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BLOODWOOD'S CORE

Does the bloodwood endure or enjoy our human presence? I am one that believes in the latter. We protect it as much as it protects us. We would be nothing without the bloodwood.

FROM THE STUDIES OF ORAKAL ALAMSA

The warders to the scholars' scrollcaves were a different kind of bastard.

While I was staunchly unenthused by the Bloodlaws as a whole and their enforced hierarchy, it was always hilarious to find somebody so deluded by their place in the bloodwood. These warders were such types: so puffed up by their importance I was surprised they didn't float through the canopy like candle balloons. You could have confused their confidence for lancers if you weren't aware. Precisely like the man standing in front of me.

'I don't care who you think you are, wretch, or who you been sent here by, you ain't no scholar, and I don't recognise your colours. Bugger off!' the warder shouted. He was a bespectacled and officious-looking man who, despite having several decades on me, was still a head beneath me in height. He held a staff before him, barring my way into the scholars tribe's caves. I say caves; they were perfectly hewn holes that were rectangular in shape and lined with a multitude of balconies and boreholes leading deep into Shal Gara's bark. Their entrance glowed with manicured vine-light.

I crossed my arms, feeling far too tired for such a battle. It had been enough spending all day convincing Eztaral I deserved to be where I was.

'I'll say it again,' I said, feeling some of the demon's fire in me. 'And, slowly this time, if it helps. I have been sent here by Eagleborn Kraid to assist Temach Atalawe. All three of us have the blessing of the matriarch – I shall assume you've heard of her – to deal with the impending threat from the east. We're the Scions of the Sixth-Born.'

My bravado fell on unwilling ears and an empty mind. 'Never heard of 'em.'

'Well, you will soon enough, I'm sure, so let me pass.'

In impatience, the warder swung out his ironpith staff, similar to Atalawe's, and tried to smack me on the legs for me cheek. I don't quite know how I did it, but I managed to trap his staff beneath

my boot. He dragged it back and puffed out his red cheeks. 'You're close to a beating, boy! Clear off!'

'Or what? You'll fetch some real warriors?'

That's more like it, Tarko. You earn your place in the world as a demon does.

The demon's praise seemed like a fellow traitor praising me for my treachery.

'Have you not noticed what's happening in the city?' I gestured around me. It had taken me an age to pass through less than ten branches. The corners of intersections were crammed with fresh-looking warders, wearing either incredibly old armour, or armour far too fresh. In any case, they had been mismatched and ill-fitting. Warriors, wilders, and lancers tramped back and forth in ranks and columns. Workers and merchants followed them with all manner of supplies. Lancewings blasted overhead in constant patrols. The air was heavy with carpenters working in the night, building all manner of fortifications, platforms, and towers to hang or sprout from the broadest branches. For a city that was so unused to the concept of war, Haidak Baran had managed to change Shal Gara's mind in less than a day. I guessed that was the power of guilt and fear.

'And that is why I am even more suspicious of chancers like you trying to get in my sacred caves!' barked the diminutive man. A vein on his forehead zigzagged down his skin in an aggressive and swollen fashion.

Thankfully, I saw Atalawe emerge from the glow of the scrollcaves. She looked exhausted, but as almost always, the smile on her face was defiant. 'And we are appreciative of your vigilance!' she called out.

'You know this little scrotum?' asked the warder of Atalawe.

Little? That is rich.

Atalawe flashed me a wink. 'He's clearly full of himself after a day of training, but I think I recognise him. I'll vouch for the lad. You can stand down, Kalabash.'

Kalabash did as he was told with much grumbling. I smiled at him broadly as I passed him by.

'There's a lot of fear in the air, Tarko. Some don't know how to handle it,' Atalawe chuckled as she guided me past the threshold of the gateway. 'Welcome to the scrollcaves.'

