception moved to illusion and dream. Sonja was there, running her hands through his hair. Her golden locks shone in the sunlight. Next he saw sweet, innocent Fuschia, her gentle eyes like those of an angel. She smiled at him, and the weight in his chest somehow felt lighter. Finally, fiery Callandra stood over him, hands on her prominent hips.

“You going to crawl into your hole and give up, just like that?”

She vanished, replaced by a dark cloud that covered him like a coffin. One final coherent thought managed to push itself to the surface of his waning consciousness.

Am I dying?

Then Jed's world went black.

Chapter Twenty-One

Comings and Goings

Aldon stabbed the pole into the water. He tried to find the riverbed, a protruding rock, a weed—anything. That raelisk had broken off one end. Now the pole was too short to reach the bottom of the Welling. They needed to get to the south bank. Jed lay behind him, unconscious, foam dripping from his blueing lips. Shallow breaths still escaped his lungs. But if they didn't find immediate help, those would soon cease.

Cal returned. "Fire's out," he said, then went to his brother's side. Apparently there was some kind of pump at the stern. He had heard Cal fill a bucket, over and over, and dump it onto the flames near the barrels.

Cal swore. "This is no good. No good at all. What in Solu's name are we going to do? Damn that bastard Rowlen and his dusksnake venom."

Aldon finally hit something solid, but the pole skipped over the stony surface.

"Wouldn't the riders keep an antidote onboard?"

"No," Cal said. "There is no antidote for the bite of a dusksnake."

"Then how do you cure it?"

"Cut off your arm at the shoulder, before it has time to spread."

Neither of them mentioned that it was too late for that.

Aldon focused on the current. "We need to get to the southern shore."

"Why are you so keen on that?"

"The spirits are tangled here, like vines clambering over each other. I can't tease them apart. I need waters that aren't muddied. Side streams are usually clear."

“How big of a rivulet do you need?”

“It doesn’t matter. If it’s small, it’ll be moving faster, which will make finding the spirits easier.”

“Here, give me that.” Cal snatched the pole from him and moved to the port side. Not long after, Aldon could feel the ship shift direction.

“I think we just passed a stream,” Cal said, coming back to the prow. “Should we stop?”

“The Welling is full of branching rivulets. I’ve studied all the sacred streams. Here’s another!”

The Callandra veered into the thick reeds, slowing before it bumped against the soft bank.

“Are we close enough?”

But Aldon had blocked out his voice. Sitting beside Jed, he closed his eyes and opened himself to the spirits. He could feel their reluctance. Freed from the tainted waters of the Welling, they untwisted themselves and flowed eagerly down this branching creek. They didn’t want to turn upstream. He coaxed them to come under his command, to let *hlasa* flood through his body. They resisted, not wanting to give up their newfound freedom. At first, only a few threads allowed themselves to be pulled back to the edge of the Welling. But as a spider begins with only a single strand of silk, Aldon used these first few to draw more strands, covering his body in a web of spirit.

He felt Cal’s presence nearby, anxious, tense, afraid.

“My brother isn’t breathing!”

Brought out of his trance, Aldon looked down at Jed. Cradled in his brother’s

arms, Jed lay still. The spirits had left him.

“Do something!”

Aldon refocused, drawing back the spirits. He weaved a thread into the wound, having to push to get through. Nothing was moving. The spirits kept hitting a barrier, like a river stalled by a beaver’s dam. He shoved the *hlasa* forward, and finally broke through. Aldon had never put spirits inside another human before. It felt strange, like Jed’s body was his own. The streams of life had slowed, the blood inching forward where it had once rushed.

Aldon urged the current along. Mixed with Jed’s life fluids, he couldn’t find the dusksnake venom. Then the spirits twirled and spun. Was he doing that? The threads pulled away from his fingers, enveloping Jed in their energy. A moment later they returned. Aldon could now sense the poison, a flame in dry fields, a shadow in the river, madness within the order. The spirits coiled around the venom, separating the foreign fluid from the true. Like taking oil from water, he lifted the poison from Jed.

Aldon’s arms flopped to his sides. The spirits left him instantly. Feeling tighter than the skin of a pregnant sow, his muscles ached, as though he had been holding a great weight, one too heavy for human hands. His head rolled with fatigue.

“He’s alive!” Cal exclaimed. “Jed! Can you hear me? You’re alive!”

Jed coughed.

“Of course I can hear you. I’m not deaf! What happened to me? What did you do?”

“It wasn’t me.”

Jed’s eyes looked to Aldon. “I found the right threads.”

“Wait a second,” Jed said, sitting up. “Do you mean to say that you put spirits *inside* me? What did I tell you about that!”

“Calm down, brother. If it wasn’t for Aldon, you wouldn’t be breathing.”

“But that’s exactly it! Every breath I take, spirits are moving through me. The very thought makes me want to vomit.”

“Nausea? That would be the poison that so recently left your system.” Aldon looked up at the sky. The warmth of the afternoon sun offered some solace. “Oh, and by the way...you’re welcome.”

Cal pulled his brother to his feet. Jed’s legs wobbled. “I’m all right,” he said, pushing Cal’s supporting arms away. As soon as he did so, Jed lost his footing.

Aldon moved to the railing, leaving the brothers to bicker over who needed to help who. His strength was returning, but he still felt spent, not to mention hungrier than a dolphin in a fishless river. Short yellow grass stretched beyond the reed-riddled shore. There was a house of some kind—maybe a small barn?—off near the base of a series of low foothills. The high sun cut through the fog, exposing the Greytops in the distance. One triangle of imposing rock overlapped another, extending well to the east and south, the sharp peaks looking like the lower jaw of a shark. He wanted to go ashore.

Jed was in the same mindset.

“I need to get off this boat. Solid ground will do me some good. Maybe that wayward farmer has some food, though I don’t see how anything could grow in a place like this.”

Jed could walk unassisted, albeit at a snail’s pace. Aldon watched him hobble down Callandra’s starboard side, toward the ill-fated remains of the raelisk. Jed bent

down, and from the charred black scales pulled out a silver dagger. Rubies branded the hilt with the mark of Vedil. There wasn't a single scratch or fire scar on the blade.

"That figures," Aldon heard him mumble as Jed tucked the chrak away.

Aldon climbed over the prow first, dropping himself to the muddy embankment. He waded through thick sludge, determined to reach this residence. He wanted to ask them about The Order. Yet as he crunched over the field of dead grass, he began to think the house was deserted. Then he saw a child walking from the other direction. The little girl, maybe five or six, spotted him at the same time. She stopped dead in her tracks. Aldon did the same. After a moment, she dropped the bundle of sticks in her arms and ran into the back of the house.

"Nice going, water weaver," Jed said, coming up beside him. "You scared her away."

As they got closer, the house reminded him of the decrepit buildings in Yelle. Except this salvaged structure looked even older. The lichen-clad stone walls were incongruous with the patched together roof: part thatch, part wood, with rolls of tied reeds and clumps of moss stuffed into the cracks. A few other stone foundations revealed themselves beneath the grass, the humps of vegetation forming a roughly rectangular shape. Perhaps a village had thrived here, once.

A door opened on rusty hinges. In the threshold a tall man appeared, thin and bedraggled. His gaunt face spoke of horrors within, while long, bony fingers gripped the door frame. Three girls peered from behind his wiry body, the youngest being the one Aldon had seen earlier. All three had dirty faces, with a mixture of inquisitiveness and wide-eyed fear.

“Riders! You best keep your distance!” the father yelled out. “This house harbours disease.”

Aldon stopped, but Jed took another step forward.

“We aren’t riders. We’re hungry travellers. Have you any food to spare?”

The man considered the three of them. “No, you don’t look the part. And I’m sorry, but we’ve nothing. The mountain goat herds are thin enough as it is, and this soil won’t grow anything but shadebush.”

Aldon glanced to the Greytops. “Why are you here?”

“We come from a village on the far side of the Felding Pass. Only a few dozen called Waleton home, although there probably isn’t anyone left. A year ago, our houses started sinking into the swamp. Then the shadow plague broke out, carried down from the Dareth Mountains. I lost one girl, and wasn’t going to wait around and lose another. We stumbled across this abandoned place a few months ago. Not much space for five, but I count my blessings that we’re still above ground.”

“Have you any knowledge on the Order of Templar?”

A strange look passed over the man’s face, as though he had just seen a butterfly emerge from a caterpillar’s cocoon. He took a step out from the doorway.

“What brings you to ask such a question?”

“My Uncle was a member of the Order. I heard that some of them have taken residence in the Greytops.”

“It’s been a number of years since anyone came around asking after the Order. This is back in Waleton, you see. Those that did were important-looking, all dressed up in blue robes. Either way, I haven’t got much to tell you. From the questions I’ve been

asked over the years, I gather the Order lived somewhere in this range at one time or another. Or at least, a lot of people think that's the case, Divinists mostly. But they're secretive folk. I imagine the Order moves quite often, to avoid being found. By my reckoning, you're about five years too late. That is, if they were ever here at all."

Aldon's shoulders fell. They had come all this way, and for what? The Order wasn't here, his Uncle wasn't here, Saira wasn't here. They had nowhere to go.

"Lhoran's light!" Jed cursed. "You got me poisoned for this? What are we going to do now?"

Aldon tried to ignore him.

The father said, "Not the news you wanted to hear. Though I don't know why you want to get yourselves caught up in all that."

Aldon pointed to the river. "This isn't a good place to make a home. The Welling carries more than riders these days."

"You mean the river lizards? We don't worry about them. They don't venture far from the water. Not this far, anyway. So unless the Welling floods, we're safe. Even if we wanted to move, we couldn't. My wife is bedridden."

"My name is Aldon Kale. I am an acolyte, and a healer. Perhaps I can help your wife?"

The nameless man took a step back, shooing his daughters away as he did so. "We don't need a healer, though the offer is appreciated. She just needs rest. Truth be told, you don't look like an acolyte any more than you do a rider. If you came in here, I fear you'd fall to the same foul plague."

Aldon sensed a nervous energy from the man. He had never realized how much a

person judged another by their appearance. No one—with the exception of Jed—had spoken ill of him when he still wore the robes. Aldon wondered: how many smiled and bowed to the robes rather than to *him*?

“We will leave you be,” Aldon said, giving a low bow. “May Solu’s light shine upon you.”

The man nodded and went inside. The door creaked slowly shut behind him.

Jed turned back toward the boat. “He has no wife.”

Aldon glanced once more at the house of ill health before following. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that he’s lying. His wife is dead. I know when a man is telling a false story. He blinks a lot, fidgets with his fingers, scratches his beard. Can’t blame him though. We’re a very sorry looking lot. Tell me, Aldon. In that book of yours, what exactly does it say about the Order?”

Aldon traced his fingers along the coverless book behind his shirt. “I will quote you the passage. ‘Since the start of the spirit wars, The Order of Templar was forced to leave the cities. Some took to the Greytops, others remained scattered across Rivaria, keeping their identities hidden. One day, we hope to reunite.’”

“Words on a page can be just as dishonest as those spoken. I’m inclined to agree with that sonless father. The Order never had a residence in the Greytops. You don’t write down something you want kept hidden.”

Aldon dragged his feet over the hard earth. “So where are we going?”

“We’re going to continue down the Welling with Rowlen’s loot, past the mangroves, until we reach a city, and sell enough for a lifetime of coin. You’re welcome

to your share. But one thing's for sure, I'm not taking directions from you again. I have enough to chase and be chased by; I don't need to add wild geese to that list."

Aldon didn't have any interest in riches. The sun shone much brighter and honestly than any gold. Cal didn't object to the plan, wordlessly following his brother back onto Callandra. Aldon had no choice but to go along—unless he wanted to brave a path on his own. Where could he go?

Jed reclaimed command, as though ignorant of the fact he had just escaped the clutches of Vedil. "Check for stowaways, Cal. No river lizards permitted on this ride. I'll get us unmoored."

Aldon sat next to the rail, feeling utterly useless. He saved Jed's life only to be reprimanded for it. His thoughts fled to dark places. Yet the spirits returned to him too, rising up from the tiny brook that chose to diverge from the great river. The *hlasa* restored his mind to a calm state, clearing his consciousness of bitter frustration. Something entered his amplified perception, a quivering of the Welling's waters. Upstream, or down? He felt a great surge, a swelling of spirits too vast to conceive. Yet before he had time to source the disturbance, Jed had pushed them away from the bank, away from the free spirits and back into the deluge of entangled threads.

Aldon thought about that man and his daughters, and the forces that had driven them to such a solitary existence. Tainted waters, disease, death, plague...what had caused all this suffering and pain? He didn't know how, but Aldon resolved to find the root of this evil that had brought raelisks into sacred waters and turned one man against another. To cleanse the spirits, *that* was his mission.

Jed sent his brother down to the hold. Cal came back, hauling a bag full of golden

urns and other trinkets. Aldon could hear them clinking together. It sounded like swords hitting each other.

Jed's mouth fell open, crestfallen as Cal emerged from the hold.

"Say it isn't so, brother."

Cal dropped the bag and put his hands over his face. "They're fakes. All of them! If Rowlen had any genuine treasures squirreled away somewhere, I fear they fled in the arms of that swimming rider."

Jed rummaged through the bag of painted metal. "What does Rowlen want with this trash?"

"When the real thing isn't available, you make the best of what's around."

"You're right, Cal. With the river tainted, traders and wealthy merchants are relying more and more on the roads. That makes for slim pickings for the riders. Did you check for loose floorboards? Nothing? What about hollow chair seats? Rowlen likes to use every nook and cranny. Here, I better go down myself..."

Aldon had had enough. Getting to his feet, he wandered down the port side. There was no telling how far a man would go to find his wealth. Lie, steal, cheat, even murder. How many would do the same for the spirits? Is that what Caro Orsen had done?

More than anything, he wanted to hold the spirits again, to feel the warm embrace of *hlasa*. But they were too far from clear waters. The spirits couldn't untie themselves.

He heard the drip of water as he reached the stern. Every second another drop fell from the pump Cal had used, consisting of a bowed handle attached to a vertical pipe with a bent faucet. Cranking the handle must thrust water up from the river underneath. He peered into the half-filled bucket. Unlike the body of the Welling, this water was

almost transparent.

Aldon abruptly regained his focus. To the west, the fog had completely lifted above the straight line of the river, leaving little to obscure his vision. That left the second rider ship plainly visible. Gaining fast, propelled by at least ten sets of oars, its prow carved new currents.

“They’re back!” he called. Jed and Cal didn’t respond. His voice hadn’t carried far enough. He sucked in a full breath, yelling as he ran.

“The other ship is back!”

“What did you say?”

Cal’s voice. Jed was still in the hold.

“The riders are right behind us!”

“Vedil’s shadow. Jed! Get back up here!”

Jed appeared from below. “What did I tell you? Rowlen wouldn’t still be after us unless there was something worth chasing.”

“I disagree.”

“Oh?”

“Shouldn’t we—” Aldon started.

“Well,” Cal interrupted, “for one, we have his ship. And then there’s you, brother.”

“Point taken. But I still think he’s got something buried in the hull. Something worth traversing through raelisk-infested waters.”

Aldon couldn’t get a word in edgewise. He stepped between them. Jed finally acknowledged he was there.

“What do you think, water weaver?”

“I’d like to know exactly what we are going to do.”

“Can’t you spin up some spirits, call up a tidal wave or something?”

“The water is tainted, the spirits are in knots. I can’t use them.”

Cal kicked the bag. “Why don’t we pitch this behind us?”

“I’ve got a better idea.” Jed moved past Aldon to the uncorked barrel. “Help me throw this overboard. The captain won’t want to lose his whiskey.”

Aldon took the other end. “This one’s nearly empty.”

“Rowlen doesn’t know that. If he asks, we’ll tell him the angels had their share.”

They tossed both into the Welling.

Cal looked doubtful. “That only gives us a couple more minutes at most. How are we going to lose the riders on their own river?”

Aldon couldn’t hold his tongue at that comment. “The Welling belongs to the spirits and the dolphins.”

“Not anymore.” Jed picked up the pole. “If we’re going to lose Rowlen’s riders, we have to get off the water. What do you think, Cal? Can we get Callandra on the shore?”

“You’re crazy, brother. It’ll never work. We need at least ten men.”

Once again, Aldon had been left out of the conversation. He hated that. “What in Solu’s name are you talking about?”

But neither Jed nor Cal answered him, because at that moment something struck the front of Callandra. The boat reared up.

Cal crouched, pulling daggers from his sleeves. “What is it? More raelisk?”

“No, not that...” Jed’s words trailed off.

Aldon crept to the rail, gazing warily over the lip. Eddies and whirlpools covered the surface of the Welling. Yet there was no wind, no rain. His heart raced as he watched the water. Callandra was slowing. Aldon suddenly knew what was happening. Ten years ago, his Uncle Garen had seen this very sight.

“It’s the changing of the current.”

Jed’s eyes shot open in surprise. “Are you doing that?”

“I already told you, I can’t manipulate the spirits here. Not even the Divine Elder could reverse the flow of the Welling. It must be the silver dolphins.”

Aldon could hear the uncertainty in his own voice. Jed thrust the pole into the brown surface of the water. “Dolphins? I don’t see any fins. How can they breathe in that murky mess?”

“Maybe something changed downstream...” Aldon started to say.

Cal cut in. “We’re drifting backward!”

He was right. Jed pushed to the right with the pole. Callandra veered toward the north bank.

“No choice now. It’s time to hop from river to mangrove.”

“We’ll never make it. We’ll be a sitting duck.”

“Ducks have legs. So does Callandra.”

“Will you tell me what’s going on?” Aldon demanded.

Jed kept directing them to the margin of the Welling. The riders were coming at them at an extraordinary pace, on a clear collision course. “I’ll let you in on a trade secret. River riders don’t always ride the currents. They spend just as much time

aground. These boats are like turtles—they work on water *and* land.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Let me finish. Callandra here is made of feather wood, the lightest available. Half the weight of balsa. To avoid being caught by River Walkers or the royal guard, they go ashore and roll their ships from one river to the next.”

“Wait a minute. Are you saying this boat has *wheels*?”

“Precisely. But don’t tell anyone.” Jed pulled out the pole and began shoving them forward from the left side of the prow. “The thing is, riders usually have a dozen men to push. I’m hoping the bank isn’t high. The swamp should be right on the other side. If the current is changing, as you say, then this is the highest the Welling ever gets.”

Aldon tried to wrap his head around this. “What’s stopping them from following us?”

“Riders don’t like the swamp. Clogs up their wheels. And then there’s the xarg.”

“The what?”

“Xarg. Protector of the selwyn. Her beak can sink a boat with one bite through the hull. Now you better hold onto something. Land ho!”

They would hit solid ground in a matter of seconds. Aldon saw they were headed at an angle for a break in the north bank. But their long, narrow craft was moving painstakingly slow, aggravated further as the prow pushed through a forest of reeds. Any momentum they had before was lost from the river reversing its flow. Jed kept spearing the water with the pole. Cal’s expression looked grim. The edge of the Welling loomed, their vessel a fish about to make a go on dry land. Aldon held onto the rail.

Callandra slammed into the low embankment, throwing him against the side of

the boat. He regained his footing. Had they stopped? No...they moving forward at a snail's pace. Yet they were still moving, through a kind of boggy shoreline. The boat's wheels were still submerged. Jed pulled up the pole, caked with thick sludge, and stabbed again into the mire of half-water, half-mud.

Aldon put his hands together on the rail. *Solu, guide us through to the other side.* But they were going into the selwyn mangroves. Would Solu answer such a prayer? Without his robes on, would Solu even hear his words?

Callandra suddenly ground to a halt. Aldon peered into the viscous slime into which their ship had firmly embedded itself.

"What happened?"

"We're stuck, is what happened!" Jed strained to pull the pole out again.

Wedge in the bank, Aldon could see where it softened into swamp waters ahead, ten paces away. Slender-trunked trees rose right out of the water, green leaves arranged like flower petals, their uppermost roots protruding above the surface. The smell of the ocean wafted over his face, mixed with a stagnant stillness. He looked back over the Welling. The riders were charging headlong their way, like a shark making a beeline for its prey. A dozen men, wearing wicked grins, waved daggers and swords their way. Rowlen stood in front, pointing at their port side. They meant to ram them at an almost parallel angle, at once keeping Callandra in place and letting them board.

Cal jumped over the rail, landing in waist-deep sludge. He leaned his shoulder into the outer hull. "She won't budge!"

Jed cursed. "Then we'll have to make a run on dry land."

"*What* dry land?"

Aldon had a sudden thought. “Get me the bucket.”

“For the hundredth time, speak up!”

Aldon faced Jed squarely. “The bucket from the stern. Bring it here. Hurry! Go!”

Jed scrunched up his face. Having no better ideas of his own, he obeyed and ran off.

Aldon sat cross-legged on the floorboards. Doing his best to still his racing mind, he reached out with long fingers of spirit. Just as he suspected, the swamp spirits were an absolute mess, twisted and bent far worse than in the Welling. Knots of *hlasa* were wrapped in even larger knots, like a thousand-foot snake coiled upon itself countless times. There was no way to find the head or tail.

Jed dashed back with the bucket. As he stopped, some water sloshed over the side.

“Careful! I need that water.”

Jed put the bucket down. “You’ve got about ten seconds to work that magic of yours.”

“First, pick that up and pour it over the side. *Slowly.*”

Jed did as he was told, just as Cal clambered back over the rail, his trousers painted in lumpy mud. “What’s going on?”

“Quiet!” Jed admonished him. “Let the weaver weave.”

Aldon concentrated on the spirits held between Jed’s hands. They were dormant, listless as a bucket of dead eels. As he tipped the container over the side, the falling spirits separated from the sediment. The translucent water suddenly sprang to life and charged *hlasa* shot through his fingers. The dumped water gushed toward the marsh.

Aldon thrust the spirits into the surface. They plunged into the mired muck, diving amongst the snarled mess of threads. He instructed the frenetic spirits to swim in every direction at once. They cut through the other *hlasa* like intersecting streams of cloud, freeing the other threads as they did so. The Callandra lurched forward.

He heard Jed yell in excitement. "It's working! Cal, help me with this pole."

Aldon kept his eyes shut. The spirits were getting sluggish in their movements. It took a great deal of effort to keep them going. Slowly, inescapably, they were being tangled and trapped in the muddy morass. The boat crawled toward the loose swamp ahead.

"Brace yourself for impact!"

He didn't have time to heed Jed's warning. With a hull-wrenching sound, the other rider boat smashed into them from behind. Aldon flew forward, banging his cheek hard against the rail. Pain shot through his head. He had acted too slow. The spirits were gone now, spiralled beyond unravelling.

"We made it!"

Aldon tried to comprehend those words. It hurt too much to think clearly. Gripping the rail, he rose on unsteady feet. Nausea washed over him. He closed his eyes until the feeling past. Cal and Jed were celebrating.

"By Lhoran's light, you did it! With a little help from our rider friends. Can you believe that? Rowlen gave us the last push we needed!"

Aldon stared through shaky eyes back the way they had come. The riders were caught in the quagmire. He realized what must have happened. With the help of the spirits, Callandra had moved far enough forward that, instead of being hit from the side,

the other ship rammed part of their stern. This shoved them clear through to the other side, and lodged Captain Rowlen's boat in place.

Sudden exhaustion struck him. His legs felt like they were made of water. He tried to hold onto the rail, but the whole world seemed to be slipping away.

Someone caught him as he fell.

He heard Jed's voice.

"Whoa there, Aldon. Take some rest. I'll wake you when we find the xarg."

Aldon couldn't keep his eyes open. His body was laid flat, the floorboards like a feather mattress with silken sheets. Too wiped to reply, he let sleep take him.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Hunting Grounds

Saira woke to a burning pain. Her whole body felt stiff. Moaning, she rose from her bed of grass and realized her arm was locked in place. Gritting her teeth, she tried to bend it straight. Her bloodied elbow wouldn't move. Like a door hinge left out in the rain, it felt as though her joint had rusted solid. She gripped her wrist with her other arm and pulled slowly forward. Every inch brought agony.

Quava and her had walked well into the night. This new day brought a scattering of early rain, making her clothes wet with more than morning dew. Now, the sun nearly at its zenith, the skies began to clear. Fenox stretched beside her, one leg at a time. She looked into his yellow eyes. His black pupils widened as he curiously regarded her.

"All this time, I could've closed my eyes and known where you were. Why didn't you tell me?"

Fenox wagged his tail twice and let out a low bark. Then he turned away from her, sticking his nose into the tall grass. From behind the green blades, Saira heard a quiet groan.

"Quava? Is that you?"

There was no response.

Saira crept forward, pushing the grass aside. The pain in her arm left Saira's mind completely. Quava lay on the jaber cat hide, her body heaving. Sweat glistened on her face, her eyes, nose and mouth all scrunched up in pain. Every breath came quickly.

"By Solu! Is it time?"

Saira's heart stopped. Never having the opportunity to see it done, she didn't know the first thing about birthing a baby. Her father had known less than her. When Maystone was blessed with a new child, the mothers never wanted her—a swen—to hold their newborns.

Quava blew out a few more breaths through clenched teeth, then shook her head. "These will pass," she managed to say between gasps. "They help my body prepare for when the time comes."

Saira knelt beside her. For several minutes Quava could do nothing but take in air and exhale, holding her belly like a child gripping a ball too big for her arms. Finally, her breathing settled. Quava rolled to her side, and started to get up. Saira reached to help her, but the woman seemed adamant about doing it herself.

"Being confined in that cave made my muscles weak." She looked at Saira as though nothing were out of the ordinary. "I need to birth by the water, for my baby. The Lanthalos River is maybe a day's travel. Let's get started."

Before Saira could object, the selwyn picked up her things and headed east. Saira double checked her tark was still strapped to her waist, bent and straightened her arm several times, then made to follow.

The odd tree had managed to take root in the Lorellien plains, scrawny looking things with more branches bare than leaved. Any bud that opened quickly lost their green, the frail stem connected to the oval-shaped leaf unable to provide the required nutrients for verdancy. Their withered trunks held monstrous knots with peeling bark. As they moved forward, the mountains in the west faded below the horizon, leaving a land overrun by grass and weeds. Fenox trotted nearby, occasionally stopping to survey the

blue sky.

Quava couldn't walk faster than a moonbear just coming out of hibernation. Taking slow, rhythmic steps, she used her spear to lessen the burden of her weight. She didn't speak, focusing solely on her movements, answering Saira's questions with a curt word or two. At one point, Quava made a lasso trap with her thin rope. She waited for nearly an hour beside a cara hole. When the slender, furry animal emerged, she snared its neck in the trap and had it skinned in minutes.

As it turned out, they weren't the only ones hunting.

Saira spotted it first. High in the sky, an eagle floated on the wind, on a steady patrol of its territory. The eagle's wingspan never shortened, the auburn plumage stretched as far as it would go. These plains were surely ripe with rodents; she wondered if she would get to witness a dive and catch.

By sundown, a few clouds gathered here and there, the puffs of white losing their brilliance with the light. Saira watched the eagle move under the highest wisp—well above the mountains themselves—and stopped in shock as the bird disappeared. The eagle was actually *above* the clouds. How was that possible? When the bird of prey reappeared on the other side of the cloud, lower and larger than before, Quava burst out of her stoic silence.

“To the trees! Help me get to the trees!”

Quava started toward a stand of knobby trunks, about a hundred paces to the south. Saira caught up and put her left arm around Quava's back. “Is everything okay? What's the hurry?”

Quava swore, frustrated by her inability to go any faster. “That gryphawk intends

to make prey out of us.”

Before Saira could make known her surprise, her foot slammed into a mound buried by the grass. As she fell onto her injured arm, two birds flew out from a concealed nest, angrily twittering at her before ducking for cover elsewhere in the field. Ignoring the throbbing in her elbow, she propelled herself back to her feet.

Fenox tore ahead. Quava waved her onward. “Go!”

Saira refused. “We’ll get there together. Come on!”

As they shuffled forward, she dared a glance back over her shoulder. The swooping gryphawk had increased tenfold in size. Its wingspan reached longer than the height of the trees. A hooked beak made her think of a scythe wielded by giants. Huge round eyes trained directly on their backs and talons the length of her legs flexed outward in anticipation of the catch.

The gryphawk pulled in its wings, cutting through the air like a razor prow through water. As it drew dreadfully near, she fully grasped the magnitude of this voracious bird of prey. She felt like a minnow to a shark, a ladybug to a robin. Against a predator this size, there was no hope but to find shelter.

Saira looked ahead. At their pace, the trees were still a minute away. They wouldn’t make it. Quava and her stumbled forward as though they were in a three-legged race. Her exposed neck felt cold and alert, the hairs on her nape standing erect. A gust of wind hit her from behind. She realized in horror the body of the gryphawk had created this current of air. And then she was rolling over the ground, not knowing if it was the wind or a push from Quava that had sent them both tumbling.

An immense form passed over her, blotting out the sky. The rush of feathers and

air engulfed her. She raised her head and saw the gryphawk pulling up, its talons empty and enormous wings flapping mightily.

Quava was already on the move. “Hurry! Before he has time to swing around for a second try.”

Saira ran. But Quava had only halved the remaining distance to the trees when the gryphawk let out an ear-shattering screech. The great bird of prey began its next descent. This time, Saira knew it wouldn’t miss. Quava struggled to keep moving. As the gryphawk dove, eyes screaming for blood, Saira knew she would have to act.

She dashed to the side, running as fast as her legs would carry her. The quicker movement caught its attention. The gryphawk veered away from Quava and focused on her. The thought of being ripped in two and then shoved in the maw of this beast filled her heart with terror. Still sprinting, she pulled out her tusk and threw it. The gryphawk effortlessly swerved to dodge the weapon. Carnage came down on wings. Saira stopped dead in her tracks and flung herself in the opposite direction to which she had been running. Her body rolled hard over the ground.

Like a hurricane the gryphawk fell upon her. Talons scraped at her head, huge claws looking for a grip. She felt razor-sharp edges slide across her shoulders and down her chest. But the gryphawk was going too fast, and didn’t compensate for her dive. The last thing the bird of prey expected was its prey to throw itself *towards* it.

The gryphawk swooped by her. Catching her breath, she allowed herself one cursory glance over her body before making the final run. Daggers of pain dug into her sides. Quava reached the sanctuary of trees at the same time. Saira threw herself down against one of the crooked trunks. Fenox appeared from the other side and sniffed at her

clothes.

A shrieked cried out above them. Saira looked up. The gryphawk glided overhead, moving in a slow circle.

“Are we safe here?” she asked between shallow gasps.

Quava nodded, setting herself down on the leese of the tree. “A gryphawk only preys in the open. They won’t risk damaging their wings. We are lucky. That was only a young bird, still learning the hunt. He practices the power of his speed, yet does not appreciate the strength within his claws. An adult would have had us both fifty paces back, one in each talon.”

Saira shivered, not wanting to envision such a thought. The lone gryphawk still circled.

“When will he leave?”

Quava was spreading out her jaber cat hide. “Not for some time. When the rains come, or all the light has left the sky. Gryphawks are proud animals, reluctant to give up prey. We will stay here for the night.” Spreading her hands over the fur, she suddenly frowned. Twisting her arm this way and that, she then began to massage her palm with the thumb of her other hand.

“Are you all right?”

“I can’t feel these fingers. My hand is numb,” she stated matter-of-factly. At Saira’s horrified stare, she added: “Quite natural, at this stage. There is no need for worry.”

Saira didn’t understand how losing the ability to work her digits was in any way natural. “Maybe we should stay here until you have your baby.”

“No, she must be born by the river. Water is soul,” Quava added, as though that explained everything.

“Aren’t you scared?”

“Of what?”

“Of having a child. Bringing new life into the world. Pushing out what has been growing inside you for nine months.”

“Whatever comes, will come. I will get to the Lanthalos River, and the water gods will do the rest.”

Saira sighed, and rested her back against a large knot in the trunk. It seemed she was more concerned about this baby than Quava. Fenox moved off to hunt, disappearing into the dusk. The gryphawk waited silently on the winds. The mayguar trotted low enough in the grass to be ignored. It frightened her to fall asleep, knowing she was still being tracked.

Quava woke her before dawn, and wordlessly began the new day’s eastward trek. Saira felt Fenox stir beside her. He yawned, baring white fangs that had tasted meat during the night. Getting to her feet, Saira found her tack in a mess of crab grass and followed.

A steady drizzle trailed them, leaving the skies empty of all but grey. One dark shade of cloud rolled over another, blending into the dreary monotone that floated overhead. Shortly after morning had broken, they passed a herd of sambar on the plains. The thirty spotted deer huddled together in the rain, white rumps facing outward. Short bushy tails occasionally flicked away their wetness. Seven or eight fawns stood on

scrawny legs in the center of the protective circle, their light beige coats fluffy with larger white spots. One male sambar boasted a set of magnificent antlers, rising up like the twin, curved branches of a smooth and barkless tree. The rest were females or adolescents, all under his guard and authority.

Quava stopped a few times every hour, wheezing in exhaustion. She never spoke, keeping her pains to herself. Each time she looked ready to collapse, eyes shut in distress and body bent over. But she always started up again, just as determined to reach her destination.

Midday, during one such respite, Saira sat beside Fenox and concentrated every thought on him. Delving into his mind, she transferred her sight to his. Fenox stared at her, expectant. It startled Saira to see *herself* through his eyes. Besides catching a seldom reflection in smooth rivers or ponds, she had never gazed so clearly upon her visage. Her face looked dirty, her hair too short. A fresh scar ran along one side of her forehead and up into her scalp, dotted with small scabs. When had that happened?

Fenox clawed his feet at the earth. Right. She needed to focus. She asked him to hunt something they could eat. He responded by turning from her and scampering into the fields. She saw, from his point of view, the grass blades move by in a blur of black and white.

Saira brought herself out of the delve. Quava was a dozen paces ahead. Before they went by a neighbouring group of sambar, Fenox returned with the snapped neck of a plump adult hare between his teeth. Long tail wagging, he dropped the kill at her feet. Saira picked up the furry body—still warm—and handed it over to Quava, who prepared the meat from there.

They stopped well before the sun settled for the night. The clouds never abated, so Saira found them refuge amidst a particularly high patch of foxtail grass. Their florets swayed in the rising wind, the thin stalks bobbing like masts in rough seas. She heard Quava yell out in the middle of the night. But when Saira went to check on her, her friend was fast asleep.

By next morning, a corner of the sky opened to the sun. As that blaze of orange broke over the horizon, a rainbow draped its colours across the heavens. The lucid arc clung to its transient existence for a time, red shimmering the brightest, then later surpassed by ribbons of gleaming yellow and blue. Eventually the rainbow faded alongside the clouds and the gentle mist used in its creation.

Quava soldiered on. “We will reach the river soon.” She didn’t speak of anything else.

Saira watched the clearing skies with concern. If another gryphawk appeared, they would have nowhere to hide. Hours passed, their pace painstakingly slow. At the hottest part of the day, Quava lurched to a halt. Saira put a hand on her shoulder. Quava fell to her knees, and then toppled sideways to the ground. She lay there, panting.

“You can’t push yourself any further. Let’s rest here. If your baby comes, we can carry her to the water afterward.”

Quava forced a smile in agreement. “You’re right. It is time. I should not doubt the word of a syl.” She paused to gulp a few mouthfuls of air. “Will you give my child your blessing?”

“My blessing?”

“Yes. Nothing would make me happier.”

Saira nodded slowly, even though she didn't know the first thing about giving blessings. Kneeling beside Quava, she held out her hands awkwardly. Quava lifted up her shirt, exposing the roundness of her belly. Saira pressed her fingers against the outside of her womb, imagining the fully-formed baby within.

"May Solu shine upon this child."

Quava sighed in contentment. Taking in a deep breath, she released a series of quick, vigorous exhalations. Then she leaned her head back, resting on the grass. In that quiet moment, another sound reached Saira's ears. The faint rustle of water. She shot to her feet. Scanning the plains, her eyes couldn't discern the source. Then she looked at what *wasn't* there—a twisting line free of shrubs and grass.

"What is it?" Quava's voice rasped.

"The river! We are close."

Quava sat up on her elbows, barely able to speak. "I think...I can make it."

Saira saw the determination written across her face. She remembered Quava's words. *Water is soul*. Saira could get her there.

"Take my hand, and I will take you to the river."

Quava met her gaze, eyes clinging to that very possibility. She nodded her head once. Saira positioned herself at Quava's back, holding her from behind. Arms wrapped around her stomach, she pressed herself firmly but gently against her body, letting Quava use her as a pillar of support. Quava got up on one leg, then the other. With Saira beside her, bearing as much weight as possible, they started toward the Lanthalos.

Quava took small baby steps, each tentative and unsure, as though she feared the next wouldn't hold. Her fingers dug into Saira's palms, nails cutting. Quava suddenly

staggered into her, changing her grip. She grabbed Saira's elbow, clutching with all her strength right where the raelisk had run its claws through her flesh like daggers through cara meat. Saira bit her tongue at the raging pain.

"You're doing well," she kept repeating. "Almost there now."

What a horse could gallop in less than a minute, they spent the better part of an hour traversing. Any remaining clouds raced toward the Wellspring Mountains, leaving a clean sheet of blue overhead. Fenox became restless. He glanced back at the two of them every few seconds, digging his paws into the ground in impatience. After awhile, he began to growl and bark.

But they were almost there. The Lanthalos meandered like a snake uncertain of its destination. Its waters flowed briskly, slowly carving a new bank as it raced around each twist and turn. *Hlasa* surged around her like a hurricane. Saira directed Quava through the narrow passage of one of the river's loops. A relentless current surrounded them on all sides. Quava's body relaxed at the soothing sound.

"Take me to the water's edge," she said.

Saira matched her short steps a little farther, to a short lip in the ground. They stepped down the red clay wall of the embankment, the earth softened here by the rain. The air felt cool.

"This is close enough."

Energized by the water and the spirits, Quava managed to lie down of her own accord.

"Yes, this feels right. When the time comes, I may need your help to flip me on my knees."

“Your knees?”

“That position helps the baby reach the outside world much faster, so the birthwives say.”

Saira didn't argue. These birthwives obviously knew much more than her about such things.

“Then you will have to catch the child.”

Catch? Saira almost found herself shaking her head. She swallowed, and sat cross-legged beside her.

“I understand.”

Saira unhooked the jaber cat fur from Quava's neck and helped her slide onto the tough hide. Quava smiled faintly and then closed her eyes, steadying her breathing. For a few minutes, nothing happened. A stillness came over Quava, her chest slowly rising and falling, her prolonged exhalations the only sound above the running water.

Her eyes shot open, panicked and feral, nearly popping out of her head. Quava's outstretched fingers jerked sideways to find Saira's hand. A wailing shriek escaped her lips, followed by another. Her body convulsed in violent, uncontrollable spasms. Saira found herself wanting to move back from this primitive persona that had overcome Quava. She acted possessed by a banshee, unaware of everything around her. Yet Quava's fingers still clung to hers. Saira held them tight.

Like someone who has just finished running up a mountain, Quava's breaths now came in short, regular gasps. Abruptly she stopped, scrunching up her face and baring her teeth like a wild animal. Quava screamed as though she were trying to push the banshee out of her. Saira realized her whole body was focused on the push. She started

breathing rapidly again.

“You’re doing great, Quava. Keep pushing.”

Quava stared at her in bewilderment, like Saira were a strange animal with four arms and two heads.

“You can do this. I know you can.”

Quava didn’t make any sign of hearing. She was lost in a primeval world, and quickly went back to concentrating on the short intervals between exhalations. Saira found herself lost in that rhythm. The cycle repeated itself, over and over: *breathe, focus, push*. Saira couldn’t tell if several minutes or hours had passed when Quava spoke a single word in a guttural cry.

