

## Rising Smoke

The continent of Sha is a thin, snaking continent. Anchored by the kingdom of Githfaera in the south, and capped by the lands of the shepherd giants in the north, the Spine Mountains rise across its entirety, splitting west from east with few passages between. East lies the Forsaken Lands, Stelia, a land from where stelin raiders emerge across the Spine Mountain's breaks, assaulting castles and garrisons with fire and death. West lies the Crescent Coast, gently curving for thousands of miles and home to all of the continent's civilization, hugging the thin bridge of land between rising mountains and stormy seas. At the northernmost point of humanity's breath, where the foothills of the Spine Mountains achieve their easternmost reach and the giants' songs are heard in the wind, lays the East March. Forgotten, ignored, and content. A simple place of few, simple villages and few, simple problems.

There, in the early morning hours of a cold spring day, a thin veil of cool mist fell from the enshrouded, forested hills down to its betrothed valley. Every blade of grass was crowned with a flower, making every bunch of grass a bouquet and filling every inch of land in color subdued by the dim waking light. Diamond necklaces of dew droplets collected on dangling leaves and pooled on Mist's hair as he sat perfectly still against a tree. He was a young man, then, not long before reaching his first quarter of a century. An angular jaw held up a freckled, bare face carved around two hazel eyes and winged by ears just large enough to be unfitting. Scrawny according to his teasing friends, he had always been a runt of sorts. Neither the tallest nor the strongest, neither the quickest nor a paragon of hardwork and endurance, but gods was he quiet when he wanted to be. As quiet as mist.

It was the first day of Strawberry Harvest, one of a hundred festivals that come in a year but also one of the village favorites. Two hours before sunrise he had left his house with his bow and walked into the forest, hoping to catch something for the feast. Rather than the ever-present ballads of birds and rustling of critters that sung to the rising sun, it took nearly an hour before he heard the first sound of life. In strange silence he sat against a mossy trunk. Watching, listening, waiting. Thoughts often wandered but rarely lingered, pulled away by the jealous claws of tiredness that fought against everything else. Eventually he saw what he had been waiting for. Two pheasants came into view and, with hardly a sound of creasing clothes or released string, two arrows flew. His job then done, he grabbed the pheasants and headed home to South Grove.

A village of less than three hundred people, South Grove was set in the smooth, rich fields south of Fern Ridge. Wooden houses and barns were spread out from and built upon a central, ancient stone plaza much too large for the town itself. Equally ancient buildings encircled the plaza, large and communal. Most were battered and chiseled by time's erosion with wooden flesh that stood on stone skeletons. A few had devolved into food storage, another the village meeting hall, and a tavern where celebrations were held. In theory it was an inn too, at least—though in reality its only guests were owls and spiders nesting in the rafters.

By the time that Mist arrived at the outskirts of the farms the sun had risen high enough to begin its cleansing of the sky's morning colors, but not so high as to disperse the cold spring dew. Thoughts of lunch and his tone-deaf whistling accompanied him past the green waves of growing wheat, fields of tangly spires of peas rising through forests of stakes, orchards of blooming fruit, and fallow fields in patient waiting. A few other early-birds were already out and about, walking and working in the morning's coolness, but few close enough to notice Mist's passing. The village proper, or what passed for it, was equally vacant when Mist finally arrived carrying his morning's catch. Fortunately, the one man Mist needed was uncharacteristically at his shop early in the morning.

Butch the Butcher was a log-armed, short, reddish-bald bulk of a man in a shop that couldn't be more different: long, airy, and built of tall, grey stones. A life-long friend of Mist's father, he was the sole proprietor of South Grove's meat, and Mist was his provider of fish and game for the town's festivals.

"What are you doing here s-s-so early? Doesn't look like you've even slept." Mist set the two pheasants down on a pockmarked and stained wooden table under the gaze of Butch's sleep-deprived eyes.