The ancestral home of the scholar tribe was not so much a cave as a canyon. The height of the walls tested my tired neck, and were carved wood covered in a range of frescoes and paintings of stories I'd known since a child. Of Suluz the Strong, and the Scorchwars before I was born. Of the plague centuries ago. Where they ended, shelves took over, lined with trinkets and treasures of Shal Gara, along with hundreds of animal skulls or stuffed specimens.

Balconies peeked from highest reaches of the scrollcaves walls. Each had a system of pulleys for hoisting baskets from shelf to shelf and to the terraces in between. Where baskets couldn't reach, fat mottled lizards meandered along railings delivering scrolls tied to their backs.

Before us lay a stone-paved avenue between the walls was wide enough for a row of slim narin trees. Waif birds twirled between the shelves and treetops, keeping a constant song and occasionally seeing fit to paint a passing scholar with dung.

‘For all my tribe’s downfalls, this remains our finest achievement. My mother said that, and I’ve never found a reason to disagree,’ Atalawe sighed wistfully as she paused to let me take it in. I got barely a moment before her elbow was in my ribs. ‘But enough out of me. How did your training go? Am I proven a madwoman yet?’

I tried to con her for a moment, but the pride couldn’t be kept out of my smile. ‘It looks like I’ve got more of my father in me than I thought. I’m a sorcerer after all,’ I said.

‘Ha! I knew I was right! You can’t con these eyes,’ Atalawe thumped me on the back I almost fell. Her shout had an echo to it, and drew more than a few stares and shushes from nearby scholars.

‘That you were, Atalawe. Turns out a mudmage just like Redeye.’

The name stilled Atalawe. I inwardly cursed my slip. Serisi sighed within me.

Clever boy.

‘That’s incredible news,’ Atalawe said. Her grin failed to die, but I saw the twitch in one of her eyes.

I had never been able to find the right words to blunt an awkward moment, and I didn’t do any better now. ‘Any sign of him?’ I grimaced. ‘Or Inwar?’

‘Not yet, but there will be. For seasons I’ve been told my optimism verges on the abusive, and I refuse to change now. Come,’ she said, clapping my sore shoulder once more, ‘we’ll talk more of your magic later.’

Atalawe led us a weaving path between groups of scholars gathered in hushed conversation, tracing her hands across the intricate walls whenever she could.

I could see the seasons etched in the scrollcaves architecture. The deeper we weaved into the stately tunnel, the paler and more worn the carvings became. Some had even been utterly destroyed by a tunnel being carved through them. Statues of jade and pink crystal watched over us at intervals. Their wooden pedestals were carved with famous names carved in fancy glyphs. Descriptions and dates joined them in tiny writing I had to peer at to even understand a word of.

Atalawe could see me looking and wondering. ‘Tut tut. You don’t know your history, do you, Tarko? These are the heroes of the Swathe. Matriarchs of Shal Gara, Dorla Sel, and other bloodwoods. Their generations stretch back from the first Matriarchs fifteen-hundred seasons ago to the plague, the Orphan Matriarch, and mother of Danaxt’s line.’

‘I knew that. Just hard to recognise at first,’ I said. I could feel Serisi staring through my eyes, examining our history. There was scorn here and there, but mostly curious silence. ‘Who’s this one without a head?’ I pointed at an older statue made from obsidian. She was of a brutish and muscular shape. Curiously, she was without a head. It look as though it had been hacked off without care.

‘That there is the Mad Mother. Alatah. She was as dangerous as half the Hells and a brutal killer. A cannibal, some scrolls say. She controlled a bloodwood of her own, and one day decided she wasn’t happy with just one. She marched on Shal Gara and would have continued on to Dorla Sel if the people hadn’t revolted against her. Good thing, too: Alatah was ready to burn the whole Swathe to the ground.’

Sounds a pleasure.

The older statues were not only worn and weathered but the artisans had clearly honed their skills over the centuries. By the time we reached the deep innards of the bloodwood, the matriarchs of recent seasons were so lifelike I expected them to reach for me. Their eyes certainly followed me. Danaxt's mother was made of jagū-eye, a rarer stone that toyed with the light. It looked like pitch and molten copper trapped behind sandglass. Beside her, last in line, was an empty pedestal. I stared back at the long avenue of statues. I had seen Suluz again, carved in stone the colour of a bloodwood leaf, and the great explorer Bamosh, but somebody was missing. 'Where's Kī Raxa's statue?' I asked.