“Now!”

Saira understood. Claspings Quava’s hips, she pulled her over to her knees and lifted up her midsection. She knew why this made sense. The baby would fall down instead of being thrust up from her mother. You didn’t pick giant jack fruit by yanking them up from their branches, you let them fall with the natural pull of the land.

With Quava on her hands and knees, Saira moved around her. From between her legs, Saira could already see the top of the baby’s head.

“I can see her! She’s coming out!”

With her back to the sky and belly to the earth, Quava hollered with exertion. The eyes and nose came into view. Saira readied her hands. With one final triumphant yell, Quava thrust her child into the outside world.

Saira caught her breath. In her hands, she cradled the smallest little person imaginable. Frail, soft, and full of spirit. Short wet hair lay across its cone-shaped head,

and long ears fell down toward its cheeks. Its slimy body smelled of earth and blood, of new life. The baby squirmed in her fingers, but didn't make a sound. For a second she thought its eyes were about to open, but the brightness of a sun never before seen made the baby turn its head.

"You did it, Quava. You have a little girl."

Quava turned herself over, her face euphoric. Saira placed the baby carefully onto Quava's chest, a cord still running from its belly button to the womb. Even in the face of utter exhaustion, Quava seemed to glow, radiating light over her child.

"*We* did it. I always knew she would be a girl. My little darling Loa."

Quava put the baby to her breast. Fenox barked loudly, interrupting the baby from her feeding. Loa let out her first cry, strong and proud.

Saira turned on Fenox, his silver hair bristling as he snarled toward the river. "Quiet! You're disturbing the baby..."

But she couldn't finish the sentence. A chill ran through her body. The light dimmed as a vast shadow scurried over her. She craned her neck, expecting to find a low-lying cloud eclipsing the sun. Instead, Saira stared into the malevolent eyes of a gryphawk, soaring straight at her. The approaching bird of prey was close enough and large enough to block out the mid-afternoon sunlight.

Saira shouted in alarm. The earlier gryphawk seemed to be a mere chick in comparison. This one had wings that spanned the width of the Welling, and brandished talons that could lift whales from the ocean. As her eyes focused on its descending form, she made out several other shapes in the sky. There were six of them in all, death on wings. Saira found it hard to breathe.

They were being hunted by a flock of gryphawks.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Prey

Fenox barked again. Saira took her eyes from the flight of wondrous ruin and followed the mayguar's stare. Ten paces away, a raelisk emerged from the river like a four-legged sea spider pulling itself onto the beach. The creature came at her swiftly, flailing limbs grating over the sandy shore, eyes hungry and red. From behind, the dark head of another raelisk appeared, its movements jerky, like a corpse rising from a coffin of water. As she watched, ten more separated themselves from the current, contorted bodies dripping with wet. She couldn't keep track of them all.

A feeling of impending doom washed over her, a deep despair that tunnelled through her body and excavated a huge, gaping hole in her chest. She felt hollow inside.

Nothing.

Saira's arms felt like rubber. She couldn't stop them from shaking. What could she do against these numbers? *Nothing.* How many were there now? Fifteen?

Loa's cries returned her gaze to her friend. Quava held her baby rigidly in her arms, eyes full of dread as she gently rocked the newborn back and forth. Loa's eyes opened for the first time, small and blue. She looked up at the woman who had brought her into the world. Saira felt her resolve strengthen to steel.

She turned. Yanking her tark from its sheath, Saira charged at the lead raelisk.

Fenox was right at her side. The raelisk halted on two legs as it tried to decide who to attack first. The mayguar was the faster of the two. A black limb, covered with scabby protrusions as though it had been recently burned, flew toward the lunging animal.

Fenox darted away, circling the creature from behind. But three other raelisk cut him off, separating him from Saira.

She reached the first raelisk then, and swung her tark at its exposed flank. But the raelisk was too fast. Flinging its opposite forelimb at her, it knocked her arm—and the tark—aside. Her weapon fell several paces from her hand. Twisting away, she ran after the tark, narrowly avoiding another swiping claw of the raelisk. She could hear the creature following her, rasping like a choking teral.

Saira reached down for the tark but something hit her from behind, sending her rolling over the ground. The raelisk was on top of her. Its marshy breath engulfed her as she spun onto her back. There she lay, weaponless, helpless, overwhelmed by the scent of rotting flesh as the creature prepared to make its kill. She thrust up her naked arms to defend herself. The raelisk aimed two gnarled limbs at her, one at her gut, the other plunging toward her neck. Saira waited for the claws to shred her body to pieces.

A gust of wind struck her—and suddenly, the raelisk was gone. One moment the creature had been hovering over her, malice and murder in its blood red eyes, and the next it was being carried off into the sky. With lightning speed, a gryphawk had plucked the raelisk from the ground, and now crushed the misshapen body in its grip. Saira wriggled onto her stomach. Her body flat against the sand, she watched the gryphawks pick off another five raelisks. That still left seven.

Saira scrambled to find her tark. The remaining raelisks stopped momentarily to consider the departure of their companions. Then they continued toward Quava. Saira was further away, and wouldn't reach them in time. In a matter of seconds, the seven raelisks would have mother and baby. She ran after them anyway, yelling. But the

raelisks weren't distracted from their easy prey.

At the sudden thrust of air, she threw herself back to the ground. She landed hard, knocking the wind from her chest. A gryphawk tore past, wings held up as it plowed into a raelisk instead. The creature writhed in its talons, trying to escape. But the great bird wrapped its claws over the raelisk tighter than a python coiled around a rat.

Saira couldn't catch her breath. The other gryphawks swooped down low, coming in for a second dive. The last of the raelisks tried to fight back, but were powerless in the face of an enemy far greater than themselves. In the water, they may have stood a chance. But here, out of their natural element, they might as well have been a handful of ants trying to fend off an anteater. The gryphawks took them as easily as a bear picking dewberries. Each talon clutched a squirming body, like an eagle with two fish. Content with their catch, they rose to the north, wings flapping like thunder in the blue sky.

Tark in hand, Saira stood on shaky legs. One raelisk remained. The creature had reached Quava and her daughter. Loa howled, a piercing sound sprung from tiny lungs. Fenox appeared and clamped his jaws around the creature's ankle. As Saira sprinted toward the melee, she saw Fenox get hit by a thrashing claw. Her *daman* tumbled over the sand and lay in a lifeless heap. Her own leg gave out at the blow, and Saira found herself struggling to hop forward on one good limb.

She was too late. As she staggered toward them, the raelisk descended upon the helpless mother and baby. She heard Quava scream...

The creature suddenly jerked to a halt. It let out a horrendous screech. What had happened? Saira didn't wait for an answer. She covered the final paces on both legs,

ignoring the sharp pain shooting down her left side. Gripping her tark as a root grasps the earth, she gave a yell of her own and stabbed the blade into the knobby back of the creature. The raelisk jolted forward but didn't fall. Pulling out her blade, she thrust it again at the vile creature's exposed side, higher this time. The tark sunk deep between its shoulders. With one final twitch, the raelisk fell to the ground like an uprooted tree.

Saira fell to her knees. A spear protruded from the raelisk's thigh. Behind, Quava crouched, fire in her eyes. That fierce expression reminded Saira of the three-horned tarn mother she had stumbled across as a child. Now she understood.

Quava had cut Loa's life cord and placed her on the jaber cat hide. Then she set herself between the threat and her child. With a passion borne from a mother protecting her young, she had mustered the strength to spear the raelisk in the leg.

Quava went back to Loa. "Are they gone?"

"Yes."

Saira's heart still raced. She struggled to slow her breathing. This was the first time she had killed. One life taken to save another. Somehow, that didn't give her much comfort. She stared at her hands. The dirt and mud were blood in her eyes. How would this change her? The tark still lay embedded in the back of the raelisk. She left it there, not wanting to touch that which could take spirit.

Fenox limped to her side. His hindleg bent with each step. He licked the wound, just above the left knee, the same place her own leg felt like a venomous snake had struck. That would take many days to heal.

Quava cooed at Loa to calm her screams, then put the baby to breast. "Is it safe?"

Saira looked to Fenox for an answer. The mayguar had finished cleaning the long

wound under his fur, and now rested on his side, panting.

“As long as Fenox thinks so, it should be. But I’ll stay with you.”

“You are a brave woman, Saira. I have never seen so many raelisk in one place. It must have taken such great courage to face them all on your own.”

Saira crawled to the edge of the jaber cat hide. She put her head down in the shade of the embankment, lying on a bed of red clay. “Not courage. I only knew one thing: nothing was going to hurt little Loa.”

“There is no greater courage. Sleep well, my dear syl.”

Saira disagreed. It should be *her* watching over Quava. Yet before she could argue, pain and exhaustion took her into dream.

#

A cold breeze blew across her face. Sounds of water and spirit gently nudged her awake. The waxing moon hung low in the sky. A narrow line of cloud passed through the bright crescent. Was it evening, or morning?

“The sun should be up soon,” Quava said in response to her unspoken question.

Saira sat up. Her whole body felt stiff, like the branches of a bristlecone. She stretched slowly, her limbs creaking and popping. Fenox had moved off to drink from the stream. He hobbled back on three legs, tongue lolling happily despite his crippled limb.

“It brings me great sadness to see a *daman* hurt so,” Quava said. “Will he ever walk on four again?”

“I believe he will. But not for some time.”

Quava had constructed a sling out of rope and her goat leather. With Loa

wrapped inside and contently pressed against her chest, she packed the rest of her things.

“A mile or so downstream is where I hid my skiff, the one I used to leave the watergroves. With any luck, it’s still there. Come. Let’s go home.”

Quava propped herself up on her spear. Saira reached unconsciously for her tusk, and found it already in the scabbard.

“How...”

“I cleaned it,” Quava remarked offhand. “Before the stains had time to set.”

“My thanks.”

They followed the dark waters. The Lanthalos furrowed its way in chaotic fashion toward Quasaria, veering left and right in sharp, corkscrew turns. Saira felt sure that if the winding current got stretched straight, the river would reach five times its current length. An hour after the crack of dawn, they found the skiff at the mouth of the swamp, under a high lip of the bank. Flipping the craft over, they carried it back to the murky water. The sides once held colour long faded by weather and time. She stepped first into the small, flat-bottomed boat, with pointed bow and flat stern. Then she helped Quava board. Fenox managed to jump in on one leg. All of them made a tight fit in the slender craft. Positioning the two oars over the side, Saira paddled them into the marsh.

The waters soon spread into a wide, tranquil body. The air smelled different here, brackish, like dead fish from the ocean. She spotted a huge array of spearheads jutting out of the water, as long and pointed as sea dragon’s teeth. Puzzled, she rowed toward the collection of giant thorns. They were *roots*, protruded up like javelins.

“The trees need to breathe,” Quava explained. “Just like Loa here. Eventually, they rise up into mangrove trees with sugary leaves. Grab one and have a taste.”

The skiff passed mangroves. Roots dipped into the water, a millipede of wooden legs. The foliage above concealed the rising sun. Saira plucked a glossy, elliptical leaf from the hedgerow and tossed it into her mouth. The sweetness of the pale green blade tickled her tongue.

“These waters are rich in salt. Many lobsters and fish live in these waters, but nowhere else.”

Fenox leaned over the edge of the skiff and wrinkled his nose. A white egret glided over the water, long beak looking for a catch. The slim bird wobbled in its low flight. One wing, bent awkwardly, possessed a gaping hole in its plumage. A much smaller, rainbow-feathered bird darted by. Saira blinked and it was gone.

“A kingfisher,” Quava said. “Yet its colours look faint, somehow.”

With Loa sound asleep, Quava hooked a net to a groove in her spear. Placing the snare in the current, she let it drag for a minute then pulled to find the net empty. Shaking her head, she tried again. It wasn’t until the fifth try that she raised a crab—wriggling eight jointed legs—out of the water. Larger than Loa, the giant crustacean flourished two pincers. One hung limp. The other two-pronged weapon stretched the length of Saira’s tusk.

Quava did not hesitate. She flung her catch into the skiff, grabbed the base of the large pincer—which flailed and clacked—and smashed the crab against the bottom boards. The shell split with an audible *crunch*. Quava twisted the barnacle-encrusted carapace until she heard it snap. With a piece of broken shell she scooped the soft insides and handed it to Saira.

She stowed the oars and accepted the crab with eager hands. The white meat

slurped down her throat, delicate, delicious muscle. Not at all salty, as she had expected.

After their meal, Saira rowed as Quava spoke of the groves. “Strange to be back. As though my old life belongs to someone else. I missed the waters, the smell of the ocean, the way the grove currents rise and fall with the seasons. I find great comfort in this. Last summer, I had never seen a mountain or lake or waterfall. Great wonders of the outside lands. But they are not home. Is this my home? Will they accept Loa into the garden grove?”

That thought weighed on Saira’s mind. She was a stranger to these waters, a stranger with hair too short to hide her snipped ears. What would the selwyn—her own people—think of her? This was her home. Yet the calm waters made her nervous. She preferred the thrum of a strong current. The spirits were hidden here, buried deep, beyond reach.

Quava fed Loa again. The babe didn’t fuss, suckling the breast noisily.

“Follow the sun, until you see the tree with wings. Turn down the narrow channel. From there, my grove is close.”

Mother and daughter slept. Fenox curled up over Saira’s feet. Saira rowed with one oar to offer her arms some rest. The skiff’s wake rippled over the bank of visible roots. More than once she heard a disturbed bird flutter away. But she never spotted them. Finally, when dusk hung heavy and grey in the sky, she found the entrance to the smaller waterway and brought the boat to a halt.

Ahead, the largest tree she had ever seen rose out from the swamp. At its base, great roots circled the main trunk like a wooden cage. Her awestruck eyes followed the massive trunk, shining with golden-brown bark, and spiralling toward the sky at an angle

before spreading into a verdant crown of shimmering leaves. The network of branches stretched north and south like a pair of enormous wings. Its shape resembled a gryphawk but with foliage instead of plumage, a pair of gnarled branches ending in smaller twigs acting as legs with talons.

But the head wasn't right. Instead of a short neck with a beaked mouth, this sculpted creature possessed a long, snakelike stem. Or was that the tail?

Fenox stuck his nose into the air, sniffing at an invisible scent. Quava stirred.

"We are here. Your arms must be tired. I have slept too long."

Saira didn't comment. Her gaze was taken by the tree with wings. She felt its sacred, ancient presence. All from one seed. Now, its topmost branches touched the clouds. She really was home. Very soon she would be among her own people, and hearing stories of the selwyn. Would she find her real father? Her mother?

"Methuselah," Quava said in reverence. "The greatest of the kaimen. How I have missed her. The tree sculptors formed her this way, out of respect for the sea dragons, and to keep them in the sea and out of the groves."

"Tree sculptors?"

"Yes. Selwyn who can twist kaimen trunks and mould their branches to grow a certain way. You will understand when we reach my grove."

Loa began to fuss. Quava gently rocked her in her arms, making soothing sounds to her child. Then her voice suddenly went still. Loa whimpered. Quava's panicked eyes were on the water.

"What is it?"

For a few seconds, Quava couldn't bring herself to speak. Fear coated every word.

“The xarg. She has found me.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

The Garden Grove

Saira shifted her eyes from the branches of Methuselah down to the placid waters of the mangroves. At first, the surface betrayed no movement. All was quiet and still. Then the sound of waves lapping against the aerial roots reached her ears. The skiff started to rock.

“She has come for me.”

As though on cue, a great shape rose from the depths of the swamp. The whole grove shook. The toothed dome appeared directly ahead, thrusting water in every direction. Saira stared. The gargantuan shell of the xarg took its form, a hill of craggy peaks. Dozens of spikes adorned the top surface, like curved castle turrets or horns of the tarn. The immensity of the xarg overwhelmed her. Where the tree with wings spoke with a quiet serenity, this creature came from the deepest chasm in the earth, inhabited by darkness and chaos. As the mountainous shell fully emerged from below, she saw its barbed edge, and the huge cavern in front where the head of the beast resided.

Arms frozen in place, Saira watched the xarg fly toward them. Any second now, the head would materialize above the surface...

Quava shook her shoulder roughly from behind.

“Saira! Can you hear me? Don’t fall under her spell. Look at me! Give me the other oar!”

Saira blinked, gaping back at her friend in a daze.

“To the channel on the right. *Now!*”

Gathering her wits, she shoved the second oar at Quava and plunged the one in her hands into the water. She paddled hard. The mouth of the channel neared. Some part of her desperately wanted to turn around, to behold the entirety of the xarg in her vision.

“Keep looking forward! If she catches your eye, you will never again see the light of the sky.”

Saira felt herself falling forward as something pushed up the stern of the skiff. Their boat flew forward on the wave. As they reached the channel, a great sound, like two mountains colliding, echoed across the swamp. The xarg had hit the mangrove roots. The branches trembled as though hit by an earthquake. Hundreds of dislodged leaves fell onto the water surface like green blades of snow.

“We will be safe here. She is too big to pass through.”

Quava guided them into a labyrinth of backwaters. The further they went, the narrower the channel became. Soon she could only see a sliver of blue sky.

“This is the entrance to my grove.”

Saira looked up as they approached a long archway of scaly bark. Formed by adjacent mangrove trunks, each set of trees joined at the apex into a spider web of branches, leafless at the top except for three conspicuous circles of foliage. The pattern matched the one on her stomach.

“Was this made by the tree sculptures?” she asked as they passed into the shadow of the tree tunnel.

Quava nodded. “Her name is Jindra. She is the keeper of the garden grove.”

“The triangle of dots. What does that symbol mean?”

“It is the mark of our people. They are usually covered in blossom. The top is Solu—the sun. Without Solu, there would be no light or heat to make the groves green. The bottom two circles represent male and female selwyn. Although we can’t see it, we are all connected to life. Without the other, the selwyn race would end.”

Saira’s oar thudded against a root. The arches continued on and on. They glided under nearly a hundred, like moving through the rib cage of a xarg-sized beast, before coming out the other side.

“By the light of Solu. Is this...” Saira couldn’t finish the sentence.

Quava sighed. “Yes. We are home.”

Saira stared at the magnificence of the garden grove. Never before had she witnessed such a spectacular vision. On a foundation of countless roots thick enough to be trunks stood a city of trees. Walls, pathways, houses, stairs...they were all here, all fashioned from giant kaimen. She could see roofs of dense leaves and ladders formed from evenly-spaced knots in the bark. Each trunk, branch and twig was shaped by a careful hand to construct this grove; they folded and twisted over one another, giving the impression that this all consisted of one enormous tree.

She couldn’t fathom the beauty of this place. Quava had mentioned the selwyn lived in the trees. But she had never imagined a place like this, a city above the water sculpted from kaimen. Every inch of this grove flowed with life.

Quava directed them toward a kind of dock comprised of a flat bed of roots. Her paddling slowed.

“Maybe we shouldn’t have come here. I don’t feel safe. The grove seems different, darker somehow.” Quava scanned the edge of the grove. “I don’t understand.

Where are all the other boats?”

As they slid onto the submerged section of the root-dock, a dozen selwyn suddenly poured out from between two walls of straight trunks. Most had long, black hair and wore earth-coloured clothing from head to their bare feet. Each carried a spear or tusk, and a dour expression as though they were expecting intruders. Two men grabbed each side of the skiff, holding it rigidly in place. Fenox rested calmly in the bottom of the skiff. An older woman stepped forward, graceful and poised, stoically considering the visitors. She wore a green shawl over her shoulders, and a leaf-covered vine hung down her dark hair.

“I knew someday I would see you again, Quava.”

Quava stood in the skiff with Loa. “As did I, Jindra. Too long have I been absent from the grove.”

“You were lucky to make it this far. The grove waters are not as safe as they once were.” She looked down at Loa gravely. “I see you have brought our new and youngest member of the grove. No other mothers have brought babies into the light. All have perished their first few months in the womb.”

“I want to explain—”

“No. You know our customs. Your child will be raised by another. And who else do you bring with you, but a mayguar and a human-dweller?”

“She is a friend...”

“She is not welcome in these trees.” Jindra regarded Saira with a frown and then faced Quava again. “Give us the child.”

Saira sensed Quava’s reluctance. After coming all this way, this was how they

greeted their own kind? She remembered Quava's story about how she came to be with child. But this wasn't right. Placing herself squarely between Jindra and the baby, Saira stared into the selwyn's green eyes.

"The child stays where she lay."

"Quiet!" Jindra hissed at her. "Your voice is not worthy of the grove. You will be dealt with soon enough."

Fenox got to his feet, looking perplexed as he shifted his eyes between Saira and Jindra. Loa began to cry at the harsh-sounding words.

Saira stood tall. "My words are as worthy as any other. And I will not allow you to take this child from her mother."

"Wait, Saira..." Quava started to say.

Jindra glowered at her. "What you want is of no consequence." She motioned with her hand. The four men stepped into the skiff, unsheathing their tarks.

Saira didn't back down. With her fingers over the sunstone, she thrust her hand from her pocket and into the air. *Hlasa* boiled over her palms like lava from a crater. She grabbed onto the spirits, wielding them like a sword that she swung out at the selwyn. The four men found themselves being flung back by a wind with no source.

Jindra's eyes shot to the sunstone. Others levelled spears Saira's way. She tried to stop the spirits but it was too late. In her anger they surged beyond her control. A shockwave of *hlasa* burst all around her. There was a sound like thunder. Nothing happened for a moment. The selwyn crouched, waiting. Without warning a blast of water erupted from below, as though the xarg were right underneath them. The sudden upwelling drenched the dozen selwyn of the grove.

Quava fell back into the skiff, clutching Loa to her chest. Saira's legs didn't falter. The water rose up and up, lifting the boat ten paces. The immersed selwyn swam frantically for the shore. For a few seconds the skiff remained there, balanced on a column of spirit. Then the sunstone emptied, like a star whose light abruptly dims. The skiff plunged back onto the root-dock, landing smoothly on the waters that were calm once more.

Saira lowered the sunstone. It felt cold, and wouldn't be filled again until they returned to the rivers.

She reached her free hand to Quava. "Is Loa all right?"

"She is fine. It seems you've made introductions all around."

Jindra watched her from a distance, clothes sopping wet. She pushed her hair behind her ears.

"Who are you, stranger, that can call the water to your command more impressively than the Untainted themselves?"

"My name is Saira. I come from a village called Maystone. I was raised with humans. My ears were cut soon after I was born. The spirits listen to my touch. But most importantly, I am a selwyn. We are all selwyn."

Unconvinced, Jindra didn't lose her frown.

"She is a syl," Quava added quietly. "And this is her *daman*."

Everyone gasped.

"A syl with cut ears?" Jindra fell to one knee. "I did not know! The legends never spoke of such a thing. Forgive me for the dishonour I have done you, Saira. But how did you come to be outside the groves?"

Saira helped Quava step off the skiff. “I hoped you might have that answer.”

Another selwyn stepped forward, a blue-eyed woman a few years behind Jindra. “Could she be Mauve’s child, from the cloud grove? Mauve left the watergroves twenty years ago, shortly after Qatar died—”

“That’s enough, Mijel.” Jindra got back to her feet and stared the other woman down. Then she turned back to Saira, looking thoughtful. “Although you may be right. Saira is the right age.”

“We should take Saira there at once!”

“No, Mijel. Saira and Quava require food and rest. Lead a party to the cloud grove. Take two boats, to be sure, and enough firewisps to last the night. Tell them we have hope once more: the syl has returned. Go now, and do not stop for anything!”

Mijel obeyed, barking orders to half a dozen other selwyn.

Saira tried to still her beating heart. She was home. These were her people. Had she been born here in the grove? It wouldn’t sink in. Saira looked to Quava. The nursing mother met her eyes, regarding her with a detached kindness. But she turned back to Loa. The one named Mijel had spoken of a woman called Mauve. Was that her mother? More importantly, was she here in the watergroves?

“Welcome to the garden grove,” Jindra said proudly. “Come. I will take you somewhere you can sleep.”

Jindra led the way before Saira could ask the questions burning in her mind. But her eyes soon found distraction as they walked into the garden grove. From the dock they passed into a corridor, made dark by the encroaching twilight, walled by trunks with a floor of smooth roots. Tiny lights danced above her, just out of reach. Saira followed

Jindra up a staircase that spiralled around an enormous kaimen. Incredibly, the slope on which her feet tread was made of bark as smooth as an alder. Like a vine, the stair-tree coiled around the much larger, vertical trunk. Fenox ran ahead on three legs, sticking his nose in every crevice and knot.

“What do you think of my grove?” Jindra asked as they walked across a curving bridge formed from two adjoined branches of neighbouring trees.

“More beautiful than my heart could have imagined. Did you sculpt this grove?”

“Much of it, yes. No other grove has a woman keeper. I am blessed to be the keeper here. The water gods gave me the gift to speak to the trees, to bend their trunks and grow branches where they need to be grown.”

“Where are all the flowers?” Quava asked. “The sky petals, moonlight blooms, and red blossoms of the xarg?”

Jindra spoke solemnly. “Last winter, their colours were taken from the grove. Every flower lost their fragrance and wilted, as though poisoned. I cannot get them to grow back. Their voices have gone silent. It burdens my heart. Without flowers, there are no seeds. Without seeds...” Jindra’s voice trailed off. “Here we are! This is my tree. I hope you find it comfortable.”

Fifty paces above the water, they stood beside the trunk of a great kaimen. Jindra stepped through a door in the trunk and *into* the tree. This kaimen must have been as wide as five selwyn. Inside the shadowy center of the tree, its inner skin beige with black rings, was a circular room with odd-shaped windows. Saira saw a bed of moss in one corner. There were stools, shelves, a basin with water, even a table, all fashioned out of the kaimen. From the ceiling, a glass orb hung from a vine. Two selwyn entered behind

them. One handed Jindra a burlap bag. The other carried something Saira couldn't see. He went to the orb, opened the bottom, and thrust his hand inside. A dozen yellow lights sprang from his fingers. He locked them in, and the insects fluttered on glowing wings.

"Firewisps," Jindra explained.

Light flickered across the room. Fenox gazed at the firewisps curiously, head cocked, as though he wanted to swat the orb with his paw. Quava went to lie on the thick moss, placing Loa against her.

Jindra opened the bag and pulled out a handful of pointed, pod-shaped fruit. "These are the last of the dagger-seed fruits, stored from last autumn." She handed one to Saira. Green-skinned and mottled with brown, the tough-looking fruit tasted as it looked. The hard, white seeds made her think of teral fangs. Jindra carefully gathered the seeds in her hand. "What I hold here are the last of the kaimen seeds. Without seeds, how can anything grow? It is a dark time we are facing. The grove is dying."

Quava had soothed Loa to sleep, and sat beside them on the stools. "There are so few boats on the root-dock. Where has happened to our people?"

Jindra's face darkened. "Raelisks are in the watergroves. Hundreds, perhaps thousands. Many selwyn have died. Others are stricken with an illness that steals all appetite before taking your sight. More than half the grove moved deeper into the swamp, hoping to stay ahead of the raelisk. We decided to stay. But our food supplies dwindle. Fish no longer swim in these waters. Less than a third of our numbers remain. Soon, I fear, we will have to forsake the grove entirely." Jindra spoke like a mother suggesting she abandon her child.

"But now you are here, Saira. The syl are sent to cleanse the waters. That is why

you have come, to restore all that is pure. Many had given up hope. You will be the beacon for every selwyn.”

“What about the Untainted?”

Jindra gave Quava a withering stare. Perhaps because of Saira’s presence, she kept her tone neutral.

“We do not speak of the Untainted.”

“I will speak of them.” Saira held her head high. She waited to see if Jindra would contradict a syl. The keeper held her tongue. “The Untainted kept us both captive, inside a cave with no light. They took me from my friends and cut off my hair. Tell me, why do you not speak of the Untainted?”

Jindra looked flustered. “That is our custom.”

“That is not a reason. It sounds more like an excuse.”

“Perhaps you are right. In all truth, many moons have passed since we saw or heard from the Seven. From what you have said, they have lost their way. I fear they may have fallen to something foul. Sometimes, the power of the spirits becomes too much for the mind.”

Saira considered that. She thought of using the sunstone on the root-dock. Is that what had happened to her? Had she let the spirits control her?

“You have come a long way, and should rest. We will talk further tomorrow.”

Jindra moved to the threshold of bark.

Saira asked the question without thinking. “Is Mauve my mother?”

Jindra paused before answering. “Yes.”

“And my father was Qatar?”

“I cannot say.”

“You mean, you won’t tell me.”

“Please, Saira. Do not ask this of me.”

“Why is the truth always so hard to speak? I am sorry, Jindra. But I must know. I will only ask you one question, and no more. Are my parents alive?”

Jindra closed her eyes, as though holding a great pain. She let out a long breath and looked at Saira. “Although it grieves me to say it, I must speak the truth to a syl. Your parents are dead.”

Saira felt her chest tighten. Something broke inside her.

“I do not know the circumstances of their passing. But I do know this is the fate of the syl, to live without mother or father. To live with no guidance, but to go forth and cleanse the waters nonetheless.”

Saira could feel a weight pushing down on her. She shoved it aside.

“But I know nothing about cleansing the waters.” Her anger spilled forth. “I did not ask for this! Who are you to say what I am? This isn’t right. What am I supposed to do?”

Sorrow marked Jindra’s face. “In that, I truly have no answer for you. Not even a keeper can tell a syl what needs to be done. That is for you to decide. Look to your heart for the answer.”

With those words, Jindra left her alone.

Saira slumped forward. *Look to your heart.* A thick, solid heaviness resided there, too heavy to ever be lifted. Emotion swelled through her, stronger than the spirits, too great to try and cope with. Anger, sadness, hurt—they stung her all at once. Her parents

were dead. She threatened to collapse under the strain of that knowledge.

“Come.”

She felt hands on her shoulders. Quava helped her get to her feet. Saira knew she was moving, walking across the room and lying on the bed of moss. But all she could feel was the emptiness inside, an all-embracing numbness. Quava tried to comfort her.

“It’s all right. Sleep now. Find solace in your dreams.”

Fenox snuggled against her back. An overpowering fatigue came over her, but Saira couldn’t sleep. She pretended to do so, and not long after could hear Quava’s soft snore. One by one, the lights of the firewisps went out, until the room’s shadows stopped dancing and left a complete blanket of darkness. Were they asleep, or had they died as well?

Saira lay awake well into the night. Memories of the mother and father she had never known raced through her mind. She could think of nothing else. Mauve. Qatar. Who were they? Why did they have to die? Loa woke a few hours later, crying to be fed. She quietly watched Quava hold her baby to her breast, the babe cradled by her mother. Quava ran her hand gently over Loa’s head, whispering words of love. They fall back to sleep together, as one never to be separated.

Tears fell over Saira’s cheeks, heavy and full. Only after she had wept, silent sobs wracking her body for several minutes, did she finally fall into a restless slumber.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Relations

A hand shook Saira awake. It was Jindra. Saira blinked her sleep away, a dull pain lingering in the back of her skull. Slivers of light filtered through the windows in the trunk, the fingers of the sun offering life with their touch. From the sharp angle of the translucent rays, the day was nearing the midpoint between dawn and dusk. Quava and Loa were gone, yet the warm mass of fur was exactly where it had been when she first fell asleep. She gave Fenox a scratch on the head.

Jindra looked at her kindly. “Mijel has returned from the cloud grove. She brought someone who urgently wants to speak with you.”

Saira didn’t ask questions. She rose unsteadily to her feet, head dizzy and light from too much sleep, and followed the keeper through her grove. A few minutes later—having moved over a bridge of branches and down a ladder of knots—they arrived at another tree-room, smaller and closer to the water. A green-robed woman sat inside, wrinkled and white-haired, holding Loa in her arms. Quava sat next to her, eating white meat from a red shell.

Jindra motioned Saira to enter. “This is Feye, from the cloud grove.”

The selwyn called Feye gave the baby back to Quava and stood.

“My dear child. I cannot believe my eyes. Such short hair! Can it really be you?” The elderly woman took Saira’s hands in her spindly fingers. “Mauve was my sister. You have the same face as your mother, the same quiet eyes. Although we have never met, I feel as though I have always known you.”

Saira was too stunned to respond. Fenox wagged his tail, sniffed Feye once, then licked her bare toes.

“This must be your *daman*. I guess he likes his aunt Feye. The poor creature has an injured leg. Sit and eat, Saira. I have much to tell you.”

Now in an even greater stupor, Saira did as she was told. Quava handed her half of a lobster. But her hunger had vanished.

“Fresh from my grove,” Feye explained.

The four women sat in a circle. Saira ate methodically. The cold meat tasted rich.

“I never doubted you were alive. Not for a second. Mauve never would have let anything happen to you. Quava told me you were raised among humans? I cannot imagine that.”

Saira finished the lobster. “What happened to my mother? How did she die?”

“I will explain. My sister was the reckless one, always venturing off on her own. But I need to start at the beginning.” Feye smiled thoughtfully, pulling absently at the leaf-shaped earrings in her lobes. “Selwyn are lucky to be with child once in their lifetime. The water gods blessed me with both a son and daughter.” *My cousins!* Saira thought in excitement. “But it’s your mother you want to hear about.

“Mauve fell in love at a young age. Qatar came from the spirit grove, at the northern edge of the swamp. A very handsome young selwyn, with hair golden like kaimen wood. One summer, he went east with a group to the great waters to gather stones for tools and sea turtle shells for rain shields. But they moved too far into the open waters. A band of humans came along the shoreline, in a much bigger and faster boat. Four selwyn lost their lives, including Qatar. Two escaped back into the groves, where

the humans dared not follow.

“Mauve took the news like a tusk in the heart. She loved your father more than anything in the world. I fear she would have done something drastic, had she not already been pregnant with you. The grove keeper wanted her to bond with another, for the child to have a father. She refused. I begged and pleaded with her. But Mauve was stubborn, like Quava here. When she had her mind set on something, not even a sea dragon could turn her back.”

Feye lowered her eyes in silence. When she met Saira’s enquiring gaze, her face mourned in remembrance.

“I could not stop her. She went in search of the Lake of Souls.”

Saira’s body shook. Mirran had spoken of the Lake of Souls, the source of the Talon River. Is that where her mother had died?

“Perhaps,” Feye continued, “Mauve thought she could somehow bring Qatar back. The waters in the Lake of Souls are known to prolong life, and even bring back those that have recently passed. I fear that her broken heart clouded her judgement. She refused to accept that Qatar was gone. The last time I saw her was twenty years ago, long auburn hair dangling over the side of the boat, floating west over the calm waters of the grove. Her belly bulged more than any selwyn with child I have laid eyes on.”

Saira didn’t understand. “You never saw her again?”

“The water gods decided her time had come.”

“But if you haven’t *seen* her, how do you know? She could still be alive!”

“I’m afraid not, child. Mauve was my sister. When she died, I felt her spirit disconnect from mine. Yet there was something else there, a new soul whose presence I

could always feel, no matter how far away. I never truly understood until now. All this time, that was you.”

Saira felt the weight in her heart lift a little. Sadness still lurked there, a still pool in a shadowy cave, but it didn’t seem as dark or deep as before.

“I am happy to be here in the groves. Even happier to have met you, Feye. Shall I call you Aunt Feye? Yes? That sounds strange. It will take some time for everything in my mind to settle.”

“Your thoughts must be troubled. But you are home now, among your people. The spirits of the grove will look after you. Tell me, Saira. Can you delve? How strongly can you touch the spirits?”

“When I am near a river, they surge through me more forcefully than my own blood. But I am still learning.”

“Yes, my daughter took many years to understand the spirits.”

“Does she live in the groves?”

Feye nodded slowly. “Ida is all grown up, like you. She is a tree sculptor in the cloud grove. You remind me of her.”

“And your son?”

“My son’s name is Fehl. But he has fallen out of the family.” Feye looked at Jindra, as though seeking her approval to speak further. The keeper remained silent.

“Five winters ago, Fehl joined the Untainted. I was proud, as proud as a mother could be. There is no greater honour than to be counted among the Seven. Except being a syl. But something happened to the Untainted. Maybe the poisoned waters twisted them away from their path. I have not seen the face of my son in over four years. I fear what he has

become.”

A hundred thoughts raced through Saira’s mind. The Untainted had cut off her hair. They had tried to kill her. Now Feye had said one of them was her son. One of the Seven was Saira’s *cousin*. She opened her mouth to tell Feye that she had seen Fehl—which one? she wondered. Then she remembered finding the body of the dead dark cloak, the day after leaving Maystone.

“There is more,” Feye continued. “Although I think of Fehl as my son, he is truly my nephew. For you see, when a syl is born, she is never born alone.”

Saira struggled to place the changing pieces of the puzzle. Then her eyes opened in shock.

“Yes, syl are born as twins. One male, one female. Although I raised him as my own, Fehl’s blood is closer to yours than mine. He is your brother, brought back by humans that belonged to the Order. Why, we shall never know: they were killed before any explanation could be put forth. Only afterward was the babe wrapped in robes discovered.”

“I saw him.” Saira had to get it out. Feye looked at her, incredulous yet pleased. Hurried steps from outside stole the moment.

Mijel appeared in the doorway, breathing hard.

Jindra shot to her feet. “What is it?”

“Keeper! There are intruders in the grove! The xarg has yet to find them.”

“Raelisk?”

“No. Human. I already sent three boats with our best spears.”

“Good,” Jindra said. “We cannot allow them to leave the watergroves. How

many are there?"

"One boat with two human males, but there may be more. Shall I join the chase?"

"No!" Saira yelled.

Jindra and Mijel both looked at her in surprise. It had taken her a minute to realize what they were talking about. A ship, with two men, in the groves. She didn't know how, but it must be Jed and Cal.

"Saira," Jindra said sternly, "trespassers cannot be tolerated in my—or any—grove."

"They are as much a trespasser as I. Those men you speak of are my friends. Were it not for them, I would not be here. My life would have been forfeit ten times over." Saira wasn't sure if that was true. But Cal and Jed had saved her life on more than one occasion.

Mijel was shaking her head. "We are too late. The spears have already been sent. They will show no mercy."

"Then you must take me to them at once."

Fenox moved past Mijel out the door. Saira started after him, but realized she needed to say goodbye. Hand on her heart, she looked from one woman to another. Quava and Feye stood as Saira spoke with a bittersweet tongue.

"Thank you both. My life has led me to become accustomed to suspicion. You showed me kindness can still be found in this world. Aunt Feye, I do hope one day to meet your daughter. With a mother like you, I can only imagine..." Saira felt tears spring. Feye held her hand tight. "She must be beautiful. And Quava. You brought me home. No greater gift could I receive than to see the groves again. Under your leaves,

Loa will grow strong and wise. I have no sister. Yet travelling with you has been like travelling with family.”

Quava frowned as she patted Loa on the back for a burp. “Will you be leaving the groves so soon?”

“I am afraid that I must.”

Feye tightened her grip and met Saira’s eyes. “Where will you go?”

“I will follow the path my mother took, twenty years ago, to the Lake of Souls. That is where this all started—where *I* started—and that is where I will find the end.”

#

The skiff—sides painted with fish scales, and stern with a tailfin—carried Saira, Jindra, Mijel and Fenox through the mangrove tunnel. Two paddles disturbed the smooth surface of the water. The sun’s reflection rippled in the current, the giant yellow sphere undulating like a jellyfish. The other selwyn gripped their spears with white knuckles; Saira absently fingered her tark but kept it sheathed.

“How far are they?”

“Just a few minutes further,” Mijel answered. “They are in the wide waters.”

