

Mantles

Prologue

The first streaks of morning light crested over the horizon and the rough waves, revealing the small island as a lush shimmering emerald in a sapphire sea. Trees rustled in the wind; they set a rhythmic and mellow backing track for the merry morning melodies of the awakening birds. For over a hundred years, Tumhai had been untouched by man, and the lush flora and fauna of the island had experienced no rude interruptions to their day-to-day happenings as they spun about the circle of life.

This morning, however, was different.

The crater that had formed near the center of Tumhai, though littered with the splintered bodies of trees, felt more alive than ever as frightened critters scurried out of the hole and into the morning sun. Nearly forty feet deep, the impact had struck water, which had just begun to line the bottom and cool the broken body of the beast that had crashed into the homes of so many creatures, unannounced, and evicted them with a great deal of force.

As the water pooled about his ears, the beast began to stir and gently sat up, propping his aching back up against the dirt wall of the crater. Nearly ten feet tall, he had little room in the tight space near the bottom of the hole to stretch out as he so often liked to do. Still clutching his empty cup in his left hand, his right traced up the wall gingerly, pausing when his enormous arm was fully extended to sink its claws into the soft soil and pull himself up to a standing position. As he came to his feet, his healing bones crackled and snapped, slowly bearing his full weight.

The crater wasn't wide enough for Wyre to spread his wings, but his claws were more than strong enough for him to clamber out of the pit his impact had formed. He stood tall and stretched, feeling a slight itch as the final fractures in his body stitched themselves together with a quiet crackle. He sauntered over to one of the trees he'd broken with his crash and filled his cup with the viscous sap that was flowing from the broken stump. He brought the dar to his lips, the tangy aroma bringing to mind his father's harsh opinions of the drug. He'd often liked to quote ancient Sury priests in his support of sobriety.

The arms of poison take away our fears with their strength, our minds with their touch, and our breath with their crushing embrace.

He scoffed at the thought. Dar had never hurt Wyre the way Garbov, his father, had been punished by his responsibilities. They'd taken his wife. His family. His friends. Even his once-unwavering belief in the triumph of good over evil, driving him to live as an outcast and to raise Wyre in obscurity.

And now they'd taken his life.

Tears welled up in Wyre's eyes once more, though he'd thought he had none left to give. He downed the cup in a single gulp, filling it up once more before flapping his wings and perching himself atop

one of the few trees left standing near the crater.

As he began to feel a buzz from the potent liquid, images of his night flashed before his eyes. He'd never been so drunk, nor flown so high, as he had the night before. He saw fire, remembering the town to the east that he'd turned into a bright orange flower, a target on which to land after his avian excursion. From his stoop, he glanced at the crater and then two miles east at the still-smoldering towers and blackened abandoned homes. He gave a wry smile at his poor marksmanship as he took another swig.

Wyre lay back into the crook of the branch, basking in the sunlight as he grew more and more drunk. Words fluttered about his head, the drink loosening his grip over his thoughts. *Father. Dead. Alone. Unknown. Betrayal. Extinction. Vengeance.*

Suicide.

How high had he flown? The air had grown thin, he recalled. He'd seen the curve of the world and the void of the cosmos before his drunken stupor had overtaken him and he'd fallen to the ground. The Gems of Thieves, once his favorite constellation, had seemed within his grasp, bright and colorful against the black canvas of space.

He'd thought the fall would kill him. An impossible height for any Sur, even a Havasur, but it was nothing a few hours sleep hadn't repaired. Legends told of Sury who'd drank themselves to death with unholy amounts of Dar, but even children knew those were just stories. The Sury had evolved physically into near-perfect beings; aside from an extremely old age, the death of a Sur could only be brought by one thing.

And Aastar Wyre had none of it.

He landed clumsily in the charred remains of what was once his home. He traced a finger along the wall of the market he'd loved so much, watching it crumble into a pile of black rubble. Tumhai was once a center of activity for his people. To see the charred remains would have brought tears to the eyes of every Havasur who'd even heard of the city, let alone set foot in there. How fortunate Wyre was the only one forced to see it.

Cremation was the custom for funeral proceedings in Havasury culture, but no Havasur had had a pyre as grand as Aastar Garbov, taking an entire city with him in his ascension. Wyre walked into the remains of the hut that had been his home his whole life. Most of the furniture had been destroyed, but his father's old bedframe had survived mostly intact. He sat at its edge, head in his hands as he wept. Thoroughly drunk now, his sobs grew quieter and quieter as he sank to his knees, slowly laying down to rest in the ashes of his childhood.

