

## *Weather The Storm*

Waves crashed against the rocky shore. Jaren looked up to watch the storm clouds on the horizon. From his place on the beach, he could see the entire ocean before him—a shimmering expanse of gray-blue water. Obsidian spires jutted out from beneath the waves, like the ribs of a long-dead beast. Or a clawed hand reaching out from beneath the waves. He wasn't sure which metaphor he liked best.

At the edge of the horizon, thick, black clouds were gathering, as if materializing from thin air. Jaren felt a surge of excitement.

“Do you think it’s a full blackstorm this time?” Jaren asked, looking to his sister, Hanya, who sat down the shore from him. Blackened sand, like grains of ash, shifted beneath him as he turned.

Hanya didn't respond at first, staring out at the waves with a stoic expression. The gathering wind whipped her hair across her face, and she moved a hand to comb it back. With the other hand, she played with her knife, turning it and rolling it over through her fingers. She'd had that habit ever since the two of them were infants.

“I hope it’s one,” Jaren said, looking back out at the water. “If it is, I’ll be very excited.” Blackstorms were dangerous cataclysms, capable of upending plants and toppling over permanent structures. But to most members of the Khengem tribe, that was what made it fun.

“I’ve been thinking,” Hanya said, “about what Jakh said. About those other tribes?”

“You mean the Liti?”

Hanya nodded. “I was thinking...could it actually turn to war? Between tribes?” She turned to look at Jaren.

“The elders say that the Khengem tribe hasn't faced full war in over a century,” Jaren said. “At worst, this'll probably amount to a border skirmish or something.”

“Perhaps,” Hanya said, not seeming convinced. “But what about our ancestors?”

“What about them?” Jaren asked.

“The elders also say that long ago, there were no blackstorms. No earthquakes, no eruptions. But then one day, these came.” She pointed up at the gathering storm clouds. “No one could have predicted it. No one would have thought to prepare for something like it. And yet it just...came.”

“How does this relate to the Liti?”

“Well...” Hanya sighed, staring back out at the ocean, then looking up at the clouds. “I can’t help wondering if this will be the same. Maybe this threat from the Liti tribe is like a blackstorm, gathering on the horizon for the first time. And we aren’t prepared for it, are we?”

Jaren opened his mouth to respond, then closed it. In a way...his sister was right. In some ways, their tribe was doing well for itself. Their Stonecasters—people like Jaren and Hanya, with their distinctive abilities—were well trained, but only for hunting and dueling. Nothing on the scale of true combat. Looking back at the storm, Jaren didn’t feel as excited as he’d once been.

“Let’s get moving,” Hanya said, pushing herself up. “Jakh is going to wonder where we’ve been.”

Jaren got up, happy to have something to take his mind off of things. He picked up his pack, slung it over his shoulder, and turned to walk away from the shore.

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As Jaren and Hanya crested a hill, a familiar view greeted them. The ground stretched outward from them into a large expanse of black volcanic rock. Small trees sprouted up here and there, their branches gnarled and their leaves a shriveled brown. To the south stood Mount Jechem, a dark silhouette against the grayish-blue sky. Its hills and crests were outlined by bright streams of magma, oozing down the mountain in what could have been rivers. The volcano had

stood for millennia, constantly erupting and spewing molten rock, giving life to the entire continent.

It was here, in its shadow, where Jaren and Hanya would practice sparring.

Jakh, Jaren's oldest friend, stood out against the rocky landscape several paces away. He waved to the two siblings, his light practice robes a stark contrast against the black and grey of the landscape around him. "You made it!" he called, grinning. "Another half hour and I'd have assumed the haverlings got you both!"

"Jaren wouldn't die to a haverling," Hanya said, smirking. Her mood had apparently improved on the way here. "He'd find it so cool, he'd get distracted, then trip and fall into a chasm by sheer luck."

Jaren cocked an eyebrow. "Surely I'm not *that* ignorant."

"Well," Jakh said, "having known the both of you my whole life...I'd say that's not incredibly unlikely."

"Not cool," Jaren said, though he smiled as he did. Jakh had a way of making insults feel like compliments; Jaren had grown accustomed to it over the years. With all the pressures of a struggling tribe, a unique ability, and the threat of war, it felt good to joke around and forget about his worries for a time. Jakh had always been good at that.

"Who's fighting first?" Hanya asked.

"I figured the siblings first," Jakh said, "to equalize them."

"How does fighting equalize us, Jakh?" Jaren asked, frowning. "One of us will win."

"Yes, but see," Jakh said, a glint of humor in his eye, "The winner will feel so good about winning, they'll compromise themselves. And when I beat them soundly, you'll *both* feel embarrassed. Thus, you'll be equalized."

Hanya snorted. “You wish,” she said, then removed a long spear from her back, turning to Jaren. “You ready?”

Jaren nodded. “Any day.”

They set their packs down and took up positions on both sides of the sparring field. Jaren took a battle stance on his side, lowering his spear and bracing himself against the cool, black stone. On the horizon, he noticed the storm clouds growing stronger. That wasn’t a concern for now, as blackstorms didn’t travel very fast. Jaren, Hanya, and Jakh would have hours to practice before needing to pack up and go home. For now, Jaren focused his attention back on his sister, who stood with her own spear at the ready, pointing out towards Jaren in a sign of respect.