Time passed sluggishly, like a snail crossing a path. Saira thought of the last time she had seen Cal and Jed, dancing around the temple guards in Baronstoke. That seemed a lifetime ago, in another world. The world of humans. In reality, she could count the number of days on one hand.

The skiff sliced cleanly through the water, powered by the steady, rhythmic paddling of Jindra and Mijel. Most men would envy the sinewy strength in their arms. The narrow channel—not much wider than the skiff, and certainly without room to turn

around—burst into the wide waters.

Saira first saw the human boat. The sizeable craft, long and rectangular, without sails, looked like it was adrift. Callandra was written across one side of the prow. A bamboo pole floated in the water, rising and falling with the gentle current.

“Riders,” Jindra murmured. “Are you sure these are your friends?”

She didn’t understand. Then she caught sight of the other selwyn. Three skiffs, each with five occupants and five deadly spears. They had formed a triangle around Callandra, about a dozen skiff-lengths away. Each selwyn sat stoically, spear held over one shoulder. Their boats were painted with snake scales.

“Why aren’t they moving?”

“Because they are waiting.”

Saira didn’t have time to ask what for, because at that moment Jed and Cal walked onto the bow of the ship. She opened her mouth to yell but found herself at a loss for words. Her body shivered in excitement. To know they were okay, to see them again was like seeing the sun after weeks of cloud cover. Finally, her voice gushed forth in a joyous bellow.

“Jed! Cal! Over here!”

Cal spotted her first. A smile broke out on his face, turning his dispirited and dismayed countenance into a beacon of hope.

“Saira!” Jed called out, waving his arms like he were stranded on a deserted island. “Hoy! Am I glad to see you! What happened to your hair? For a second there, I thought we were in real trouble. What did I tell you, Cal? We’re fine! See, they’re already moving off.”

The three selwyn skiffs paddled toward the shores of the mangroves. Jindra and Mijel both crouched low. Saira frowned.

“Did you signal them to withdraw?”

Jindra shook her head sombrely. “No. Don’t you see the swelling? The xarg has come.”

Saira swung her eyes to the east. The xarg rose above the water, a mountain thrust up from the depths of the earth, the spines on its shell like the turrets of some long forgotten fortress. Barnacles crusted that impenetrable armour, a few brave sea stars clinging to their portable home. The leviathan pushed through the water like a gryphawk through air. The groundswell of water shot forward as an arrow, its head fixed on Jed and Cal’s ship.

Saira looked at Jindra. “Tell the xarg to stop!”

“She will deal with them as she sees fit. There is nothing I can do for your friends.”

“Get off the ship!” she yelled at the brothers, not knowing what else to say. “The xarg is coming! Run!”

Jed and Cal had already spotted their doom. They ran back toward Callandra’s stern.

“Saira, what’s going on—”

But Jed’s words were cut short. The xarg struck with such force that Callandra was thrown up and back like a fish pulled from a river by a fisherman’s line. The brothers flew off the side of the ship, which smashed into the water only to lay listlessly on its port. Saira stood, trying to see if they were all right. The skiff rocked.

“Sit down, Saira! We do not want to attract her attention.”

She ignored Mijel’s warning. Cal’s head broke the surface of turbulent water, followed closely by Jed. The brothers struggled to keep their heads afloat, bobbing above and below the watery maelstrom. Behind them, amid eddies and bubbles, Callandra slowly began to sink.

Then she saw something else rise above the current. At first, it looked as though the very depths of the swamp were being pushed up from below. Muddy, lumpy green, like a rotting log covered with moss. She discerned the curve of a beak, as long as their skiff.

The head of the xarg materialized. Two blue eyes blazed forth, those bulging irises crossed with a band of black. She couldn’t look away.

As she watched, the xarg opened jaws large enough to horrify Vedil himself, and lunged at the two helpless brothers. She heard Cal scream. Without thinking, Saira dove into the water.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Taming of the Xarg

Jed could not believe his eyes.

Four days they had wandered aimless through the mangroves. Cal kept saying they were lost. Jed disagreed.

“We’re not lost. We’re exploring. And yes—there’s a difference. When you’re lost, you *know* where you’re trying to get.”

Their going was unbearably slow. The spirits were asleep, or so Aldon said. That left them with one splintered bamboo pole in a ship meant to be oared by a dozen seasoned riders. She was too big: they could jump into the water and swim and make faster progress. Callandra wasn’t about to go on a diet any time soon. Jed didn’t mind; he preferred women with real curves.

Four days.

For four days he tried to take them northwest (NO?***). But either the mangrove maze or the current worked against them. And then, their fourth day in the groves, they stumbled across this channel. Everything seemed to be going well: pleasant weather, persistent westward breeze, and direct passage. Then the swen appeared.

The three boats came at them fast, the first spear even faster. Jed dropped the bamboo pole overboard in surprise. How could a man throw so straight from a rocking canoe? Soon Callandra was surrounded. Aldon stayed below deck, while Jed and Cal crouched beneath the protective prow. The swen remained in place; no demands, no attempts to board, not even a change in expression.

“How can I be of assistance?” he called out after ten stale minutes. “I’m sure we’re all reasonable men here. Perhaps we can reach some kind of arrangement.”

But they didn’t so much as blink. That’s when Saira showed up.

Jed, so happy to see her, nearly burst into laughter. And not—he had to admit—just because he was in trouble. He had missed having her around. With just the guys, life lost its spark. She added an innocent, feminine touch that, despite himself, he found himself drawn toward.

As he was reassured his brother that everything was going to be all right, Cal spotted the approaching tidal wave. The towering water came at them fast enough to bowl Callandra right over. Not knowing what to do, they dashed toward Callandra’s stern.

But the wave arrived first. Saira yelled. All he caught was “xarg,” her other words lost in the wind. The wall of water smashed into Callandra, and Jed found himself flung overboard.

He hit the surface hard, and the world became water. His head throbbed. When his vision cleared, precious bubbles of air floated all around him like cottonwood seeds in early summer. Jed couldn’t see more than a few feet. Which direction was the surface? He tried to follow the bubbles, but his mind played tricks on him. Were they going up or down? His lungs burned.

Which way?

Jed caught sight of a thrusting leg. Cal! Propelling himself after his brother, he shoved his arms down and kicked his feet. A few seconds later he found air. Jed gasped in relief.

Yet there was no time for a respite. Cal's eyes were on the giant swamp turtle—the xarg, Saira called it—bearing down on them. Her huge maw opened, revealing the tongue inside: a fat, eyeless snake.

Treading water, Jed called out to his brother. “Distract her for me!”

Cal stared at him.

“I’m serious. Splash some water. Sing a song. *Anything*. Or we’re both be in Vedil’s claws by dusk!”

Cal gave him one final look, as if to say: *You better know what you’re doing*. Then Cal screamed. He batted the surface of the water with flat palms, making a sound like a hammer on an anvil.

Jed considered the xarg. She must be the size of fifty stallions. The creature veered towards Cal, but didn’t slow its attack. Jed kicked his feet and swam toward her right side. How did the xarg move so fast? Were her feet touching the river bottom?

He didn’t have time to think. The xarg descended on Cal. With the sound of a cedar being split, the xarg snapped her beak shut, as though in anticipation of the catch. Her eyes trained on Cal, Jed found himself ignored. Thrusting his arms and legs, he lunged forward, trying to grip the scaly hide. But his fingers were knocked away by the xarg’s giant flailing leg. His brother went under.

This time, Jed pulled a dagger and plunged the blade into the skin just behind the xarg’s leg. He was surprised at the ease in which it entered the supple flesh. The xarg made no sound. Yet he could feel her body twisting, generating whirlpools that threatened to pull him beneath the surface. Jed kept his grip on the dagger hilt. His free hand sunk a second knife into the xarg.

The xarg grunted, the way a gryphawk might grumble over an irritating flea in its feathers. The mammoth turtle kept turning. But like a dog chasing its tail, the xarg's head couldn't quite reach him. Jed clung to his daggers and made footholds within the folds of scales. Pulling one blade free, he stuck it back into the xarg, higher this time. In this fashion, he climbed the mobile mountain. Then his dagger hit solid rock.

His hand stung. The dagger fell as he wrung his vibrating fingers.

He couldn't get past the shell. If Orianne's impenetrable shield were made from an earthly resource, this must be it. Now what? His arms started to tire. He couldn't hold much longer. The xarg's thrashing nearly jostled his other dagger free, leaving him dangling by one arm. He needed to change tactics. Down? No, that was the xarg's domain. Up? The shell's curved lip reached over him like a grotesque awning. No, too far. Maybe with an axe and footspike. Abruptly, the xarg stopped.

Jed hugged the reptile. Her scales bulged outward as the xarg breathed in. She had obviously given up. About time, too. Stalemates were as irreconcilable as a wife and her husband's mistress. He could admit to finding his equal. Today, no victor would be crowned.

He watched *Callandra* quietly sink beneath the current, bubbles of air popping at the surface as though a second xarg were underwater. Yet another girl he had lost.

"Help! Look out!"

Cal's voice, filled with panic, pulled Jed into the present moment. Just like his brother to get into trouble after Jed got things under control. He switched the hand on the hilt and shifted his grip, wanting to look over his left shoulder to the water below. The xarg's cavernous maw obstructed his view.

Cal's shout—clearly not made in self-preservation—became a distant memory. The xarg might have stopped moving, but for a reason: to fully stretch her head from her body. Her long neck reached from under the shell like an egg-stealing python from a gryphawk's nest. Folds of mottled brown skin became taut. Jed's marvel at the creature's flexibility, overshadowed by a desire to keep all four limbs, readied him for the xarg's assault. He lowered himself as far as he could and waited for that voracious beak to snap. Her eyes tried to lock onto his, but Jed kept his gaze downcast. Nonchalant prey never appear confident to the predator they hope to fool.

The xarg gave no warning, striking fast and hard. Just as he predicted, she went for his midsection. Jed bent his knees, found footholds, and launched himself up. The xarg couldn't lift her head, not after stretching so far from her shell. Yet she was faster than him—her upper beak plowed into his legs, sending Jed into a somersault. He went head over heels once and slammed into the shell. At least, that's what he assumed. He caught his breath and pushed himself up, only to realize he wasn't on the creature's back: his body lay sprawled across the protruding snout of the xarg. A furious eye—coloured a dark, depthless blue, and larger than his own head—followed him as he scrambled onto shaky feet.

Jed stepped right between those two swivelling orbs. Along her gnarled neck he ran, shoes sinking into the xarg's spongy skin like firm mud or wet moss. Bringing her head out this far required a good deal of effort—Jed figured she would have just as much trouble retracting. This helped him keep his balance. When he reached the base, where collar met body, he leapt and grabbed onto the lip of her shell.

The xarg twisted in the other direction. Jed threw himself atop the creature.

Green algae gave the mountainous carapace a slick surface. The moving xarg made the climb difficult, but he found grip on the barnacles. Between the two highest peaks, having scaled the turrets of the shell, the proud conqueror propped himself up.

As though in protest, the xarg roared, the sound of a mountain plunging down to crush a forest. From his throne on the shell, Jed suddenly knew she wasn't angry at him. Only now, given a moment's reprieve, did he witness the madness going on all around him.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Leavings

As soon as Saira jumped into the frigid water, Jindra and Mijel tried to pull her back in the boat. She knocked their helping hands away. They were going to let the xarg kill Jed and Cal. She wouldn't stand by and watch. But what *could* she do? The elusive spirits fled from her hands like shadows at midday. So she tread water, watching events unfold before her, dumbfounded as Jed actually swam *toward* the xarg. Is there anything humans wouldn't do?

Then the xarg revealed herself fully. She shivered, awed as the enormous reptilian head stretched further and further from her shell. Jindra and Mijel became even more agitated.

"Saira! Take my spear!"

After a moment she obeyed and grabbed the base of Jindra's spear. She let herself be pulled toward the boat. She heard Cal scream, and turned to see Jed spin through the air and crash onto the head of the xarg.

"Let me pull you in."

Instead of taking Mijel's offered hand, Saira flipped back in the water, released the spear, placed her feet squarely against the side of the skiff and pushed off. This time Fenox joined her, lithe body paddling alongside her in the channel, yet slowed by his injured hindleg. Saira's skin burned cold as her body sliced through the water toward the xarg.

Jindra yelled, but she couldn't make out the words. Saira needed to help her

friends. This was her only option. She swam fast and hard. The water became turbulent as she approached the xarg. She counted all eight legs, scaly trunks like shield spruce whose roots reached deeper than her eye could follow. Then a huge set of claws rose above the surface, five dripping scimitars that tried to scratch Jed off her neck.

The xarg spotted her. An icy grip clutched Saira's heart as the huge neck slowly swung above her. The smell of rotten fish, and all things dead, washed over her. This is how a shrimp must feel, she thought, when faced by a turtle one hundred times its size. She waited for that beak to snap her body in half, but it passed right by.

"Saira, this way."

The voice startled her. Cal treaded beside her, concern in his eyes. But she saw something more. Comfort and care. She wanted to tell him how glad she was to see him, even throw her arms around him. But she needed to swim for her life.

Staying by her side, Cal led her across the channel. Fenox followed, the xarg did not. Why, she didn't know. Had she caught Jed? Waves still churned all around her, jostling Saira up and down. They reached the mangrove roots and she gripped their bark-covered javelins, like spines that belonged to the land itself. Through these deadly shallows she found more than the shore. Someone familiar sat on the shore of aerial roots, huddled beneath a cloak and partly hidden by a wall of curled leaves. He clutched something to his chest, as though it were as precious as a newborn. Was that...

"Aldon!"

He was smiling too. Pulling her up, she couldn't stop herself from hugging him close. "I thought I would never see you again. I thought the dark cloaks had killed you!"

After a moment, she felt his arms press lightly against her back. "The spirits were

watching over me. Over us both.”

Cal clambered to the shore behind her. Saira felt awkward holding Aldon and hastily let him go.

“What happened to you?” she asked Aldon. “How did you get here?”

Cal cleared his throat. “I’m sure our story is just as long as yours. But right now, my brother needs help.”

Saira turned. The four selwyn skiffs were circling the xarg, feigning with their spears as they did so. What were they doing? Jed had flattened himself against the shell. From this distance, she couldn’t tell what he was hanging on to. As she watched, the xarg began to descend into the water. She suddenly realized what the selwyn were doing.

“They’re trying to distract the xarg!”

“Wait,” Cal said. “You mean to say those swen—selwyn, I mean—are helping Jed?”

“No...” she started to say. Not helping Jed. Helping *her*. The syl.

The xarg disappeared quickly into the depths, like a sandbar under the incoming tide. Jed situated himself at the highest point—soon the *only* part of the xarg still visible.

He spotted them on the shore and waved. “On my way!” he called.

Jed waited until the last possible moment, took a two-step run and leapt toward them. His feet-first plunge coincided with an enormous uprising of water displaced by the xarg’s body. White waves crested and fell in a wide circle, causing the selwyn to hold on tight as their skiffs rode each wave. Jed popped up from below the surface like an apple placed underwater. A minute later, Cal helped him onto solid ground. Jed wiped the water from his sopping beard.

“It’s good to see the family back together. Next time, we stick to the plan. No more running off, whether or not the Divine Elder is involved! Did you see me tame that beast? It’s all in wrist. For her sake, I hope the xarg doesn’t come back. Saira, why did you cut your hair?” She opened her mouth to speak. “Hold that thought. I know you can’t wait to confess your undying love for me, but our happy little reunion must be put on hold.”

Saira shook her head, but couldn’t shake her smile. It felt so good to see them all. Then she looked across the channel. Over the wake of the retreating xarg, seventeen spears approached. None of the selwyn were smiling.

“Time to find another way out of here.” Jed pushed through the thick foliage.

Aldon didn’t move. “It’s no use. We’re surrounded by water.”

“An island? That’s Vedil’s luck.” Jed pulled his dagger free, the one with rubies on the hilt. Can’t believe I still have this thing.”

Cal broke in again. “Saira, maybe you can help us understand. Are you with us, or are you with *them*?”

Usually, she took comments from the Trail brothers with a grain of salt. But joking or not, Cal touched upon the seriousness of this situation. Where did her loyalties lie? She was sure if she ordered Jindra to kill these three humans, the grove keeper wouldn’t question her. Could she persuade them to do otherwise?

The four boats halted a dozen or so paces away, the selwyn standing with spears poised. Well within range. Jindra and Mijel came forward. Saira motioned Jed and Cal away from her. “Stand behind me. If you want to live, don’t say or do anything.” They looked too surprised to do anything but obey.

“Saira.” The grove keeper let the word hang in the air, like the question Cal had just asked. “Do you wish to travel with these three human males? They are only alive by my command.”

Her clothes heavy with water, Saira did her best to stand tall. “As I told you before, they are my friends. Their lives are tied to my own.”

Mijel regarded Jed, Cal and Aldon like a scolding mother. Except she shared no blood relation. And the children were more like pests, giant rats she would step on in a moment’s chance. “No human has ever been permitted to leave the groves.”

Jindra rested her spear against her shoulder. “You speak the truth, Mijel. Yet our legends also speak of syl who destroy tradition and bring change. Many resist her. Remember Nivh, daughter of Quesna? A thousand years past she taught keepers how to construct groves. Heresy, they said. And now look where we are.”

Mijel still wore a frown. “Keeper of the Groves is one thing, befriending humans...”

“Who am I to question the will of a syl? So be it. Saira, you may go with the three you call friends. I only ask that you leave the groves immediately.”

“With pleasure,” Jed muttered. Saira ignored him. She knew Jindra really meant “I only *demand*...”

“Take my skiff. It will guide you safely out of the groves, as long as you avoid the wide waters.”

“Thank you, grove keeper. I will not forget this.” Somehow, she felt Jindra would want to hear that. “I am grateful for your help, and for my life. But you should not risk the lives of so many for one.”

“You are a syl. Your life is worth a thousand selwyn.” Jindra stated it like saying the sky is blue.

“How many humans would that be?”

This time, Jed spoke loud enough for the grove keeper to hear.

Saira didn’t acknowledge him. “Jindra, may we speak alone for a moment?”

The keeper didn’t answer at first, eyes glossing over Jed. “As you wish,” she finally said, as though unable to deny a syl’s request.

Mijel joined one of the other skiffs, freeing the fourth. Cal looked to Saira for reassurance before climbing aboard. She nodded—Fenox paid none of them any heed, set on cleaning his fur and licking the scabs on his hindleg, so Saira suspected no ill-doing. Soon the three men were waterborne, leaving Jindra, Saira and her *daman* on the island of roots.

“I would ask that you do something for me,” Saira said. “To give a message to Quava and Feye.”

Jindra waited. She wanted to hear the message before accepting.

“Tell them they are my family. Tell them I would call their groves my own if I did not have to leave. I will guide my every action to cleanse the spirits and make the rivers pure. That is my promise to my people, no matter where the path may lead.” Saira paused. She thought of saying more, but couldn’t get her tongue to wrap around the word *brother* or *Fehl*. “My final words are for you, keeper. Mauve—my mother, the mother of a syl—left the groves to have her child. Quava did the same. If you punish Quava, that would be the same as punishing Mauve. If you punish Loa, that is the same as punishing me. No greater punishment exists than separating mother from child.”

Jindra looked past her, eyes peering inward. Then her gaze fell onto Saira hard. “That child was saved by a syl. I will see her no harm. But now let me speak my own words of truth. Humans have no respect for selwyn. Your friend showed that just now. If they knew the location of our groves, they would not hesitate to burn them down. By allowing those three to leave, I put the very home of our people in peril.” Jindra let that idea set. “Males have no respect for females. As a woman, you must know this already. To travel with three human males is foolhardy, and can only bring you pain. Do what you must, but keep your eyes—and your *daman*’s eyes—open.”

The keeper hefted her spear and walked past her. One of the selwyn skiffs took Jindra aboard. Watching them sail away, Saira felt sadness wrap around her heart like cloth over a stone. Would she ever see any of them again? Or would her journey—like her mother’s—take her from the groves, never to return?

“Time for our merry band to depart.” Jed paddled the fish-skiff through the protruding mangrove roots. Fenox jumped in ahead of her. “Although I’d feel better in one of those snakes. I have the feeling we’re in for a game of cat and mouse, but the prey is outnumbered. Hey, what are they...well, it’s nice of them to show us the way.”

Although the selwyn skiffs had moved off, they didn’t leave, resting quietly on the still waters. They blocked every passage but west.

“They won’t hurt us.”

“No, Saira, you’re right—not as long as you’re on board. What did she call you? A syl?”

“Yes.”

“Whatever that is, I’m glad you’re it.”

Suddenly exhausted, Saira sat back in the center of the boat, just ahead of Aldon. From the stern, Jed maneuvered them onto the next narrow channel, the liquid path leading them northwest, while Cal took the prow. She found comfort watching the rhythm of his arms, paddling one side of the boat, then the other. But her real interest lay in their stories. Jed regaled them all with his account of escaping Baronstoke. How they had to fight off a dozen guards, buy themselves horses—“ponies” Cal corrected—just outside the gate, and outwit the Divine Elder himself.

“We went on to find Aldon here with a nasty bruise on his noggin. He told us about the dark cloaks taking you east. We agreed to come after you.” Cal coughed. “Friends don’t abandon friends. We had to sell our horses, including my lovely Sonja, to get a fine-looking boat.”

“It was a fishing vessel. You cheated Vik, remember?”

“I was getting to that! If my wife here would keep quiet, I’ll continue the story. Where was I? The Welling River! It wasn’t long before we bumped into an old boss of mine...”

Saira listened to Jed’s words—and Cal’s frequent amendments. Aldon was silent throughout, never taking his eyes off the water. She wanted to hear everything, but her head felt heavy with fatigue. She remembered her first ride over the waters with the Trail boys, before they met Aldon. Such a long time ago. She was a different person then, a woman without a path.

Lying on the floorboards, she closed her eyes. The sound of wood pushing water drowned out most of Jed’s words. Would they come with her to the Lake of Souls? And if they did, would Jindra’s prediction come to pass? Saira didn’t know, and soon all

thoughts passed out of mind. With Fenox curled beside her, her sleep was sound and clear.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Meldpool

The next few days, Aldon spoke to Saira about everything. Uncle Garen, The Order, the dark cloaks. She explained how the kidnappers cut her hair, how she escaped by calling *hlasa* from a well of Johan deep in the mountain, and her journey across the Lorellien plains. Her power over the water spirits fascinated him, and—despite who she was and where she came from—he found himself eager to converse with someone who could touch *hlasa*. She explained the process differently, as though she were a vessel to be filled. When she opened herself to *hlasa* the current surged through her. With Aldon, it felt more like a tug of war; the spirits pulled on one end, he on the other. Saira shook her head.

“I don’t pull the spirits free. They answer when I call. It’s as though a gate exists between me and *hlasa*. Once I open the gate, I can’t stop the flow.”

Aldon wondered what that felt like, to be filled with the divine. “Does it become too much?”

“Yes. The more I let in, the more of myself I seem to lose. I feel tired afterward, yes—but also drained of something more. Something I don’t quite understand.”

Aldon knew what she meant. That gaping hole below the heart, deep in the chest. Being a selwyn, did the spirits interact with her differently? Or was it because she was a woman?

Speaking of which, Cal kept stealing glances at her. Worse yet, Saira didn’t seem to mind, looking amused by Cal’s attention. Although Aldon felt a connection to her,

Saira was still a selwyn, and therefore unclean. But he kept his mouth shut on the matter.

The day after the xarg encounter, they took turns story sharing. Saira told them about her mother and the Lake of Souls. They all agreed to head north. Aldon wanted to find The Order, Saira wanted to find the source of the Talon River, while Cal was intent to follow wherever she went. Jed didn't argue; Aldon got the sense he was only coming to appease the group. Not surprising—the one thing Jed cared for wouldn't be found on this journey.

Jed and Cal did most of the paddling, though everyone took at least one shift a day. An hour ago, the morning sun sending a swath of white reflection over the smooth ripples, the mangroves finally narrowed to the Lanthalos River. He could touch the spirits again, seductive and warm. Aldon let *hlasa* flow around him, but did not try to draw them under his command.

“The book Mirran gave me speaks of two or more people weaving the water together, at the same time.” He held out *The Order of Templar*. Saira accepted the water-stained tomb. “The author calls it a merging of the elements, or a meldpool. Unfortunately, a lot of the words got washed away when I swam to the shore. Before that happened, I read every page twice. This meldpool is usually done by different members of The Order. An Earth Druid and Singer of the Flame, for example.”

Saira read quietly for a time. The Lanthalos twisted like switchbacks on a steep hillside. The winding meanders had Jed cursing every few minutes. The Trail brothers moored the skiff on the muddy eastern shore.

Jed spat into the sludge. “Three days with only sour berries and salty crab. My stomach needs real food!”

They all went ashore, Fenox the first to leap onto solid ground. The mayguar stretched, his silver fur standing on end as he arched his back. Cal and Jed ventured further inland in hopes of finding a warm-blooded meal. Saira stood near the shore, staring into the current. Then she handed Aldon *The Order of Templar*.

“Let’s try it.”

Aldon was speechless. The very suggestion shocked him. “Didn’t you read about the dangers? About harming other members of the meldpool?”

“Yes. But we’ll just start with a drop or two. I have never shared spirit before. You can break the connection anytime.”

Aldon considered that. The book said merging the spirits could kill a man if one member carried more *hlasa* than another. Yet it was usually a meldpool involving four or more where things got out of hand. What would it feel like, to share the spirits?

“Okay, let’s try it. But only for a few seconds.”

“How do we start?”

Aldon recalled the instructions, with a memory that had permanently chiselled the Seven Scriptures into his mind. “We both need to reach for the spirits. Or in your case, open yourself to them. When you feel their energy, pass a drop to me. The book says that when someone near you calls the spirits, it’s like a giant spring opening at your feet. Through *hlasa*, we should feel more connected than roots and earth.”

Saira nodded as though he were telling her that fruit grew on trees.

“Are you ready?”

“Don’t worry, Aldon. As long as I don’t use the sunstone, I will have full control.” Saira raised her head and closed her eyes. “Ready.”

They stood beside each other, facing the river even though the direction of the source did not matter—only that water was near. Like a crab trapper, Aldon carefully pulled the lines of spirit from the depths of water toward him. The charged threads coiled around him, hot and nourishing, like having roast mallard after a week with no food. Except he could never imagine his appetite for *hlasa* being filled. Some part of him craved more. He pushed that hunger away, and instead made himself aware of Saira. He couldn't mistake her, a spring of gushing spirit. They were like two bonfires, close but not quite touching, but prepared to merge into a single, blazing inferno. A few strands of fiery *hlasa* snaked toward him. Was Saira doing that? He let the strands, like vines growing over a branch, spiral and loop around his own water spirits.

The intensity of the spirits washed over him. His body felt lighter, lifted somehow by *hlasa*. He was a feather on the winds of spirit. Yet a quick peek down revealed his feet were still firmly planted on the ground.

Abruptly, he found himself holding more *hlasa* than he had ever held before, more *hlasa* than he even knew existed. A waterfall of invisible energy fell upon him, upward from his feet to his head. His stomach heaved. Vomit rose to his throat, sour and burning. Aldon gasped. He snapped his eyes open and severed his connection.

The spirits instantly pulled away from him, like a taut bowstring that recoils after being cut. But they didn't return to the river. He felt the strands fly from him to Saira. As he watched, her calm, poised body suddenly went tense. Her neck went rigid, veins bulging. Before he could act she collapsed to the bank.

Aldon ran to her side. "By Solu, what did I do? Are you all right?"

Saira shook her head and blinked fiercely, as though regaining consciousness after

being knocked cold. Aldon held her shaking arms. “I think...” She closed her eyes and swallowed.

“Saira?”

Her eyes opened slowly, and she looked up at him, somehow childlike in her stare. “I think I’m all right. When you let go, all the spirits around you suddenly grasped for me. Everything escalated, and I couldn’t hold on. When I first tried to let go, the spirits clung to me. Then I fainted—at least, I think I did.”

“What’s going on here?” Jed appeared with a dead cara, its scrawny body limp in his hand. “Trying to make my brother jealous?”

Aldon helped Saira to her feet.

“We were testing the spirits.”

“Spirits? Keep those to yourself. Did I tell you Aldon here saved my life with the spirits? Gives me the chills just thinking about it. I’m still not sure if I should thank him or curse him.”

Saira looked confused. “But you’re alive!”

“Exactly! That hasn’t helped me any. After all, I wouldn’t be heading *towards* Vedil’s horns.”

Cal had busied himself in the skiff. Aldon saw him push the boat downstream, so it floated back to the watergroves.

“What are you doing!”

Jed answered for his brother. “We decided to continue on foot. Time to use our legs.”

Aldon felt the heat rise in his cheeks. He thought Jed had changed—or shifted, at

least a little. But this was the same story, Jed making impulsive decisions and acting as self-appointed leader. Caro Orsen had done enough of that for one lifetime.

“We? You didn’t ask what Saira and I wanted.”

“That skiff was a gift from the keeper,” Saira added.

“So now you’re both against me? You spirit weavers are one of a kind. How times never change. Listen, my former Elder-boy. My arms are tired and the current is against us. Going over land will be faster. We’ll find more food. And if you recall, we’ve bumped into in a few things in the water this past week that we might want to avoid in the future. The Lorellien Plains will be safer. Do you agree? Or do you want to chase down that hopeless skiff?”

Aldon remained silent.

“I thought so. Now, let’s see if we can scrape some meat off this old cara. Not much on him, I’m afraid. He barely had the strength to bare his teeth. At least our misery will be less for having put him out of his.”

“We will follow the river to Valei.” Aldon surprised himself at his own conviction. He knew the importance to Saira and him for staying close to the spirits.

“Who put you in charge? All right, if it makes you happy, the Lanthalos will be our guide.”

Aldon left it at that. He didn’t want to follow orders from a pickpocket.

Jed led them on a steady march. The dry, clear skies were a refreshing change from the wet and heavy air of the groves. The landscape stayed flat and bare, the only diversity brought by trees with no limbs and scattered clumps of yellow grass. Saira spoke to him once, to ask about his control over *hlasa* during the meldpool. Aldon found

his hands shaking as he responded. “I, uh, couldn’t keep the spirit threads in place.” He tried to calm his trembling voice. Did he not want to admit that a selwyn had more mastery over the spirits than him? “It felt like putting an arm into raging rapids. I wasn’t ready.” He said no more.

The mayguar caught dinner; the large, flightless bird resembled a pheasant but with long black tail feathers that uncoiled like the fiddlehead of a fern to reveal a bright red eye. As Aldon took to his bed of wilted grass blades, his eyes instinctively searched for the moon and the face of Johan, the first disciple. Despite the cloudless sky, dotted with brilliant stars, the moon slept the full night.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Cocooned

The new moon rose with the sun, a nearly invisible face with a thin sliver of a white smile. Solu stole the stars from the sky, but seldom the moon. Clouds nestled around the Wellspring Mountains to the west. The day looked clear.

Even before they started, Jed knew they would have to cut across the Lorellien Plains. The Lanthalos would soon start its wide and treacherous western loop. Aldon wouldn't be happy, an idea Jed didn't mind at all. This ragtag group needed someone to keep them together.

He worried about Cal. Would he turn on him as well? After that comment to Saira about liking women with short hair. By Solu! His brother was pining for a swen! Couldn't blame him, though. But short hair? Short hair on women was like flowers with severed petals.

Saira was pointing. "There are sambar ahead."

She sounded sure. She was annoyed at him for the way he had spoken to the woman with the spear. *That was the Keeper of the Garden Grove.* He was quick to retort, *It's hard to show respect to someone who wants to feed you to the fishes.*

Jed scanned the length of the Lanthalos. "I don't see anything."

"Two miles ahead, approaching the river."

Jed looked from her to the horizon. "Are you pulling my hair? Which is almost as long as yours, by the way. Your eyes can't see that far."

"Not mine. Fenox."

Jed kept forgetting. Apparently she could see what her baledog saw. What had she called it? Delving. One of the selwyn had taught her that. But no other selwyn could do it. Only Saira. Jed didn't complain. A good leader needed good recon.

Twenty minutes later the spotted deer appeared, drinking awkwardly from the shore. They must have scrambled down the bank, and now had their front legs spread wide as they drank, heads down but eyes round and full. Lying down to drink exposed them to predators. The lone male sambar saw them first, and herded his harem away from the water. Jed counted twenty-three. Now *that* was the life for him.

"Look at the fawn." Saira sounded excited. "So precious."

The young fawn, its large white spots yet to shrink, trailed after the black-tipped tails flicking over white rumps. He couldn't see any other fawns.

"Tell Fenox to catch that fawn."

Saira looked horrified. "I will do no such thing."

"Then tell him to scout ahead, along the Lanthalos."

"Why?"

"Why?" Jed waved after the sambar. "Because we are going to follow them."

Aldon, carefully situated in the corner of Jed's vision, didn't even glance after the spotted deer. Jed gave him credit for that.

"We agreed on our path."

Jed shrugged. "Sometimes one has to break an oath to do the right thing."

"Don't speak to me about oaths. When have you ever kept an oath? Breaking things, that's what you're good at. You agreed yesterday to follow the Lanthalos. Now you want to go across the plains. None of us are surprised. You treat us like sheep. I

don't belong to your flock, Mr. Shepherd, so..."

Jed let him finish. Everyone needed to vent some time or another. Aldon still managed to get annoyed at Jed.

"Are you listening?"

"I heard everything you said."

"And?"

"And? We're going north. Saira agrees with me, don't you?"

She looked startled. Probably didn't want to get mixed up in all this. But like it or not—Jed knew how *he* felt about that—they were all in this together.

"Do your little delve thingie. Fenox knows I'm right."

Saira turned to the west. She didn't quite close her eyes. Standing still, her breathing shallow, she somehow put her eyes into the mayguar's.

"Rocks," she said. "Sharp rocks. Even Fenox is having trouble finding footing."

"So what do you recommend?"

Saira answered Jed by heading north. Jed grinned at Aldon.

"Lady's in charge."

As they trekked over the flat plains, a stoic silence fell across the water weavers. Did they really miss the river that much? Cal tried to avoid conversation.

"You didn't feel like talking yesterday either. What's gotten into you?" But he and Jed both knew. "I'm your brother, you can talk to me about anything."

Cal took the bait. "You don't really mean that."

"Try me."

His brother sighed. "You're jealous."

“What in Lhoran’s light are you—” Jed caught himself.

“See?”

“Okay okay, I’m listening. But I think you’re crazy.”

“You’re jealous of Saira and me. Every time I walk beside her, talk to her—heck, even when I’m *not*—I feel you glowering at my back. Can’t you be happy that—”

“I’m not jealous.”

“Fine. Have it your way. Then you won’t mind if I speak to Saira for the next few hours.”

“Go ahead, Cal. I told you I’m fine.”

“Thanks,” Cal said, in a way that indicated he thought Jed was full of sambar droppings.

Jed watched his brother take up conversation with Saira. Something ached in his stomach. Seeing the two of them together...was it jealousy? No, not jealousy. Not him. But what? He and Cal were brothers. The past eight years they had done everything together, except Jed’s stint with the riders. Yet Cal had wanted to work in the city and earn an honest living. Jed liberated him from that awful fate shortly after rescuing the fiery redheaded Fuschia from Rowlen. Brothers were blood. Brothers stuck together. *By Solu, I am jealous.* Not just of Cal, he realized, but Aldon as well. Saira and the former Elder-boy shared the spirits. That left him on the outside looking in. And Jed liked to be right smack dab in the middle. What could he do about it? Not much. Except lead them all on a fool’s quest. Maybe they would find a River Walker. That would make it all worthwhile. Though rumour had it those aloof guardians of the currents were all dead. Rumours told as often as that one held more than a kernel of truth.

The ground took on the colour of ash, as though scarred by wildfire. Jagged moss-covered rocks replaced grass. A few weeds had found purchase in the unforgiving bed of stone, the fertile soil either buried or burned. Within the hour, the entire landscape looked like the remains of the greatest bonfire ever lit.

“What is all this?”

Aldon picked up a loose, dark grey stone. “Lava rock.”

“Lava rock? Where’s the volcano?”

Aldon shrugged.

Jed found himself a nice, moss-cushioned seat and called for a rest. Five sambar grazed in the distance, content in their island of grass. They were all males, horns broken or just starting to show, making them either too weak or too young to challenge a larger male for his flock. Failures, is what they were. They kept together out of necessity—more sets of eyes and ears.

Cal found a rock large enough to accommodate him and Saira, Fenox lying at her feet, while Aldon sat cross-legged on a bare patch of earth. It felt warmer here, warmer than a spring day under the afternoon sun should feel. Heat seemed to brew underfoot, a secret fire beneath the dark stones. Curious, Jed hopped off his moss-padded throne and explored. He tried to find a crevice, half-expecting smoke to start seeping through cracks in the rock.

The pounding of hooves on stone diverted his focus. At a swift gallop the five sambar took to the west. They showed no signs of slowing, determined to race out of sight. Strange, he thought, as he headed back to the others. The only reason sambar bolted that far—

Something cracked under his foot. Jed lifted his leg. He had stepped on a ridged yellow sheet. It made him think of dried onion peel. Kneeling, he ran his hand over the rough, unusual surface. The yellow sheet felt rigid and firm, thick as fir bark even though it crunched beneath his leather sole like an autumn leaf. His eyes followed the entire length of the ribbed layer of...skin?

Jed nearly jumped. This moult spread out ten paces across and more than forty in length. What animal—no, what *creature*—had wriggled out of this shed?

“Cal! Saira! Aldon! Come have a look. I’ve found some bad news.”

While Jed waited, his suspicions were confirmed. This yellow sheathe of skin—the exact colour and consistency of a snake shedding—was the size of a river rider boat. He glanced around the relatively flat terrain. Where did it hide?

“Hurry up! No time for romance, you two. I found one of the xarg’s cousins. Or at least its last moult. You aren’t going to be—”

A shrill scream interrupted him.

“*Gryphawks!*”

From the way Saira unleashed the word, she knew exactly what was in store for them. Jed jerked his head to the east. At first, he saw only one. That dark spot became a dark line, flying toward them well above the horizon. As they neared, individual gryphawks took form. He had seen them before, always from the safety of a boat. He remembered the time Rowlen threw a man overboard, “I got tired of his face” his only explanation. Jed saw the gryphawk dive and catch before the man could call for mercy. While the first gryphawk flew up with the flailing rider in its talons, another tried to steal its prey. The second gryphawk ended up with the rider’s left leg.

For a moment, Jed couldn't move. The speed and grace of these great birds of prey captivated him. His overwhelmed mind tried to count them all.

There were at least a hundred.

Something grabbed him from behind. Jed spun to find Cal holding his shoulders.

"We need to find a shelter!"

"What?"

"Something, anything! *Run!*"

Jed obeyed. But it was like running through a nightmare where his actions didn't matter. He made the motions that would inevitably lead to his end. He was no sambar. They would be caught. And they would be eaten.

"Now we know what the sambar were running from."

Cal's words gave Jed a focus.

"Don't be so sure."

"They're coming from the east. The sambar went west."

"I know, but...by Solu, what is *that*?"

Jed skid to a halt. Against a ridge of black stone, nestled in its shadowed alcove, was a giant cocoon. He thought of the shedding and matched up the two sizes. Yet this cocoon was leathery and brown—and alive. Inside, a faint rhythm of movement, the beating of a heart. He put his hand on the stiff, inelastic casing, feeling for a pulse.

Cal touched the hardened cocoon gently, as though afraid of damaging it. But even a gryphawk beak would have trouble penetrating this iron womb. "What in Vedil's name have you found?"