It was hours later when Wyre lazily blinked open his eyes. The evening sun had cast long shadows through the small home, but a single ray of light across Wyre's face had gently ended his slumber. Laying on his side, he was looking directly beneath his father's bed, at the remains of old books and

keepsakes the elder Aastar liked to keep there. Through the piles of grey ash, the edge of a relatively unscathed notebook caught Wyre's eye.

It took a bit of work for Wyre to grab at the notebook; built with a boulder-like musculature, his wide frame and large arms couldn't quite fit beneath the bed far enough. Frustrated from repeatedly grabbing at piles of ash, he overturned the bed itself, leaning it against the wall and trudging through the blackened books till he arrived at a single bright orange one.

He was surprised that he recognized it at second glance. A gift for his father from his Uncle Nelson, the journal was one that Aastar Garbov had used mainly for professional matters. Wyre took a seat against the wall, the fading sunlight illuminating the pages of his father's work.

Wyre had always found his father's work boring; tedious and repetitive, he'd always felt that his father's diplomacy in his career held him back from reaching his full potential. Though he'd had no intention of following in his father's footsteps, the pages before him now drew his attention as would an oasis in a desert. He struggled to understand many of the intricacies of the notes, but they delighted him and brought him closer to his father all the same.

For the first time in weeks, Wyre had a smile on his face as the sun began to set. He'd reached the last written page and thumbed through the final blank pages nonchalantly as he looked up to admire the hues of the twilight sky. Wyre loved the way the slowly setting sun seemed to sink like a rock in water as it touched the horizon, as if being pulled down by the weight of the world itself. Glancing down, he realized he'd reached the back cover of the notebook.

Wyre froze.

A small inscription inside the back cover had caught his eye, unmistakably his father's handwriting once again. But was it possible? He read and re-read it repeatedly, burning the words into his mind.

Shak Rasan lives. Nidai Mand.

The words were askew, as if written hurriedly, perhaps whilst standing. Wyre's mind raced as he furiously flipped back to his father's hand-drawn map of the nearby islands. He saw Nidai at the edge of the map, the largest island---and smallest continent---in the world. It was West of Tumhai, but he could not be sure of the distance. It was certainly hard to miss, however. He chuckled quietly at the absurd thought of flying past it without noticing. Even so, the journey was not going to be easy. He'd been there as a child, but that was so long ago; riding on his father's back as he flew had given him the leisure of sleep and relaxation. And the elder Aastar was certainly superior in flight. Wyre made some quick calculations: flying there would be the better part of a day, but Wyre had a renewed energy and swiftly packed a small bag. Tucking the notebook carefully into the pouch, Wyre slung it across his chest and walked out of the hut, his shadow stretching long behind him. He turned to take a final look at his hometown; though blackened and charred, he still felt at peace here. His heart felt heavy, not knowing when---if---he would return, or if Tumhai would ever be rebuilt to its former glory.

Wyre spoke a silent prayer to the Trikon, and spread his wings, catching the evening breeze and

jetting off westward. From the shores of Tumhai, the sun dipped below the horizon, and Aastar Wyre soon followed.

Chapter 1

Though the early morning was black as pitch, Rayan Henley's feet moved quickly through the narrow path up the hill, deftly avoiding the punctured soles and twisted ankles of hundreds before him. The trail was no newer to Rayan than was his own name; a grin stretched across his face as he recalled the scars he'd gotten tumbling into the rocks and brambles, each one telling a story of foolish decisions, pretty girls, or, as was most often the case, both.

As he crested the hill, he ran a hand along Nantri, the spirit who had looked over and protected the colony since the dawn of his people, feeling the inscriptions of the Reges and Reines over the years. That the strongest of his people sought its guidance was a calming sentiment, as were the veins of light that traveled slowly along the mother tree, pulsing softly up the trunk and into each leaf. The brown wood was strong alone, but was certainly made more resilient by the silver streaks that traveled in short bursts from roots to treetops. Glowing purple in beautiful synchrony, they seemed to carry the strength of the island up into the heavens, illuminating the darkened sky before the sun rose.