"No, I was so excited to see what you brought me today that I couldn't sleep." Turning and inspecting the pheasants, Butch blinked and repeated his inspection as if for the first time. "I was up all night long. It sounded like a herd of something moving around. And weird wind, and my dogs, oh my dogs just kept barking at something and whining. I went out three times and didn't see anything but there *was* something. Wasn't no way I was going in the treeline with those sounds in the dark."

"S-surprised that Aunt Coraline didn't head outside and scare it off herself with her scowl."

"She did go outside once. Said she heard some other strange sounds, then her and the dogs wouldn't leave the house. Muttered something too but she just looked spooked. Don't think the whole north side of town didn't sleep either. I saw the Flints and the Mirs and the Lockays all out before sunrise, too, and they're all lazy bastards."

"Maybe it was a weed." Mist said it jokingly, though really he said it wishfully. Creations made from random spurts of magic, weeds defy logic and sense. Mist had only seen one weed in all his life: a cow that had sprouted butterfly wings and developed an insatiable appetite for wine.

Nothing else had ever happened in South Grove. Aside from an occasional visitor from the other East March villages or new products brought in by the traders that went south to Astrasta once every few months, the only novelties were obstruent trees. So it should be of no surprise that when Mist heard Butch describe *anything* different, Mist's neglected curiosity took firm hold before he was aware of it.

"Eh, suppose so. Who knows. Maybe it was a giant bat flying around, or some walking trees like in the old stories. Don't much care as long as they let me sleep."

"Do you know if anyone has taken a look around?"

Butch gave him a curious look. Everyone knew Mist was far from the bravest around, though nobody bothered reminding him about it. He still had a habit of shrieking when he saw snakes or when someone jumped at him, and he wasn't naive about the fact either. Unfortunately for him, what he lacked in mediocre bravery was matched by a surplus of curiosity, with the two frequently colliding with unpleasant results.

"You want to look, you go right ahead," Butch replied as he started stripping the first bird, but Mist was already making his way out the door with a small strip of nabbed jerky in hand by the time that Butch looked up. "Don't get yourself eaten!"

Mist walked north, towards the supposed scene of the night's sounds, as his mind walked wildly. Despite his eagerness to see a weed, the desperate yearning for a break in the perpetual banality of life, the tentative fear in his mind wouldn't stop trying to close the curtains over his curiosity. *No, no, no. It's just going to be something stupid I know it, like cows or sheep. Or it'll be like when old Mrs. Fletcher sold the wrong mushrooms and everyone thought they were possessed for a day.*

Before he knew it, he found himself halfway through the village plaza red with banners, ribbons, and strewn with tables ready for the celebration. Most of it had been set up the day before, but the aroma of strawberries was fresh as the cooking and mixing began in earnest. At its center was the Dry Well, an old and wide stone well that, as far as any memory or story could tell, had never actually had water in it. But it was a solid space with ancient columns holding a much newer wooden roof. From across half of the plaza Mist heard the annoying voice of Speaker Galath, the ceremonial head of ceremonies for South Grove, rise of the sounds of pots, pans, and whacking knives. Suddenly alert to the threat of being drawn into a long-winded, one-sided conversation, he quit his habitual whistling and hurried along.

Though South Grove was not home to many, its homes were spread out even at their thickest congestion, so that it was twenty minutes before Mist came to the edge of the village proper. There it was that he saw Alflosta in her father's forge, tending the infantile embers for her day's work. She was one of only a handful around Mist's age in South Grove. The closest, in fact—she was born only twenty days after him.

From an early age she was taller than most of her peers, taller even than most of the older children, a trait that never waned. She bore an untraditional form of beauty, one that bloomed seemingly overnight from a dormant winter to a blazing summer day. Freckles that were bashful became cherished. The shy smile, askew with lichen acne, grinned into butterfly-conjuring happiness. Her short hair seemed borne from the fire her father kept. Its tendrils danced like flames in the wind, the few loose strands always singed to uneven ends by loose embers and their own flame.