Thunder bellowed from the north. Jed watched a huge column of black rise

toward the sky. Like an enormous, black-barked, branchless tree, the column stretched to the height of cloud. Too thick to be smoke. Soon another pillar joined the first, then three more, until the wall of black was complete.

Jed almost started to laugh. “Now what?”

Saira, with a quiet, terrified awe, gave him the answer. “It’s a shadestorm.”

He could smell the ash, heavy and coarse in his lungs. The dark, roiling mass bloomed like a black flower. The ground shook, as though threatening to crumble away at any moment. Were they standing on a volcano? Jed could feel his entire world spin. He wondered if the very earth below his feet was about to erupt.

Then another column shot up, closer this time. But the thunderous roar didn’t belong to a volcano.

The head of a moleworm burst forth from a subterranean tunnel. Ash spewed from its open jaw, pushing that impenetrable column further skyward. Jed first thought of a snake, except he caught sight of two short, jointed legs with blunt claws. There were no long serpent fangs. Rather, its teeth were like the raelisk but more ordered, a neat line of wide, equal-sized incisors running the entire length of its colossal mouth. The moleworm bent down and sank its teeth into the grey earth, and a moment later expelled black sediment overhead. That was the source. The cause of the shadestorm. Of all the moleworm’s terrors, the one Jed focused on were the eyes it didn’t have. Maybe it didn’t need them.

Everyone stood frozen, spellbound, staring at the black mountain that had risen from nothing and would now cast down their doom. Jed glanced over his shoulder. He could make out the plumage pattern of the gryphawks, ripples of white rustled by the

wind. Black predatory eyes trained on him.

He knew what had to be done.

“Into the shadestorm!”

Saira stared at him, bug-eyed. “*What?*”

Cal, unsurprisingly, took her side. “Have you lost your mind?”

“We either stay put and become bird meat or take our chances inside the storm.

Believe it or not, I’ve still got something to live for.”

They weren’t convinced. Aldon looked ready to faint.

“Fenox! Get back here!”

The mayguar didn’t heed Saira’s call. Jed watched Fenox run headlong into the shadestorm. His body disappeared the moment he entered the ash.

“I’ve said it before: that’s one smart baledog. Follow Fenox and I!”

Jed ran after the mayguar. The solid, dark fog raced toward him. With only a moment’s hesitation, he let his body be swallowed by black.

He stopped. The sting in his eyes forced Jed to shut them. He was inside the shadestorm. Now what? There was no time to think. If he knew the secret of the shadestorm, he probably wouldn’t live long enough to tell it.

Someone coughed behind him. Was that Cal? Hard to tell. He couldn’t see his own hand. He reached out and touched an arm. Then he found the owner’s hand with his own. Not soft enough for Saira or Aldon.

“Is everyone here?”

If there was any response he couldn’t hear it. No time to lose. Jed stepped forward into nothingness, tugging Cal along. The closest moleworm was somewhere to

their left, so he veered in the other direction. The going was slow, the terrain treacherous enough without being masked by the storm. He often waited for the chain of people behind him to catch up. Then, after what felt like hours, everything went deathly quiet.

His ears still rang. Jed wiped the ledge of soot from his eyelids and tried to open them a sliver, a narrow window to the outside world.

Black. Nothing but black.

Even if the sound had stopped, the shadestorm showed no sign of dissipating.

“Where are you taking us?” Cal’s voice sounded strange, muffled as though speaking underwater.

“Can’t go over it, can’t go under it...”

“The shadestorm goes on for miles!”

“What’s that noise?”

Saira asked the question. He didn’t ask her to clarify, because he could hear it too. Faintly at first, like fallen autumn leaves blowing over dry twigs. A serpent slithering over rock. More than one. Coming toward them.

“Let’s move!”

But he knew Cal was right. There was no way they could get through the shadestorm. They were in the middle of the moleworm hunting grounds. Being blind, this was how the moleworms levelled the playing field. Any prey caught in the storm stumbled around in a mad panic. It was only a matter of time before they became the grub of a giant grub. If they were going to survive, they had to put on a mask of their own.

“Saira, where is Fenox?”

“Right beside us.”

“I need his help. Can you tell him to find one of those cocoons?”

He waited, but she didn’t respond.

“Saira?”

“Give me a second—okay, he found one. There are quite a few.”

“One will be enough. Take us there.”

Saira moved past Cal and took Jed’s right hand. “This way,” she said, even though none of them could see. Except Fenox, and through some miracle of the selwyns, Saira as well.

Their footsteps, thudding over stone, failed to camouflage the rustling slide of their predators. Jed pictured a moleworm, following their vibrations, mouth agape, ready to swallow them whole into the cavernous tunnel that was its stomach. Saira stopped less than a dozen paces away, knelt to one knee and put Jed’s hand firmly on the leathery cocoon. It felt warm.

“Cal, help me cut a hole in this shell.”

For once, his brother didn’t question him. Daggers scraped against the impenetrable cocoon, shrieking like nails on glass.

Cal muttered, “It’s no use. We might as well be cutting steel.”

Once again, he couldn’t argue with his brother. Jed’s first attempt shattered his smallest knife. You couldn’t use a blade of grass to cut dragonfruit. Unless...

Jed reached behind his belt, feeling for the ruby. His thumb ran over that red eye, as lucid to him as the harvest moon over a clear horizon. He pulled the chrak out and plunged the blade deep. The tip cut cleanly through the outer cocoon, a knife through

young rabbit flesh. Determined, he slashed and sawed a jagged line in the thick shell.

“What is that *smell*?”

Like milk left out too long—all day, in hottest summer, for a week. Jed breathed through his mouth but couldn’t escape nausea. He finished the cut and made two more, on either end, so it outlined a double hinged door. Then he reached his hand inside, fingers passing wet and squishy innards. He pulled back, grabbing the stiff edge of the pupal casing, and with a series of loud snaps opened the makeshift door into the cocoon.

“Get inside.”

Even in the black fog, he knew exactly what expression Cal wore on his face.

“Sometimes, I don’t know if you’re a madman or a genius.”

“I’m a survivor. Now get in there and see if it’s safe. I’ve got to make three more doors.”

With a *slurp*, Cal submerged his body. Jed completed another set of cuts, enough for Saira and Aldon, when Cal made his report.

“Softest bed I can remember. Face outward, and you can breathe well enough—just plug your nose.”

“Everyone got that? Saira, give me your hand. Now—step forward a little, and get inside. Don’t worry, it’ll be fine. Aldon? Here we go. Welcome to the Trail Inn, luxury suites only. Don’t forget to breathe!”

With the others safely stowed—he just hoped their gargantuan bedmate had already finished feeding—Jed set on making his own bed. Fenox would have to fend for himself. The closest slither became a low rumble, like a boulder rolled over brittle rock. His arm began to tire of cutting through such thick and dense material. The chrak had yet

to dull—if anything, it seemed to be sharpening—yet his forearm muscles demanded rest. He switched hands, and after a minute finished the incisions. Reaching inside, Jed managed to find a grip the same moment the moleworm found him.

The smell hit him first. Sambar blood, hot and fresh. Maybe the moleworm was full.... The creature brushed against his right knee, enough to almost knock him over. Jed pulled his leg away. As he did so, the moleworm froze.

Jed didn't dare move. He even forced himself to breathe through his nose, fighting vomit with each inhalation. The moleworm was still touching his knee. Yet it stayed in place. Jed's heart, a furious pump in his chest, was all he could hear. Balanced perfectly in place, he waited for the moleworm to move on, to search for other prey. No movement.

Only the hairs on the back of his neck told Jed his mistake. Like a snake, the moleworm could move one part of its body and leave the other at rest. The part pressed against his knee—ensuring he was still there—remained completely still. Meanwhile, the head of the moleworm, the mouth with a perfect circle of teeth, was coming around, slowly preparing for a single strike.

Jed dove headfirst into the cocoon. The moleworm sprung ahead the instant he moved. Bodily juices smeared his face. He twisted, trying to pull his legs in. If this—the tail end of the creature—were going in one direction, he would wager all of Rowlen's loot that the front end was on its way here.

With one final pull Jed wrenched his last limb inside. He tried to wipe the goo off his face—the only part of his body not immersed in the soft folds of cocoon tissue—but the sticky, gelatinous fluid clung to his skin like honey to bread. The next thing he knew,

the moleworm was inches from his face.

Of course, he couldn't *see* the creature, but its breath—a mix of sambar fur and choking ash—fell upon him as a drunk's exhalation over a child. A moment later a pair of claws tore at the side of the cocoon, trying to find purchase. Jed knew it was all over once they wedged into the cocoon's open wound.

The claws disappeared, and silence reigned. Jed's imagination betrayed him with horrific visions of the moleworm chewing its way through the safety of the shell. He became acutely aware of a rhythm of sound—like listening to the ocean from a distance, a wave reaching the shore, a pause, then another wave forming. A recurring breeze, foul and rank, fell over his face and into his lungs.

Breathing. That was the sound of the moleworm breathing.

He realized in horror that the moleworm had wrapped its mouth *around his body*. Only the cocoon casing kept its teeth from closing in on him. It seemed to be trying to suck him out. Jed felt his spine quiver. He spread his arms and legs as far out as he could and, in the long minutes that followed, tried to think of Fuschia's soft red hair draped across his chest.

Chapter Thirty

Dispersal

Saira wondered if this is what a womb felt like. Warm, floating, her body completely embraced. An almost imperceptible rocking, back and forth, gentle as a summer breeze. She could barely move and yet somehow felt safe. But then there was the smell. She didn't know how many hours she had been lying here, but the scent of moleworm insides never dispersed.

She couldn't sleep. She kept thinking of Mirran's poor family. They must have been on the eastern road from Valei during the new moon. His wife and three daughters trapped in the shadestorm and hunted down by moleworms...too awful to imagine. How could Saira have forgotten? Mirran had warned Aldon and her about this very time and place, and they walked—no, *ran*—right into it. Where was Mirran now? After Caro Orsen burnt down his home—and everything in it—where had he gone? She realized, with a chill, that he never would have abandoned his books. That was his life. If they became ash, so did he.

She felt movement against her leg. Saira held her breath, her disgust at the rancid smell stunted by fear. The creature came closer, toward her face. Something wet ran along her cheek, rough and firm. *Fenox!* In her panicked thoughts she had forgotten to delve. Her lack of concentration would have made it difficult—if not impossible.

Fenox licked the sticky residue from her face, attacking it diligently, like a cat to its own muddied coat. Then he found a place to lie, stretching next to her body, their spines aligned. The familiar, musky scent of his fur comforted her. Exhaustion finally

made its presence known. Saira's body compelled her into the unconscious, lulled further by a heart beating close to her own.

She woke to a growl. Something nudged the small of her back. At first she thought it was Jed or Cal. With a start, she realized the world had returned. She could *see!* The shadestorm was no more, faded into the oblivion of an uninvited nightmare. White clouds, edges lit into colour by a rising or setting sun, welcomed her sleepy eyes. For a moment she really thought it was all a dream. Then nausea returned. She coughed and tried to move, her arms reluctant to respond.

The growl came again. She saw Fenox, his fur matted and paws ankle-deep in ash. He stood several paces away looking back at her. A hard object struck her in the back a second time and Saira screamed.

Jolted—literally—into action, she thrashed about, dislodging all her appendages from the thick soup inside the cocoon. She stood on two legs and nearly fell, righting herself before taking a step. Her body felt heavy, wearing a coat of moleworm innards. She made it to Fenox and turned. Either from her scream or the writhing within the cocoon, her three companions also awkwardly emerged from the makeshift womb, shielding their eyes against the glare of the morning sun.

But Saira couldn't take her eyes off the hole in which she had made her bed. A long, black limb jutted out from that very spot. The stiff appendage looked like a giant grasshopper leg—lithe with multiple joints. It flailed about, reaching further from the cocoon. She realized she was looking at a knee bent all the way back on itself now trying to stretch out fully.

Cal was relieved to see her. He put a sticky hand on her shoulder and tried to motion her away from the cocoon.

“No, it’s all right,” she said, unsure of her own words. Fenox’s intermittent growl wasn’t one of warning or fear, but a quieter, unusual sound brought on by curiosity.

They moved back several dozen paces—even Jed seemed to think that a good idea. Saira stopped to watch, transfixed by the emerging creature.

The leg appeared to be stuck. It jerked, almost in spasms, but couldn’t unfold. Had they damaged it? The cocoon suddenly split in half, like an egg with a soft shell. The creature—clearly no longer a moleworm—pulled the outer casing apart. The cocoon offered one final convulsion before falling away, a shed skin.

A blue wall emerged, tall and bright, reticulated with soft white. Saira’s jaw dropped. The delicacy of the colour and sensual shape reminded her of the gods themselves.

Aldon couldn’t contain himself. “What are we looking at?”

“A sail, by the looks of it,” Jed answered, bonded by their common awe. “And not a finer one have I laid eyes on.”

Saira saw the similarities. Except this sail had a head with twitching antenna. The main bulk of the creature’s black body, spotted with white, twisted to and fro for a minute. And then the sky blue sail parted to reveal two.

A pair of mammoth wings unfurled. Saira couldn’t believe this was once a moleworm, that beauty could come from such a monster. Only the gods could bring such a miracle to life. The creature pushed its wings down, then raised them slowly, as though testing its new limbs. After several rhythmic beats of increasing speed the butterfly rose

above the earth. Saira felt the wind of its swiftly beating wings against her skin, like the breath of Solu himself.

“Look there!” Jed pointed. Saira, absorbed by the birth of new and fragile life, hadn’t noticed the dozens of cocoons all around them. More moleworms completed their metamorphoses, the blue sails transforming the barren landscape into a vibrant ocean.

“This one was the first to emerge. I helped it!” Jed sounded truly proud. He added, “I’ll never step on another caterpillar.”

One by one the butterflies took flight, higher and higher, until hundreds filled the sky. In fact, they took on the very shape of the heavens, frantic wings flapping, creating a swathe of rippling blue. A number possessed white wings, those patches of honeyed pastel like clouds on a hot summer day. Saira watched the skies shift and meld into a living colony of air-borne moleworms.

Aldon was smiling. “A miracle, this is. I wonder where they are going?”

The butterflies split into two groups, the swarm of blue parting to the north and east. Watching them go, Saira felt sadness in her heart. She spotted several butterflies settling on the ashen landscape a few hundred paces away.

“A few are staying.”

Cal looked from the butterflies to her. “Those with wings like to explore, while others are happy in their home. That’s something my mom used to say.”

Saira looked into his wide brown eyes. In the sun they looked softer, a gentle hazel. She gazed along the waves of his shoulder-length and had to look away. Her face felt hot.

Cal cleared his throat. “I think my mom had wings, yet she never left home, as

much as she pretended to be happy.”

“I never knew my mother. I only have stories.”

“Better than nothing, I suppose.” Cal looked awkward.

“What about your mother?”

“I was nearly ten when the sickness took her. I remember my birthday, she fell down the stairs and broke her leg. But she never screamed. My dad flew into one rage after another when she died. A year later I ran off to Baronstoke and Jed caught me trying to steal dragonfruit. Not from him—from the fruit stand that only *he* was allowed to pinch from, or so he told me. He had been watching me for awhile, and knew we were half-brothers.”

Jed was throwing rocks into the empty cocoon. “These butterflies have scattered, and I suggest we do the same. Let’s hope the gryphawks have had their fill. No snacks on the way home.”

Had he been listening to her and Cal? Saira wasn’t sure.

As they started over the plains, she spotted fresh cocoons, paler in colour, formed overnight. Would these emerge into butterflies a month from now, the day of the new moon? She couldn’t separate her wonder from her fear. The very moleworms that had tried to make meals out of them would soon blossom into flowers on fragile wings.

The long walk stretched into days. The sambar were gone. Moss and dark rock became flat, listless terrain. Grass lay scattered here and there, often yellowed despite the season. The sky turned monotone grey with no scent of rain. Saira spent most of her time talking to Aldon about the spirits, or Cal about anything. She found herself wanting to lie next to him at night, but didn’t have the courage to ask for such a thing, and felt

awkward anytime they got too close. Jed, for his part, ignored them all, always ahead, their solitary leader.

Then Jed stopped, and she saw the lake.

The waters of Solas Lake, concealed by a low range of hills, fell into view without warning. Saira gasped at the expanse of near-stillness. She caught movement, faint ripples carried across a sinuous surface greater in size than all of Maystone. The late afternoon sun danced in a line among the shallow valleys between water ripples. The power of this place resonated through her, felt deeper than bone. A vast well of spirit.

“Do you feel that?” she asked Aldon.

He nodded slowly, then frowned. “Something dark is here. Darker than before.”

She felt it too, a sinister undercurrent not betrayed by the lake’s calm exterior. Against the glare of the orange sun, sliding toward the cloud-flecked horizon, Saira sensed an empty shadow, like a full moon obscured by thick cloud.

Jed was standing next to them. “Former Elder-boy, you’ve been here before?”

Aldon nodded. “You haven’t?”

“Nope. Too holy for my blood. What were you doing here?”

“I was sent by the Divine Elder, and came here with my Uncle. The town mayor let me ring the bell tower.”

“Sounds like you’re in their good books. You want to lead?”

Aldon frowned. “Not this time.”

As they circled Solas Lake, Saira watched the water lap onto the shore, wave after endless wave. She had never seen the ocean. Is this what Omnia looked like? So much water. So much spirit...and yet the pebbled shore stretched too far up the bank, as

though more water had once filled this place. Stones that should be wet with spirit lay cold and dry.

Fenox returned from the north from one of his sojourns. He looked tired and ragged, not greeting her in his usual, playful way. He took a long drink from the lake.

The city neared. Valei sat, triumphant, near the center of the lake. Perched on an outcrop of stone that had risen in ages past, a long bridge connected the maze of buildings to the shore, where the gatehouse filtered visitors. Saira could see no one on the bridge. Around the buildings she spotted canoes, dories and ferries, resting oddly on solid rock. They were all tied to poles. Why bother tethering a boat above water?

Aldon was trailing behind. He looked weak, his face white. “What is it?” she asked.

“Talon River. I can’t feel its current.”

It took Saira a moment to understand. Jed was leading them towards a bridge that crossed over a wide mouth of smooth, curved rock. A giant furrow in the land where a river once raged. Saira stood at the edge of the bridge, looking down at the quiet bed of stone. The spirits were no longer running from the mountains of the north, no longer filling the lakes, the rivers, the bodies of all who relied on these currents. She could hear Quava’s voice. *Water is soul.*

Now, the Talon River lay barren. She stepped down, underneath the sturdy bridge, to walk over the shrivelled stream. Not a single trickle remained. The Talon stretched over fifty paces across, its smooth grooves carrying only a slow, cold breeze. Her heart, heavy with sorrow, brought on shaky tears. Cal offered a hand on her shoulder. Yet not even his touch could console Saira from this nightmare. The sunstone in her pocket felt

cool as ice.

“What could do this?”

Aldon looked from her to the riverbed devoid of spirit. “Whatever has dried the Talon is a force greater than the gods themselves. Vedil himself must have taken part in stealing this spirit.”

Jed looked uncomfortable with Aldon’s words. “Let’s go into Valei and find some answers.”

Everyone and everything was quiet as they approached the city. The bridge turned out to be a twin walkway, very narrow, with a channel of water running between them.

“You can only enter Valei by water,” Aldon explained. “These two walkways were for the guards.”

“Doesn’t seem to be a problem at the moment.”

“Wait,” said Cal. “Look at the gatehouse.”

The gatehouse, a square building at the start of the bridge, looked abandoned. The door lay on the shore as though pulled off by its hinges.

Saira looked down at Fenox. “Get inside the gatehouse. I’m going to delve.”

She told her *daman* to go across the bridge into Valei. She could sense his reluctance. *Be careful*, she said.

Saira went into the gatehouse, an empty room excepting a bench and small table, and sat on the creaking floorboards. Closing her eyes, she saw the world in greys.

The bridge sped by as Fenox scurried across. He kept his body low. She could feel the hairs on the back of her neck tingle. What was Fenox worried about?

The city of Valei opened beneath a giant stone archway, carved into snakes that coiled up either column, their heads twisted around each other at the top. Through this threshold of stone sentinels emerged buildings on stilts and streets that were rivers. Canoes replaced carriages. Arched bridges connected cobbled sidewalks. Rows of brick houses curved along the edges of a deep canal. Spirit must flourish in this place. The awe she felt couldn't stop a shiver from racing down Saira's spine.

The city was deserted. Not a soul in sight.

Fenox kept moving. Valei was a labyrinth whose order she couldn't figure. The mayguar moved swiftly and turned around corners with intent. Left, right, left. She couldn't keep up. He passed three-storey houses, their lower walls worn by water. A temple of silver stones, its double doors framed by five carved dolphins jumping over this sacred entry. Then a bridge with dozens of steps up to a flat platform and dozens more going down.

He stopped. Saira focused, peering at the shadows of buildings, looking for what had given Fenox pause. She realized it wasn't what he had seen, but what he could smell, what he could hear. The scent of metal and sweat lingered in one of the buildings ahead, laced with anger and frustration. Haste filled the air. Heavy footsteps approached. And there was a voice, very near, speaking as though to her...

"Saira! Wake up!"

Jed was shaking her shoulder.

"What are you seeing?"

"The city has been abandoned." She spoke slowly, still halfway in a dream.

"Everyone is gone. But someone else is here."

“Who?”

“I don’t know yet! I’m going back to Fenox. Don’t disturb me again!”

The mayguar was in the same place, but seemed to be scanning the buildings. He fixed on one, ran toward its open window, and jumped through. Saira thought she could feel her own body lift off the ground. Inside was a home with chairs and clothes littered on the floor. Fenox padded over the carpeted floor, careful to avoid the shattered glass of smashed goblets. All the cupboard doors were open. He leapt onto a counter, turned to face the window, and settled down to wait. And watch.

For a long time, Saira could hear or see nothing but the silent streets of Valei. The mayguar’s patience stilled her fear and restless excitement. To be patient was to be unseen. Long minutes passed, and her vision blurred. Was Fenox falling asleep? She wondered if delving worked both ways. When he closed his eyes, could he see the world as she saw it?

She tried to nudge him awake with her thoughts but he didn’t stir. His eyes suddenly shot open, locked onto the square view of the city through the window frame. The sound reached her first: agitated voices, armoured feet, rustling robes, along with the scent of haste. Then a tall figure came into view, followed by half a dozen others. Their leader was the one Saira couldn’t tear her gaze from. That face, although several dozen paces away, came out clear through the mayguar’s vision. This face belonged to the man that had tried to kill her, those eyes saw her as vermin. In Baronstoke, within the Ivory Hall, he had nearly ended her life without a second thought.

It was the Divine Elder. He was here, in Valei, with other Elders.

She woke from the delve in shock.

Cal was at her side. He took her hand. “What’s wrong?”

Saira gasped for breath, her chest tight with terror. She looked at Cal, then Jed and Aldon.

The words were no more than a whisper. “Caro Orsen.”

Aldon frowned. “What about him?”

“He is in Valei. He’s *right here*.”

No one spoke, each of them digesting the news with a varying mix of surprise and dismay. Saira tried to delve again, but couldn’t concentrate. Jed broke the tense silence.

“I’m going into the city.”

“*What?*” Saira and Cal answered in unison.

“I said, I’m going into Valei. I’m going to find out why Caro is here. I am tired of running. Aldon? Are you with me?”

To her surprise, Aldon agreed with Jed. “I want to know what happened to this city.”

Jed was already heading out the gatehouse to the bridge. Saira called after him. “Fenox doesn’t think it’s safe!”

“Caro doesn’t know we’re here. And if the stories about Valei are true—correct me, Aldon, if I’m wrong—you can make a hundred turns in this maze of a city and never retrace your steps—or find the place you’re looking for. In any case, Fenox will keep an eye out for us.”

“It’s not like that,” she tried to tell him, but he and Aldon were already moving onto the bridge.

Chapter Thirty-One

Valei

Aldon was shaking. First there was Talon's bare riverbed, the most precious source of spirit gone dry. Then his mind collapsed at the state of Valei. This city, more divine than any in Rivaria, had been deserted. Now Sarai told them Caro Orsen was here. He had grown up under the Divine Elder, been mentored by his teachings. Aldon hated him. His full rage threatened to explode at any moment. He knew seeking out Caro would be folly. The Divine Elder was far too strong for him. Yet Aldon needed to see the city, to understand why the world was falling into ruin.

Jed led them, single file, across one of the narrow walkways. This was meant for the Valei guard, to prevent invasion by land. Six years ago, he and his Uncle Garen had come here. Garen went north for a month while Aldon did service in the Temple of the Dolphin. The mayor of Valei—Holden, a friend of Caro's—had taken Aldon under his wing. Holden toured him proudly around the city, explaining the illustrious construction of its fine architecture, the comfort of his citizens, and finally the towering bell tower. *The tallest and largest in all the lands*, Holden had stated. *When our bell rings at daybreak, even the mountains of the north wake.*

Aldon's sorrow washed over him, the painful flow of the past and the ebbing of a safe future—turning desolate—almost too much to bear. His Uncle was gone, murdered by Caro. His favourite city lay in decay before his eyes. He tried to shove aside anger and grief. Something had to be done before despair claimed his heart.

They were nearing the edge of the bridge when Cal shouted out in alarm.

“We’re being followed! There, along the shore.”

Aldon spun. At least thirty of the royal guard marched up the western edge of the lake towards the gatehouse behind them. A blue-robed Elder—could that be Ithaniel?—was with them. Ithaniel and he had played bones and dice when Aldon was a child; another teacher turned foe.

Saira’s voice quivered. “We should go back!”

“We’re too far out,” Jed countered. “That, and the fact they’ve spotted us.”

Aldon saw he was right. Several of the guards pointed, others unstrapped sheathed swords from their backs and tied them to their waists. There would be no treaty between these parties.

The serpent arch loomed. Aldon passed under that symbol of time and transition. Rivers slithered across the land like snakes, their start and end unclear. Serpents were sacred beings, slender and strong, their bodies moving with the spirits. He stopped, put a hand on the stone archway, and fell into remembrance.

Valei was a city of colours and curves. Red stone bridges over the sinuous canal, cobbled streets that meandered alongside brick buildings painted brighter than Solu himself, doorways right above the canal that arched into semi-circles, their lower reflections in the water completing the shape. People moved about in a constant current, traders from Salos Lake offering water rice in exchange for sculptured stones taken from the Talon River by artisans and fashioned into moonbears or the sungod. Aldon had always wanted to work with his hands, to shape the hardest rock into something softly beautiful. For many years he had listened to the wisdom of Elders. Always he had wanted to created, to put his feeling into stone and build a physical memory with his own

two hands.

This city burst with excitement and creation. Shopkeepers hollered friendly greetings to passersby. Ladies in gold finery curtsied to the acolyte. Aldon awed at marble palaces with statues of kings of old slaying open-beaked gryphawks that neighboured shining temples only accessible by water. A persistent din reached his ears, oars striking water, children laughing at the curious strangers in their city, the resonant ring of the bell tower.

Now the sounds were gone. Even the water was quiet. The level of the great spirit canal had dropped a dozen feet, exposing the thick stilts upon which many buildings were built. His eyes scanned Valei for life. He could only see what was different. Violet Oriane flowers that adorned the waters of the canal were replaced by surfacing debris—cracked tables, split hulls and discarded bas reliefs of old gods forgotten until now.

Everything was still. No movement or flow. Without the Talon emptying its sacred waters into Solas Lake the currents were no longer carried through Valei. The city was built on an outcrop of rock that remained—when he and his Uncle visited—completed submerged. The spirits were receding, pulling away from the earth and sinking into the dark places of the world.

“Aldon! Come on.”

Saira tugged at his shirt sleeve. It was too big for his arm. Nothing seemed to fit anymore.

“Take us somewhere safe.”

He realized Jed was waiting for him. Aldon tried to ignore the decay of colour

and soul and focused on their options.

“We’ll go to the Temple of the Dolphin. This way.”

Shadows covered the street surface, creeping up the eastward side of the tall buildings. Aldon zigzagged through Valei, then led them along the sidewalk of smaller canals, over arched bridges and through secret lanes.

“Watch for a canoe,” he instructed. “We’ll need one to get inside.”

Jed swung his eyes along the canal they were following. None of the craft were worthy, half-sunken into the ebbing spirit waters. They turned a corner and there stood an edifice of silver brick. The stones of the Temple of the Dolphin shimmered despite the gloom of impending twilight. Each had been hewn from the Talon riverbed during a summer drought over a century ago. One by one each misshapen rock was polished by dedicated acolytes and placed into the four walls of the temple. The walls weren’t particularly high. The bas reliefs of dolphins jumping over the double doorway, which sat above the water, had no colour but plain, grey stone. Yet this temple remained Aldon’s favourite. Within its simplicity he felt closest to the divine. Inside, when the sun was high, the glass ceiling let the light of Solu dance over the inner walls of silver. Many hours and days he had spent here, carrying water from the Talon and pouring the bucket into the spirit cauldron at the temple’s heart.

Cal noted the fluid entrance. “I’m going to salvage a boat.” The brothers scurried off the sidewalk and started to tug on a half-submerged skiff.

Aldon paused. Caro knew he favoured this temple, and that he had done service here. If Ithaniel had recognized him on the bridge he would tell Caro. This sanctuary would no longer be safe. Saira was looking at the dolphins as though they were familiar.

“We should go,” he told her. “Caro will look here.”

Jed and Cal were heaving in futility at the prow of a sad-looking vessel. Another decrepit boat had sunk a little further down the canal, its broken oar jutting above the surface. Cal went to investigate. As Aldon watched the twisted oar lurched to life. What he thought was mangled beech wood suddenly became a black arm.

Saira screamed first. “Look out!”

Cal had already seen the danger, a long knife in his left hand. The raelisk rose quickly, its contorted body dripping with stale spirit. The grotesque creature locked eyes with Aldon. Red orbs froze him in place. Three more raelisk emerged from the low canal, gangly reptiles on two legs, dark and swift.

Jed ran past him. “Seems Valei isn’t deserted—she’s just taken on new residents. Where to?”

Aldon immediately knew. “The city center. That way!”

They ran hard. Aldon’s knees jolted with each footfall on the cobblestone. His joints ached. Fear helped him ignore the pain. To escape the raelisk they needed to get away from the water. To get high.

The bell tower stood in the north end of the main square. Tall and imposing, the giant cylinder of brick reached for the clouds. Last time he was here, hundreds of people filled this square. Diverse voices drowned any other sound. Now each step felt deafening. Aldon’s spine tingled. He felt vulnerable running across such an open space. The small, wooden door to the tower dangled on one hinge. Jed darted in first. Aldon followed.

Jed stared up. “I thought you didn’t like heights.”

Aldon remembered the narrow, railless stairs, spiralling up, up, up toward the top of the tower. Five hundred steps exactly, according to Mayor Holden. A wave of dizziness threatened his balance.

“I don’t mind the tower,” he lied. “I’ve done it before.”

Even without looking Aldon was terrified. Six years ago, the Elder at the Temple of the Dolphin had invited him for an audience. A reward, perhaps, for twenty-nine days of continuous service—sweeping, dusting, maintaining silence, lugging water. Did any of that matter now? The Divinists were corrupt, spreading lies about selwyn and the water spirits. Or maybe it was only Caro Orsen. He didn’t know who to trust.

In the Dolphin Temple he and the Elder had sat cross-legged next to the spirit cauldron. Five hours of silence. Aldon tried not to shift. His muscles ached, legs screaming at being held still for so long. He didn’t want to insult his venerable host. Finally, the Elder offered him some water from the cauldron, and asked him to find a vision. A challenge born from the dark places of the mind.

“Fear drives us to do the unholy. To overcome that which we are afraid is to swim among the water spirits. Tell me, child, what fear lurks in your heart?”

It didn’t take Aldon long to find his challenge. “Heights.”

“Speak with clarity, child. Tell me again with a brave voice.”

“Heights,” he said again, louder but no less fearful. “I do not do well in high places.”

“Much better. Darkness must have a voice. To share that voice is the first step. This allows light into the places we dare not go. Tomorrow, I want you to climb the bell tower with mayor Holden...”

Aldon found it hard to listen. He could only see that bigleaf maple. He was ten, exploring the Ivory River with his Uncle Garen. Great knots protruded from the tree where old branches had fallen, bulging eyes in the bark. While his Uncle sat quietly next to the river Aldon scrambled up the maple, past the branch stubs to the healthy boughs covered in leafy moss and dangling ferns. His excitement grew with each new foothold.

Then he looked down.

The world, so far below, swam before his eyes. He couldn't speak, not even to yell for help. Aldon stared at the distant, unreachable forest floor in terror.

He had always been a quiet boy. Many adults called him timid when they thought he wasn't listening. The forest was a place he never felt shy. Free and energized, he followed his Uncle over river-cracked boulders and across narrow logs bridging gaping chasms. Yet up in this bigleaf maple he felt far from everything safe.

His Uncle called his name, for what seemed like hours. Garen finally spotted him huddled on one of the topmost branches, back thrust against the wide trunk's knobby bark.

"It's okay, my dear boy. You got up, you can get down. One hand and foot at a time."

He refused to listen. Stubborn with fear, he sat in that tree until the sun started to set. Sprung into action by panic—the only thing worse than being trapped was being trapped in the dark—he started his long, laborious descent.

His Uncle, patient as always, coaxed him down. "Wonderful work, Aldon. There's the next branch...you've got it! Nicely done. Almost there now."

He touched the ground as the last sunray slipped behind the fresh spring canopy. Never did he climb another tree.

In Valei, standing at the bell tower's foundation, Aldon truly missed his Uncle. His gentle words, brown eyes both wise and kind, the one constant in his life. Until Caro took that away.

Aldon breathed slow, trying to steady his uneasy heart. Jed, Cal, and Saira had already scaled the first dozen steps. Anticipation, he knew, always proved the worst. He just needed to start, to get to the top. And then—he would deal with it.

The first step, rounded downward in the middle by countless feet of the past, felt easy, the stone solid. Six years ago, going up the tower with mayor Holden, Aldon kept looking down. To see how far they had come, how far they would have to go. Holden commented on his city; this palace and that lord. Aldon heard next to none, wishing there was a rail, keeping his feet from the edge and his focus on not shaking too much beneath his robes. Now, without his robes, his shaking was visible.

His friends called from above. Friends—two thieves and a selwyn. Yet they felt like siblings.

“Aldon!” It was Saira. “Hurry! The Divine Elder is coming.”

Aldon trained his eyes on the spiralling steps and ran. If Caro found them, nothing could be done. The Divine Elder would strangle them all with *hlasa*. They needed to get to the top; he needed to remember something the mayor had said. A story about an infamous burglar who escaped from the peak.

Halfway up his thighs began to protest in earnest. His muscles, tight with exertion, felt ready to snap. He pushed on. Three spirals later he stopped at a window to catch his breath. He didn't remember these bars. The narrow vista faced southeast. From this height, much of the sun's light still reached the land. The lake sparkled under

Solu. At the corner of Solas Lake his eyes caught the sight of human touch—construction, a mishmash of lumber and stone. A fortification of some kind. The mess of a wall looked unfinished. He realized in horror that someone had tried to dam the lake. But who? And why? Perhaps to maintain the water level of Solas, to hold the spirits close to Valei. Yet that would starve the water spirits from Ivory River.

Aldon continued his ascent. The steps changed, the rock brighter, the edges sharper. These stones were flat, not yet smoothed by nearly a century of ringers going up and down. Ten years ago the top of the bell tower toppled during a storm. They added crossbeams and rebuilt it taller, so it eclipsed Roan's bell tower by a few paces. Bragging rights for Mayor Holden.

From the top metal clanged against stone. His friends were at the gate. He hugged the curved wall, knowing how high he must be, refusing to glance down. The air felt colder and heavier, like invisible cloud. He hurried as fast as he could, clutching the inside of the tower, her aged bones both nicked and dulled, the larger nooks and crannies patched over with streaking plaster. The dimly lit tower brightened as he approached her pinnacle.

Jed rattled the gate. "We can't get in. It's rusted shut." Through the bars, past the final three steps Aldon saw the five enormous bells, stoic and silent.

"Let me see."

Aldon took Jed's place. The barred gate held a lock. He didn't remember the Mayor having a key. A yank on the gate only caused a clatter.

"Told you. Brilliant plan to bring us here, bellboy."

From below, far down at the foot of the tower, they heard a jangle of a different

kind.

Saira quivered. “It’s Caro.”

Aldon turned to her. “You can see him?”

“I can’t. Fenox can.”

Right. He wondered if *hlasa* was involved with delving.

Jed couldn’t keep still. “The baledog can’t help us against the royal guard. By Vedil’s shadow! What do we do now?”

Aldon went back to the door. He followed the edge to where it ran along the stone, searching, remembering. Metal and stone kept them out, but wood would allow them in.

“Give it up! There’s no...”

Jed went silent as Aldon’s hand closed over the hidden wooden latch. With a single pull the door swung inward.

Cal grinned. “He’s got a few tricks you should learn, brother.”

The five bells were arranged like a star, the grand, gold-rimmed bell its center. The name of every Valei mayor was inscribed on its elegant waist. Each of the smaller, yet still table-sized bells hung halfway out four arched windows. The east was painted with Solu, a dazzling circle with radiant hair, while blue ringed the north bell, wrapping the bronze surface with the Talon River. The west bell was white with Lhoran’s face, and the south rippled with the eternal spirit of Omnia Ocean.

With Mayor Holden, he stayed up here hours, in part to defer the long descent. Yet fear alone didn’t captivate him. Wind blew through his hair, like spirits sent down from Solu himself. The Nether Mountains, the greatest pyramids of stone in this world,

the well of all spirit, never looked so regal. Aldon felt just as tall as those snowcapped peaks.

Aldon put his hand on the cold northern bell. How long had it been silent? The four of them were trapped. Just like that tree, there was no way out but down. Instead of his Uncle, the Divine Elder and his royal guard waited at the bottom.

“Aldon! I have come for the stone.” Caro’s voice echoed up the tower, his words curling along the stairs. “Give me the spirit stone and we will leave you to this decaying city.”

Aldon trembled. For twenty-eight years he had obeyed that voice. He struggled to think clearly.

Jed was frenetic, peering down the stairwell and then over the ledge. “What stone is he talking about? That’s all we’ve got to barter with.”

Aldon looked at the bells. His mind, though not calm, found another focus. “I have another gift for him.”

Jed got the idea. “Hah! Now we’re talking.” He went to the central bell and scrambled onto the lower lip. Even so, his outstretched hands didn’t reach anywhere near the crown.

“You’ll never move that one.” Aldon went to Solu’s bell. “Caro will appreciate this bell more.”

Aldon held the bell firmly. With Cal’s help Jed jumped from the bell to the wood yoke holding it in place. “Clear the deck!”

Aldon and Cal leapt to the west side. With several swift cuts Jed cleaved the thick ropes connecting yoke to crown. The bell fell like a brick, striking the tower platform

with a short-lived bellow. Jed leaned into the bell's waist.

"I'm in a giving mood today. Time to make a delivery!"

Aldon hesitated. He didn't like to destroy, especially the sacred. How many times had this bell rung, each hour of each day, guiding thousands to wake, work and sleep? It didn't feel right.

Saira and the brothers shouldered the bell to no avail. The vein in Jed's forehead bulged with the effort. "No time to think, bellboy. Push!"

Aldon bit his tongue. He went to help but couldn't find a grip. Turning, he shoved his back against the bell and used his legs for leverage. Cal joined him.

Jed laughed. "That's it!"