'Conveniently missing, isn't she?' Atalawe muttered, looking about with a wry smile. We weren't alone in the grand and shining corridor, not by a long shot. Other scholars in green furs and robes passed us by at a stately pace, staring at our rushing feet. A few of their gaggles actively pointed at Atalawe and I and whispered conspiratorially. One or two stood upon the balconies, looking down their noses at us while they sipped at wine in crystal cups.

'And why do I get the feeling we're not welcome?' I asked.

'My tribe – from temach, to orakal, to godseer – always turn their noses up at those who choose to specialise in wrangling, or seedwitch crafts. But that's not all,' she said. 'I'm somewhat of a... pariah here. Nobody likes to hear they're wrong, and I've told them many a time. And I'm a little unorthodox, you could say.'

I noticed one man with gold trim to his robes stop and stare at us.

'Temach Atalawe! What a surprise to see you in the scrollcaves for once instead of being out in the loam like a sixth-born. At least you've managed to wash that jagū-stink off you for a change,' he called to us. 'Where is that beast today?'

Another scholar temach was quick to join in the mistreatment. The woman had a puckered face as if she had just bitten into a lemon. 'She's been here all day, Orakal Lilato. Says she's here on matriarch's orders and something to do with the Sheertown tragedy.'

Lilato laughed. 'By the Six Hells you are, Atalawe! If I heard right, you were one of the traitors being marched to the Burrows yesterday.'

Atalawe was already pushing me past them. 'Things change, unlike the lot of you.'

The other temach's wrinkled face was now creased in laughter. 'She's been looking at all the sacred texts sworn only to the orakals and godseers. Down in the deep rooms.'

Lilato's disdain turned into abhorrence. 'She's *what*? What do you think you're doing, Atalawe?'

'Like I said to this waste of space earlier,' Atalawe laughed. 'Try to stop me. I have every birthright to be here, and if you're not going to help me assist the matriarch, then you can all piss off out of our way.'

The orakal spluttered. 'How dare you, Temach! I—I outrank you!' When hierarchy clearly had no affect on Atalawe work, Lilato threatened her instead. 'I shall tell the godseers of this!' he yelled after us.

Atalawe couldn't have cared less, and led me between a narrow and inordinately tall door.

'What a bunch of loamers,' I tutted, staring back at the swollen Lilato.

'That slug hasn't ever forgiven me for turning down his slimy romantic proposals seasons back. He spluttered and yelled and insulted me. Even laid hands.'

'What happened?'

Atalawe's eyes twinkled with mirth. 'I broke his jaw and he's loathed me ever since. When people can't have what they want, they come to hate it.'

To hushed laughter, we changed course along skinny corridors shaped like ravines. Levels of shelves and burrows stretched up into a dark where fireworms buzzed about free of their lanterns. Thin walkways had been carved between the shelves and were occasionally frequented by a ambling scholar's with lanterns. The larger burrows glowed with vinelight, looked like eyes out from a cliff-face of scrolls. Their numbers were staggering. If there was an order to them, it was lost on me. Some were huge and ragged at the edges, others dyed green or blue, and between them were leafleather-bound books, their pages of thin carved wood.

Atalawe guided me on to a hollow at the end of the faintly curving corridor. A wary pair of warders protected a door ajar. Unlike the others, they didn't try to stop us.

'Who's the wretch?' asked one of them.

'He's with me. Another of the matriarch's chosen.'

The other warder seemed a twitchy sort. 'I'm telling you, the godseers aren't going to like this. You didn't give us enough gems for this trouble.'

'Like I've already told you, it'll be my problem. Don't you worry. Your purse is fat already,' Atalawe reassured the man with a hearty pat on his back that made him stagger. I knew what the feeling.