Jakh raised his right hand from the side of the field. Making a fist, he shouted, “Fighters ready!” Releasing his fist, he yelled, “*Akhacham!* Fight!”

Jaren dashed down the length of the sparring field, eyes trained on his sister. As he came up close to Hanya, he dodged to the right, sliding across the stone earth and ducking beneath a swipe of her javelin. He stopped and threw himself to his feet, then blocked an incoming blow from Hanya. He thrust his spear upward, smacking it against the wood of Hanya’s spear, then twisted to avoid one of Hanya’s strikes. He spun around and retreated to the edge of the field, panting and gathering his breath from the bout. Then, he closed his eyes, raised his spear, and slammed it end-first into the ground.

Jaren felt a wave of power course through him, and he sent a mental command to the stone beneath him. *Yeligh*, he told it. *Move*. Promptly, the earth began to shake as large cracks formed in the earth between him and his sister. After a few seconds, he snapped his eyes back open, cutting off the connection. The world returned to him in a flash, as if he’d dozed off and just woken up. He fought off the slight disorientation common to all Stonecasting and focused back into the moment as Hanya struggled to remove her foot from the cracks Jaren had made.

Jaren dashed across them, leaped over Hanya, and landed behind her, tapping her in the back with the butt of his spear. *Point.*

Hanya grunted, extricated her foot from the cracked stone, then retreated as Jakh raised his hand to call the point. Jaren returned to his starting position, then checked his arm. Sure enough, a portion of his right arm had been transmuted to stone through his magic. A large, shapeless section of it, about the size of his fist, was stone-grey, as if someone had dumped wet clay on his arm and let it harden. He flexed the arm, which didn't feel any different—haverstone conversion never felt stiff, despite what he'd imagined before becoming a Stonecaster. It *was* slightly dangerous—vital organs would stop functioning if transmuted to haverstone—but in small amounts, like today, a small bit of conversion never hurt. It would wear off eventually, and Jaren's arm would be good as new.

That would need to wait, however. Jaren settled into his stance once more as Jakh counted them off, then released his fist again, signaling for them to go.

Jaren rushed forward, but slower this time, taking a defensive approach. Hanya stopped near the center of the field, then whipped her spear through the air, striking it against the stone. Jaren heard an audible *crack*, followed by a *fizzle* characteristic of Stonecasting. In a split-second, Jaren felt a *tug* on the haverstone in his right arm. It pulled him backward, knocking him off his feet, and he scrambled to keep from dropping his spear. He slammed the butt of his spear into the ground again, power flowing back into him. He gave a short mental command—*Ezha!*—and the pull on his haverstone faded, impeded by his own mental command. Hanya's Stonecast—commonly known as a haverjerk—was designed to attract his haverstone arm directly towards nearby stone. Jaren's own Cast—the Cast of Melting—was designed to combat that. By channeling the Cast, Jaren would be immune to further haverjerks for a certain length of time, depending on how long he took. The longer he channeled, the longer his Cast would hold.

Jaren snapped his eyes open, coming into focus just as the end of Hanya's spear smacked him in the forehead. Jaren was knocked to the ground, then felt something hard hit him square in the chest. Hanya's spear. *Point.*

Hanya backed off, returning to her original position, and Jaren pushed himself up, rubbing his chest as he checked his arm. The haverstone had spread, and up to a quarter of his forearm had been transmuted so far. *Could be worse*, he thought, remembering his earliest days training as a Stonecaster. Back then, pacing himself had been difficult. Now, he could channel most mid-level Casts without affecting too much of his body. He often felt proud of that.

Jaren braced himself at his starting position once again, breathing steadily, ready to strike. The next point would win the bout. He and Hanya watched each other across the field, quiet, focused. Then, Jakh raised his fist and called for them to start.

Jaren dashed forward and gave it everything this time. He spun his spear in a wild loop, sweeping it down towards Hanya, who expertly blocked. He pushed her spear aside and tried to sidestep her, but she swept hers downward to trip him. He dodged, rolling away to recover. He came to his feet, crouching, then raised his spear to quickly block Hanya's next strike, standing up and countering afterward with a strike of his own. He spun out of Hanya's side attack, then ducked as she swung her spear over his head, then slammed it into the ground once again. Jaren scrambled out of the way as the air fizzled and popped, and more cracks appeared in the ground, releasing a sulfurous scent as they opened to the air. He snapped his own spear onto the floor and sent a single word of command through the wave of power that followed.

*Lipakakh*, he thought. *Bright.*

The stones beneath him suddenly glowed a brilliant white, blinding him before he could shield his eyes. As he cut off the connection, he felt *heat* rise off of the stones, as if they were ready to burst with power. Then, in a split second, it was gone. Jaren blinked his eyes open and,

with Hanya distracted, dashed behind her and rapped his spear against her back. *Point*, he thought. *And match*.