With a groan the bell shifted, bronze chafing stone. They grunted and pushed until it reached the three steps before the gate, tilted down, and got lodged in the doorway.

Jed scampered around the bell. "Gotta turn it! Left. No, no—the other left."

The bell wanted to move, stuck in place like a moth in a web. Aldon could feel its need to escape, to fall and finally rest after ninety-seven years of service. He stopped, took a breath, and counted quietly to three. Cal and Saira must have heard him, for they thrust Solu's bell forward the same instant he did. The bell fell on its side and rolled awkwardly out the gate, its clapper—a long tongue inside the bell—dragged noisily on the inside lip. With a sharp turn the bell reached the edge of the spiral staircase. The lower rim fell halfway over the precipice, hit its crown, and, with one final thunderous ring, the bronze Solu plunged toward their enemies. Down it went, struck the stairwell thrice, and crashed into the foot of the tower.

Jed danced a little jig. "That's what I call a good time."

Cal peered toward the bottom. “I have feeling we’re not out of the rapids yet.”

Aldon looked to Saira. Her eyes were shut and filled with the vision of Fenox.

“Caro is outside the tower. I can’t see the guards.”

“Nice job, bellboy,” Jed said. “First order of business when dealing with a rival group—separate their leader. For your sake, I’ll try and stay alive. But Cal’s right. We’re still stuck. Let’s get another bell. Lhoran, perhaps?”

“No. There’s another way.” Aldon remembered the story. The palatial thief who ran up the bell tower, only to elude the tower guards by—

“What is it?” Jed cut in.

“Down the stairs. We’re going out the window.”

Jed stared at him, incredulous. Was that the same look he often gave Jed? Aldon didn’t linger. He led them down. The chasm of the tower’s belly loomed in his peripheral vision, yet his footing stayed firm, his fear in check. He didn’t want to be afraid, to keep living in the shadow of others. A puppet no more.

The bright and rough steps became old and dull. They reached the window through which he had spotted that outrageous dam. Light flooded the gloomy interior. Aldon inspected the window frame—he should be skinny enough. Saira put a hand on the steel bars stained gently with rust.

“Maybe I can help,” she said.

“Not this time. Caro is waiting for us to touch the spirits. I’m sure he’ll use them against us, somehow.” The thought of *hlasa* being turned on him, suffocated by spirit, brought terror into his heart. “Jed. Use your knife. The one with Vedil’s curse.”

The Trail brother obeyed. The ruby-hilted dagger sawed clean through each steel

bar in a second or two.

“How did you know my chrak could do that?”

“Anything touched by Vedil cuts sharply.”

Goose bumps ran up Aldon’s arms. He felt an imminent wind, a breeze not there before. From below, the clink of heavy armour rounded the stairs. The first royal guard of the Divine Elder came into view, his silver suit dancing with light like the ocean at sunset. The guard stopped and let his long sword rest against the stairwell. He put his shoulder against the wall, as though for a respite, looked up and spotted them under the rim of his steel helm, and renewed his ascent, charged by the proximity of his prey. His jewelled breastplate twinkled.

Jed skipped down several stairs to greet him first. “Hello there! We’ve managed to get ourselves lost in this tower. Care to show us the way out?”

The guard, heedless of the taunt, advanced with his sword gripped in both hands. Jed, seemingly oblivious to the danger, kept bouncing down the stairs. Once within range the guard thrust his blade upward. Jed hopped back.

“Not a friendly one, are you?” Jed said as he moved in closer yet again.

The guard brought his arms back, lifted them over his shoulder, and plunged his sword down. Jed leaned back to avoid the deadly attack. Except this time he darted past the guard, scurrying along the stair edge, his heels halfway over the curving precipice. The guard, with no desire to be sandwiched between enemies, brought his sword around with a might swing. Jed rolled. The blade cleaved the air above his head. The guard had expected to connect—he stumbled forward with the momentum of the swing. Unable to stop, his weighted body fell cleanly over the stairs. He dropped out of sight, plummeting

to the distant bottom. Three more guards, undeterred by their dispatched comrade, came around the staircase.

Aldon turned away before the loud crunch of metal and bone made him wince. There was no time. He climbed into the window.

The twilight city lay underneath him. The sheer drop struck him with vertigo. Vast, empty space. Nothing else separated him from certain death. Yet somehow, this was happening to someone else. Not him—he was only observing. Aldon could feel his knot of terror, his difficulty breathing, sweaty palms with shaky fingers, and a stupefying dizziness. At the same time he felt detached, a witness rather than participant.

The first support beam was to one side of the window, down and left of the lower ledge. He stepped onto the wooden pole despite his vigorous dismay, and there being room only for one foot. Another beam presented itself, and Aldon found himself walking around the tower, nothingness under his feet. When he reached the far side despair took hold. They had nowhere to go. Fear shot back into his conscious mind. His muscles twitched but his legs wouldn't move.

The bell tower had been built next to a palace—but that was too far down. Maybe he had gone out the wrong window? The thought made his stomach churn. He stretched his arms behind him, giving the tower an awkward reverse hug. Saira, Cal and Jed were balanced on precarious beams, looking on expectantly. He had to save them. Instead, he had put them at the mercy of Caro and the wind.

Holden had told him the thief leapt from here to the palace roof. But that must be ten paces down! He couldn't jump that far.

Aldon closed his eyes. He saw the Elder of the Dolphin Temple. They sat in

stillness next to the spirit cauldron. From that vision he gathered strength. The challenge lay before him, here, now, waiting to be conquered. His Uncle Garen called him out of the tree.

Slowly, he opened his eyes and jumped.

Before he knew it Aldon hit the roof. His legs protested at the impact and he fell to his knees. The pain—surprisingly little, a dull throb in his thighs—vanished as he got to his feet. He caught Saira as she landed, although she nearly knocked him flat. Cal and Jed dropped down like cats. Holding Saira's arms, he felt shakes throughout his body. He let her go.

Jed patted him on the back.

“Bravo. Honestly. I had my doubts, but you're a natural. Bellboy to the rescue! I'll take things from here. Rooftops are my jurisdiction.”

Aldon, both relieved and annoyed, followed behind. Now, in relative safety, exhaustion threatened to consume him. His knees groaned, those hinges ready to buckle. He fought against fatigue as the sun set in the west. *Solu forgive me*, he thought as languid darkness crept quietly over Valei.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The River Walker

Jed found them a path from building to building, treading atop a giant tiered puzzle. They climbed up ledges, dropped down levels, backtracked out of necessity, and—occasionally—stopped for a few minutes to listen and wait, his mind alert to the next part of this plan. His curiosity of Valei, although still piqued by hidden treasures that lay unguarded by her former denizens, shifted to survival. They had to get to the water.

He had been scared in that tower, had seen no way out. Aldon proved to be cool while he nearly panicked. If anything, he felt a need to redeem himself to his three companions.

As they skulked over the peak of a softly sloped roof, he caught the sound of his salvation. At the edge he peered down. Through murky twilight he caught supple movement that betrayed the presence of the lake. Better yet, a series of windows ran just beneath the gutter, each with a columned balustrade. Jed moved directly over top of one, next to a sprouting chimney, found a grip on that square brick pillar, and swung easily onto the rail. He went to kick at the white shutters, thought better of it, and nudged one of the louver slats with his toe. A creak as it opened inward was the shutter's only complaint.

Within his first few steps he mapped their way out. He had entered houses hundreds of times in this fashion, and knew how to diagnose each room for potential valuables and exit vicinity. These days, food and cloth were worth their weight in silver.

He rummaged through an armoire and gave Cal, Saira and Aldon each a plain long-sleeved shirt. Judging from the mildewed walls, provisions were not to be had. Three short staircases later they reached the main, barred entryway. The tall gate stood ajar, stretching two stories. Thick, red crust on the lower halves of the bars suggested decades of being submerged. A vacant channel led from the building's ground level, past the gate to the lake outside. The owners would have entered by water and docked here, where he now stood. Jed walked out the desiccated entrance and moved toward the canoe he had spotted from the rooftop.

Something moved inside the canoe. Jed pulled his chrak out, trying to discern the dark figure. The head of Fenox popped up from the belly of the boat.

“Ha! The baledog beat us to it.”

Fenox wagged his bushy black tail as Saira neared. The four of them slid the canoe into the water. Jed leapt in first and took the bow seat with the single paddle. Everyone else shared the stern. With the added weight the sides of the hull nearly dipped into Solas. He pushed them off. The canoe rocked and water slipped inside over the midship, only enough to wet their soles. He paddled smoothly, three strokes a side, until the bow settled gently among the pebbles of the northern shore.

Cal and he pulled the canoe from the lake, and all four carried the clue of their passage well ashore. They hid the boat in tangled, leafless stems of shadebush, the only cover they could find. Then Jed kept them on the move until the thin crescent moon set where the sun had also vanished.

He slept with an active mind. Raelisk flitted in between dreams of women and

unimaginable wealth. He found Fuchsia lying naked on a bed of gold coin, legs stretched over large gems reflecting her perfect white skin. Red hair curled on diamond pillows. She beckoned him forward, a fiery gleam in her eye. Jed tried to move but the raelisk entered the room first, like a spider, long arched legs reaching over the windowsill. He yelled but a whirlpool of ruby and emerald sucked Fuchsia under. Jed turned to flee but the door was gone, replaced with a curtained window. The raelisk sprung the same instant he dove out the window. He plunged into deep water. Something crashed on top of him—the raelisk, its roving eyes a deeper red under the surface. His face burned in that baleful gaze. More appeared in the water. Twisted limbs snared him, pulling Jed into darkness.

He shot awake with an abrupt intake of breath. Jed put a hand on his hot forehead. Despite his sweat he was chilled to the bone. That nightmare wouldn't leave him. It took different forms, changed setting and tone, yet every night he wrestled a raelisk underwater. He closed his eyes but the crimson stare of the realisk followed.

Jed blinked and sat up. The sun had crested the Dareth Mountains. Clouds covered the snowcapped summits, the clear sky overhead a steel blue. From lower down, in a valley between peaks where the crown of the sun rose, warm rays fell like fire on his skin. He let his face and hands thaw in the eastern heat.

He studied the grim terrain, dark and dry with scant sign of green. Cal and Saira lay back to back on the torpid earth, he realized with irritable envy. Which part bothered him most—their closeness, their warmth, their contentment—he wasn't sure. Fenox lay in Saira's arms, head nuzzled under her petite chin. He ignored them and went to Aldon, who lay awkwardly curled between bramble and a family of stone.

“Hey, water weaver,” he said, much louder than needed as he shook Aldon’s shoulder. “Rise and whine. It’s cold and wet and I’m hungry. Let’s move before I feel worse.”

Within a few minutes legs had stretched and empty stomachs growled. Jed took them toward the sun, veering slightly north. Aldon had a noticeable limp. Saira and Cal looked chipper enough. They foraged for berry and fruit along the way. Birds had picked most bushes clean. Overripe dewberries that drooped heavily from flowerless leaves or lay plumply squashed on the ground made up Jed’s breakfast.

He couldn’t erase the image: Cal and Saira beside each other, their bodies touching. Jed rubbed his eyes. What was *he* getting out of this expedition, anyway? Valei had been stripped clean, at least the easy loot. He wasn’t about to fight raelisk for buried treasure. The further they went from civilization, the more isolated he felt. Food, shelter, women, swag—his comforts were gone, soon to be replaced by the interminable daggers of the Dareth Mountains.

Aldon, despite his limp, seemed driven, a fierce light in his eyes—like the xarg: brimming with anger, looking for release. He had a purpose. What did he hope to find? Jed didn’t know. Cal and Saira had each other. That was enough for them. Meanwhile, recurrent nightmares kept Jed’s bed cold and worn. Starvation, solitude, death...he had danced with them all. But never this close. What compelled him forward? What awaited him in the northern blight?

The sun arched into the sky, fell behind cloud, and faded from sight like a gold coin dropped in the sea. The smooth, uncovered bed of the Talon opened before them, a huge furrow of rock carved bluntly by waters carried from its glacial headwater.

Wordlessly, they turned north toward barren white peaks. Fenox trotted down the silenced stream. Probably good, Jed thought, to keep an eye on the south. Despite the occasional twist, the Talon provided a direct path to Vedil's Horns, the two curved, slender columns of stone only dim shadows at this distance—maybe two days' walk. The riverbed, muddy in spots, sprouted no life but gasping grass and weeds.

Something red caught his eye. Jed had a knife in hand before the danger fully revealed itself to be a river pool. The circle of water—five or six paces across—sank deep into the bottommost bedrock. The colour gave him pause. Solid and viscous, a penetrating crimson. Sheathing his blade in his sleeve, Jed knelt beside the river pool and put his fingers into that perfect stillness. They came out stained; at once smooth and coarse, red sediment softened in water. Not at all like blood.

He wiped the tainted grains on his pant leg and continued. Every few minutes they stumbled across another pool: always deep, and a rich red. Jed threw a rock into one. The stone disappeared almost immediately, yet he had a sense of a slow, feathery descent.

They had just passed a tenth crimson pond when Jed spotted the man. Tall and solitary, he strode forth alongside the river with a brusque, resolute step. He held a regal air, although his unkempt, dirty blond hair suggested anything but royalty. Snug, earthy garb covered his torso and limbs, excepting a blue stripe that swooped from one side of his neck, across his chest, down to the opposite hip. Jed stopped short. He knew who this was. Or rather—*what* he was. Yet the great sword in the man's hand—a monstrous two-handed blade carried with complete comfort in his right hand—gave Jed pause. The steel glinted in a set of grim blue eyes.

Jed called out. “Hail, stranger!”

The man responded with a booming voice from legend, gruff and direct. “Do not walk on the river.”

“I hate to nitpick, but the river’s gone.”

The stranger’s step hurried. The sword rose. Stains ran the length of the blade’s edge. Only a dozen paces separated them now.

“Do not walk where the spirits sleep.”

Jed understood. This path was sacred, even without a current.

“Everyone move to the shore. Hurry!”

Cal, Saira and Aldon scampered to the far side. Jed, however, moved to meet the River Walker.

He knew the rumours: every Walker killed by the dark cloaks. Yet pinning down this claim was like snaring a Walker’s shadow—entirely impossible. Walkers were seen only when they wanted to be seen. They never strayed from the banks of their chosen river, and answered to no one but the oath they had sworn. As a child, Jed’s mother told him stories. Jed, always fascinated, remembered every detail: how Walkers could breathe beneath the water for hours by shifting into the currents of the river. Or the Walker who, defending his headwaters, once turned back thirty men with his sword.

Now, these tales had become truth. The Walker stopped, close enough for Jed to feel his breath. Sinewy muscle surged along his lithe frame.

The Walker spoke first. “What finds you so far north? Answer by word of truth or I will send you to the spirits.”

Jed put his weight on the front of his toes. A small, almost imperceptible

movement born from instinct. But the Walker reacted at once.

Before Jed could blink that mythical sword was pressed against his chest, and his right wrist—the one now holding the chrak—pinned by the Walker’s free hand.

“Speak your truth! Or I will silence you.”

Jed liked his mother’s stories better, the ones told in the comfort of his childhood bed. They never included orders, death threats, or a grisly beard thrust against his face. This cat proved faster than he. Jed wavered between annoyance at the Walker’s tone and admiration at his speed. In any case, he had best play along. His mother had told him Walkers, above all else, valued spirit and truth.

“My name is Jed Trail. These are my companions. The handsome fellow who takes after me is my brother Cal, the awkward one is Aldon and that’s Saira. We have come from Valei in hopes of finding answers.”

“Your words carry many meanings, although few of virtue.” The Walker stared, his cobalt gaze penetrating far deeper than Jed felt comfortable. Apparently satisfied, the Walker yanked his sword clear. Jed scrutinized the carving on the flat of the blade; from a sun near the hilt a river flowed, often in wide meanders, to the wicked tip.

“I am Kirin, who followed Taro, who followed Katal, who never left the Talon River. I grant you passage on these sacred shores. Walk in spirit.”

“Just not *on* the spirits. Thanks—I think.”

In response, Kirin turned, sheathed his sword with his back to Jed, and marched north.

Jed shrugged. If Kirin was going to ignore him, he would do the same. He stepped after the Walker, who never glanced back. Cal, Saira and Aldon moved in a

parallel fashion.

After a minute, Kirin halted, still in repose, like a tree putting down roots.

“You may cross here.”

A muddle of boulders and logs offered a path across the withered river. Jed bounded and clambered to the other side. The Walker followed, slow and deliberate, and yet somehow kept perfect pace with Jed.

“Want to tag along?”

Kirin imparted no sign of hearing the question. He examined Jed’s three companions and then settled his eyes on the Nether Mountains.

“Well then. It seems we’ve gained a sword. I hope you eat as much as you speak, because my belly is as empty as our food stores. Hello? Have it your way, then. I get the feeling you ain’t moving until we do.”

The four companions traced the contours of the Talon. Sure enough, the Walker trailed behind. For a time, no one spoke. Jed felt a stout wind, like the breath of the mountains, flee upon them from the north, as though sailing along the course of the river. Jed lingered, pretending to adjust the collar of his shirt. When Aldon passed, leaving Jed closest to the Walker, Jed addressed Kirin.

“Before now, I’ve never seen a Walker. Where are the others?”

This time, Kirin answered immediately, and without emotion. “I am the last.”

He walked on.

Jed strode alongside, fascinated. He was having a conversation with a River Walker! The *last* Walker. “Are you sure?”

“The river brothers know the presence of every other. Now, the confluence is

silent. Some of my brothers fell to raelisk, others to dark cloaks.”

“Where did you buy that sword?”

Kirin stiffened, momentarily, at the question. “River Walkers carry only that which their own hands have made. Or possessions their predecessor had no need for when they passed into the realm of spirit. We do not harbour thievery.”

Jed couldn’t hide the awe in his voice. “You forged that blade yourself?”

“From metals in the riverbed. This sword protects that from which it came.”

Jed chewed on that idea. Everything *he* owned had been plucked from someone else. Kirin, however, had crafted each article himself, right down to his undergarments.

“When did you become a Walker?”

“I have walked these shores thirteen years, since Taro returned to the currents.”

“How did you come to be the last?”

Kirin’s eyes drifted over the barren bed that was his guard, as though seeing the ghosts of the Talon. Jed thought of a shepherd still walking the fields of his departed flock. Then the Walker straightened. “I have spoken my piece for today. I will say no more.”

Kirin proved true to his word. Try as he might, Jed could coax no further sound from those sombre lips.

In that silence, he thought of his mother. His first twelve years they lived as slaves in Sharn. Growing up, she always had a bedtime story for Jed. Tales of the gods, dragons in the sea-bottom, adventures in distant lands, often involving River Walkers. At night, when Jed closed his eyes, her voice floated back to him, soft as wind on a sail. For him, those hazel eyes held only love. She tried to hide the sadness from Jed. Yet he saw

it. Sometimes, when she thought he was asleep, he watched her fold clothes and hum faintly to herself. In her eyes, something was broken. She would stop and stare at the floor for what felt like an eternity to Jed, and the heaviness of her heart pooled in those orbs. Wet tears of despair threatened to fall but never quite formed.

Then, one day, she told him their owner was his father. The man who belittled her, abused her, and crushed her spirit daily. Jed was gone within the week.

She knew his plan to flee. The night before, after his last bedtime story—how the water spirits loved everyone and everything, and would always keep them connected—Jed’s mother locked eyes firmly with him. For the first time in his life, she gave him an order he could not refuse.

“Never come back to this city. Be free. Listen to me close now: I never want to see you again. Do you understand? Never.”

He left before dawn, picking the lock to his room with a rusty nail pocketed a few days prior, and slipped past the dozing house guard. Shame chiselled his gut, a jagged blade that never dulled. To his mother, he kept his promise; in doing so, Jed left the woman he loved most to the man he hated more than death.

Walking beside Kirin, he felt a quiet kinship. They were both men of their word and lived by their own rules. At times, Jed bent those rules to his liking—yet from the age of three, he had always imagined himself a Walker.

Saira’s voice took him out of reverie.

“By Solu! What are you doing here?”

Jed peered ahead. Sitting on a large rock, with a smile nearly as wide as his round face, was a short and hairy mole of a man. Although they had never met, he realized this

could only be one person: Mad Mirran.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Song Stones

Saira's head spun with impossibilities as she ran to greet Mirran. How, what, when, why—curiosity got pushed aside as she wrapped her arms around him.

“My girl! The honour of such a greeting has been absent these many long, lonely years. Your hair is shorter and your eyes a good deal wiser. I see you've met my friend.”

“You know the Walker?”

“Three whole days! Or is this the fourth? Out here, a day with a new acquaintance is worth a year with an old friend. Saira, what stories we can share! Oh my, have my words upset you?”

Saira shook her head fiercely through blinding tears. “But the fire? I thought that you....”

Mirran's eyes lit like stars as he laughed. “Fire may take me yet from this life! But not one kindled by Caro Orsen. I still have flesh and blood, though ink and parchment has become ash. Oh! One mystery I wanted to untangle. Oh my, it's not to be. I suppose the shadestorm shall remain a riddle.”

Saira felt her stomach clench. How could she tell him of the shadestorm, knowing what she did of his wife and daughters? The truth of that riddle was too much to bear.

Mirran's bushy brow furrowed, then his eyes shot open.

“Where have my manners gone? Introductions are in order! You know Kirin. I know Aldon. Aldon! Still living outside the robes. Wise choice, if an unhealthy one.

Sometimes becoming friends with yourself makes for many enemies. These two are strangers, though not for long. They move the same. Brothers? Cousins?"

"Brothers," Saira said. "Jed and Cal."

"Ha! I had a hunch, and those seldom lie. Like a lady's intuition. Let me tell you my adventures! After the visit from the Divine Elder, I tried to follow your *daman*. I knew his paws would soon cross paths with you. Of course, the prints of a *daman* always fade a few minutes after they are made, even in fresh mud. So I decided my path led north. Why? To try and unravel the greatest mystery of our time: the tainting of the rivers. And the Talon is where it all begins."

Mirran rambled on. Saira listened fervently, her heart warm. Mirran spoke of his limp, the slow progress he made toward and past the twin lakes, and nearly being caught by Caro.

"I camped outside Valei two nights, in hopes of a meagre catch of fish. Solas Lake proved to be as dead as the city. I have lived off my garden far too many years. So, yet again, I went hungry. The third night I heard an all-too-familiar sound. At first, I thought the dreams had returned: steel shoes, heavy swords, and flames that flicker. Caro and his entourage walked right by the shadebush that was my tent. I watched those torches coalesce by the gatehouse, and then cross over into Valei. A city fit for fools, with the Talon gone dry."

"We saw him too," Saira said. "More importantly, he saw *us*."

"A shame, that. I fear he is making for the Lake of Souls. To what end, I dare not imagine. He will move slowly, with that small army and their ridiculous metal suits. I think they went into Valei looking for food. My dear, whatever is the matter?"

Saira stared at him. “Do you know how to find the Lake of Souls?”

“Of that, I’m not certain. But I do know the legends. Unless we want to take wing with a gryphawk, we best carve our own path.”

Saira wondered why so many sought the same place. She told him about yesterday, of the raelisk and the Divine Elder.

“So Caro still haunts the city? I wonder what he seeks.” Mirran glanced at Kirin. “Perhaps we should walk. That’s what River Walkers like to do, after all. And we best keep ahead. If Caro has any inkling of your plans, he will redouble his efforts.”

Saira trailed alongside the Talon with her five companions. Mirran made her feel at home, somehow. Like her father—*step*father, rather—he loved books and words and stories.

Mirran kept her ears full. “Far too cold these days for the season. Chills my bones. Kirin, the kind fellow he is, fed me these past few days. He knows cara holes and wild mountain bulbs like they grow on trees. After some weeks of tiring these old legs, their only fuel mushrooms and berries, I was about done...”

He went on. Saira heard most of what he said, his gentle voice like a whimsical lullaby. She found taking quick glances over her shoulder at Cal. Most times, he didn’t see her—or pretended not to. Last night, in the cold, they touched for the first time. Her body felt drawn to his heat. Their skin never made contact, yet even being clothed, back to back, excited her like dancing during the dawning festival. Now she felt awkward. Judging by their lack of conversation this morning, so did Cal.

As they walked, she briefly closed her eyes. Fenox, somewhere to the east, had found himself a watering hole. As he drank, her own throat felt less parched.

“Come look!” Mirran exclaimed, bringing her back to the Talon. Mirran moved as fast as his short, stubby legs would take him. “Another marvel of the Walkers!”

Curious, Saira hurried behind. Mirran stopped beside a large, red pool, its depth hidden by the thick colour. The still roundness of the river pond made her think of the harvest moon.

She looked to Mirran. “Kirin did this?”

“Yes! Best of all, he did it with rocks, plain as a pimple.”

“Why?”

The Walker overheard, stood very tall next to them, and offered his answer. Jed crept close to listen, more rapt than Mirran, like a child with his favourite teacher.

“Red water is safe water. The spirit stalkers—what you know as raelisk—steal spirit to elude mortality. Their bodies possess so much *hlasa* that they become invisible when surrounded by the sacred currents. They use river pools as caves, a place to remain hidden and ambush unsuspecting prey.

“Usually, there are not so many pools to tend. But with the river gone dry so fast...” At this his voice changed, more sombre, something proud turned sorrowful.

“Spirit stalkers will be seen in swifter currents. Thus they prefer stagnant water, like this pool, where the current is trapped. The soul of a stalker is also trapped, held prisoner by the very immortality they hold so precious. I use Solu stones to steal their camouflage. Like so.”

Kirin pulled two squarish, maroon rocks with rough edges from a pocket. With a firm grip, he rubbed one against the other, as though sharpening a blade. The scrape of rock on rock formed a fine sand that tumbled softly onto a flat stone slab underneath.

After a minute, he scooped the powder into his palms, whispered to the spirits in hushed tones, asking their permission to add stone to their waters, and let the Solu dust fall into the pool.

At first, the red sat like tiny crumbs on the surface. Kirin watched, his silent, liquid eyes holding secrets he did not speak. The sand shifted, curving and delineating into a spiral that bloomed outward. The pool deepened and danced into life, a whirlpool of spirit. She felt a brief surge of *hlasa*. Her sunstone burned in her pocket. Then the waters calmed, leaving an opaque, crimson tranquility. Saira didn't feel *hlasa* pass between the Walker and the water; something else connected Kirin to the river.

Wordlessly, Kirin wiped the residual grains from his hands and continued their northern trek. Mirran laughed and pointed at the pool.

"Ah, what wonders there are to be found, even in a simple stone! This pool will stay red for weeks. But enough of the outside world. Saira, tell me where your feet have taken you, the tales *you* have made."

For the next five days and nights, Saira told the stories she remembered, and—with some encouragement from Mirran—the ones she couldn't at first recall. Being kidnapped by the Untainted, meeting Quava and the baby being born, the gryphawks chasing them to Quasaria, Saira's aunt and the truth of her parents, her brother being one of the dark cloaks, the magnificent watergroves and deadly xarg, reuniting with Aldon, Cal and Jed, and finally their time in Valei.

Mirran exhausted her with stories. She liked to listen; he just didn't know when to stop. Her reprieve? The times Mirran walked with the Walker. Those two shared wisdom and occasional wit. They looked an odd pair: tall and short, slender and stout,

the Walker almost part of the land, Mad Mirran with his clumsy shuffle. She adored their friendship, the long silences that never felt awkward, their unspoken mutual respect. Cal and she, on the other hand, hardly spoke, an enduring silence that felt anything but comfortable.

As they drew ever closer to Vedit's Horns, those narrow towers of rock like two claws reaching from the earth, the pain in her gut twisted into tight knots; not borne of hunger—Kirin and Fenox kept them all nourished—but of tragedy and truth. Saira's secret hounded her. For Mirran's sake, she had omitted the shadestorm from her tales. The more she thought about it, the sicker she felt. To not tell was a lie. Even if she wanted to spare Mirran his grief, she could not keep that terrible mystery hidden from the one person who deserved most to know.

So she determined, on this day, the sky an icy blue, to disclose the gap in her story. Somehow, knowing she would tell him made everything worse. She found reasons to be distracted. Nausea rose higher and higher, puddling at the back of her throat. For what must have been the tenth time this morning she went to tell Mirran. This time, *he* was the one preoccupied.

The river was singing.

The songs were shaped by stone, the images carved in the riverbed. They sang of the moon and sun, of water and spirit. Not with words, but in the silent voice of legend and myth.

Mirran clasped his hands together. "I have only heard rumour of the song stones! Never did I dream to lay eyes upon them."

Without its current, the Talon could not hide the stone carvings. Chiselled in the

river rock, well-smoothed by spirit, were sculptors of symbols and gods. She saw an enormous sun, its rays depicted as hundreds of lotus-petalled Oriane flowers curling down the riverbed. Further up the moon was carved, again and again, all twelve phases, ending with the full circle. In this moment, Saira felt very small, like bearing witness to the birth of the spirits. Aldon crossed his arms on his chest and bent his head, bowing to the divine. There were animals too, meticulous in form, great birds of prey and snow panthers of the Nether Mountains.

Mirran rushed excitedly over to Kirin. Saira half expected him to pull on the Walker's sleeve and plead for the story of the song stones.

Kirin gazed upon the carvings in sorrowful reverence, perhaps unsettled at being able to see these sacred motifs meant to remain hidden beneath the raging currents of the Talon.

"These are sentinels of the river, guardians that bless the spirits. All the waters that flow south from here, to Valei and beyond, carry the blessings of these carvings. Fertility for crops, strength for men, wisdom for the wise. These were carved before the time of Walkers, during the great drought in the Age of Dragons. Since then, the spirits have brought goodness and health to the peoples of Rivaria. Now, with the tainting of the Talon, their songs go unheard."

They walked in relative quiet, Mirran offering occasional commentary. "Cattle and chicken! Must be to bless the livestock. The next one there. See the seventeen men and women in a circle? Part of an ancient rain ritual. And here's another sun, and those look like...raelisk."

He was right. Half the face of Solu was carved in the river rock, spanning the

broadness of the Talon. On the other side were long-limbed, human-like forms with four sets of claws, their mouths open in surprise and eyes wide with terror. They appeared to be fleeing north from the sun.

Mirran squinted. “That almost looks to be a barrier. What story do these stones tell, Kirin?”

“This was intended to keep the spirit stalkers in the mountains. Any raelisk wanting to pass southward would have to move over the face of Solu. None of the cursed would dare cross such a stone. Yet the raelisk have found other paths to the Twin Lakes.”

Saira peered closer. There were cracks in the sun carving, deep clefts of missing stone. Did the River Walker know how far south the raelisk had spread?

Vedil’s Horns protruded into the sky, only hours away. The rolling plains spiralled and arched into patchy hills. They had now passed into the kingdom of the cursed. She knew what needed to be done.

“Mirran? Can we walk, just the two of us?”

“Why, of course, my dear! But aren’t we already doing that?”

“Yes...” she started to say, but her voice escaped her.

“You looked like my wife just then! All nervous when she had something big to tell me. *You’re going to be a father, Mirran!*”

“It’s about the shadestorm,” she blurted.

Mirran looked at Saira, quizzical, and waited.

“We found the shadestorm the day of the new moon, just as you said. I know you told Aldon and I about the dangers of the Lorellien Plains. I forgot. The four of us were

being chased by gryphawks. We had no choice but to go inside.”

Mirran’s eager and earnest countenance nearly broke her heart. She kept going.

“Giant moleworms are what create the shadestorm. They spit ash into the sky, like roving volcanoes. In that shadowy dome, black fog so thick you can’t see your own hands, they capture their prey.” She cringed at her last word. “The new moon makes the night even darker.”

Mirran suddenly looked very cold. “How did you survive?”

“Jed cut a door for each of us into the moleworm cocoons. We slept inside until daybreak. The storm had passed. That’s when we witnessed the miracle of the shadestorm. The moleworms morphed into butterflies with huge wings coloured like white cloud in the sky. Those wings of magic floated on the breeze, carried to faraway places.”

Saira left her tale there. Mirran had shrunk away. Not from her, exactly, but from the memory. How many countless times, she wondered, had he imagined the death of his daughters and wife? How many different ways had he seen it happen? Now those nightmares could solidify into something so horrendous Saira questioned whether she had made the right choice. Had she told Mirran for his sake? Or hers?

Mirran kept silent with his sorrow. Saira didn’t know what to say. They passed another elaborate song stone, a long bridge that slithered toward a mountaintop lake. Mirran didn’t give the carving a second glance. Saira studied the sculptured rock, curious. The bridge had no supports, hanging freely as though held only by air. Jed asked Kirin about it. The Walker only shook his head.

The great mountains loomed. A mosaic of earth tones undulated along the

horizon. Dozens of Nether peaks fenced off the northern sky, noble spires of rock thrust up from dark places, the highest summited by perfect crowns of snow.

Saira had never witnessed the mountains of old. She felt small, like candle flame to the sun. These towers of unfathomable rock is the place her mother had sought. Now, it held Saira's destiny.

The riverbed became treacherous. The Talon snaked violently, its invisible waters determined to follow the deepest furrows of the land. Saira helped Mirran over the difficult earth. Vedit's Horns stretched so high the sun blinded her vision from the pair of sharp-toothed pinnacles. Between those horns the river ran, its sterile bed climbing a cliff thirty paces tall. A naked waterfall. Swords of stone covered the rock face, jagged and hooked despite the softening touch of spirit. Each blade stabbed downward, an impenetrable fortress.

Kirin, in front, stopped to survey this obstacle.

"Dagger falls."

Jed scurried to the base and, after a brief upward glance, pulled some rope from his pack. "Cal, let's tie and tack."

Cal fished out his own lengths of rope, and they knotted three pieces into one. Jed tied the rope around his waist; Cal did the same with the other end. Then the brothers went to work.

Jed and Cal spread out like wolves circling prey. The width of the waterfall matched its perilous height; when the rope between them went taut, they were still both within the body of the forgotten falls. The Trail brothers, with no intention of finding a circuitous path, opted for a direct ascent. They began apart, each blazing their own path

up the precipice.

At first, Saira didn't understand. Why climb separately? Then Cal called to his brother. Jed stopped, muttered something about beginner's luck, and hurried back down. Then he proceeded to trace Cal's hand- and footholds. When he reached his brother, Jed wrapped a length of rope around a sturdy blade of rock, after which Cal went up several paces, tied his rope, and waited for Jed. Cal always went first; a reward, Saira figured, for discerning the surest course from the bottom. In this fashion, the waterfall was slowly but surely conquered, although Jed cursed a few times, shook his hand, and thrust a bleeding finger into his mouth.

They disappeared over the apex of the falls. A minute later, Jed tossed the rope down. "Might as well have a look. But you ain't gonna like what you see!"

Aldon went next. He had to climb a bit to grab the swinging end of the rope. Confident in each step, he showed no hesitation. How different, she thought, than the first rock face he had scaled outside Baronstoke. Even Mirran managed, with Kirin's help—and the three men heaving above—to attain the waterless summit.

Dagger Falls loomed over Saira, a huge claw at the foot of the mountain. A full riverbed would suspend this path in cascades of mist. Now, she climbed in relative ease. After catching her breath, she despaired at the course before them.

They stood in a hollow pool where spirits once frothed. A few pockets of water remained, home to brittle lichen and scattered moss. Another barren waterfall stretched to the sky, higher, it seemed, than the ominous peaks behind. She saw only one option: a cave to the right, a black hole in the earth.

Saira and her five companions stopped at this threshold of shadow and stone.

When the Talon carried a current, the waters ran both over Dagger Falls and down this wide tunnel into the humid belly of the cave. Jed found a suitable rock and threw it into the plunging darkness. The fist-sized stone fell down, down, down before making a loud but distant splash. Rippling water echoed faintly.

“That’s farther down than we just climbed up.”

Mirran glanced from Jed to the cave. “The river labyrinth is meant to keep people out.” Then he turned his eyes to Saira, and his voice became low.

“What you told me before, about the shadestorm...I always wanted to know. Even if the answer carried great sorrow. My pain goes deeper than bone. But that’s *my* pain to bear. Do not take on the burdens of others, Saira. One set of shoulders can only carry so much. It takes courage to speak the truths people don’t want to hear. For me, a part of my soul can now rest.”

Saira looked into the gentle well of his eyes and fought back tears. She tried to think of something to say. Somehow silence seemed most fitting.

A noise made her turn. Jed ran toward the mouth of the cave. Cal shouted but he was too late. Jed leapt between those midnight jaws. She watched in horror as the shadow of the mountain swallowed his body whole.

Chapter Thirty-Four

River Labyrinth

The black water felt like shards of ice. Jed's legs sliced into that frigid stillness. Then he spread his arms and legs, hoping to slow his descent.

He could not go back. Something in this mountain called to him, like the singing of the gods. Never had a path been so clear, not since the path *from* his father. He had to find a way, *his* way.

Voices called after him. His brother. He realized, with a start, that his head was still above the surface of the cavernous pool. In fact, something pushed the weight of his body up. He barely had to tread to stay afloat.

Aldon, he remembered, had said something about spirit and speed: swift water carried more magic. Jed swam with countless spirits, and his heart glowed. He tried to look up but there was no light.

"*Jed!*" His brother's voice, a faint and fearful whisper, cried out like the gentle wail of a lost child.

"Come on in, Cal. The water's fine!"

For some time, there was no response. He searched for the pool's edge. Mirran called down before Jed found anything solid for his limbs.

"The labyrinth has one beginning and one end." The old man's words echoed over each other. His gravelly voice rumbled as though the mountain were speaking to Jed. "All can find the entrance. Few reach the center. You will be tested four times, once by each element. Fire, wind, earth and wood. Do not turn back! Always go forth."

“What do you mean by—” Jed’s response was cut short. To his left, something submerged from the pool. Jed clenched the chrak in his right hand. He saw the raelisk from his nightmares, ragged forearms like a hinged saw. Those toothed limbs flailed towards him. Although he couldn’t see his enemy, the sound clearly moved closer. In dark water, the raelisk held every advantage.

“By Solu! I can’t see a thing.”

That was Cal’s voice!

Jed tried to see his face. “What in Vedil’s name are you doing here?”

“Good question. To be a slave, is to have routine. To be free, is to have risk. Remember? That’s the first thing you ever said to me. I will risk the darkness with you, my brother.”

Although no one could see it, Jed smiled.

“What’s in this water, anyway? It feels alive.”

“Nothing you can put your finger on. I still haven’t found the edge, and I’m cold as winter ice. What are the others going to do?”

In response, another splash muddled the pool. A minute later, Saira joined them as well.

“Two’s company...” Jed muttered.

“And three’s a crowd. Remember? Not the first thing you ever said to me, but far more often.”

“Four elements. Four of us.” Aldon’s voice, firm and resolute. “I wonder what steals the light?”

And then Jed could see. He snapped his eyes shut. The light burned. His eyes

adjusted from the pitch dark, and he squinted carefully at Saira's face. She held the sunstone above the surface of the water, the same stone he had lifted from her pocket ever so long ago. His eyes still stung, yet the stone provided little more than candlelight. The wide, surrounding walls gleamed with wetness. Stalactites hung like fangs from the cavern ceiling.

"Mirran is staying behind," Saira explained. "Kirin too. He said the waters from here to Solas are under his keep. He won't abandon his guard."

"Not much left to guard."

"Kirin also said beware the spirit stalkers. That this is the hole from which they have escaped the Nethers."

Jed's spine tingled. He really thought Cal had been a raelisk.

"I found the way in!" Aldon seemed to get taller as he emerged from the water onto a cylinder-shaped channel. The others followed. Jed didn't feel any warmer *out* of the water. His leaden clothes clung to him like leeches.