Behind the door, a squat and ornate room of muffled air welcomed me. There was a table, lanterns, and shelves, but what was unexpected was the giant pile of disarray that filled the room. The shelves had been cleared. A mountain of scrolls my height and taller spilled over the table and onto the floor. These scrolls looked older than the ones I'd already seen. Their parchment was yellow with age. Some were so ancient to be inked on animal skins and stretched on boards. More books with wooden pages and faded paint lay sprawled open.

'Next time I hear the word unorthodox, I'll know it'll mean making a mess.'

'Ha! I don't make it a secret I have a distaste for my tribe. We made a mistake when we stopped singing our stories and started to carve and write them down. It made us forget, made them something to be owned,' Atalawe ranted away as she picked between her mess. 'Looking at these shelves, you'd think we knew it all. You'd be wrong. Those scholars are caretakers and nothing more. We don't pine for knowledge as we should, but just stick to organising and reorganising our shelves to look busy. And worse, half the scrolls filling these caves are nothing but accounts from drunken, amateur scholars centuries forgotten, claiming to tell the truth. Any texts of use are declared sacred and hidden in rooms like these, out of bounds for temachs and most orakals. Even these stories talk too much of the gods, or of nothing at all. Here we have supposed methods of

summoning ancestors. Story after story of the gods' deeds in ancient days. And look here! An old matriarch's recipe for frog stew, would you believe it? This is not history nor scholars' work. This is why I am glad to be unorthodox. A pariah. The fourth-born have become lazy, pompous, self-indulgent, and frankly, stupid. Not unlike the rest of the tribes, to be honest. Anything truly useful has been buried, or worse, lost and "destroyed" by those I told you about.'

'The fireborn. The ones who worshipped the demons.'

'And may still.'

I picked at a scroll that was purple in colour. Broad figures painted white and red seemed to be praying around giant seeds shaped like arrowheads. They spread across ten platforms that looked to be wheeled like wagons.

'Well then,' I said, brushing my hands. 'How exactly are we going to move a bloodwood?'

'Oh,' Atalawe chuckled. 'I have no idea.'

'What?' I asked, immediately deflated.

Atalawe thrust her hand between the scrolls and cleared a space to reveal a thick book of wooden pages, laying fat and faded. Burn-marks crisscrossed its cover. It not only looked ancient but well worn.

'I have clues, but that is all. Found this hidden at the back of a shelf. Only took me several hours. I've always wanted the excuse to look for such things but I've never been allowed to.'

I nodded along. 'We're not supposed to be in here, are we?'

'Absolutely not,' Atalawe laughed. 'The moving of the bloodwoods isn't so much a fable as a fact that's no longer true. Small bloodwood saplings are often known to follow the sun until they decide to settle, but that is all that's believed. My theory is Shal Gara hasn't forgotten, but that she simply needed to be *told* to move. In these carvings is an account of the last time Shal Gara moved, and more recently than six hundred seasons ago. A fire broke out on a leafroad and burned half the Midern. Shal Gara moved half a mile, presumably in response to the flames or heat.'

I processed her words while Atalawe flipped pages. 'Tell me you're not suggesting we set fire to the tree?'

I do hope so. My father would be most pleased we saved him the trouble.

Despite Serisi's vote of confidence in the idea, Atalawe laughed heartily.

'No, lad. The scholar that wrote this had less of an empty mind than most fourth-borns I know,' she explained, clenching the hand that bore the tattooed black eye. 'He proposed a simpler idea, that exposing the core of a bloodwood to certain wood-smoke might urge it to move. He suggests the sand of the Scorch as an alternative, or even better, he says the essence of a demon.'

'What essence?' Serisi and I spoke together. Atalawe heard only my voice.

Atalawe slapped the book shut. 'I have no idea, but we're going to try two of them at least. I managed to gather a few supplies before you arrived. No demon essence, sadly.'

'When?'

‘Tonight.’

‘Tonight?’ I echoed.