Jakh cheered from the side, clapping, as Hanya dropped her spear, rubbing her eyes. Jaren lifted his spear in triumph, then turned to Hanya, proffering a closed fist, turned downward. Hanya, still blinking, closed her hands around Jaren's fist, shaking it. The *gheghfeha*—the Stonecaster's symbol of respect and concession.

"Well fought, both of you," Jakh said from the side, stepping up to them.

"I almost had you there, Jaren," Hanya said. "Admit it."

Jaren smiled, shaking with energy. "I'll be honest, you gave me a run for my haverstone in that last bout. It was *close!*"

"Speaking of haverstone," Jakh said, "I think you may have overcompensated some, Jaren."

Jaren frowned, checking his arm again, then gasped. His entire forearm had been turned to haverstone. It stretched backward from his wrist, then cut off in a jagged ring just before his elbow.

Hanya whistled. "How much channeling were *you* doing out there, Jaren?"

"Not much," Jaren said. "It was fine a few minutes ago. I probably lost control over that final Cast."

"The Cast of Light, wasn't it?" Jakh asked. "I was wondering when you'd try *that* one out. It's supposed to be one of the most powerful Casts there is!"

"In terms of conversion, maybe. Not so much in practical use."

"Still," Hanya said. "That was *bold*."

"Are you still up for another fight, Jaren?" Jakh asked, eyeing the arm.

“I should be fine,” Jaren said. “I’ll just take a quick rest. Jakh, did you bring the solvent oil?”

“Sure did,” Jakh said. “Didn’t expect to use it this quickly.” He proffered a small flask of oil and handed it to Jaren.

Jaren uncorked the flask and dripped some oil onto his left hand, sitting down and setting the flask on the stone. He then reached for his right elbow, which hadn’t been converted yet, and smeared the oil onto it. He felt a sizzle as it touched the haverstone on his arm, as if the two substances opposed each other. In a way, they did. Solvent oil was a common substance capable of repelling the effects of Stonecasting. By smearing the oil on his elbow—and then his right shoulder, followed by all other major joints and vital areas—Jaren would be able to momentarily stop his Stonecasting from transmuting those parts of his body. Jaren hadn’t expected to need it today, but then again, he hadn’t foreseen himself channeling such a powerful Cast in such a simple sparring bout.

As Jaren rubbed the oil into his other joints, Jakh spoke up. “I heard the elders speaking,” he said. “Back at camp. They said they sent a messenger to the Liti tribe yesterday.”

Hanya perked up. “When did you hear that?”

“Just this morning,” he said. “A little before I left to scout this place out. The messenger came back last night, and he was in...rough shape.”

“How rough?” Jaren asked.

“Rough enough that he needed to use a lot of Stonecasting to get out of their camp. He was half-haverstone by the time the elders found him. He even got a *haverscar*.”

The three of them fell silent. Jaren and Hanya shared a look, and Jaren remembered the conversation they’d had earlier today. *We aren’t prepared for it, are we?* Hanya had said.



“How much does this change things?” Jaren asked. “I mean...are we going to war over this?”

“Not yet,” Jakh said. “The messenger hasn’t recovered, and the elders want to know for sure whether his Stonecasting was for fighting or just getting home in time for the storm. So, we’re not going to war. Not yet. But it has me...concerned.” He looked solemnly out at the blackstorm, the clouds now blanketing the horizon. Thick, black, imposing. Yet also slow, delayed. Ignorable, for a time.

But you couldn’t ignore a blackstorm forever.

“How long do we have?” Hanya asked.

“Until it gets worse? I...can’t say.” Jakh stooped down to sift through his pack. “But whenever it does come, it looks like our innocent days will be over soon.” He fell silent.

Jaren continued rubbing his solvent oil into his left shoulder. His whole life, sparring had been nothing more than a sport—a way to train, yes, but mostly as a respite. The tribe had never needed trained warriors, as its problems had never been much more than the occasional drought or frequent blackstorm. The tribe had, despite these harsh circumstances, always managed to prosper.

But times were changing. In the last two years, problems for the tribe seemed to have grown in significance. The Liti tribe had migrated in from the north, resources and game had grown scarcer, and the nearby volcanoes, like Mount Jechem, had even grown more active. Lately Jaren and Hanya’s practice rounds had begun to take a more serious tone, as both of them knew they might soon need their skills, and their abilities, for much more than recreation.

Jaren had tried to ignore the signs, but now they had grown too great to ignore. No one could ignore an encroaching threat from another tribe. No more than they could ignore the

blackstorm clouds on the horizon. They may have advanced slowly, but they always caught up, no matter how hard you tried to avoid them.

So, the only thing you could do was be ready for them.

“Well then,” Jaren said, finishing the last of his solvent oil and standing up, “if the world is going to change, we can only change with it. Let’s get this duel on, Jakh. And this time, let’s make it mean something.”

Jakh nodded, moving to pick up his spear from where it leaned against a tree. Before entering the sparring field, he stopped, looked at Jaren, and said, “Stand strong.”

Jaren and Hanya shared a look, then joined Jakh in reciting the core tenet of the Khengem tribe. “Face the winds,” they said together. Then all three shouted, “*Weather the storm!*”