Between the sound of her work and being turned away from the open air, she wasn't aware of him approaching. Mist could have simply said "Hello" but that was boring. Sure, she was surrounded by sharp and heavy implements with the knowledge of how to use them, but Mist had lost count of her threats to use them without seeing her once follow through. So, instead, he whistled a bird call as he passed and tossed a pebble at the forge, hitting it a foot from

her head. Several seconds later a response of the same bird call chirped behind Mist just before a handful of petty pebbles peppered his back.

“Where’s that smoked fish you promised me last week, weather-boy?” Alflosta yelled after him. A smile on her face, a hand dusty with fresh dirt, and a crackling fire in her furnace.

“Didn’t you hear?” Replied Mist as he spun around to face her and walk backwards. “They all heard you were hungry and they all s-s-swam back to the sea. Give me another week and I’ll talk one into your oven. I hear from a reliable source that Butch has fresh pheasants though, if your stomach can’t wait.”

“If you want that new knife you better start talking fish, else you’ll find it in your leg.”

“A truly charming lady, truly. You make Prude Queen Tapel s-seem almost like good company. Almost.” Mist stopped and walked back towards her, lowering his voice with the distance. “Hey I’m going over to check the woods by Butch’s place. He said that s-something weird was going on all night with s-sounds that kept everyone awake. Did you hear anything?”

“Who didn’t hear it? I woke up four or five times. First it was some deep rumbling like stampeding cattle that went on and on and on. Then there were weird sounds that were much closer, like trees creaking and squeaking in the wind, but it was moving. I don’t know who was doing what but make sure you shut up whoever was doing it. Probably those stupid Theog brothers getting drunk and letting someone’s cattle loose. Just make sure I can sleep tonight or else *I’ll* take care of it.” As if on cue, the fire behind her popped.

“Ah yes, your beauty sleep. I know how much you desperately need it, I’ll make su-sure you get it tonight.” Taunting her, he hastily walked out of kicking range and continued on his way, his cheeks pinched by a grin.

“Hey!” He turned back to see Alflosta bearing an equally strong grin that cut across her wide mouth, an extended fist with one erect finger reaching out. “Might want to hurry, looks like someone’s cleaning up,” her finger jabbed towards Fern Ridge where, as Mist turned to look, a thin plume of smoke was lazily climbing from behind the hill. “Doubt Taerian will enjoy her shrine getting filled with smoke.”

Now nervous, he quickened his pace towards the hill, veering off of the sole path and into the treeline as he eyed it with increased suspicion. Several others were outside looking at the smoke and talking to one another. A few, as Mist could see, were also walking up the hill’s pathway ahead of him towards the suspicious peculiarity. Choosing not to follow the convenient path that wound up the hill to Taerin’s shrine, Mist decided, instead, to veer into the woods he knew by heart. It was quicker to the other side and, afterall, he probably wouldn’t find whatever or whoever had made the sleep-preventing sounds the night before conveniently placed along the path.

Worrying thoughts moved into his mind and stomach like tendrils of voracious vines, amplified by the eerie silence around him. There were still no birds that he could hear sing or squirrels that he could see climb. It was as if the forest had been vacated of its children in a day, leaving behind only worms and beetles. There were a lot of worms and beetles, in fact, more than he had ever seen in one place. His spine shivered at the sight. Streams of black, brown, and

burgundy beetles bustled in bursting streams of legs and chitinous waves through creek-beds of parted grass. *That's... disgusting.*

Mist carefully made his way across the hill, stopping frequently to look and listen. Nothing.

Aside from the miniscule clapping of gentle leaves, there was no sound. Nowhere was there any sign of anything having come through recently. Hardly a fresh sign of deer, let alone something loud and destructive. That was until he came towards the base of the northern side of Fern Ridge, not far from the smoke he could spy through the canopy's gaps. There he came upon a tree. An impressive old fern with soft needles and a warty base. A short, fresh cut was made into the bark. Neither an ax nor a saw could have done it, and Mist had never known the wolves to make a single cut into the bark like it, especially at its height.