‘Haidak has been clearing the leafroads all day just in case, or so the messengers and gossipers tell me. No merchants have come from the east since the sun first turned black. I have to say, for a son of that bastard sage Kol Baran, Haidak’s surprised me.’

Serisi explained. *One does not look into the eyes of a demon and stay the same. Death has the same effect.*

‘Isn’t that the truth,’ I said without thinking.

Atalawe nodded, distracted by something behind me. ‘And here we go again,’ she sighed mockingly. I turned to see a group of angry looking scholars swaggering down the corridor towards us. Three wizened figures accompanied a furious Orakal Lilato. From the stripes of paint across their faces and garish pendants of a third eye draped on their foreheads, they were godseers, and therefore the highest rank of the fourth-born. It was claimed the godseers were so wise they could commune and understand the Three Gods’ will. I had always been highly doubtful of that. A few warders were in tow, mostly looking as if they had been awoken from a nap.

Tucking the book of carvings under one arm, Atalawe picked up her staff with the other and strode to face them as if she were marching to battle. The two warders at the door looked bemused and awkward. One stared at me and postured as if he were going to seize me. I don’t know if it was something in my eyes, but he backed away instead. Serisi chuckled.

Orakal Lilato was full of pomp and outrage, and that was before he saw the book under Atalawe’s arm. ‘How dare you, Temach Atalawe! You surrender that relic immediately!’ he hollered, voice filling the layered hallway. ‘That is a sacred text meant only for the higher ranks of this tribe! You have no right—’

‘I would argue I actually have every right,’ Atalawe countered. ‘When will you realise that knowledge is not to be hoarded but to be explored and put to work? The dust on these supposedly prized relics almost choked me to death when I entered that room. What are you doing with all of this, if not learning from it?’

‘Stagnating,’ I muttered.

Atalawe nodded. ‘Correct.’

One of the wintry-hued godseers, one with a braided beard wrapped around his neck several times like a scarf, stamped his foot. ‘Who is this boy and what is he doing here? He has workers’ marks.’

Atalawe’s flashed me a smirking sideways look. ‘That he does, and he’s still smarter than half of you.’

‘Put. The book. Down,’ another godseer hissed, prodding her marked palm with every word.

‘Ordinarily, I might respect your wishes, but these are dire times and dire actions are needed, as you’ll see tonight, when Shal Gara begins to move. You’ll have the matriarch to answer for if you stop me.’

The godseers laughed between themselves. Lilato gesticulated madly. ‘You see, Godseers? She is deluded! The loam has driven her insane.’

Atalawe sighed dramatically. ‘I don’t know about you, Tarko, but I’m bored of being doubted.’

‘Bored is an understatement. Fed up of it, to be honest.’

I do not like these dusty creatures, Serisi told me. Teach them a lesson, Tarko. I might as well have some fun while I am imprisoned in your mind. Spill their blood.

It was a fine idea, but I clenched my fists and remembered Eztaral’s threat of using magic.

‘Now if you’ll excuse us...’ Atalawe said, beginning to circle the angry gaggle.

‘Stop her! Arrest them,’ cried the bearded godseer.

It seemed Atalawe’s reputation preceded her. With a single menace of her staff, the warders backed away. ‘You fourth-borns can see to your own troubles. Something isn’t right with this city.’ muttered one of them. Another silently made for the exit.

‘Don’t want none of the matriarch’s fury.’

The last warder shrugged as he joined his friends. ‘I ain’t taking a side, it’s just this place is so damn boring,’ he said.

Atalawe laughed.

In a rage, Lilato shuffled forwards with a hand raised, but Atalawe was too fast. With a crack of bone and a nasal squeal, the ironpith staff clocked the orakal in the nose.

‘My nose! You’ve broken my nose, you bitch!’

To the shocked and confused faces of the godseers and one whining orakal, we tailed behind the warders as they jogged out of the scrollcaves, eager to be free and away from any trouble they could be blamed for.