Aldon stood at the entrance to the labyrinth. The path lay perfectly flat, ten paces across, curving on either side into two vertical walls.

Jed glanced at Aldon. "You want to spearhead this one? No? I understand. Cal, watch the rear. I'm taking us in."

The four walked into the river labyrinth. Sodden feet squished dully on the smooth floor. Jed expected trouble, yet the straight path presented no obstacles, no choices. The fuzzy glow from Saira's stone stretched surprisingly far. The passage turned abruptly to the left. As they continued, Jed sensed a vague bend in the path, as though they were being led in a circle.

“Jed?” Aldon kept his voice low, yet it echoed well down the corridor. “Do you think this is usually filled with water?”

“If it is, that’s one element we don’t have to worry about.”

“Mirran said nothing about water being one of the four. Water is spirit, and spirit connects all elements into one.”

“Don’t get Divinist on me. Just keep your eyes open.”

For a long time, they walked along the faultless corridor. No dirt, no dents, no sign of anyone ever passing before. Even the high ceiling appeared precisely level. Jed was sure they had gone in one enormous circle when, inexplicably, the stone tunnel turned left. If there was a center, they were farther from it.

“Hold up.”

Jed put up one hand, and the other to his ear. “Cal, do you hear that?”

Saira looked confused. “I don’t hear anything.”

Jed shushed her. “Cal?”

“Yes. Something is in the air.”

Jed strained to listen. The howl, louder before, had softened to a quiet hum, like the tail end of a sunwolf’s cry. Then the wolf raised her head again, and thunder howled from her jaws. Except as it neared the howls separated into distinct voices, each carried in the flooding air.

“It’s coming!” Cal cried, his voice buried by the explosion of wind.

Jed’s hair was blown straight back from his head. He had to shield his eyes to keep them open. Saira and Aldon had fallen on all fours. Although he could not hear his own voice, he shouted “Brace yourselves!” just as the wind spirits slammed into them.

Jed was thrown from his feet. He landed hard, on his side, and twisted over. Spiralling white rays rushed past. They coiled together, dozens of them, forming a braid of spirit. He didn't move, mesmerized into stillness. And then they were gone. That flash of brilliance disappeared and stole the light. The air felt heavy with water, his dry face wet again, like the clean sweat of morning dew. His mom had always told him dew was the tears of the spirits.

Jed got to his feet, bruised but not broken. The black was absolute. "Anyone there?"

Cal and Aldon answered first, then Saira. "I'm all right," she said. "But the sunstone flew from my hand."

"Let's find it." Jed reached over the floor with his hands. "One down, three to go. That element was easier than eating dragonfruit pie."

Saira found the sunstone. Or perhaps the stone found *her*. When the light agreed with his eyes, Jed discovered the next challenge lay before them: a perfect red circle. The circle sat a few paces ahead, filling the floor of the corridor with vibrant scarlet, too large to jump or scurry around. The solid colour shone under the sunstone's light.

"Ideas, anyone? Aldon, what about that book of yours?"

"I gave it to Mirran for safekeeping. But the red circle emblem belongs to the Singers of the Flame."

"Fire, eh? Well, if you can't go under it, can't go around it..."

Jed pulled a dagger and tossed it onto the first circle of four. The blade somersaulted across the floor, never actually marked the polished surface, and came to rest near one edge.

“Seems safe enough. Mirran said to go forward, and forward only. Here goes!”

He stepped just inside the circumference. Nothing happened. He brought his other foot in, so Jed stood entirely in the scarlet circle, and held his breath. The circle didn't respond. Pace after pace, he slowly crossed the fire disc, which felt no different from the rest of the floor. He reached the far end, stepped outside, and peered ahead.

“There's another circle here...”

“Jed?” It was Aldon. “You forgot your knife.”

He turned and instinctively went to retrieve his dagger. As soon as his foot touched the scarlet surface flame erupted from below. The blue fire, hot enough to melt metal into a silver pool, filled the entire circle with its impenetrable flame. Jed felt heat sear his skin. Lucky for him, it wasn't the circle he was standing in that gushed fire like a rising waterfall. Rather, the fire circle that was now *behind* him roared with an electric blue inferno.

Jed jumped back. As his foot lifted off the first circle, the second went cold.

“I have to say, I prefer the wind spirits. Consider my dagger a sacrifice to the Singers of the Flame. I have an idea about these circles. Cal? Get everyone to step well back from the rim of the first circle. I'm going to cross the second. It might get hot in here.”

He steeled himself and marched toward the next scarlet disc. With eyes closed, he stepped onto the red. Fire shot up, this time from the first circle; once again, the one that was behind. When he got across, and the smokeless fire vanished, Jed turned and cupped his hands over his mouth.

“Listen up! You need to cross both circles, *one at a time*. Never step backward.

Got that?”

“Good work, brother! Aldon’s coming next.”

One by one the others crossed, the first circle lighting up as soon as they touched the second.

Jed slapped Cal on the back. “Halfway there already! I don’t know who set this labyrinth up. But if they don’t want people to get in, they might install a few trapdoors or guillotines.”

“Don’t count your moleworms before they hatch. Lead on.”

Jed kept them moving quickly, confident now that they could conquer the labyrinth. What was left now? Earth and wood? After fire, how bad could they be?

The curving corridor twisted back on itself, first to the left, then the right. Abruptly they reached a crossroads—or so he thought. Four symmetrical openings in the wall, two on the left, two on the right, appeared to be branching passageways. On closer inspection they proved to be small alcoves, each with barely room for a single person. Jed put his hand on the smooth interior wall.

“These were put here intentionally. What are they for?”

Cal looked the alcove up and down. “I hope they don’t do anything.”

“I have a feeling everything in here has a purpose. Let’s not wait to find out.”

Jed started again, but paused a dozen paces later at a familiar sound. The river labyrinth was howling. A breeze soon tickled his ears.

“Lock arms this time! I’d rather keep my feet on solid ground. Saira, hold onto your sunstone! Here they come...”

The wind picked up. The four of them locked elbows and braced their backs

against one wall. Jed closed his eyes and waited. A terrifying idea suddenly bolted him into action.

“Go back!”

Aldon looked at him strangely. “What?”

“Go back! *Now!*”

“We’re not supposed to—”

Jed ran back, pulling everyone with him. He had no time to argue. The opposing wind made his legs feel as though they were running through water. Along with the spirits of the air he could feel the rising heat: hot, hungry and on the hunt.

He shoved Aldon into the first alcove. Cal had already taken shelter. Jed helped Saira reach the third and then sprinted toward the fourth and final sanctuary. Everything moved in slow time, his motion stunted by the furious gale shooting past. That windstorm also carried another element. Down the dark corridor, he could see the coils of spirit soaring towards him, shimmering white that brought a blue brighter than the sky.

His feet began to lift off the floor. Still five paces away, Jed vaulted himself ahead, angling his jump so the spirited wind flew him into the last alcove.

A torrent of flame rushed by, a wall of electric blue. The river of fire filled the passage from floor to ceiling. The occasional tongue of flame licked inside the alcove. Yet an invisible barrier kept him safe. The wind spirits had reached the scarlet circles, united with the red element, and forged a firestorm far deadlier a threat than solitary wind or flame. In union, those elements took on a far greater power.

The fiery tempest departed as easily as it arrived. Jed stepped into the main corridor of the labyrinth. He realized they were in trouble. Because if each element

added its destructive force to the previous, by the time they reached the third and fourth elements all bets were off.

He didn't say anything to the others. He didn't have to. Jed led onward with a determined step—yet not too fast. Sure enough, after the labyrinth turned back on itself thrice more, a set of alcoves appeared again. This time, they waited inside the alcoves for the howl of the firestorm to pass. In Jed's mind, the timing of the wind spirits was consistent. To survive, they needed to keep an even pace.

In silence, they walked a half circle, back another half circle, then back again a quarter circle. The switchbacks came quicker now. Nervous sweat ran down his temples. The frigid pool before the labyrinth entrance felt like a luxury now. He knew the next set of alcoves should appear soon. Instead, the third element blocked the entire passage.

Roots hung from the ceiling, dangling like copper tentacles. Others sprang from the floor, thicker than Jed's legs. They shifted every few seconds, like living stalagmites and stalactites, sometimes attaching to neighbouring roots, or separating into single wooden vines. The roots stretched far enough down the passage to block his vision. Jed touched the supple wood. Smooth as arbutus, soft as leaf.

"I think we can fit through here," he said, pointing between two of the largest roots. "Anyway, we have no choice—and no time."

Saira nodded, and Jed entered the third element. His body squeezed through the fat vines of wood. The fit was tight, yet the roots, in slow, tree-like fashion, moved to accommodate him. He zigzagged through, following the widest passage. The light from Saira's sunstone had trouble reaching around the tangle of roots. The resultant shadows crept over the underground stems, turning them a sinister charcoal colour. Jed felt a stab

of fear. Yet he could see now a clear corridor ahead.

At that moment, the sunwolf raised her head. As though beneath a full moon, she howled with all her strength.

Jed's body tensed. He pushed through. The end was in sight; he had to get out of this mess of roots and to safety. Yet the roots closed in. The more he grappled with his arms, the more snared he became, caught in a web of wood. As he tried to pull the writhing wood off his muscles tightened—so too did the roots, until he might as well be wrestling with solid steel. The roots lifted and turned his body. He was trapped. His head swam with fear.

Something grabbed his ankle, clutched his clothes, tried to pull him down.

“Jed! It's Saira!”

He stopped his struggle to listen. He couldn't see, his face covered by silky roots.

“Calm your mind and they'll let you go.”

What did she mean, calm his mind? The firestorm would consume them all!

“Relax!” Saira said. “Imagine the roots releasing you, and they will. Struggle, and they pull tighter.”

He didn't understand. But nothing else worked. Jed tried to think of something pleasant, a soft bed of goose down, the warm body of a lover. He let his muscles relax. The roots loosened in turn, unravelling the knot they had formed around him. He was free! Taking Saira's hand, he took her through to the other side. Cal and Aldon also appeared. The howling of the wind spirits bellowed behind them, burning blue fire. He spotted the next alcove tetrad and raced ahead, scarcely reaching shelter before the currents of wind and flame fled past.

When the tempest had gone, Jed stuck out his head. The spirit fire had left the roots untouched.

“I guess friendly fire doesn’t hurt.”

Jed glanced at his companions. Saira had one hand over her face. Was she crying? Cal tried to console her. Aldon, wide-eyed and short of breath, looked as though he had just woken from a bad dream. They had fought the labyrinth for hours, exhausted, stressed, and not a crumb of food remained. He needed to get them out.

“Just a little farther. The center is near. I’ll get us there.”

Jed wanted to believe that. He continued down the passage, trying to keep things light. He joked about new moons and giant butterflies, bell towers dropped on the head of the Divine Elder, with nary a chuckle in response. Everyone was tired. When you were tired, you made stupid mistakes. In here, you would not live to remember a single wrong step.

The labyrinth stretched on, interminable, a journey of stamina. The firestorm struck like clockwork. Always, four alcoves waited for them.

Cal called from behind. “Hey, Jed! You missed something.”

Jed hesitated, then went back. As the alcoves demonstrated, something ignored could prove disastrous.

“What is it?”

Standing next to the glow of Saira’s stone, Cal peered into a dark opening.

“Maybe a way out...”

Jed followed his brother’s gaze into the large crevice in the wall. Unlike the labyrinth, this pathway was cramped, twisted and rough-edged. Water trickled from the

fissure onto the polished labyrinth floor.

He shook his head. “I’m not going to cheat this one. Let’s finish what we started. Anyway, I don’t like the looks of this—”

The raelisk appeared out of nowhere. Jed planted his feet and brandished his chrak. The creature came from rock, as though a human-sized shard of stone had splintered off and taken the form of a raelisk. Kirin had said they could camouflage. Its arsenic body glistened with water. Jed lunged with his knife but the raelisk’s reach proved greater. Forced back, he and Cal fought to keep the raelisk at bay. They quickly lost ground. More creatures flew from the opening like bees from a disturbed hive. Ten, twenty—he lost count.

“Run!” he screamed.

Jed knew raelisk could not survive outside that crevice. But for how long?

The labyrinth turned. The clicking gallop of the raelisk followed behind. Aldon had paused at the next set of alcoves.

Jed shoved him forward. “Don’t stop!”

They needed to reach the *next* alcove tetrad. The raelisk were slowed by jagged claws that found little purchase on such even terrain. If they ran fast enough, and timed things just right, the alcoves would shield *them* from the firestorm and reduce the raelisk to ash.

Saira, at the front, skidded to a halt.

“Keep moving!”

She turned to face him. The despair in her eyes froze Jed’s heart. “There’s no way out!”

She was right. The corridor simply stopped. After all that, this was the end? Jed could not believe it. Had they missed something? A sign, a clue, another passage?

The carmine eyes of the raelisk appeared first, sunken sockets in burnt red orbs. Dozens appeared, casting a crimson glow through the corridor. Aldon pushed against the wall in futility. The stone did not budge. Then he moved his hand to the wall on the right. The russet brown colour differed from the dark sleek stone. Aldon managed to press his fingers *into* the wall. “This feels strange,” he said, and then proceeded to walk straight through.

“We’ve reached the center!” Jed exclaimed, and leapt after Aldon.

His body plunged into liquid earth. Warm, viscid mud oozed over his limbs. Although wet dirt plugged every pore, he could still breathe. He smelled loose soil, minerals mixed with decay. Soon his buried body transitioned to gritty sand, sharp and coarse, scratching his skin. Where was he being taken? He moved forward without thinking, without wanting, into granular silt. The fine sediment hardened into clay, a tenacious syrup so thick and clammy his body froze in place.

He saw red. Only red. Was this the end? Deep underground, suspended in terra cotta, forever a part of the earth? But he wasn’t ready. He needed to live.

The clay cracked like shattered glass. Fractured pieces fell away, huge clumps of sediment followed by the smallest grains, leaving a fine ochre dust. He wiped his shirt clean and looked up.

The final stretch of labyrinth lay before him. The straight corridor, walled by earth, led to a silver column. Radiance and joy burst forth from that column, a perfect light, like sun shone through a diamond.

Cal, Saira and Aldon stood next to him, exhausted from what came before and captivated by the prize ahead. His brother glanced back at the elastic wall.

“You think the raelisk can get through?”

“I think they would be here by now.”

The others waited, expectant. Jed, with a sense of pride—*he*, after all, had got them here—took his first step toward the light.

“Last one there is gryphawk food!” he said and promptly sank to his waist.

Jed tried to claw his way out. Only with Cal’s hand did he regain his original footing. His dignity spoilt, he tried to brush off the dirt. This time, the earth glued to his pants like honey to fur.

“What a mess. Haven’t these spirits had enough fun?”

Aldon ignored him, transfixed by the column of light. His eyes burned with quiet excitement.

“Care to share what’s on your mind, water weaver?”

“This is the final test.” Aldon took a step forward. His voice sounded very distant. “A labyrinth is not a maze, but a path to wisdom. Only those on a journey of the heart can earn the light of wisdom.”

Jed frowned. He’d rather dodge firestorms than wrestle with his soul. What happened to those not so pure of heart?

“Any hints for us lesser mortals?”

Aldon didn’t respond. He smiled, hypnotized by the light. With his head high he strode forth with purpose. Like a water strider over a pond Aldon crossed the impossible.

Saira followed next, her face holding tears rather than joy. Once again her feet

passed where Jed had fallen.

Cal looked to Jed. “Can you feel that?”

“Feel what? Something has changed here. If they can do it, why can’t I?”

He stepped in the imprint of Saira’s foot and sunk to his ankle.

“Listen,” Cal said. “Not to me. To the spirits. It feels as though they are calling me forth.”

Jed knew what Cal meant. The nagging of his conscience, the stirring of murky memories. He didn’t want to go there.

Cal moved off toward the silver column. Jed watched his brother go in a slow, measured pace, leaving him behind. Fear clutched his heart. Not his fear—his mother’s. Alone with his thoughts, Jed had no choice but to face the enemy within, the greatest challenger.

I only did what she asked of me.

All these years, that rationale allayed his guilt. No longer. He saw his broken mother, trapped with the man he refused to call father. Jed had never gone back. Not because of his mother’s orders. But because he was afraid. Afraid of what he would find. His mother still alive, still in pain, the depths of sorrow seen in her eyes when she thought he wasn’t looking.

That helpless feeling returned—a child who cannot correct a great wrong—and untamed anger, ardent and wild. Molten fire charged through his blood, hot and coursing. His fluid fingers pulsed. Except this time Jed’s anger passed through him, a great ocean swell that smashed into the beach and then receded to leave the shore calm. Without his rage he felt empty, numb. Slowly, like the incoming tide, sadness crept between the dark

crevices.

I left her in his hands.

His freedom had come at a cost. Tears threatened to fall, tears he had never allowed. They welled in the corner of his eyes, pockets of grief coming to light. Jed didn't know what or why or how to do this. Before, he had always fought against his sorrow, quarrelled with tears until they retreated. To accept them was to somehow grant victory to his father, to admit the pain of Jed's past. He wanted to pretend that away. Try as he might, he could never completely bury his truth.

Now, he didn't fight the tears. The light grew brighter. Jed's wet eyes, transfixed by the silver column, didn't stray from that vision as he stepped closer and closer to the center. Where the others had gone he did not know. All he could see was light, perfect and full.

Over spirit and earth he walked, grounded to himself. The column, a steady waterfall with no mist, moved to his beat, not further or nearer but in harmony with his heart. How small it looked from a distance, yet now filled the entire cavern with white water that tumbled both up and down.

Jed reached his hand toward the core of truth and fell into light.

Chapter Thirty-Five

The Great Circle

Aldon could not see. White filled his vision. Fuzzy pinpoints of black, as though the night sky had inverted colours, folded out into the shape of the cavern. Someone else was here, an unseen presence. Although the bursting light struck him blind, it did not burn. Rather, the fading white glow fell upon him like the rays of Solu: warm and nourishing.

The ghosts of white flitted away and all went dark, scant few seconds separating midday from midnight. A voice spoke from the shadows of the mountain.

“Welcome.”

Aldon tried to make out the speaker. He sounded friendly enough. A new light dawned from Saira’s sunstone. The brothers were here as well, in this small cave with no exit. A man sat cross-legged before them, wreathed in a brown cloak.

“For as long as I have sat here, none have come through the river labyrinth. This is a day to remember.”

Aldon gazed upon the man in shock. The short black hair, crinkled forehead and full beard that fell from his chin. Here, in the bowels of the Nether Mountains, he had found his Uncle.

“Uncle Garen!”

The man jerked his head up in surprise, white eyes landing squarely on Aldon.

“Aldon? Is it truly you that comes before me now?”

Aldon’s voice quivered. “I am here. I am with you.”

Garen rose to his feet stiffly, a short staff in one hand. “Come forth. Let me feel your arms.”

His every muscle trembled as Aldon went to his Uncle and placed his arms around those robes. “I thought you had returned to the water spirits.”

“No, my son. I simply returned home.”

Aldon closed his eyes and put his head over Garen’s shoulder. His body shook.

“My dear boy. This is a moment of joy. Let it move through you.”

When he pulled away, Aldon couldn’t help but laugh. “I don’t believe it. All this time, Caro was wrong!”

“More than you know. I am sorry that I could not bring you. Had I tried, Caro would surely have killed us both. Only with the help of friends did I manage escape. And now you are here. I could ask for no greater gift.”

Jed stepped forward and cleared his throat. “Sorry to interrupt this family reunion. But can you tell us where *here* is exactly?”

“Why, you have come to Circlehaven, home of the Order. Aldon, it seems you have arrived with friends of your own. I count three.”

“Three came through the labyrinth. Two were left behind. This is Jed Trail and his brother Cal.”

Garen reached out a sinewy arm and shook each hand in turn. “Who bears the light?”

Aldon, startled at his Uncle’s ability to see without sight, looked with wonder from the sunstone to Garen. Many times his Uncle, using the subtler senses, perceived more than Aldon’s eyes.

“This is Saira. We met at a water temple south of Baronstoke. We have been through—”

“By Solu! Did you say *Saira*? What miracles the spirits provide! I am sorry, Aldon, to interrupt. Perhaps you have better manners than I. It is wonderful to see you again. Both of you. In a manner of speaking.” He touched an eyelid with his hand. “Saira? Can I ask to hear your voice?”

She looked awkward. “I’m not sure what to say.”

“For now, that is enough. How strange it is to hear your voice now, all these years later. This is a miracle that cannot wait. Come. Let me take you to the Great Circle.”

Garen turned and walked straight toward a wall of stone, using his staff as a cane. As he neared the rock crumbled and vanished into the air like the mist of a waterfall, leaving a circular threshold. The tunnel, a giant silver cylinder, led towards light. Aldon heard the trickle of water, and, with an outstretched hand, touched the fast flow of spirit.

“Apologies for the rush. You have come at a time of turning. Many of the Order have already left. The Lake of Souls is in peril.”

“The Lake of Souls?”

“Yes, Aldon. The true source of spirit. Many rivers have been tainted. All flow from the Lake of Souls. We have tried to protect the southlands from the raelisk. But even the dam was not enough.”

“Uncle, the Talon is dry.”

“Yes. Our doing. Don’t give me that look. I can hear your surprise well enough. The raelisk have spread too far. Our dam confines the remaining spirit stalkers to the

Nethers.”

“But the spirits cannot reach the people! Without water there is no life. Have you seen Valei?”

“In this case, my blindness is a blessing. I have heard tidings. Valei was abandoned before the Talon ran dry. The decision to dam is only a stop-gap measure. The currents carry too great a danger. Drought is more desirable than the dark spirits of old. The waters must be cleansed.”

Aldon tried to understand. To help the peoples of Rivaria the Order had taken that which was most precious to them.

“Uncle, I do not understand...”

Sheer awe lifted the words from his tongue. They had reached the end of the tunnel and entered a vision of spirit and spheres.

“Ah, here we are,” Garen said. “The Great Circle.”

A giant sphere opened before them. Taller, it seemed, than the bell tower of Valei. They had entered from one side, so the sphere stretched both above and below. Within the enormous circular cavern hovered dozens of other spheres, their walls transparent, connected by stone platforms, bridges and stairs held in place without pillar or chain. Robed women and men, mostly reds and browns, moved throughout the maze of walkways, entering—and instantly disappearing—into spheres with some haste. Others suddenly appeared without warning. A globe hung at the exact center, pulsing white and blue, like a giant sunstone shedding azure light. The outer walls rippled as a swift creek surface would do. Light sparkled and danced over the curved walls.

“The Great Circle.” Garen sighed. “Upon this, I wish my eyes could rest. The

Order built the Great Circle three hundred years ago, beneath a waterfall and above a natural spring. Spirit always flows over these walls, though we fear the spring may soon fall under shadow.”

Aldon peered over his shoulder. A thin film of continuous water ran over the walls, the cavern’s fluid skin. *Hlasa* rushed by on all sides.

“What is this place?” he asked his Uncle.

“Where human and spirit are one. Where *hlasa* is never hidden. Within these spheres, men and women, young and old, are schooled in the ways of water weaving.”

Saira’s eyes, wide with wonder, also carried familiarity. “This reminds me of the watergroves. How does one construct a sphere in the middle of a mountain?”

“Much like the tree sculptors,” Garen said. “Except Earth Druids did most of the work. The Wind Speakers *do* help keep everything in place. Let’s find Beryl and Laridin. They will want to see you.”

Garen hobbled forward, using his staff to walk a straight line. He turned to ascend a winding staircase; each step resembled an upside-down floating pyramid. Aldon cringed as his Uncle took each precarious step. His own foot nearly missed a stair. After then, he kept his eyes down until the stairs no longer spiralled.

The smaller spheres, each the size of a cottage, shimmered with spirit. Garen stepped through the wall of the sphere before them, a thin sheet of water. As Aldon went through, his insides tingling with light, the deceptive wall revealed her secrets. Inside the sphere, hidden from view until now, sat half a dozen members of the Order. They stood from stone chairs, situated around a floating slab that served as a table, and addressed Garen directly.

“Who do you bring before us?”

“I bring four who have bested the labyrinth.”

Amid gasps of disbelief, all eyes immediately jumped to the strangers. Many were interested in Aldon; most settled on Saira.

“Let me introduce Jed and Cal Trail. And my nephew, Aldon Kale, closest to my heart. Saira Quindel stands next to him, the one born at the Lake of Souls. The children of the past have returned.”

A tall, red-robed member of the Order spoke to his brothers and sisters. All of them left except an older, rounder woman bearing brown robes much like those on Garen’s shoulders.

“My name is Laridin. I am the head of the red robes.” The gaunt, bushy-browed man hardly moved as he spoke, his eyes locked with Aldon’s. “This is Beryl of the Earth Druids. Come sit at our table.”

Garen followed his Uncle and took a seat across from the one named Beryl. She smiled and nodded. The stone chairs—of which he could have sworn numbered only six when they arrived—felt soft as moss.

Laridin ran his eyes over each of them. “Garen, you should have called a private audience. Such a secret should so remain.”

“Secrets are little better than lies. I lived a lie for twenty years. No more. These four, my nephew among them, have taken the journey of the labyrinth. Tradition demands we show them every sphere.”

Laridin furrowed his brow. “There is no time for tradition. In any case, the river labyrinth has been breached.”

“Making their trial even greater.” Aldon sensed the tension between Garen and Laridin. “I will take the time.”

“And leave your post?”

Garen turned his blank stare from the Singer of the Flame to Aldon. “The center of the labyrinth is watched day and night. In my lifetime not a single stranger has passed that way. Most end where they started. A journey of spirit cannot be made by someone who is not ready.”

Beryl spoke next, kind yet direct. “So much to tell, so little time to tell it. Garen, you were there with Wilton Lhee. You were there when the syl was born. Use your words to spin the tale.”

“My father?” Saira spoke suddenly, her voice raised. “My father was there?”

“Stepfather, yes,” Garen explained. “The Lake of Souls calls many, both far and near, to her deep waters. Your mother was one. After you were born, Wilton took you to Maystone. You see, he preferred country to city, so it made sense...but I should start at the beginning.”

Some food was brought by a brown robe. Only Jed and Cal reached for the cave fruit and cara meat.

“The Lake of Souls is a giant cauldron of spirit gathered from earth and sky. From her waters all life in Rivaria thrives. Every seed and root carries the germ of spirit. Every animal that drinks from the stream takes *hlasa* into their body. Without rivers, humankind would live without spirit in the waterless shadow. And then, on a day that long passed into legend, the waters were tainted.”

Garen scrunched his eyes shut and lowered his head, as though cringing from a

bright light. Aldon put a hand on his Uncle's shoulder. Garen took his hand and, after a long sigh, blinked his eyes open and continued the story.

“In the Age of Dragons, when the world was still young, Naga—the greatest of all dragons—called these mountains home. Terror claimed the hearts of all who fell under her long shadow, said to stretch from one end of a city to another. Dragons were immortal creatures, their scales filled with everlasting spirit. Most lived in the mangroves or at the bottom of lakes, so when they slept the spirits slept with them. Naga, last of her kind, grew weary of her lonely life. Despair stole her will to live. None of her kind remained, every dragon-child slain at the hand of humans.

“Thus, after 2,000 years, she chose the highest peak to make her grave. Naga flew above cloud until the sky turned black and her wings crumpled from exhaustion. From there she fell, the longest fall, down into the crater that is the Lake of Souls. Her silver blood spilled forth into those sacred waters. And there it stayed. For you see, dragon blood is thicker than spirit. Naga's viscid blood pooled in the Lake of Souls, while the good spirits—light and free—still flowed to the valleys. Four or five ages passed before this secret was found.”

“A secret it should have remained,” Laridin interjected.

“Perhaps. Yet if the whole truth were known, such secrets would not hold such power.”

Garen turned to Saira. “The dragon's blood gave the Lake of Souls a gift, one that many sought. Those who drink from her waters claim the immortality of dragonkind. Countless came in search of that prize. None succeeded, until a man named Barem found his way to the crater. He drank from the Lake of Souls and lived the life of five men. So

determined was he to live, beyond the age of even the oldest of kings, that Barem returned to the Lake of Souls whenever the autumn of life showed a new wrinkle, a grey hair. But the more he drank, the more the curse took hold. His winter years stretched, long and dark. He became more reptile than human, and the first raelisk came into being.”

“Wait,” said Saira. “A friend of mine, wise in these ways, told me the raelisk are selwyn.”

“Some are selwyn, others human. All are cursed by the promise of eternal life. The dragon blood in Barem’s body made him prisoner of the spirits. Others heard the tale of this fountain of youth—and, as those after such treasures are wont to do, they did not heed the warnings—and hunted after the Lake of Souls. Barem waited for them to come. Struck with the loneliness of Naga, he caught others in the web he could not escape. They joined him in his wretched, everlasting life, and Barem was no longer alone.”

“Can we free them from this curse?”

“No, Saira. You cannot separate a weed that grows inside. Raelisk are shells of their former selves. They have more dragon blood—a murky broth of suspicion, venom and spite—than their own. When they made the choice to be immortal, they left their human and selwyn spirit behind. Great power draws all those who want more in life. Or to bring back those who left us too early. That is the legend that whispered in your mother’s ear.

“Mauve came to the Nethers in search of immortality. Not for herself, but her husband—your father. She hoped to somehow bring him back. When Wilton and I

stumbled across her, weak from fatigue and lack of food, I immediately remembered the prophecy of the syl. A daughter, born on the shores of the Lake of Souls, would one day cleanse the water spirits. Mauve, so pregnant she should have been bedridden, was nevertheless adamant that she reach her goal. She acted wary of humans, but consented to our help. Wilton and I saw her to the lake. This was before the raelisk had emerged from their dark sleep. She stood on the shore a long time, eyes on the still waters. A single tear fell down her cheek. What she was thinking, I cannot say. Perhaps she realized her hope had been false, a truth her heart could not accept.”

Saira, hands folded on her lap, stared at the stone table. Aldon tried to offer a comforting glance but her eyes were lost in another time and place.

Garen continued. “Your mother fell to the ground. Wilton and I rushed to her side and realized her contractions had started. Later that day, under skies of magnolia clouds, you were born.”

Saira raised her head. “And my brother?”

“Your brother, yes. So you do know. Did Wilton speak of it? He was born second, a great surprise to us but not your mother. I know how hard this all must be to hear, Saira. But it must be told. With her last strength, Mauve held you both in her arms and spoke your names. For a brief moment, joy lifted her sorrow. Yet she wanted to bring your father back. He could not be there, and her broken heart could not be healed, not even by her children.

“That night, your *daman* appeared, no more than a young pup. He slept next to you, that first night and every thereafter. Where, might I ask, is Fenox now?”

“In the mountains,” Saira answered, eyes half closed. “Hunting cara.”

“Indeed. This is where he first learned to hunt. He protected you your first year, and would not have us take you from the mountains. Your brother, however, cried for seven moons. Three of the Order carried him back to the watergroves. We hoped a relative or friend would adopt him. Perhaps selwyn medicine would soothe the pain us humans could not see. But the plan proved tragic.”

Laridin spoke gravely. “An error of judgement. The Order should have stayed out of the groves.”

“Yes,” Garen concurred. “We learned later that the selwyn had deemed them intruders. All trespassers are slain on sight. One of those killed was Laridin’s father. As for your brother, I cannot say what became of him.”

“His name is Fehl.” Garen, Beryl and Laridin all looked at Saira in surprise. “He is a member of the Untainted. I believe I have seen him. But he did not recognize me. We have not spoken.”

“Intriguing. What curious tales you must have to tell. Let me finish mine. The Order feared your presence in the mountains, Saira, would bring the Untainted upon us. Nothing carries greater threat than a war of spirits. After a year, Fenox began to venture much further south. It was decided you were to be taken to Maystone, where Wilton himself grew from boy to man. He could not bring himself to cut your ears. So I handled the blade. That secret, born from human ignorance, you were obliged to bear. I always hoped one day to ask your forgiveness. I do so now.”

Saira could not find words, her eyes wet with sorrow. Aldon spoke to the silence, the first of a thousand questions.

“How did you know Wilton Lhee?”

“We both came, separately, to the Nether Mountains in search of truth. We found the Order. And each other. Wilton was like a brother. Decades later, when he went to Maystone, I lived among the Divinists in Baronstoke. That’s where I found you, Aldon. Under the watchful eye of Caro Orsen, any outside contact became far too dangerous. Although Wilton and I didn’t see each other for twenty years, we shared stories through letters. You and Saira are, in many ways, cousins.”

Aldon looked to Saira. Her downcast eyes hid how she felt.

Jed fidgeted in his chair, absently fingering a knife hidden under his pant leg. “Excuse me for asking what might be obvious to you. But what are my brother and I doing here?”

“Although you may not weave spirits,” Laridin answered, “you are still tangled in their threads. You both came through the river labyrinth. Therefore your destiny is tied to the spirits.”

Garen protested. “Are they not too young?”

“Older than many who have already gone. Caro is close, now. We cannot let the so-called Divine Elder reach the Lake of Souls. The power he will try to unlock will ruin us all.” Laridin looked from Jed to Cal. “I must request your blades. Countless raelisk guard those waters. The dragon blood protects them from *hlasa*. Every arrow and sword are needed.”

To Aldon’s surprise, Jed readily nodded. “My knives will do what they can.”

Garen placed his hand flat on the table. “These times are troubled by more than Caro Orsen. The raelisk outnumber us ten to one. That is why, after thousands of years, they have left the Lake of Souls in search of a new home. Their scales taint the rivers.

They must be stopped.”

Laridin put his hand on the opposite side of the table. Beryl did the same. “This morning, Jeneth and Eran left with the Wind Speakers and Wood Keepers. Tomorrow at dawn, Beryl and I will lead the Earth Druids and Singers of the Flame to the cloud bridge. I ask you to join us, should it be in your hearts. Few of us, if any, will survive. The choice is with you.”

Garen sighed. “Such a time you have come. Perhaps it was meant to happen this way.”

“Or perhaps it is no more than chance. You have arrived on the eve of battle. Now say your story, and make haste with your words. There is much to do.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Remembrance

The fog of memory weighed on Saira. All she had forgotten, and all there was to remember. Her father—stepfather, rather—had held everything from her: Saira’s birth, her heritage, her family, even her *brother*. Wilton knew she had a brother, yet never told her. Why?

She stood now before a great candle labyrinth. Cal had offered to come with her. Saira, engulfed in her own emotion, pushed him away. Garen, after showing her other spheres—the sky sphere where rain fell into the mountain, the quiet sleeping sphere, and several dedicated to the four elements—had brought her here. “A place for thoughts to settle and the mind to rest.”

Her mind felt anything but restful. In the river labyrinth, as she approached the center, thoughts of Wilton had returned to her like a tide nearly stretched out of sight. Sadness at his passing. Smiles for his gentle soul. Tears for his absence. And then a great wave of forgiveness tried to breach the invisible walls enclosing her heart. She had held on to anger and hurt without knowing. When Wilton returned to the spirits, he had left her alone. The villagers of Maystone exiled her. She needed to forgive for something her stepfather could not prevent.

The candle labyrinth, as every room in Circlehaven, was found in an enormous sphere. Stairs spiralled up and down, an intricately woven web her eye struggled to follow. A candle sat on each step, alternating from the left side to the right. Thousands of tiny flames flickered from silver and gold wax, as though she stood amongst the stars.

Despite the convolutions, the simplicity of the starting path drew her forward.

Saira took the first step. One floating stair after another, she walked without seeing where the flight of steps led. In this intricate labyrinth she spent more time going away from center than towards it. Her sight fell inward. Thoughts betrayed her.

Again and again, Wilton had lied to her. He knew why her ears had been cut. He knew why the other villagers shunned her. He knew the truth, a truth he had never shared. Did he carry the intention of telling her? Probably. But Saira would never know. When she had asked Garen of the matter, he simply said Wilton knew best. The best for whom?

In the silence of the labyrinth, her uncertainty lingered and swelled. Every step felt shadowed by mistrust. She ran her thumb over the jagged stumps of her earlobes. Was truth only an ideal easy to chase but impossible to follow?

Saira stopped. She had gone dozens of steps—perhaps hundreds—without being aware. Empty space surrounded her. She stood on a small, unsupported rock-stair with no idea where she was going. A dizzying array of candlelight nearly spun her off balance. She focused on the next step. A silver candle to the left, then gold to the right, then silver again. In that trance of movement and light, her mind began to shift.

From all she had learned this day, Saira could not hide the pain. She needed to let that tight, cruel knot unravel. She had trusted Wilton with her life, and he had betrayed her. Or so she felt. In truth, Wilton had sacrificed his friends and home. He left the mountain to care for her, despite Saira being a selwyn; other humans would have left her to the terals.

How uncomfortable he sounded, Saira remembered, when he spoke of her origins, or her ears, or three belly buttons. A part of him must have wanted to be honest, to be

loyal to her past. But her truth had too great a price to bear. Had the town elders known of her heritage? Is that why she was never welcome?

Thoughts spiralled with the stairs. She could not think of her mother without a freefall of tears. Wilton was the only parent she knew. Because her mother was dead, Saira could not know her father, not even in story. With that realization, her heart nearly burst.

The labyrinth turned abruptly. Ten stairs climbed to the center of the sphere. She hurried to the end, hungry for liberation. It was empty. On a circular platform ringed with amber candles, Saira looked for something more. There was no treasure, no shortcut, no way out but the way she had come. Nothing was found in the middle, nothing but *her*.

For a long time she sat there, eyes lost in the flames of the sphere. It came to her that the center was a mirror. She had to look to herself. All this time, she wanted answers from others. Who was she? Where did she come from? Now, with every page of that story written, she could not find peace.

Spirits flowed along the sphere's periphery, fluid bodies glinting in the candlelight. She felt their energy, warm and reassuring, but did not touch *hlasa*. To do so would take more than she had and distract her mind from her core. Wilton had loved her as a daughter. She had trusted his love completely and loved him in return. When he was taken by the spirits, Saira's faith in herself faltered. No greater hurt could she remember. More than anything, she wanted to see him again. To see Wilton—her father—and feel safe in his arms. To accept that would never happen was to embrace the darkest sorrow of her heart.

Saira got to her feet. The labyrinth waited. With each step her resolve grew.

Tomorrow, she would venture to the Lake of Souls, to the place where everything connected.

She woke in the sleeping sphere on a bed of air. The day felt quiet. She lay for a time, as dreams of fire and water faded, until her mind became still. For a moment, she breathed deep of that serenity.

On this day, her destiny would be told.

From a pillow of cloud and sheets of wind she rose. She stepped outside the circle of spirit to find a wooden bowl of steaming oatmeal. At least, they looked like oats yet tasted like rice. She spooned the bowl clean.

Although not as grand as the great circle, the sleeping sphere felt like a giant pond of bubbles. Hundreds of small spheres hung throughout the room, a geometric tapestry. Some drifted from one staircase to another like huge crystal balls on an invisible track. She saw Cal, Jed and Aldon—along with his Uncle Garen—exit from neighbouring spheres. Cal smiled at her; she managed a half-smile in return.

Jed eyed the moving spheres like a spotted deer watching distant gryphawks. “I’ve had enough of these spirits. Shift the current of a river, or make a light to guide you, but an entire *city*? This is too much. I’ll stick to my knives.”

Along the narrow stairway winding up to Saira’s sphere, Aldon walked anxiously behind his Uncle. “But you can’t see!”

Garen strode forth as though he possessed the vision of a jaber cat on the hunt. “I can’t argue there. But I will not stay behind. Of the Earth Druids, only Beryl holds *hlasa* stronger than I. My hands will be needed.”