Just as he was prepared to give up looking and investigate the smoke instead, a shimmer caught his eye. A huge feather was nestled on a tree branch, impossibly still and balanced on a twig-of-a-branch a third its size. It was a feather unlike any he had ever seen. In his hand its shaft rested against the veins of his wrist and almost matched it in color. The vane was an iridescent dance of dark green before flowing into bright yellow, moving through orange, red, and black, rivers of white shot through like sharp claps of applause. A silver sheen glimmered over it all, glinting like sunlight in rippling water. When Mist turned the feather over the colors seemed to move and shift in the light, changing to purples and yellows, blues and pinks, an orchestra of colors entrapped in a delicate feather. Stunned into awe by its beauty, it took several minutes of staring before he remembered the world outside of the tunnel vision he had fallen into. Gently wrapping the feather in some spare cloth, he tucked it in his shirt. *She'll like this.* Deciding that he had already found as much weirdness as he could beyond the smoke itself, he returned to his descent.

Mist approached the first plume of smoke. Gently, cautiously. Walking from tree to tree, keeping one arrow knocked on his bow just in case. Even though he was well aware he would probably get scared and run before using it. He could see through the sprawling cobwebs of branches interlocking from forest floor to the sun's halo that he was nearly at the smoke's source. Close, and yet there was no familiar scent of burning wood tingling his nose, or the crackle of fire. Only the pumping of his own blood rattling in his head. A trail of smoke as large as the one he could see, he figured, would need a bonfire. A decent one, too. The forest, albeit eerily quiet, seemed to be as it should be. Yet it clearly was not.

Because he knew the area as well as one might know the feel of their fingers, he knew—despite his detour—that just ahead was a meadow. An ideal place for anyone lighting a fire without wanting to burn the whole forest down would be. When his view pushed through the masking kaleidoscope of emerald leaves into an unhindered view of the gold meadow, he saw an almost empty field. Three men from South Grove stood in the open almost directly to his left, but no fire—no smoke even. Seeing the three of them relaxed him somewhat, and his curiosity took control when the middle man, Samuel Flaxet, began to point towards the cliff-face of the hill exposed to the open meadow. Convinced that it must be safe if those three were standing in the

open, Mist moved forward into the open just enough to see what they were looking at, and it was quite hard to ignore.

One side of the meadow had always been walled off with a nearly vertical portion of the hill's base. A wall of jutting rock laced together by spiderwebs of ivy and rivets of moss. Now, however, a dark, circular hole several dozen feet in width was cut into the hill a couple of feet up. The smoke, suddenly of a strange, foreign odor, engulfed the cavity, slowly rising out from within and into the sky. Mist followed it with his eyes, peering nearly straight up, seeing it catching the wind far above and dissipating. But no bird, not even a buzzing fly, was in the air, only the reflective, metallic underbelly of a great wyrm far, far above swimming through the clouds.

"Hey!" Mist yelled, startling the three men into inelegant, surprised twists to face him. "Which one of you drank too much and dug a hole to hide from your wife?" He walked closer so as to not yell in the case that there were others mulling about unwelcomed.

Samuel showed a sneaky smirk. Everyone knew that he had, in fact, tried that once or twice before. Gregory, to Samuel's left, stared blankly, seemingly unaware that any attempt at humor had occurred. And, on the far side of Samuel, Peter simply sneered down his protracted nose.