The statues watched us leave in silence. The godseers, now minus Lilato, did their best to bustle behind us. They shouted all kind of threats of punishment, expulsion, and banishment to Atalawe and I. They waved their wrinkled hands. Several scrolls were thrown after us, bouncing harmlessly off our heads and around our feet.

I looked to Atalawe several times to see if she was worried, and every time her face had the same confident expression, and her bold and bright eyes yelled the same sentiment: *good riddance*.

‘And stay out!’ was the final shout to ring in our ears.

Outside, the sunlight had died and yet the sky had a fine orange glow to it in the eastern half. A bright fingernail of moon hovered between the streaks of ever-present smoke. An awkwardness had taken over the city. People gathered in clumps. Those nearest the kitchens and food merchants nervously swigged from bark cups or half-forgot to eat as they stared upright. The underside of the Crimson Crown had opened up, and was currently burning with light. The matriarch and her sages stood upon their regal skyriser, mere specks from Belarhana Branch.

‘They’re waiting for us.’ Atalawe informed me as she pushed a path through crowds.

‘Who is?’

‘Who else but the matriarch and her sages?’ Atalawe laughed.

At least this time I could fully enjoy being in royal company with expecting to be hanged. ‘Do you think we can do this?’ I asked. ‘Move the bloodwood, I mean?’

‘I don’t think. I hope. That’s all we can do sometimes is hope.’

Hidden in my pocket, I clutched the sharp talon of Serisi’s.

We waited in silence as a skyriser whisked us upwards through the branches and colossal leaves. We were past the Midern when the drums started to pound. They began slowly, so deep I thought it was the rumble of my starving stomach. One by one, they built into a crescendo that put a shiver in my heart. Call it fear, call it anticipation, but they were the sounds of war. All of Shal Gara would soon know the truth as we did.

Our next skyriser arose as the matriarch and her entourage descended from the Crimson Crown to meet us. Both platforms met where the bloodwood’s crown began. It was where the trunk of the bloodwood divided into six enormous upthrusts that split again and again as they soared. While the lower branches ran at right angles to the lower trunk, these sought the sky, and held the entire upper canopy of crimson leaves in their web. The largest of the branches before the split was appropriately named the Branch of the Matriarchs, and it was where a great plaza of wooden decking ringed Shal Gara. It was so large that smaller decorative trees grew in neat circles between pillars of carvings.

Blind Pel and Eztaral were waiting in their leafleather Scion’s cloaks, hooded and shadow-faced. Highwarders stood close at their side, as did Haidak Baran. His eagle’s feather had been reinstated around his neck and yet he still had the habit to scowl at me. Several other lancers and ravenborns stood around him, dour and exhausted. Atalawe stood beside her fellow Scions.

‘Did you manage it, Atalawe?’ muttered Eztaral.

The wrangler had no time to answer. The matriarch maintained her distance behind a thick wall of spears and muttering sages, but Envoy Okarin parted the ranks to greet us. Along with the regal chains of amber and crystal around her neck, there was a warrior air to the envoy to Shal Gara thanks to her black trews and stiff red shirt. With her head entrenched between its tall, sharp collars, her hands on hips, Okarin’s crimson eyes toured the gathering. ‘Well, Scions?’ was all she said at first. ‘Can you get Shal Gara to move? What of that promise?’

Atalawe nodded to Eztaral. She spoke for us all. ‘It was no promise, Envoy Okarin, but we may have found a few ideas I would like to try.’

‘*Try*? The mother wants answers. Solutions, not ideas and guesses.’

Eztaral cleared her throat. ‘I trust in Atalawe, Envoy. I’d recommend doing the same.’

Haidak, as humbled as he had been in the Crown, still bore a streak of his old self. I hoped it would stay a streak and not widen like a fissure. ‘You really think you can do this?’ he asked of me.

‘I don’t think, Haidak, I hope.’

Atalawe smirked as silence was called.