“Uncle, I have only just found you. Surely some must remain here in Circlehaven?”

“Perhaps you don’t understand. All of the Order is going. The spirits that hold the city together will fall back into the cracks of the mountains. Circlehaven will not be here. But if Caro unleashes the dark power from the Lake of Souls, Circlehaven will be the first wiped from existence, followed by every town and village that does not bend to his will. To save the land, we must abandon our city.”

Garen stood before Saira. “I trust your labyrinth walk helped you to see.”

“Many things, yes,” she answered. “Thank you.”

Aldon, still unconvinced with his Uncle’s decision, shook his head. Garen found his hand.

“My dear boy. I am sorry the adversity of the world is what has brought us together. Of this, there must be some reason. Had you not come yesterday, we may never have shared spirits.” With his next words, Garen’s voice became soft. “You do not need me anymore. On the mountaintop, I may need you. Let us go together.”

And so Garen led them to the sky sphere. Pale morning sky domed this room. Saira watched red and brown robes, many armed with cudgels or bows, enter clear bubbles and disappear. The transport spheres rose up toward the gaping hole in the side of the mountain and evaporated like fog in the sun, leaving the Earth Druids and Singer of the Flames to stand outside the realm of the city.

Garen vanished into a sphere. The four of them followed. Jed held his breath. As Saira stepped through spirit the world began to move. Up she went like a geyser, able to see everything from inside—or more importantly, that nothing physical held her up.

Her feet stood upon hidden threads of *hlasa*.

With a *pop* the bubble of spirit burst. Solid rock pressed against her soles. Saira steadied herself, gazing upon a vista of sloping stone above a pink horizon painted by the hand of the dawning sun. She shivered. Wind and cold came in gusts. The red and brown robes climbed up the steep rock face. Garen had started after them.

“How far is the Lake of the Souls?” she asked.

Garen didn’t hesitate to point. “There. Mount Naga.”

Saira stopped, dumbfounded. His finger pointed away from the mountain they were on, much further north, to the grey silhouette of a soaring peak. Deep cloud shrouded the tremendous spire. That imposing mountain, tallest spine of the world’s backbone, made this rock little more than an anthill. Clouds roiled forth from Mount Naga as hills of white smoke.

“That must be miles from here! How long will it take to get there?”

“Not as long as you think, or would like.”

She was about to ask him to clarify when the faces of Kirin, the stoic River Walker, and Mirran materialized over the edge above.

“My word!” Mirran exclaimed. “It seems our paths are meant to cross. Though, with the help of our new friends, I did take a rather fascinating shortcut.”

Saira gazed past her excited friend at the scene behind. On a plateau that stretched out from the mountain like a vast, stony balcony, a flock of gryphawks had alighted. Dozens perched on the flat mountainside, great wings fluttering into tempests. Beaked heads cocked from side to side, eyeing their human prey with interest, perhaps considering how best to pluck them with claws that could easily enfold a stallion.

One by one the gryphawks lowered feathered bodies flat to the ground. To her astonishment, members of the Order began to climb on the backs of the great birds of prey.

Mirran laughed like a child who first gazes upon snow. “I knew truth could always be found in the old legends. When one of these voracious birds showed up where you had left us, Kirin and I ducked for cover. Then we realized: as though it were a flying horse, a man and woman rode on its back! And they wanted us to join them. But how do you tame such a beast?”

“They remain wild creatures.” Garen had sat on the plateau’s wide rim to catch his breath. “The Wind Speakers use the spirits—not to control the gryphawks—but to converse to them. We do not disturb their lofty nests. In fact, the presence of the Order helps deter most trespassers. In return the gryphawks will, on occasion, carry us where we need to go. They will not fight for us. But they will bear us passage to difficult places.”

The first gryphawk rose, five on its back, wings fully spread, beating the air fiercely with the added weight. Dust galloped and pebbles scrambled off the plateau. Saira shielded her eyes. Even the larger rocks trembled.

Garen returned to his feet. “Without trust and communication, there would be no such peace between us. Now it is time to take to the skies.”

Jed leapt ahead. “Which one is the fastest?”

Saira soon found herself alone. She hurried after Garen.

“Are you sure this is safe? My friends and I are not part of the Order.”

“Each bird carries four or five, including one Wind Speakers. That is why they

left yesterday, to carry the Wood Keepers to the cloud bridge. The word has spread to the other gryphawks in the range, bringing them here. Which steed calls to you, Saira?" She saw Laridin coaxing one of the grandest gryphawks; she directed Garen to the smallest bird she could see. Strange, being more afraid than a blind man. "All right. Do not climb aboard until his beak touches the ground."

Saira looked to his head. The eyes of the gryphawk, vigilant black pearls, examined her thoroughly before settling down with the rest of his body. His tail feathers, creamy brown with snowy tips, flared as she neared. If Mirran had flown, how dangerous could it be? Then again, this bird brandished talons that could—inadvertently—eviscerate her.

"Use his hind leg as a step."

Saira tried. Except, even bent, the gryphawk's hind leg rose above her head. She went back to the knee. Finding the bone, she placed her foot in the groove of the joint and gripped the closest feathers to pull herself up. She wondered if that felt like someone pulling *her* hair. In response, the gryphawk raised and twisted his foreleg around to try and brush her off. She waited for that floundering limb to relax and continued to climb carefully, passing feathers that stretched longer than her arms.

"Don't touch his wings. Don't make any sudden moves. And hold on tight. The Wind Speaker will direct—"

The bird lurched ahead. Garen's words of warning, lost in a rush of wind, were instantly forgotten. The gryphawk, instead of making a slow ascent with the rest, hurdled over the mountainside. Now, as Saira clutched feathers fragile as a late autumn leaf still clinging to the stem, they plummeted toward the rocky chasm below. The blast of air

blinded her. With eyes shut, Saira struggled to wrap her legs around the avian torso.

The gryphawk screeched, followed by the sound of a sail suddenly catching the wind. Her body, thrust against feathers and taut muscle, clung to the swooping bird. She squinted her eyes open. The gryphawk had unfurled his magnificent wings, soaring mere paces above the mountainside. Rock and dirt flew by in a stream of earth colours. Like being dangled above raging rapids—except *she* was the one moving—Saira watched the world race by, powerless to stop the gryphawk's flight.

A light drizzle began to fall. The others were gone. Where was the flock? More importantly, where was this one taking her?

She realized that in selecting the smallest she had also chosen the most reckless. The young bird seemed to be having *fun*, much like an adolescent boy first allowed to ride a horse. Yet this steed had a mind all his own. Then it hit her: this was the same gryphawk that had chased her and Quava on the Lorellien Plains. The same predator that tried to make a quick meal out of them. He wasn't flying her to the Lake of Souls. They flew toward the nesting grounds where she would be fed to the youngest gryphawks.

With an abrupt turn they rushed skyward, carried on an upsurge of wind. And then they were amongst the flock, diving and spinning. The thirty other birds of prey flew steadily forward with even, rhythmic wing beats. She spotted Jed and Cal on a larger bird with one of the blue-robed Wind Speakers. Jed started to say something about Saira taking *his* gryphawk but her wild steed barrelled underneath that neighbouring gryphawk, close enough to brush her hair against its raised talons.

Another, older bird opened its bronze beak and called out, a piercing shriek that rang in Saira's ears. Her gryphawk, like a child being reined in by a parent, kept with the

flock. He limited his air-stunts to the occasional zigzag that left her stomach anywhere but where it should be.

By the time Saira's mind calmed to the fact she wouldn't be eaten, they passed through a fine mist, soft and wet on her skin. Cloud, she realized. Mount Naga, the greatest peak of the Nethers, rose before them. Her summit, hidden behind a collar of billowing white, must touch the sky. Saira peered down at the dense fog below, a white ocean of waterfall mist. They were between the clouds. Her ears felt plugged.

The gryphawks stopped flapping their wings and glided gently to a perch just below the second layer of cloud. At the last moment her gryphawk decided to finish with one last dramatic feat of flight: an upside down turn. Saira screamed and clutched his feathers with white knuckles. Fortunately, the young bird rolled fast enough; her body stayed with his.

She clambered off her impetuous steed. The gryphawk cocked his head, inspecting the place on his back she had ridden. He squawked at her, ruffled his feathers, and, with a single beat of his wings, took to the sky. One by one all the gryphawks lifted off and dove into cloud, fading at first into tenuous shadows and then from sight entirely.

Laridin eyed her askance, as though *she* were responsible for that juvenile bird's behaviour. He came to her briskly.

"At the Lake of Souls, do not touch the spirits. You are a wildweaver. The danger is too great. Leave the spirits to us."

And he left her. Saira fumbled over his words. A wildweaver? What did he mean?

A dozen green-robos greeted Laridin gravely. He looked upset. "Where are the

others? I told those fools to wait!”

Saira moved away from the discussion, searching for her friends. The cold mountain air stung, her breath white. Cal found her first, relief on his face. Before he could speak she threw her arms around him. She closed her eyes in the warmth of that hug. “Thank you being with me. For bringing me here. I could never have done this alone.”

She pulled away. Jed, Aldon, and Mirran stood around her. “Thanks to all of you. Without your help...”

She found herself unable to finish. So far they had come through times of trial, yet always, in the end, together. Aldon, who once refused to speak to her, now regarded her as an equal, a sister.

“We’re like family,” Jed said, and then looked away, hiding his emotion.

Mirran held her hand. She felt bonded in his grip. “I will stay, and leave the fighting to others more able. I’m not sure what good I can do here, at the foundation of the cloud bridge, but this is my place. Kirin will go in my stead.”

Saira nodded. A tear ran down her cheek, knowing in her heart she may never see him again.

“The tears should wait. The others are ready. We may cross paths once more, you and I.”

“I hope for that more than anything,” she cried and wrapped him in her arms.

Everyone gathered around Laridin. A ramp of stone arched upward, vanishing into turbulent cloud. The Singer of the Flame regarded the eighty women and men coolly.

“The raelisk have already taken many of the Order. Only twelve of the Wood

Keepers remain. The Elders from Baronstoke have yet to be spotted. Perhaps Caro fell to the immortal hands of the raelisk. Of that much, we may hope. This march is our last. We must cleanse the taint, no matter the cost. The cloud bridge will take us to the Lake of Souls. Walk with the spirits. And a sure step! Only the bridge decides who shall cross. I will lead us there.”

He turned and made the first step onto the cloud bridge. Within moments mist cloaked his body. And then he was gone, a walker through cloud.

Others followed, the red robes first. Aldon and Garen went with the Earth Druids. Saira scurried after Jed and Cal, trying to keep close. Yet after a handful of steps white enveloped her. She held out her hands, her fingers sheathed in cloud. Her steps were blind. She floated forward. There was nothing to see, and at once everything. Voices echoed over echoes. She heard a woman in front scream. The voice fell, down to depths too far to fathom. Saira kept going. Her soles no longer met rock. She walked on cloud, up, up, until she stood above the world. A warm breeze fell upon her. Below, in the hollowed crater of the mountaintop, rested the Lake of Souls.

The wide waters, hundreds of pace across, glowed with spirit, breathing light into the clear sky reflected overhead. Sharp rocks lined the shore. The surface lay still, perfectly so, undisturbed by wave or wind. The magnetic colour of the lake, an impenetrable blue borne of the deepest ocean, enchanted her. She gazed with the awe of memory and time: her mother had birthed Saira on these shores.

She expected a barren bowl; instead, fields of green stretched from lakeshore to the edge of this vast cauldron. Jagged boulders—hugged by thick moss—interrupted the short, even grass, and spoke of a long dormant fire.

Then she saw the bodies. On the left side of the lake lay dozens of Wood Keepers interspersed with Wind Speaker colours. Blood stained every robe. She expected mangled limbs and shred torsos. But the green and blue robes were empty. Her horrified stare rested on the calm water. The Lake of Souls slept, a well-fed predator.

Saira shot her eyes to the left and right. Of the eighty that walked the cloud bridge, perhaps fifty remained. The others, lost to the mountain, would be mourned later. Her friends had all made it, excepting Mirran. For a second her eyes caught the glint of sunlight on steel. Were those more bodies on the opposite side of the lake?

Laridin surveyed the scene. “The spirit stalkers will soon rise. We must start the meldpool. Eran and Jenneth, swiftly now! Where is Beryl?”

Someone shouted in warning. All eyes turned to the lake.

The waters began to ripple. Not as a wave on the sea, but as viscid mud that bubbles in one place and leaves the rest still. A balloon of opaque blue rose from the surface of the Lake of Souls. The sphere of tainted spirit ruptured and muculent water flooded over the gnarled head of a raelisk.

Crimson eyes gleamed with fury. At this, the invasion of their home, they would stop at nothing.

First ten appeared. Reptilian bodies glistened, bathed from the blood of the dragon. Then there were forty. One hundred. From this womb of eternal shadow nightmares flooded forth. Saira wondered: were some of these men and women of the Order? Did the water hold the power to create such swift evil? More and more oozed from the cradle of their immortality.

Saira fought the urge to flee. Her legs shook. She gripped the tark in hand, trying

to find the strength with which Quava had wielded this blade. Her fingers quivered over the hilt. She could not hold on.

The legion of raelisk advanced.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Death

Kirin moved to face the impossible.

The enemy before him could not be vanquished. But he would not lower his sword. Not this time. If he fell here, the spirits would nevertheless be served.

The red robe named Laridin barked orders. Those with blades were to protect those without. Kirin didn't wait to see who, if any, followed. The members of the Order carried their weapons with stiff unease. Perhaps they were wise with spirit; but in battle they were as children.

The River Walker suddenly found himself no longer alone. Jed strode boldly beside him. The young man did not speak as they bridged the gap between life and death; neither did Kirin. He knew the fear in Jed's soul, a fear that could be hidden but never removed. Courage was often only a mask worn by the cowardly. And yet Jed wore his fear and bravery plainly. Despite the odds, this thief walked with him to the end.

Kirin acknowledged his companion. "If the spirits take me, I will ask you to carry my sword."

Jed stumbled in his step and righted himself. "By my mother's good name, you have my word."

Kirin shifted his focus to the dogged red eyes of the enemy. More rose from the lake every second, hundreds of fallen soldiers, servants of the dark water. He wanted to take ten before he fell. Five would still prove honourable.

He was the last Walker. The shame burned. Once before the raelisk had

challenged him. He had fled. He should have died that day. A River Walker never runs, but faces every challenge openly. He had left the shores of the Talon, his sacred guard, and watched dozens of raelisk slip south toward the unprotected cities and villages. There were too many. He could not stop them all. So he chose to live, to break his oath and watch the river run dry. That is how he became the last. Not mastery of the blade, or singing with the spirits. But fear. Fear alone had crowned him with this sordid title.

A Walker answers to no one but himself. On this day, Kirin refused to turn from his destiny.

The spirit stalkers invited him forward. What was once human lurched with a shambling gait. Crab-like limbs stabbed the grass. Some managed to advance on two legs, others swaggered on all fours. A patchwork of scales replaced skin, their bodies plagued by a disease that nourished the corporal and forsook the soul.

Kirin sidestepped the bloodied green and blue robes. The listless cloth lay tattered and frayed, a relic of the recently bereft. Here, the raelisk paused.

Jed pulled a ruby-hilted dagger into his left hand. “They are scared of you.”

“Not scared. Surprised.”

They knew his sword. It was not one they expected to see here. Many times, on Talon patrol, he had warded off any errant raelisk. Somehow, they had followed the Talon’s waters down from the Lake of Souls; always, he pressed them back—until last year.

Many before him now vividly remembered his sun-carved blade. They opened misshapen jaws, as though to utter their hatred. Rasping snarls escaped between fangs of the cursed.

Kirin waited. More raelisk gathered before them, a wall of thickening limb and claw. The River Walker raised his sword to the sky, spoke a prayer as those rays blessed his blade, and centered himself on the task at hand.

The spirit stalkers charged. With a swing of his blade he struck the first two down. Another shrieked, like metal being twisted out of shape, and threw four flailing limbs at Kirin. He severed one in a clean arc. Yet the lower reached its target. The lizard-like claw slashed his ankle. Kirin did not feel the wound. He felt only further clarity of his choice.

He thrust his blade into the raelisk's chest. Red orbs went black, its mouth open in a silent scream. More surrounded him, a sea of hungry reptiles. Jed yelled in warning. Kirin ignored him. He would not turn away.

As the spirit stalkers closed in he held his blade to the sun and waited for salvation.

#

Garen grabbed Aldon's hand.

"Take me to Laridin."

Aldon held his Uncle's arm firmly and led him to the Singer of the Flame. He was glad to have a focus. The raelisk were too many, an army that emerged from the lakeshore like the endless waves of Omnia ocean. He was not a fighter. How was he to touch an enemy immune to *hlasa*?

Laridin sat cross-legged on the grass. A Wind Speaker and Wood Keeper joined him, leaving a vacant fourth spot in their square. A few Earth Druids milled nearby.

Garen spoke before Aldon could describe the scene. "Laridin, I ask to join the

meldpool. If Beryl is gone, I should be the one to take her place.”

Laridin nodded. “That is your choice. Very well. Be strong with spirit.”

Aldon guided his Uncle to complete the square. With a bony grip, Garen gave his nephew’s hand one final squeeze. “Stay close. The spirits will protect you.”

“I will not leave you, Uncle.”

“For that, you must forgive me.”

Then Garen let go, put down his cane and joined the other colours of the Order. Aldon stepped back. The remaining members, a few handfuls at most, formed a protective, weaponless circle around the welling meldpool.

“Aldon?”

Saira stood next to him. She looked fragile, like a child left in a market square.

“Do you feel that?” She spoke quietly to the wind. “They are weaving *hlasa* together, as we tried once before.”

Aldon thought, *when you nearly crushed me with spirit*. Yet she was right—the four members of the Order worked in tandem to form an invisible network from a strong current of *hlasa*. The Talon River must flow beneath these rocks and under the mountain.

He closed his eyes. The spirits, raised and threaded into an integral tapestry, sent swift shivers down his spine. Hot energy streamed on all sides. Like being at the lake temple, such a long time ago, where he met Saira, Jed and Cal. In that sacred space, the spirits were easily heard. Life flowed. The hidden colours of the world trickled into view. That’s where he first touched *hlasa*. Not by reaching out, but by opening something within. Only with inward eyes could the spirits be held.

With a start, he realized that day had passed only weeks ago. So much had

changed in a mere blink of the eye.

He heard a sharp intake of breath. Aldon opened his eyes. Saira's body had stiffened. He placed a hand on her shoulder. Frozen in place, she didn't react to his touch.

Aldon lifted his gaze.

On the right side of the Lake of Souls, from behind a towering boulder, seven dark shapes materialized. Black cloaks shifted fluently forward like shadows under a setting sun. Each carried a blade tipped with a circle. These were the same who chased them along the ravine. The same that ambushed him and Saira. The dark cloaks.

Aldon's head swam. He nearly collapsed. The body memory of being clobbered to unconsciousness throbbed in his skull. He put a hand above his ear, where the dark cloak had struck him. The blow felt tender and fresh.

The Untainted halted. Behind the seven solemn figures another approached. They parted in the center and Caro Orsen stepped between. The Divine Elder levelled his gaze upon them and flicked his wrist. Like a sea of black the dark cloaks rushed toward the defenceless members of the Order.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Life

Caro paused, just a moment, to take in all that had happened.

They were all here. Everyone. Saira and the Trail brothers. Garen and his naïve nephew. The last River Walker. Laridin and every single remaining member of the Order. They were all here. And when they were gone, no one would be left to stand in his way.

He did not relish in this fact. He saw it as inevitable. The world needed stability. He could offer that. Under his thumb, the land would flourish and the spirits would be controlled only by those who understood their power. The other elders were dead—killed by raelisk along with the royal guard—but he needed them not. With his new supremacy there would be no challengers. Kings of nations would bow to him. Every man and woman would call him friend or fall to his power. His wisdom and will would be followed.

Prophecy may suggest otherwise. But prophets were men. Men made mistakes. The victors rewrote the stories. Their voice—his voice—would be heard for generations.

The Untainted were critical to his plan. Caro tracked them for years. He sent elders to every river and stream to act as his eyes. When they finally met, the swift steel of the dark cloaks cut down a dozen of his royal guard before Caro could offer his exchange. If the Untainted did as he asked, Caro would leave Quasaria untouched by human hands and show them the path to the immortal life. The promise of power holds great sway over those without.

Only one dark cloak spoke, a guttural whisper of curt sentences. He wanted to know of any selwyn living amongst humans. Caro spoke what he knew. On this, they saw eye to eye: their people were meant to stay apart. Human with human, selwyn with selwyn. Diversity brought discord. People found harmony through union. Man and selwyn shared only conflict: human desire to construct vast cities next to rivers, the selwyn belief in false spirits. Food, custom, philosophy, faith...the list only grew with the telling. Intolerance brought human and selwyn together. A severe intolerance for any person that strayed from their home. To have peace, they needed to be kept apart.

More important, the dark cloaks knew the rivers, every riffle and twist. Only they could find and eliminate the River Walkers. Walkers, much like the raelisk, were immune to the effects of *hlasa*. With the guardians of the currents removed—those obstinate men of honour trusted no one, or rather mistrusted everyone with equal merit, and would stop and question even the Divine Elder himself—the dark cloaks and he would reach the Lake of Souls and finish their bargain.

Nevertheless, the Untainted declined his offer. So a month later he arranged another impromptu meeting. Then another. Each time, Caro gave them a selwyn name and the town where he or she could be found. Trust began to bud from those suspicious boughs. Still, their human prejudice made the dark cloaks resist. A little spirit woven carefully into their minds had helped shape their response.

Caro never told his elders the real bargain. During each meeting, a twist of the wind spirit kept his voice secret. When his closest advisors inquired he told them, in all truth, that the dark cloaks were helping rid their cities and villages of renegade selwyn—and left it at that. He wanted to confide in Saul, his oldest friend, but Jed had seen an end

to that.

Caro's fire burned. He had not forgotten Saul's murder. The others gathered at the Lake of Souls could be reduced to ash with a wave of his hand. But for Jed Trail, his vengeance would be anything but swift. Cal would die first, a slow pain witnessed by his brother. And then Caro would let Naga be treated to her first meal in 10,000 years.

With the raelisk suitably distracted, the Divine Elder went to work. The rock below his feet flooded with spirits. Many were coiled around the Order's meldpool. But the Untainted would soon free those spirits for him. Fire, wind, earth, wood—he did not put such limits on himself. Caro embraced all the elements as one.

The currents of *hlasa* roiled over his limbs, a potent surge like a river undammed. He pulled in one thread after another, tying the spirits until they coalesced into a braided web. Methodical and exact, Caro focused entirely on this tedious work. He began to shape the mesh of spirit into a sphere. The *hlasa* resisted. Like reluctant acolytes, the spirits did not like being coerced. But Caro's hand was firm.

He reached further, seizing every loose thread. Caro needed to ensure he had enough to raise the power of the dead. Should he lose hold, the mountain itself might crumble to the deepest valley. More and more water spirits spiralled under his control. He stood at the center of that whirlpool, a magnetic pillar. Still he reached, ravenous, voracious, scraping every drop into his resurrection sphere, until the spirits threatened to tear like rope pulled in two directions by galloping horses.

The Lake of Souls shone with a light that called him forth. But he would not step into those tainted waters. Not yet. First, he would call forth a power too great for mortals to imagine.

Caro guided the sphere gently. The cords of *hlasa* strained and throbbed. He lifted the spirit sphere from himself, placed it on the Lake of Souls and released all connection but one. The final attachment, the umbilical between him and the great beast soon to be rebirthed from these dark waters, Caro left intact. That thread would grant him the power from an Age long past. Like the collision of giants, he felt the sphere rumble and reverberate as it merged with the surface of the lake.

Rise from your sleep.

Hlasa mingled with those radiant waters like oil poured into a pot of boiling water. At first, resistance—then they fused. Caro spoke through the spirits.

Gaze upon the mountain. Breathe once again of the cloud. Stretch your wings to block out the sun! Long have you languished in these sacred waters with stale muscles and dormant bones. Rise again! Free yourself from this blight that has served as your bed these many ages passed. The time has come for fear and terror to reign in the skies. Rise again!

From somewhere deep and dark, as though the very mountain came alive, the shadow dragon stirred.

#

Saira felt her body fall. Every fibre of her being hung loose and defeated. Her eyes stung with disbelief. The carefully constructed story of her life collapsed like columns in an earthquake. She wanted to surrender to despair, to close her heart to the truth before her. So far she had come to reach this place, to find the answers of who she was. Now she found Fehl, her brother, here at the Lake of Souls. One of the Untainted.

She knew he was a dark cloak. Knew he had helped kidnap her, even tried to kill

her. But to know her brother was allied with Caro Orsen, the man who vilified her people to the point where humans murdered them on sight, was a pain that split her soul in two. Her mother and father were gone. She would never know their faces, never hear their loving voices. Fehl was her closest family. They had shared Mauve's womb. She could not accept such betrayal.

Yet her eyes did not deceive her. Her brother stood with the Divine Elder, companion to the enemy of all selwyn. In this, the very place she and Fehl had entered the world together, Saira vowed right then: one of them would not leave.

Something inside her shifted. The sadness, a well of quiet tears, began to simmer. Her rage, usually a faint, lowly murmur, erupted. Anger writhed and seethed like a snake whose tail has been bitten. Her hands no longer trembled with fear—they quivered in tight fury.

Saira gripped her tark in both hands. As she stepped toward the dark cloaks—knowing she would die on the shores of her birth—her resolve only grew. She would not hide from the truth.

Aldon called after her, beseeched her to come back. Saira did not turn her eyes from the enemy. There were seven. One of them was Fehl. Did he know who she was? Would he listen? If he heard her words, he might choose not to believe.

The dark cloaks came upon her as a pack of terals. There was no hesitation, no moment of reflection, no sound to their movement. They thrust to kill. The sun sparkled in those seven blades. In that brilliant flash Saira saw only death. The weapon in her hand afforded no challenge, a goat's horn to jaber cat fangs.

She lowered the tark and called instead to the spirits. She pulled from hidden

currents. The water spirits surfaced willingly like moths to a candle. Except she burned as wildfire. *Hlasa* swirled around her chest and scorched down her arm. Without guidance the torrential spirits razed into the earth.

With a thunderous tear the ground in front of her burst. The spirits rent the earth like a knife cutting into flesh. The wound spewed the blood of the earth. Rock and dirt exploded upward, leaving a chasm between her and the Untainted.

This gave them pause. The dark cloaks formed a half-circle but did not advance, separated by the earth's open wound. Saira kept the spirits held at the ready, lightning in her hands. Most of their faces were hidden, yet the hood of the dark cloak on the far left had fallen back. She could see his face, pale and sharp, eyes coloured by the sky. She knew at once these were the eyes of her brother.

For a second she lost her focus, drawn by kinship and a trickle of hope that he might know who she was. She reached for the spirits so she could whisper her name in Fehl's ear. And the name of their mother: Mauve, who pushed them into the world nineteen years ago, on the shore of the lake only a stone's throw away. Surely he would remember.

Yet the spirits were gone. The very second she let her guard down, the dark cloaks cut her threads of *hlasa* and made them their own. The residual spirits slipped away like water between her fingers. She grasped for *hlasa*, trying to find a rope that had turned to sand.

The spirits thickened and returned. But they no longer sang to her. *Hlasa* coiled around Saira as a constrictor over its prey. A sinister hand directed the spirits to lock her ankles together and strap her arms to her sides. Unable to move, she watched three of the

dark cloaks circumvent the fissure in the ground. Vulnerable, helpless, as the time Caro Orsen snared her in spirit inside the temple at Baronstoke, she struggled to move, to scream, to do *anything*. While four of the Untainted maintained the spirit-hold on Saira, the other three moved to finish her.

A flurry of movement by her feet caught the attention of the Untainted. She could not move her head to see what it was. The dark cloaks fixed their eyes on the ground, swords at the ready. And then she spotted grey fur with a silver stripe charging headlong at the enemy.

Fenox!

With teeth bared the mayguar snarled, a guttural, venomous sound that gave even the most formidable predator pause. The approaching dark cloaks divided. Fenox lunged after the two to the right. The lone dark cloak slipped by the mayguar and stepped toward Saira. It was her brother. Fehl lifted his sword and turned on the spot.

The other six dark cloaks put down their arms. Saira felt the ropes of *hlasa* fall. Like a beached dolphin she wanted to immerse herself once more in the spirits. But she stayed her hand. In this moment, she dare not move.

The closest dark cloak to Fehl, held several paces away by the wary mayguar, gestured with his free hand. His fingers moved furiously from one sign to another. She realized: he was speaking to Fehl. Her brother responded with a simple flat hand that he formed into a fist. Then he pointed his sword at the chest of the dark cloak.

The dark cloak put his hand out, ran a thumb over the tips of his fingers, then back again, and withdrew. The six Untainted moved as one away from Saira.

Fehl turned, and she looked into the face of her brother. His skin, white as teeth,

made her think of that skeleton face on the banks of the Ivory, the day after she fled Maystone. He was taller than her. His earlobes hung low, almost covering an old scar that ran down his cheek and slid under his chin. His blue eyes gleamed. With what? Remembrance? Curiosity? Hate? Love? What mystery dwelled in those orbs?

He made a motion with his hand, pointing a finger up and then swiftly down. Saira didn't understand. She shook her head.

Fehl tried again. Saira imitated the sign, and then spoke to her brother for the first time in nineteen years.

“You were born here. So was I.”

He nodded. His gaze fell upon the shore of the lake. When he turned back, a new light shone in his eyes. Fenox rubbed against his legs. Fehl smiled—her brother actually *smiled*—and crouched down to give the mayguar a scratch between the ears. When he stood straight he hastily signed with his hand. She struggled to follow his fast fingers. At her perplexed expression he ran a thumb over his dangling earlobe, snipped with two fingers made into scissors, and pointed at Saira.

“Yes,” she said. “They were cut by my stepfather, before I was taken to a human village.”

His face changed then, a subtle yet significant shift, like a child that first understands how a river flows from the mountain. She couldn't put her finger on it, exactly, but she felt as though her brother now saw her as a selwyn. Fehl opened his mouth to speak. Only a hoarse croak emerged. He closed and swallowed, then tried again.

At that moment Saira was thrown off her feet. The Lake of Souls erupted. The

sacred waters rose as though pushed skyward by a new wellspring. Clear spirits floated up, a crystal cloud that shimmered like a full moon's light on the dark sea. That water hovered, iridescent, dripping rainbows. Had the meldpool completed its cycle? Were the waters cleansed?

And then a darkness surfaced from the light. An enormous wing cut through that luminous shell. The water spirits sloughed off like snow from a dead bough. Another wing appeared as a flat, black spear. This second wing thrust higher than the first, throwing *hlasa* aside into a tangle of spirit. Both wings burned a midnight black, a frail, translucent screen between her eyes and the midday sun. Saira peered into this leathery eclipse. What manner of evil had awoken from the Lake of Souls?

With a slow, measured movement, the head of the shadow dragon rose from her ancient grave and ascended the sky.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Nightmares

Jed threw his last knife. The blade lodged in the thigh of the nearest raelisk. The enraged creature shrieked and knocked the blade—as well as a lump of flesh—free of its lanky limb. Kirin, nearly encircled by raelisk, had some kind of death wish, holding his sword to the sun instead of the enemy. Jed did not intend to go down without a dance. The raelisk moved better in water than on land. That advantage needed to be played.

“Kirin!”

The River Walker, his gaze locked in a trance, did not hear him. Jed found a loose rock and threw it at Kirin’s back. The Walker barely twitched at the impact.

“Listen up! We won’t do the water weavers any favours by making our last stance here. Follow me! Quick!”

Kirin hesitated. Jed ran away from the lake—away from the well of spirit stalkers—and swiped a small blade from the battlefield. It was the chrak. No surprise there. Kirin finally lowered his blade and twirled his body in an arc, sending the closest raelisk reeling back. Then he made to follow Jed. Yet four raelisk closed him in.

In the blink of an eye the first crumpled beneath Kirin’s sword. The second lunged over its fallen brother. The Walker stepped aside and the raelisk ran into his cruel blade. The third wavered, startled by the speed of this adversary. In the next moment the cursed creature blindly flailed two contorted arms above its shoulders, reaching for a head no longer there. The last chose its attack cagily, veering away from the other raelisk. When the Walker beheaded the third, the fourth and final raelisk leapt for his exposed

back. So focused was the raelisk on the Walker that it had lost track of Jed.

Jed's downhill sprint sent him headlong into the raelisk. The creature caught sight at the last moment and turned and swept at his legs with a razor-lined limb. Jed dove over the black appendage and rolled to one side. That gave Kirin the single opening he needed to end another wretched immortal life.

The Walker looked to Jed, his breathing steady and calm. "My gratitude is yours. Now where shall we lead the spirit stalkers?"

"I'm sure inspiration will strike soon enough. Until then, we go up!"

Inside the bowl of the crater, the margin presented a mounting slope. Jed and Kirin loped up the grassy incline until the green curved into steep, impassable grey. The raelisk swarmed like hungry sharks after the scent of blood, except—as Jed had hoped—they were slowed by the lack of familiar buoyancy. The greater the slope, the more they struggled to find firm purchase. Yet the wave of amphibious adversaries numbered too many. This maneuver saved them seconds at most.

Back the way they had come, he spotted Cal with the armed members of the Order. His brother had more to live for. That's why Jed left him in charge of that ragtag group. Cal possessed just as many smarts as Jed, if a tad less charisma, but he had love. Not mere infatuation—Jed fondly mistook lust for love—but something that grew deeper every day. He wanted his brother safe. Yet against this tide, the Order would fall faster than flowers under a horse's hooves.

"We need to get behind them, draw the raelisk away."

To do that, they had to run along the inner rim of this cauldron. Every moment lingered was lost to the enemy.

Kirin studied the terrain. “The spirit stalkers will overtake us before we reach the far side of the lake.”

“Choose your chance. I’m taking this one!”

Jed raced along the cauldron’s edge and the narrow divide between life and death. To his left, a sheer wall of slate. To his right, the horde of immortals. Kirin trailed him, a swift and steady shadow. The raelisk clamoured up the slope, eager limbs reaching for elusive prey that would soon fall into a corner. Jed understood now their need, their desire to share such a cursed existence. Trapped in hollow bodies, the raelisk lived in deathless torment, a pestilence that spread like a plague. Yet this disease did not offer a quick end—but a long, interminable, tortured afterlife. In their crimson eyes, he could see the call, their drive to make others suffer and endure as they.

They wanted him to join their ranks. They wanted Jed to become a spirit stalker.

With the warm hilt of the chrak nestled in one palm, Jed readied himself for the first wave of attack. In their fervency, the raelisk stumbled and fell over one another. The ones behind pushed the others forward. Brusque claws snatched at his feet. Kirin arced his sword, a grand sweep that kept the closest stalkers at bay. Jed held no such advantage. He kicked one solid in the chest, sending the raelisk toppling into the dark sea of scales behind. The tide ebbed for a moment and then gushed forward. Jed waved his chrak, madly knocking back the onslaught. A raelisk grabbed his ankle. Another clawed his knee. He slipped and fell. They pulled him down. Hungry eyes glowed in the excitement of the kill.

Kirin’s blade lopped off the limb holding Jed. Another swing of the Walker’s sword cut the raelisk in two. Jed lay there, stunned, grappling with how close he had

come to everlasting purgatory.

“Up!” Kirin ordered.

Jed somersaulted to his feet. Raw, red pain screamed down his legs. He ignored the agony and faced the impossible. They were surrounded. Hundreds of spirit stalkers tore and scraped for his warm flesh. Hot blood ran down both his legs in spurting rivulets.

“Up!” Kirin instructed a second time.

Jed craned his neck. The top rim of the crater had descended from treetop battlements to the height of a tall fence. He sheathed his chrak and launched himself at the wall of rock. With all four limbs he scrambled to find a hold, a shelf, anything to use as leverage. His foot hit a stone and he propelled himself upward. The loose rock fell away but he gained the top. His muscles throbbed, ready to snap with the effort of holding on. Jed heaved, his strength threatening to fail, and got his legs over the rim. Then he twisted around to reach down over the ledge.

“Grab my hand!”

The Walker, hemmed in by heaps of raelisk bodies—both living and dead—wavered.

“*Now!*”

Kirin tossed his sword up. Jed seized the hilt and went to place the heavy blade behind him. He realized Kirin had *given him his sword*. In doing so, the River Walker was passing on his legacy, handing down what he no longer needed.

“No!” Jed yelled.

However, the Walker was attempting to scale where Jed had just passed. But he could not find purchase on the sheer rock. Jed stretched his arm. Too far. A spirit

stalker pinned his right leg. Kirin jerked but could not free himself. Instead, he kicked at the raelisk's head with his left foot. The creature wailed and swiped at this new irritant. In that moment the raelisk released its hold. Kirin jumped, given a boost by putting his foot on the raelisk's shoulder, and Jed pulled him to safety.

“For a second there I thought you weren't going to come after me.”

The Walker brushed the blond hair from his stoic blue eyes. “I remain alive so long as it serves a purpose.” Then he took his sword and started down the precipitous path.

Jed dashed to follow. He could see over the edge. Fields of cloud stretched to every horizon. He swung his eyes to the right. The Lake of Souls glimmered as though it were full of firewisps. Why those waters were warm in a place that should be twenty paces under ice he did not ask. They needed to get to the vacant end and keep the raelisk distracted for as long as—

He stopped in his tracks. Jed peered to the far side of the lake.

“The Divine Elder.”

Jed stared at the Walker. “You know him?”

“Caro Orsen. Yes. I know enough to keep suspicion close to my heart.”

“We must stop whatever he is doing. I'm sure that can only help the Order.”

With a fresh objective in sight, Jed felt a surge of energy. He and Kirin circled along the rim and then cut back down. It was much faster to go across the bottom of the bowl then take the whole perimeter, which promptly rose into yet another precipice. The raelisk gave chase, now a few dozen paces behind.

Side by side, Jed ran with Kirin at the lake's edge. Caro had his eyes closed. He

seemed to be speaking. But to whom? Jed caught sight of the dark cloaks, all seven, when a creature burst out of the lake.

The raelisk sprung from the water like a coiled snake. A second spirit stalker followed the first. Jed found himself flung on his back. The raelisk fell upon him. He tried to use his chrak but his arm was held at the wrist. The creature raised its serrated limb and plunged it down into Jed's exposed stomach. Those finger-knives speared through his shirt and into his flesh.

Kirin's sword split through the body of the raelisk. The creature dropped into a silent crumple. While Kirin tried to dislodge his blade the second raelisk tore into the Walker's back. Kirin jerked, sucked in one final breath and stood upright a moment, as though only momentarily stunned. Then his eyes dropped, their light taken into oblivion.

On the banks of the Lake of Souls, the last River Walker fell.

Jed roared to his feet. The remaining raelisk stumbled back, startled by prey it took as dead. Jed's belly bled, but the wound did not go as deep as those down both legs. He would have been disembowelled had Kirin not stopped the raelisk's attack. Chrak in hand, he slashed at the creature whose eyes blazed with maniacal glee. Jed's reach proved too short. The raelisk's deadly arms were too long. Jed threw his chrak and stepped back. Kirin's sword still jutted from the torso of the fallen raelisk. Jed wrenched the Walker's blade free and used that momentum to smite the creature that had slain his friend.