The tree, though surrounded by many others, could just as easily have been standing alone; its sheer size made it outstanding, a strong, wide-armed angel reaching for the clouds from the treetops of the island. Though much younger than the village protector, Rayan carried a strength and grandeur among the people of the Muertan colony as Nantri did among the trees of Muertos. The twenty-year-old displayed a tall, lean, and athletic frame as he stretched to retrieve a couple low-hanging fruit, seating himself comfortably among the roots to eat one as he overlooked his home and the rough sea beyond. He set the other aside as he swept a few curly black locks away from his face; matted from the seawater of his morning swim, they looked like a dark mop head, resting atop his deeply tanned body.

As Rayan gazed out to the horizon, he heard the distant thunderclap of Typhoon, roaring just a few miles from the shore. The storm had encircled the island for many ages, forming its barricade around Muertos long before Rayan had been born. The wall of clouds stretched from sea to sky; Rayan just barely caught a glimpse of the rising sun between the two before it hid its face behind Typhoon, only to return in an hour for the second sunrise over the clouds. Rayan sighed and ran a hand through his knotted hair, calming himself before he grew anxious and angry at the will of the gods.

For a skilled seafaring people, the Muertans were confined to the land a great deal. Many had tried

and failed to venture beyond Typhoon's grasp, their bodies to wash up on the shore days, weeks, or even months later. It had been 40 years since travel beyond the buoy line was deemed punishable by law, ensuring at least a year's indentured servitude or more, depending on which precious resources had been risked or lost in the endeavor. All knew the law, but the allure of a world, a new life unencumbered by Typhoon proved too great for many. Even the reigning Rex had spent 2 years in his youth cleaning Nantri's altar and chopping firewood after losing a boat and an eye to the Muertan sea.

Rayan felt at peace as he finished the motherfruit and threw the pit into the nearby bushes. Faintly, he heard a pair of footsteps behind him; they stepped softly as if making an attempt to hide their sound, but the slight crunch of the leaves and twigs around Nantri was unmistakable in the relative silence of the early morning. Rayan smiled as he restrained himself from turning around to look, sure he already knew the crunching culprit.

"Hey *Reine*, you're up early for once," Rayan couldn't help but chuckle until he felt the sting of a projectile on the back of his head. He looked back to see Mikti standing in just one sandal, the other having ricocheted off his head and onto the gnarled roots.

"Don't call me that! How many times do I have to tell you?!" She paused to look up at a particularly plump purple fruit, just out of her grasp. "I'll forgive you if you get me that though," she said with a smirk.

Rayan stood up and tossed her the motherfruit he'd set aside. "Think fast!" He grinned as she scrambled to catch it, hoping he'd be able to suppress a laugh if she didn't succeed.

But she did, and she slipped off her other sandal as she stepped onto the roots lining the top of the hill. She took a bite of the motherfruit and a seat on a knot slightly higher than the one Rayan had chosen; he glanced up and smiled at his tired friend, the dark circles under her eyes betraying her lack of sleep.

"Quit it," Mikti snapped at first, but quickly softened her tone. "Sorry, I'm really out of it. But you know I don't like it when you stare."

"I wasn't staring, I zoned out. You're not *Reine* just yet, don't flatter yourself." Rayan smirked as he turned to face the sea once more.

"Please stop calling me that." Mikti knew he meant it jokingly but it stung a bit more on this day. She forced a smile, "It's not gonna happen anytime soon, you're closer to the title than I am, *Rayan*." She'd been thinking about the pun for a few days, waiting for an opportunity to use it. Rayan scoffed, clearly unimpressed, but Mikti was pleased.

Rayan stood and climbed up a few roots, sitting next to Mikti so he could face her while they talked. The wind was picking up as she watched the water and continued to eat; Rayan watched a few blonde curls set themselves free of the messy bun on her head. She'd worn royal clothing this

morning; they fit her beautifully, the material much stronger and more resilient than the clothes sold at the market to families like Rayan's. As was custom for Muertan royalty, her sleeves reached just past the elbow, still revealing the dark birthmark on the light olive skin of her right forearm. The shape of a skull, the sigil of Muertos, identified members of the Muertan royal family, alongside military personnel with a rank of Admiral or Commander General. Subconsciously, Rayan let a finger drift to his own collarbone, feeling the twisted skin of the brand beneath it.

"Hey, don't play with that." Mikti knew her friend -- and his nervous tics -- all too well. "Are you excited to graduate?" She asked with a smile, taking his mind away from his demons.

"Hm. I don't know. I mean I'm not sad about it, but it's gonna be weird right? All we've ever done is school I don't know if I'm ready to start *doing*, ya know?"

"You're ready! Don't be a dork." Mikti punched his arm playfully. "You're like the best student this year what are you worried about?!"