"Nobody dug it, boy." Peter said coldly. His poor attitude could have been excused by a stranger for his visible lack of sleep. But that excuse would be useless on anyone who knew Peter—he was always an arrogant prude. As the village arcanist he was indispensable, needed by everyone for help with everything from treating common colds to childbirth, from curing a field of crops of blight to preserving stored grains for years to come with runes. The problem, however, wasn't just that he did it all in narcissistic self-importance, but that he derided everyone who was not an arcanist—which was everyone else in his life. His father, the previous arcanist, was admired by the community. Whether he knew Peter was a poor choice or not was irrelevant for a traditionally hereditary position in a village all about tradition.

"We were awake all night because of damned devilish sounds." Peter continued, his sneer glancing between Mist and the hole. "When the sun rose I saw this smoke and came to inspect its source. Though I would usually wait for someone with more free time to spare than myself, such as you, to do something, it so disturbed my sleep that I want to ensure it *is done*."

Gregory, meanwhile, had begun to fall asleep as he stood there. Samuel, not among Peter's fans, turned back to look at the new cave rather than listen. Before either Peter could continue or anyone interdict, however, a loud and very odd guttural squak came from within the treeline north of them, away from South Grove, immediately followed by the sound of something large running through the brush.

Without hesitation Samuel and Mist, already nocking an arrow again, raced towards the sound, slowing only when they entered the treeline and the thick innards of the forest forced them to. Later, thinking back on it, Mist would be surprised that he ran *towards* the sound. His speed, one of the few things he could pride himself on, had always been demonstrated in running away from things. Bats in the night, cows that surprised him with loud moos, spiders, parents

finding a chore for him to do. Running away was one of his biggest pastimes—even if he never went far. Yet there he was, running ahead of slow Samuel towards who-knew-what. It felt good.

After their initial rush into the forest, they quietly and carefully slipped through the springy grass that compressed under their feet as they pursued the sound. Another sudden bolt of movement shot through the branches and bushes. Mist chased after it in haste, quick and nimble through the forest as behind him Samuel's heavy footsteps thumped and thin branches snapped. Whatever it was, it moved far too quickly for Mist to keep pace with it. Their sprint was short-lived, as were the second, the third, and the fourth sudden sprints deeper into the forest. Each time it seemed to run just before it was in view of Mist or Samuel, yet whatever it was likewise showed no urge to lose its pursuers.

It was not long before Mist recognized that they were heading deep into the forest. Too deep. Approaching the vague border where the safety of humanity and the worshiped gods met the enveloping coldness of unknown forest and the wild gods. Where stories of good and fortune were overshadowed by stories of mystery, fear, and gloom. Where creatures of fables lingered behind trees, and creatures of malevolence waited in the shadows. Sure, it was safe ninety-nine times out of a hundred, but it was the hundredth time that swayed willpower against entering. There were people who ventured into forests off of the paths and sanctuaries, and they came in three types: the armed, the lost, and the crazy.

After chasing the intangible and its increasingly frustrating sounds for a time, the two men stopped. Mist, followed by Samuel breathing heavily, found themselves in a small glade, dimmed and cooled by an overhanging ceiling of leaves housing a rotting, mossy tree that dipped its skeletonized arms into a small pond as still as glass. All around it a wall of trees stood still, their branches unwavering, their blanketed bases of brambles undisturbed. After having teased the two men through the forest, whatever or whoever it had been showed it could lose them when and where it chose.

"Well I'm stumped." Samuel said with gusts of breaths as he sat atop a damp, mossy stump. "I don't know what that was but I'm too old for running around in the forest. Or just... running."

Mist nodded and listened, but not to Samuel. While it was difficult to listen over the heaving of Samuel's breaths, it was even worse with him talking. Even still, Mist was certain there wasn't anything moving nearby. With only the turning of his neck, he scrutinized everything before him for any track or trace of where it had gone, only to find nothing. He lifted a foot to look down, seeing his own footprints clearly imprinted in the wet grass and clover. Yet the identical forest floor ahead was, without a doubt, untouched. In lifting his head from the forest floor his eye caught sight of fresh claw marks in the tree beside him. Then another several feet higher. His eyes climbed the tree when—a bright flash.