He knelt beside Kirin and gently turned him over so his face saw the sky. The sun's rays shone for the last time into those eyes. Jed closed his eyelids and let his own emotion wash over him. He wanted to give something back. Kirin saved his life; there

was nothing Jed could do but carry what the Walker carried. That was his duty to Kirin, to all River Walkers. To keep their traditions alive.

The ground tremored, as though the mountains were the playing blocks of a child who had decided to shift the world about. Jed staggered toward the lake, trying to steady his legs. The mountain shook him off like a flea. He felt his body lift up. The earth flew away from him. Jed watched the world spin and realized he was above the surface of the water. As he plummeted into the Lake of Souls Kirin's sword slipped from his hand.

Hot, tainted water flooded his mouth. He coughed underwater. When he finally righted himself, he could not reach the surface. Something held him back. Jed turned to find the face of a raelisk inches from his own. That gaze beckoned him toward something dark, something eternal. He kicked and flailed but too many arms tugged at his limbs. Down he went, into the deep of the lake, joining a hundred crimson eyes in the depths of his despair.

#

Aldon felt as though he were witnessing the end of the world. On all sides, men and women fell, cut down by the relentless raelisk. He saw their bodies being pulled into the lake like slaughtered goats dragged to the barn. One by one these comrades were transformed into cursed shadow selves. In his helpless state, numbed by an all-consuming dread, Aldon watched these horrific events unfold.

Saira had gone to face the dark cloaks. He did not follow. Not from fear—although his every breath trembled—but because he would not abandon his Uncle. Garen had asked him to stay close to the meldpool, so stay he would.

The currents of *hlasa* rushed over him. Needle threads ballooned into cords the

size of anchor rope. The spirits were condensed into clarity, yet he could not touch them. He was a boulder in the midst of raging rapids. So thick were the threads he could almost see the currents, like shooting stars that coiled around the four members of the Order. With their sight turned inward, they raised the spirits to their greatest concentration. Laridin commanded the group, binding the spirits they brought forth into a series of circles that reminded Aldon of giant snowballs. They all sat cross-legged, eyes shut, bodies relaxed into deep focus.

Except Uncle Garen. Whenever Aldon looked, Garen seemed to be in pain, his face scrunched up into a point. Why did his Uncle strain more than the others?

Red eyes stole his attention. A faction of at least forty raelisk had broken through the scattered ranks of the Order led by Cal. Every fiery orb was trained on the meldpool. The spirit stalkers shambled towards them, rigid and unshakable. Those not part of the meldpool went to distract the raelisk—how they would face an enemy moulded by tainted spirit, Aldon did not know. He stayed.

His Uncle's body began to convulse, sudden, erratic spasms of his shoulders and neck. Aldon flew to his aid. Laridin, somehow still conscious of the physical world, snapped his eyes open.

“Do not interfere! Stay where you are!”

Aldon halted. Garen's body continued to violently shake, as though his movements were controlled by another. He needed help. Despite Laridin's order, Aldon sat behind his Uncle. He place his hands just below Garen's shoulders, felt muscles twitch like brittle branches in the wind, and tried to still what could not be stilled. Short and shallow gasps wheezed through his Uncle's clenched teeth. Garen struggled to hold

a weight far greater than his strength, as though he gripped chains meant to raise a drawbridge.

“I am...not strong...enough.”

Aldon put his head close to Garen’s. “I am here, Uncle. Let me help you.”

“Listen...Aldon...listen. I am going to pass the spirits. To you. You will carry the threads of the earth. Keep them in place. Do not guide them...Laridin can direct—” His voice cut and body jerked as though pulled by a rope tied to a horse. Aldon held Garen firmly, feeling every fragility of his Uncle. He fought interrupting tears. Then Garen’s thrashing settled, as a wailing babe finally settles into sleep. For a moment, Aldon feared the worst. But his Uncle still breathed. “Laridin will see the spirits through. Sit next to me.”

Aldon agreed and shifted his position.

“Remember. You are the container. Let the spirits come. Do not control them. You are strong. I know you will see it done.”

“I am ready, Uncle.”

Aldon closed his eyes and opened his heart. He could feel two swellings of spirit: one from the Order, the other from Caro. Both were directed toward the Lake of Souls. He focussed on the smaller spheres.

The threads held by Garen, like delicate autumn leaves, fell from his arms onto Aldon’s lap. The *hlasa* nourished him, hot and full. The spring welled from a deep fire, cavernous yet acute in the way it pierced through flesh and bone. With every rivulet of spirit that joined his stream, the greater his appetite became. Aldon reached for more, fervent in his search, doing everything but tug them from his Uncle. A storm washed

over him with gusts of spiralling spirit and raindrops that sizzled.

From the center of that turbulence he sensed the distance of his Uncle, as though Aldon stood at the top of the mountain and Garen at the base. The spirits connected them. Yet with every thread handed over their link weakened. Something more than *hlasa* was being unravelled. His Uncle's foundation was being replaced. He could feel Garen's tenuous ligaments, the corroded hinges and joints. And the sluggish way blood oozed through his body, a lethargic river. When he realized what was going on, Aldon turned to his Uncle.

"When you pass me the last spirit, what will happen to you?"

Garen breathed slowly now, long, ragged inhalations followed by hoarse ejections of air. Aldon wondered if he could speak.

"I think," Garen uttered and then gasped for more air. "I think you already know. I am a part of this meldpool. Therefore, I cannot leave...without my spirit being taken. When I pass these threads to you, I will also pass...into the spirit realm."

Aldon burst open with emotion. Fat, languid tears spilled down his cheeks. The spirits demanded his attention, clung to him like eager hands that pulled toward the deluge of *hlasa*. But he held the furious torrents at bay.

"There must be another way."

"No, Aldon. I must die. But you can help save the others."

"I can't do it, Uncle. I can't take the threads that hold you together."

Although they could not touch, he felt Garen's spirit, the very essence of his being. His Uncle did not hold sorrow or despair, only fatigue. This aged tree had lost its leaves, and was ready to have its roots pulled. Aldon had to choose, to either prop up a failing

body, a life that had flown its course, or to let his Uncle go.

“Free my spirit. Take me to the currents.”

Aldon closed his eyes. The final threads of *hlasa* were there, waiting, lingering. Memories woke from the past. The daily teachings of his Uncle. Their long walks along the Ivory River. The way Garen took the role of gentle father, and raised him as a son, as his very own. And the time Aldon climbed that bigleaf maple, where he felt trapped, unsafe, so far from the world. His Uncle’s comforting words brought him back.

Now it was Aldon’s turn, in this final moment of release, to offer kindness and compassion.

“You will be loved always, Uncle. Your spirit is safe. I will guide it to the river everlasting. Go now and be at peace.”

Garen let go. Aldon received those closing threads, the final tangle of a knot unravelled. With a cold and wet face, he spoke a silent goodbye to his Uncle. And then all but the meldpool disappeared.

The swirls of spirit from before, a rush of vehement energy, now dribbled like eddies next to the vortex that engulfed him. He could handle each individual thread. But suddenly a hidden undercurrent ruptured, like dry kindling thrown onto hot coals. Taken as a whole, the parts of this spiritual tapestry beat like a god’s heart. He struggled to hold on. He could feel the Wind Speaker and Wood Keeper, their minds calm within the fire. Laridin tugged at his ropes of *hlasa*, needing them to complete the meldpool. Aldon barely kept them contained. Laridin could not free the ropes. A dozen different threads constricted around Aldon’s chest, pushing the air from his lungs. With his breath stolen, panic threatened to take hold. He knew the raelisk must be close. Perhaps seconds away.

He could not breathe, could not think clearly, could not endure this pain.

Aldon centered himself. He closed off all thoughts. Or at least, he tried.

Crimson eyes crept in, burning in a sky of black. Uncle Garen blind on a staircase. The belltower in Valei. The gaze from Caro Orsen at Aldon's betrayal. He turned each thought aside. Not with a push, but an acknowledgement of their presence, and a request, for a time, to leave his mind. One by one the thoughts faded like ripples on a pond.

With his mind clear, he opened his heart to the spirits. He focused on *hlasa*, the way the currents flowed with him, over him, through him. They were a part of him. He was a part of them. The spirits would breathe for him. They would carry him. The tempest that surrounded Aldon settled the way storm clouds disperse under the solstice sun, leaving him holding the spirits with tender fingers.

Laridin lifted the threads from Aldon. The Singer of the Flame did not take the spirits. Rather Aldon held the threads as Laridin wove them into sun spheres. Each sphere, concentrated with spirit, pulsed with potential energy. Aldon felt them as stars, blazing, radiating, ready to burst. The more Laridin condensed them, the greater their power vibrated to a divine rhythm. The Singer of the Flame released his hold and the spheres exploded into light.

Two things happened at once. The sun spheres scattered and reflected off the lake, blasting into the chest of every raelisk. But the condensed spirits did not aim to kill. Like a transparent sunrise the embedded circles of light, fixed where human and selwyn hearts once pumped, spread into pure white. The tainted waters fled from their veins. With their curse gone the artificial shells of the raelisk crumbled into dust. Their bodies split in all directions, shedding lucid rainbows.

The spirits around Aldon flitted away like bats whose cave has burst into light. He felt the second spell, cast simultaneously into the Lake of Souls by Caro, as a seismic shock wave. The single sphere harboured no intention to cleanse. The Divine Elder had moulded spirits with but one purpose: to grant life to that which had slept for 10,000 years. As the great shadow rose from her deep slumber the mountain trembled.

Aldon's entire body ached, down to the bone, as though he had swum the length of Omnia. He slumped over his Uncle's corpse. Garen had fallen onto his back, his mouth half-open and limbs painfully still, unencumbered by the suffering around them. When Aldon gained the strength and courage to raise his weary head, he could not look away from the nightmare of nightmares above the Lake of Souls.

Chapter Forty

Curses

Pipe in hand, Mirran sat quietly at the base of the cloud bridge. The gryphawks had long since vanished, agile feathers carried on crystal winds. The mountain was asleep. He could feel the dormancy of the stone, the tall, lethargic peak. Something inside began to stir. Beneath Mount Naga, he thought of his family.

He did this every day, tried to see the faces of his wife and daughters. But they had faded into marooned memory. At one time that had bothered him. Somehow, it made things easier. He could still hear Jana's strong voice, the way she called his name, emphasizing the first syllable. "Meeeeeeer-ran!" And the smell of her hair after bathing in the river. They all had long auburn hair that fell straight to every slim waist; that much he could remember.

Mirran stroked his pipe but didn't smoke, his bag of driftweed empty. What was he doing here? So far from home, a home that had fed Caro's fire. While others fought and died, he carried no purpose. Mirran sent a silent blessing to those on the other side of the cloud bridge. His bones were too old for war. He would wait and see. That was all he could do.

There was a blur of movement to his right. It was Fenox! The mayguar did not stop to acknowledge Mirran but instead vanished into the fragile bridge of cloud. As he watched Fenox disappear, a muddled memory quivered to life. He had watched the mayguar lead him forward once before. He had followed with resolve, with a new goal.

Of course! How had he forgotten?

There was a reason he was here. He would see it done. And if he fell, that would only take him closer to that which he had lost long ago.

You foolish old man, he thought to himself, and stepped into cloud.

#

Jed gasped for air.

As he surfaced, the dagger in his lungs was pulled free. He spat out tainted water from his mouth, sour and mordant. Moments ago he stared a deathless death in the face. And then in a burst of light...the raelisk were gone. He didn't know what had happened. But he reckoned he had the spirits—and their weavers—to thank.

The crater rocked and swayed. Jed ignored the quaking earth. He had to find Kirin's sword. He was prepared to dive back into these foul waters to find that silver blade. Yet there was the River Walker's prize, floating on the Lake of Souls as a feather on wind. He swam then waded through the lake—which looked clearer somehow, as mud showered with rain—and raised the heavy sword in disbelief. What did it mean, when metal became lighter than water?

That question shook him. His ponderous mind chased him out of the warm lake. And then a voice reached his ears, crisp, resonant, an ancient song that coursed through his veins. It spoke of a warning in the water. Was that Kirin? Jed stared at the sword, eyes drawn to the engraved sun above the two-handed hilt. But more than one voice lived here. Did all Walkers of the Talon dwell within this riverrock blade? The song came again.

Beware the shadow of the lake.

A sharp wave of goose bumps pricked his skin. Jed was being followed. He

turned to face the Lake of Souls. Under the midday sun rose a creature of the night.

At first Jed saw raelisk, thousands clawing their way out from the deepest waters. But this monster, mother to the spirit stalkers, with scales carved of the blackest onyx, spanned the width of the lake. A long neck reached for the clouds. Ash suffocated the air. The day went dark. Any vestige of hope faded into the oblivion held in those obsidian eyes. Wings fashioned by Vedil himself blotted out the sky. The shadow dragon returned to world of the living, and cast despair into the sun.

Jed stood perfectly still, a petrified statue. If the gryphawks were sand sparrows, this was a perennial falcon. Against such a foe only sorrow could be sought. He watched the dragon claim the sky and fell under the shadow of her wings.

Do not look to darkness. Trust to hope.

The voice of Kirin's sword pulled him away. Jed moved from the lake and crouched on the grassy shore. There he waited.

With his sword resting on the ground, Jed's knuckles brushed against something that felt like glass. He raised his hand. The chrak lay beneath his fingers. Before he recognized the inevitable, that ruby-encrusted hilt fell into his grasp. He willed his fingers to leave the dagger where it lay. Yet while his mind spoke one thing, his body did another.

With the chrak tucked behind his belt, Jed fixed his eyes on the shadow dragon. Her noble head had turned from him, intent on the members of the Order. Thunder roiled from her beating wings. Gripping the sword of the Walker, Jed took a long breath—it felt like his very last—and dashed toward Caro.

The Divine Elder faced the shadow dragon, his fingers spread as though he held

an invisible sphere. His hands moved carefully, with a directed purpose, the puppet master manipulated his puppet. Jed needed to stop him. Yet first he had to deal with the dark cloaks.

The Untainted descended upon him as a black cloud. There were six. Swords with circled tips came toward him. Jed hoisted his new blade, the way Kirin had held it to the sun, guided by the spirits of the River Walkers. The warmth of Solu slid down the metal edge and through the grooves of the handle. Touched by the sun, his fingers tingled in anticipation.

The dark cloaks were an impossible challenge. Jed tensed his muscles. The six selwyn sped forward, ready to run him down—and proceeded to run right by. He felt as though he were invisible. The seventh member of the Untainted came just behind. This dark cloak glanced his way, a ghost face beneath the hood. For a moment they locked eyes. Jed was startled to see an ally rather than an enemy. And then all seven disappeared behind him, leaving the Lake of Souls.

Caro Orsen awaited. Jed hoped the Divine Elder would be preoccupied pulling the strings of the shadow dragon. No such luck. Caro shook his head at Jed as though preparing to scold a disobedient child. Jed ignored the fear in his heart, the fear of being strangled by spirit. How long would it take Caro? Would a simple flick of the wrist snap his neck?

Caro smiled and beckoned him forward.

Jed did not hesitate. Whatever spirits Caro used on him, Jed would, at least momentarily, divert his attention. Perhaps the Order could use that time. To do what, he did not know. But this was all Jed could see. He would not turn away.

Jed moved within several paces of Caro, wondering when he would be thrown to the ground. With leisure and great relish, the Divine Elder lifted a hand above his head. Jed planted his feet and steeled himself for the intangible blow. Caro's withering gaze wrapped a cold, heavy blank around Jed's soul.

Kirin's sword burned in his hands. His skin hissed and blistered. Jed did not let go. He didn't know what was happening. But he kept going forward. With his hands on fire he bridged the final gap between them.

Caro flung his arm to the right. A wall of blue flame sprang from the earth. Jed leapt back. Heat singed the hair on his knuckles. But he stood his ground. Cobalt fire encircled him. Jed recoiled from the wicked blaze. He was trapped. Then he found himself lowering his sword into the flame. The flickers sputtered and died. The well of fire ran dry. Caro stood, mouth agape, on the other side of the charred grass and earth.

"The Walkers are all dead!" The Divine Elder shifted his eyes to the sun-carved blade. "That sword does not belong to you."

"It was a gift."

With Kirin's sword leading the way, Jed confronted Caro.

The Divine Elder stumbled back, hands tugging madly at the air. The ground split and tore into fissures, like a knife sawing through a thin crust of bread. Dirt, grass and rock simply fell inward, down to a chasm far below. But wherever Jed walked the earth remained. The sword protected him.

Caro called dormant roots from the earth that shot through the surface as spears. Jed stepped freely past them all. The Divine Elder looked to the lake, to the shadow dragon, and raised his left hand. When he brought his flat palm down, sharp and exact,

the dragon beat her wing.

The air roared to life. Caro sheltered himself with spirit. Jed flew back. The wind blasted him hard in the chest, stealing his breath. When he recovered, lungs desperate for air, his hands were empty. His sword lay half a dozen paces away.

Caro stood above him, once again amused. "It's your move."

Jed feigned for the sword. His left foot dug into the ground while his right hand pulled the chrak free. With every muscle taut he pushed off. The chrak made a mark for Caro's midsection and stopped an inch before the target. Jed felt the spirits freeze his arm, an icy grip that crushed his fingers. They moved down his wrist, clutched at his elbow and seized his shoulder. From there the spirits spread across his neck, a deadly caress that squeezed and squeezed. Jed's eyes bulged. Thick pain wracked his skull and then subsided as his head became faint. The world threatened to spin away.

Caro paused. "Not too fast. No. We want to slow this down."

Jed wanted to close his eyes, but Caro ensured they could still see.

"You offered Saul a quick end. That much I can thank you for. But yours will be deliberate and delicate, one piece at a time. Your light will go out slowly. The eyes will remain. Always, they will remain, so I can see them fill with darkness everlasting."

Jed did not want to hear Caro's voice. Yet each word rumbled in his ears. Caro revelled in his agony.

"That will please Saul. Because I know he is watching. Tell me, Jed Trail, how many have you killed in your day? How many lights have you taken from this world? I will be doing Rivaria a favour by capping your candle. Where do you suggest we start? Here, I'll let you point."

Movement came to Jed's left hand. He could twitch his little finger. Caro had freed the spirits from that single place. With his pinkie, he aimed straight at the Divine Elder.

"That won't do. It's not polite to point. Didn't your father teach you that? I'm sure he taught you a lot of things. Care to share?" Jed tensed, if that was at all possible. "Or shall I probe a little, take a walk down your memory lane. Let me know if you object. No? Then let us see what we can find. Hmm. It seems your father had a firm hand."

Jed squirmed on the inside. To know Caro now wandered among his secrets and lies made his stomach churn. He raged against his prison. The spirits held him tight.

"I see he left more than one mark. He kept you well tamed. Such a turbulent child. You should be proud of your father. A strong-willed man. He got whatever he wanted."

Jed tried to escape the truth behind those words. Caro might be reading his memories like pages in a book, but Jed still controlled his own thoughts. Caro was much like his father, someone who held power and used it to cause harm. Both were small men. Not cowards exactly, but corrupt in the soul. They inflicted pain because that is all they knew how to do.

Caro changed tactics. "I see that isn't a trigger for you anymore. I suppose there is always your mother. Do you want to know what happened to her? Such a sorry tale. It will be my pleasure to tell you. But first things first. I think it's time you give up that pretty dagger."

Caro plucked the chrak from Jed's rigid fingers. "You were going to stick me with this beautiful blade, just as you did Saul. I wonder how that feels, to have a knife twist

and turn in your gut, to know that if it goes too deep there is no turning back. That's well worth a try."

The Divine Elder pressed the dagger under Jed's ribs. As the blade cut cleanly through his shirt and into the flesh underneath Caro caught sight of the red glow in his palm.

"What's this? Rubies in the hilt? A chrak! A fine curse you have passed on to me, Jed Trail. But if I recall, a man cursed with a chrak can still take the lives of others, even the dagger's former owner." Caro's eyes lingered over the sparkle of the rubies and then shifted to meet Jed's helpless gaze. "I fear your flame will not burn much longer."

The blade went straight through Caro's stomach. Not the chrak, but another blade from behind. Jed, released from the spirit hold, grappled with the reeling body of the Divine Elder. Caro's blue-grey eyes flared in surprise. In that long moment Caro's sight blurred and then dimmed. The light from those orbs sank into eternal night. The Divine Elder still clutched the chrak in limp fingers. Jed, his chest heaving, pushed Caro aside.

Cal appeared, his face flushed and the blood of the Divine Elder on his blade. "Thought you needed my help. Now you owe me one."

Jed threw his arms around his brother. "We'll call it even."

"Next time, we stick together."

"Agreed." Jed's eyes strayed to the chrak. The rubies called to him with glitter and show. He went to retrieve his new blade. "I'm trading in my knives."

Cal frowned at the sword. "Where is Kirin?"

"The spirits took him. Something told me he was ready."

"You aren't going to keep your pretty dagger?"

“No. It’s a parting gift.”

Cal turned to the lake. The shadow dragon had lifted her gaunt body free of those languid waters. “There is one final darkness to face.”

Jed stood beside him. “And I will risk it with you.”

Chapter Forty-One

Latent Secrets

Naga woke.

Rising from the Lake of Souls felt as a dream. She drifted up from the water like a fog, without shape or form. She could not see, could not hear. Naga felt only the threads pulled across her, the hlasa tying knots around withered tissue. Her crippled skeleton, strengthened by spirit, began to reassemble. Scales clustered and claws sharpened. Her left arm, perhaps too damaged by her fall 10,000 years ago, hung flaccid. She flexed her five right claws. For an age and more her body had bled dry, feeding this lake an immortal syrup. The pain of her existence returned. What was once vacant and decrepit became solid and whole, burdened by weight.

The lucid shadow stretched latent muscles, her tendons fastened by spirit. Naga remembered the solitude of her final years, remembered her end. With that memory bitter seeds began to sprout. Naga felt the living flow of air. She felt the warm breath of the sun. The sky opened before her eyes. The beauty of the world filled her with a wrath born of vengeance.

But she was not in control. Another coerced her into response. She was not ready to rise, not so quickly. Yet the hands of her master were inflexible. He told her to raise her head. He told her to flap her wings. She raged at being disturbed from her long sleep. Raged at how the light burned her eyes. Raged at the power held over her. But she obeyed.

And then the chains fell away. The weight lifted like a heavy layer of scales

being shed. Her control returned. With her resurrector gone, Naga could lay once again in the comforting waters of the lake.

Anger pulled her from thoughts of silence and sleep. She knew humans had stolen her children. She would assuage her hatred for those that walked on two legs. Up she thundered. Her expanse of wings, held together by spirit, buried hope and faith under long and ominous shadows. Far below the target of her venom moved to flee. None could escape her fury. She dove and the earth recoiled. The air beneath her fled as minnows from a restless shark. She brought down a wave of terror. Ice and death erupted from her belly. Her very breath became poison, a malevolent vapour that surged from jaws of spite.

Cold ash shot from her serpent fangs. That fountain of disease and decay enveloped every human on the south side of the lake, their bodies reduced to frozen cinders. Again she rose, a tower of shadow and scales. This time she made note of four she had not at first seen. They sat on the grass, weaving spirit toward her. Naga shred those cords of hlasa like a sword through a spider's web. She hovered over her prey, her belly boiling with venom.

Naga plunged in eager descent toward those who would satisfy her bloodlust.

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Saira struggled to stand. The world shifted around her. Fehl had returned to the dark cloaks, who took flight from the crater. Where was her brother going? The emotion of their first meeting since the year of her birth left her heart vulnerable. Did he run from her? Or the menace of the mountaintop? In the distance, Cal had run through Caro Orsen with a knife. She thought she spotted Jed carrying a silver sword. The raelisk

were gone. In their stead, the shadow dragon darkened the sky. A dozen members of the Order, caught in the grey blight of dragon breath, dissolved before her eyes. Her head spun.

Something bit her leg.

“Ow!”

She looked down at Fenox. The mayguar did not wait for her. He padded silently toward Aldon and the meldpool. Saira stumbled to follow.

The members of the Order still sat in a circle. Then she saw Aldon was one of the four, his Uncle dead beside him. Fenox licked Aldon’s hand. She knelt on the grass and put her hand on his knee.

“What happened?”

“He wasn’t strong enough. I had to complete the meldpool. I had to take his spirit.”

Saira closed her eyes. “And the raelisk?”

“We untangled them from their curse. They are part of the true eternal. Caro is dead, but his hlasa lingers. He has set midnight free under the sun.”

“Silence!” Laridin stood. The red robe glared at Saira then turned to his Order. “Naga is upon us. Give me your threads! Without them, our days end here. Stay your hand, selwyn. Do not dare interrupt!”

As Aldon concentrated, Saira stepped back and looked to the heavens. The dragon loomed. Fear wrapped a dark blanket over her shoulders, cold, clammy and tight. Naga fell from the sky, a nightmare carried on wings. The dragon’s gaze turned Saira to stone. She lost herself in the fathomless eyes of her predator. Naga’s head, a snake with

black horns, thrust toward her. Saira found herself locked place. Unable to run, powerless to act, she simply watched the shadow dragon plummet toward her, open jaws of terror, and unleash an ocean of jagged ash. Ggrey death suffocated her. She tried to scream but no sound escaped her lips.

The cindered breath of the dragon sluiced over her. She felt the bite of iron frost and a memory of fluent fire. Yet she stood in a bubble. All of them did. Laridin had weaved a circle of spirit to protect them. The Singer of the Flame, bent over and hands clenched above his knees, looked ready to topple.

“I cannot hold the sphere shield.”

Naga curled around the crater for another attack. Saira tried to think clearly. She wanted to shut her eyes, to close out panic and terror. Her friends needed her help. In her pocket, the sunstone burned. She tried to touch the stone. Her fingers came back hot and red. Fenox sat at her feet and looked up at Saira expectantly.

“What do you want me to do?”

Something distracted the mayguar. Jed and Cal were running toward the lake. Toward the shadow dragon. What in the world they were up to?

A voice sounded behind her.

“My oh my. I never thought my eyes would see the Lake of Souls, much less a beast from the Days of Legend.”

“Mirran! Why have you come?”

“Well, you see, I tried to follow your mayguar once before, and it eventually—given my slow legs—did some good. I thought I’d try once more. There is something you need to have. Something I meant to give you long ago. In fact, it is the oldest

document I ever laid my curious paws on. Perhaps as old as Naga here.”

Saira glanced back at the inbound dragon. “What is it?”

“She doesn’t look happy, no no. Though I suppose I would be rather grumpy too, being woken from such a deep sleep. I never was an early riser.”

“Mirran!”

“Oh right. Here it is. My most treasured prize, salvaged from the Great Library in Roan before the sunfires. The Scroll of Five.”

Mirran unrolled a frayed scroll and, with an air of reverence, handed it over to Saira. She took the faded piece of parchment, light as a feather, and studied its script. The letters she recognized but the words were foreign.

“I can’t read this.”

“My many apologies. The hand that wrote this belonged to a man—or woman, I suppose, I’m not entirely sure—that lived in the Age of Dragons. A prophet and scholar by the name of Andei Riverson.”

“Here. Tell me what it says!”

Mirran squinted at the ink. “I don’t speak the Old Tongue. But I can read it well enough. I’ve read this scroll every year since my eyes first met these words. Let me see. Such messy handwriting. It speaks of a lake circled by cloud whose waters birth the dead. Of sons that replace fathers. There is a sword that will change hands, a curse that will fall. And four humans of four colours—”

Laridin’s voice boomed. “Get down!”

Naga blasted them a second time. This time Laridin flew back, screaming, the robes that covered his arms charred to crisp dust. Wisps of frozen flame sieved through

the sphere shield. Saira lurched to her knees. Mirran tumbled into her. The infiltrating dragon's breath cut like ice shards. Tiny frigid daggers raked her skin. She clenched her teeth in anguish. For the last time, Naga circled the Lake of Souls.

She got Mirran to his feet. "Where is the scroll?"

"I'm afraid I dropped it. It must be around here somewhere..."

"Just tell me what I need to know!"

"Yes. This would be the pertinent time. Where was I? Four humans of four colours, joined by a fifth who belongs to the water race. A woman that bears the mark of the three. She will unite the spirits and cleanse the waters."

Saira didn't hear the rest. There wasn't time. She stepped into the center of the meldpool. The four elements pooled around her. Laridin, too weak to protest, eyed her askance from the grass; she still felt the fervid undercurrent of his hlasa. Earth, wind, wood and fire puddled around her feet, languid as a mountain stream in winter. She faced Naga, who came at them low this time, right claw extended, and lifted the spirits into her arms.

The threads hung limp. The spirits were tired. Saira dug into a well that had run dry.

"Aldon! All of you! I need every thread."

Laridin glanced from her to Naga and back again. Perhaps out of exhaustion, perhaps in desperation, he agreed and the empty riverbed began to fill. The others followed, four streams merging with the flood that was Saira. She gathered the currents. Laridin's hlasa lashed out at her, burning cords she had to tame; solid earth from Aldon, heavy strands that felt like thick mud; from the Wind Speaker threads spiralled in every

direction, swift and chaotic, refusing to lie still; the Wood Keeper offered thick columns of spirit, separate and sturdy with branching loose ends that she threaded together. She fused the elements into a single entity, wrapping earth with fire and wood with air. Then she flung the united spirits as a spear of the gods.

The writhing weapon struck the shadow dragon squarely in the chest. Naga, armoured by Caro's resurrection sphere, stayed her course.

She could not stop the shadow dragon with force. She did not know how to fashion a sphere shield as Laridin had done. To untie the knots Caro had tied was her only option. She wrangled with the tightly woven hlasa. The tangle of tainted spirit would not budge. With river fingers she reached her nails between the cords, clawing for a supple snag, a loose thread, anything to give her a grip. But anywhere she pulled the knots only twisted the spirit tighter. She could not undo what Caro had done. The cords of the resurrection sphere would have to be severed. How did one cut through the very essence of life?

Naga breathed in, sucking and mixing air with the vitriol inside. Saira struck at the dragon—again and again—with gales of air and arrows of fire. The blows bounced off Naga like pebbles thrown at a turtle shell.

Right then Cal and Jed appeared. They raced between the shadow dragon and the meldpool. Saira stared, horror-struck, as Naga redirected her wrath at the Trail brothers. The shadow dragon lunged and still they did not move. Only when her jaws flared with fangs that dripped freezing fire did they run, Jed on one direction, Cal the other. Naga's head flew between them, too close to strike with tooth or breath. She had to choose which brother to target. Her right claw, strong and formidable as in her youth, made the

decision.

Naga plucked Cal in talons that could lift mountains and crushed the spirit from his body. Jed screamed, an unholy scream of hate and despair. The shadow dragon carried Cal a hundred paces up and let him fall to earth. Saira turned before Cal crumpled into the ground. The sickening thud, over all too quick, echoed in her ears.

Sorrow struck like a knife in the gut, sharp and cruel. Her faith faltered. She was ready to let go, to let everything fall. But she needed to reach Cal, to do whatever she could to bring him back. First, the shadow dragon had to be brought down.

Saira no longer borrowed the spirits. She wrenched them from the four surrounding her. Like a cat with a ball of yarn she pulled every strand free. The currents flailed around her. Laridin tried to hold the spirits from her, to prevent Saira from stealing them all. But she was too strong, too angry to stop.

Naga soared directly overhead. Frantic, Saira twisted herself together, ignited the spirits and thrust them at the shadow dragon. Her attack shattered like a glass sword. She could not reach the scales on the other side of the resurrection sphere. Naga dove to finish them all. Saira pushed back. The earth shook under her feet. She felt the weight of the dragon, a weight she tried to hold at bay. Her own body became light. She watched the ground stretch away from her. Someone yelled at her but Saira could not hear the words.

The shadow dragon raged against her wall of spirit. Saira barely held on. She could only hold Naga back a scant few seconds. She needed to find the weakness, the fault in Caro's design. Nothing escaped her perception. Yet there was no gap, no breach in the resurrection sphere. She thrust and probed and sensed something attached to the

shadow dragon, a tether of spirit that dangled free. The moment she tied her spirits to this loose cord Naga broke through.

The shadow dragon sensed her opportunity, folded her enormous wings and plunged. Saira could see herself in Naga's eyes, a tiny creature to be stepped on. She could feel the dragon's tortured pain. Something had shifted. She had control.

Saira commanded the dragon to veer away and return to the sky. Naga obeyed. Dark wings beat as though they were her own. Saira felt the wind on her scales, the insignificance of the mountain, the power of her body. To have such control was to never know fear. She could have and do anything. Never would her will be questioned.

Yet, beneath that dominant shell, something ached. To share spirits with Naga was to know her suffering. A long and lonely life of violence and death. A mother who had lost her children. Light and warmth had faded. For her, the sun no longer burned.

Saira tugged at the loose end. The threads began to unravel. The spirits, freed from Caro's prison, separated and danced off the mountain. Like rock into sand the shadow dragon's wings crumbled. Sinew and muscle rescinded and her skeleton dismantled. Ribs and vertebrae fell from the sky, huge slabs and blocks bone that embedded next to the Lake of Souls for another age to come. Naga, released from her troubles and torment, returned to the refuge of her long sleep.

Saira ran for Cal. Mirran shouted after her.

"Wait! There is more to the scroll!"

She did not heed Mirran's call. Her focus was Cal. As she approached her legs began to shudder. Jed was already there, head in his hands. She found it hard to breathe. The air in her throat fluttered. Cal lay on his back, his body broken. Saira fell to her

knees and wept.

In that moment Saira understood her mother's grief. To lose someone you loved was like cutting off a part of your own spirit. Cal was gone, taken by the hostile hand of the dragon. She could not bear the thought of his absence, the stillness of his breath. But her mother's pain was the greater. Mauve had lost her life partner, the father of her unborn children. That grief would have claimed her soul, her only desire to find and join again with that which had been lost. Mauve wanted Saira and her brother to know their father. The Lake of Souls offered that possibility.

Saira wiped the tears from her eyes. She looked to Cal, at the face she had slowly grown to love. Jed, torn on the inside, closed his brother's eyelids. She put a hand on Cal's cheek, already cool. She could not accept that this was the end.

Jed looked at her funny. "Saira, remember when Cal got stabbed by one of Roundbelly's thugs? You used your stone. Do you still have it?"

She felt the heat in her pocket. Could it work? No, she was too late. But with burning fingers she pulled the sunstone free anyway. The smooth rock glowed. Many of the spirits around the lake had fled, yet the sunstone still held hlasa. She went to place it on Cal's chest when the stone leapt from her hand.

The sunstone rested above his heart and burst with light. Rays shot in every direction. Saira had to look away. A wave of hot air rushed past. Her body tingled. When she turned back the sunstone was gone. Cal's eyes blinked open. Saira's breath froze. Cal coughed a few times, put a hand where the sunstone had been, and stared up at her.

"Where was I?"

She smiled through fresh tears. “Too far away.”

Jed laughed. “You did it! Thank the gods!” He yanked Cal to his feet.

Saira watched the brothers embrace. Exhaustion gripped her. She lay back and gazed up at the sky, at the sun behind that bright, radiant blue, and fell into joyous sleep.

Chapter Forty-Two

A Fresh Current

“Well, I guess this is it.”

Outside the ruins of Circlehaven, Aldon, wearing the brown robes of the Earth Druid, spoke the words in a solemn tone. Saira met his sad yet friendly eyes, eyes that had traded suspicion for trust this past month.

“Are you sure about this?”

“My Uncle always told me to follow *my* path. I have come to Circlehaven for a reason, to help rebuild what has fallen. This is my home now.”

She hugged him hard, a long embrace that spoke of a deeper kinship. “I will miss your gentle strength. Thank you for having the courage to be my friend.”

From there, Saira, Cal, Jed and Mirran followed the dry riverbed of the Talon to the Dareth Downs. Solu shone clear each and every day. Fenox led them on a path that meandered. Saira usually walked with Cal. They held hands and she laughed at his boyish grin. Sometimes she walked alone, her thoughts on her parents and Fehl and the mysteries that still lingered. And Wilton Lhee. Jed proved the quietest of them all, often sitting on the bare riverside, Kirin’s sword in hand. He could see something now that was absent before.

They four companions soon came to the song stones. The raelisk carvings were gone. Saira stopped next to the slender and delicate sculptor of a crescent moon. Mirran sat next to her.

“I never finished telling you about the Scroll of Five, although I *tried*. There was

something about darkness being lit, and the sun making a new heart. The scroll spoke of a brother to a Walker whose sacrifice will be rewarded. You gave Cal the sunstone. That was his gift. But I guess you figured that part out for yourself.” Saira nodded but kept silent. Mirran stared, for a time, toward the distant horizon in the west. “Speaking of darkness, something inside me has lifted. I would like to be around people again. Perhaps I will settle in Roan, and see if the library needs a new bookkeeper. You’ll have to come for tea sometime. What about you, my young lady?”

Saira got to her feet. “I intend to follow the currents.”

Later that day, Cal caught her in a wistful mood. “A feather for your thoughts?”

He handed her a gryphawk feather. Saira ran her hand through the soft, tawny barbs. “I was just thinking about something my stepfather said, when I first asked him where rivers come from. It’s the story of the Tainted River.”

“I would like to hear it.”

“Me too!” Mirran said. Jed stood nearby as well.

“Well, this is the way Wilton told it.” She closed her eyes in remembrance, and heard Wilton’s kind voice sending the tale through her.

One day, a young man named Johan went walking along the riverside. But the water had withered away, leaving a barren bed of rock and sand. Too many fish had been taken, too many dams built, and so the river was tainted. The spirits within the currents rose up into the heavens, refusing to return. The clouds stopped breathing so the rain could no longer freeze and the snow could no longer thaw.

Johan followed the river further. A decrepit tree, its spindly branches brittle and bent, stood on the cracked bank. He put his hand on its bark and the tree spoke to him.

“My roots are dry. I have no water to fill my leaves.”

Johan poured some water from his pouch around the base of the tree. The water ran up the roots and the leaves were green once more. He stroked its bark and the tree said, “Why do you follow this empty river?”

“I want to find the true current.”

He gave a little more water to the tree and went on his way.

Johan followed the river further. A tired river dolphin, unable to move its small, broken body, lay on its side in the abandoned riverbed. The river dolphin spoke to him.

“My fins are dry. I have no water to soothe me.”

Johan poured some more water from his pouch onto the skin of the dolphin. The water shimmered over its surface and its skin was silver once more. He stroked its fin and the dolphin said, “What brought you to these barren shores?”

“To see if there are others I can help.”

He gave a little more water to the dolphin and went on his way.

Johan followed the river further. A frail man, his back hunched over a walking stick, hobbled over the smoothed river stones. The old man crinkled his brow and spoke to him.

“My mouth is dry. I have no water to wet my parched throat.”

Johan poured some water from his pouch over the cracked lips of the old man. The water trickled down his throat and his mouth was wet once more. He put his hand onto the old man’s shoulder and the old man said, “Will you have enough water for yourself?”

“Do not worry, for your need is greater than mine.”

And he gave the last of his water to his new friend.

“Your heart is true, so I do not wish to deceive you any further.”

Before his eyes the old man became a spirit and rose into the heavens. The clouds breathed, the rain froze, the snow thawed and the tainted river was pure and flowed once more.

Saira opened her eyes. The sound reached her first. The rustling of a thousand leaves, the distant cry of a silver dolphin. A strong and eager wind scurried over the dry bed of the Talon. She saw the old current appear, snake around the nearest bend and run clear and clean over the song stones. Then the spirits returned. A second wave rushed from the Nether Mountains and the river roared to fullness. She breathed in the flow of life. In the cascade of water, in the spirit of every living thing, a new Age was born.

With a final glance toward the mountains of the north, Saira turned to follow the fresh current of the Talon River.

March 3, 2010