"I mean there's only 8 of us."

"Yeah well shut up. I'm still in 8th place so..." Mikti's voice trailed off, catching slightly as she sniffled.

"Mik I'm sorry hey, I..." he scooted closer to her, "I didn't mean it like that."

"I know, I know. I'm not upset, it's just scary. I'm still just a kid, I don't even know if I want to be Reine, but this stupid skull says I have to be." She picked at the birthmark as if to scratch it off. "And I don't want to make mistakes. The gods know, Reges and Reines haven't made the best decisions; I don't know if it's prejudice or pressure but I don't want to turn out that way." She reached out gently to feel the brand on Rayan's chest. "I don't want anyone else to get hurt."

Rayan turned toward the sea once again, lost in thought. For decades, his people had been shunned on the island; between demeaning jobs and teetering on the edge of famine, many of the islanders who had attempted escape from Typhoon were of his kind, looking beyond the storm for a better life. Their population had dwindled rapidly as resources became scarcer, and it had seemed like the Kur people would soon be extinct on Muertos.

But that had changed with Alonzo Rex.

Affectionately referred to as Zo Rex, Mikti's father had single handedly fought against the oppression of the Kurs, welcoming them as Muertans in their own right. Many on the island still saw -- and supported -- a divide; Rayan could feel their glares when he spoke to the Rex's daughter, but legal equality had been achieved. As the first Kur Muertan to graduate, Rayan would be the only Kur with a Muertan Assignment for at least a year. No longer would all Kurs be resigned to the tasks of servants and criminals, cleaning beaches and digging sewers. Though his profession would be assigned, it was nearly guaranteed to be a noble one. A teacher perhaps, or a fisherman. He dreamed of a role as a lifeguard; it was unlikely for the first Kur to be formally educated, but he longed to spend his days on the beach and in the water, his favorite place in the village he'd come to

know every inch of. He was determined to prove himself, but the task proved daunting at times, solely shouldering the dignity of his people.

"Rayan look!" Mikti grabbed his arm suddenly and pulled them both to their feet. Pointing out into the water, she screamed. "Leviathans! By the buoys!"

Rayan followed her gaze to the rough waves, catching a glimpse of the monstrous webbed feet of the hellish creatures. Though it was rare for them to venture too close to shore, many a Muertan sailor had the scars and stories of the Leviathans. They'd taken the lives of Muertans and Kurs alike; the stone arrows, axes, and spears used by the hunters and fishermen were useless against their hides. Only the Muertan military could fight them, though no confirmed kills had ever been reported.

"That's the fifth sighting this week, right?" Mikti's voice quivered slightly as she turned to Rayan, quickly regaining her composure as she remembered her place as Reine-apparent. "It seems like they've swarmed this cove recently, where are they coming from?"

"I'm not sure." Rayan's voice trailed off as he thought deeply, looking around the beach for markers. "I don't know how many have been seen, but I think they've all been between those two bouys." Rayan gestured at a stretch marked on the beach: about 80 feet apart, the beach markers corresponded with the buoys bobbing in the waves about a mile from the shore. He scratched his chin, "They haven't congregated like that before, have they? Like they're looking for something, maybe to eat or a place to rest."

"I haven't ever seen them work together. I don't think they're very smart, just really strong." Her heartbeat slowing again, Mikti sat beneath the tree once more. "I guess I'll report it when I get home. Whatever it is, it can't be a good sign to have Leviathans coming to our village in hordes."

"Yeah that's true." Rayan took a seat next to her, and focused on the pulsing veins of Nantri once more, putting the pressures of Assignment Day and Leviathans out of his mind. He smiled softly as she rested her head on his shoulder, not sure if they'd ever get to spend time together like this anytime soon. He reminisced on the times they'd spent here; their friendships with other Muertan youths had come and gone, but Rayan had had Mikti by his side since they were five years old. He'd always known the day would come when she'd move on to more royal duties as a Disciple Reine, eventually becoming the sole regent of the island and its people. Kur people may have achieved legal recognition, but it would be a long time before they were part of the elite or military classes.

He sighed, feeling the morning breeze sigh back, as if recognizing his strife.

Rayan turned to Mikti, as if to ask a question, quickly realizing she'd fallen asleep on his shoulder. As he moved slightly to awaken her, the first rays of sunlight peered over top of the stormwall. Mikti stirred, and soon the pair were treading down the hill once more, bathed in the glow of the second sunrise.