At last, Matriarch Danaxt emerged from her entourage atop her emerald beetle. She sat legs folded and perched as rigid as an arrow despite the sheer weight of crystal jewellery that draped across her chest and shoulders. She moved her beetle towards a large ornate horn of birch bark and silver. It sat before her on a pedestal at the platform's edge. The matriarch halted the insect at the horn's skinnier end and raised her bracelet-heavy hands wide as she prepared to speak. In the vine and lantern-light, she positively shone with the silver spiderthread that wrapped around her body. A crest of crystal feathers that rose above her head. I noticed then that her jewellery glowed with its own shivering light from tiny ampules of nectra.

As the drums fell silent and Danaxt prepared to speak, cheers thundered from all around us. The branches and leafroads encircling the tree were full of people. The vines shone brighter than I had ever seen.

'Hear us, tribes of Shal Gara! Hear us, citizens!' Danaxt uttered. The bark horn gave her withered tone an unnatural volume and reach. I expected even the Neathering could hear her.

'A dark age has fallen upon us, unprecedented in recent centuries. Word of the massacre at Sheertown has spread, but we can now confirm its truth. A truth that lies heavy on my heart. A truth I cannot bring myself to believe even now despite the truth.' Danaxt took a breath. 'Our brave warriors and sorcers died not at the hands of marauders and trickery, but at the hands of foul creatures. Demons, as they are known to us.'

The roar of disbelief spread through the city and chased the matriarch's voice into the forest.

'Scoff, we did, just as you do now, yet you shall believe the word of your matriarch! We have seen proof with our very eyes. The night that still plagues our sun is a sign of their coming. Even now, their wildfires can be glimpsed. Their smoke chokes us and they grow only closer, my citizens. Believe us when we say we do not take this threat lightly, and that we would not speak these words to you unless we believed it absolutely necessary.'

I watched the fear spread. From my vantage point you could see it in the wild and waving hands, demanding sense and reason. Others crowded along the branches, perhaps eager to return home or escape the bloodwood altogether. Even half the nearby sages looked torn.

Matriarch Danaxt held up her hands high for peace. All across the city, warders and other second-born stamped their feet or spears for silence.

'What can be done, Matriarch?' wailed a voice from somewhere in the rich canopy above. I shouldn't have been surprised. The nobles had the farthest to fall, after all.

While Danaxt took her time in gathering the right words. While I stood nearby and useless, vainly hoping a few eyes had found me amongst the important crowd. Karonak, especially, to rub it in his face, but mother, Tesq, and even Ralish. I wished they had let me keep the Scion armour on.

The matriarch's exhale ran through Shal Gara like the sound of a breeze through the Swathe. 'We will attempt to move our Shal Gara.'

Half of the city fell deathly silent. I knew the feeling: a confused awe. A sense of being painfully small, thrown in for good measure. Just like demons, moving bloodwoods was rooted in fable. At least this memory had survived in a better shape. The other half spluttered and blustered. Litter began to rain from branch to branch.

‘Let there be peace, tribes and citizens! Believe in the order and majesty of the Swathe. Our mighty Shal Gara has moved before and she will again, Three Gods willing, and she shall give us the time we need to prepare ourselves for the demons’ coming. It is a blessing of escape from the fires of these would-be destroyers that have come to face us. They have chosen poorly, we tell you! These demons challenge dynasties that have survived for thousands of seasons. Bloodwoods that have stood for centuries longer than memory! These demons have come to our forest before, and we drove them back then and we will do so again!’

The promise roused the city. My own heart lifted, shivering with anticipation that was equal parts bloodlust, pride, and fear.

‘There will be no panic, not tonight not any other night!’ screeched Danaxt over the din of the city. ‘There will be no fear. There will be no trouble caused! Every citizen will remember their place and calling. We will have order! We will keep to the Bloodlaws, and by the Three Gods of sun, soil, and rain, and all their spirits, we know we shall prevail!’

The resulting roar deafened us all. I had to give it to the matriarch. She knew how to handle a crowd. Since a child I had known words were weapons or tools depending on how you wielded them. Danaxt had spun the truth, but wrapped it in pride, duty, and honour. I knew Shal Gara was far from reassured, and countless miles from being content. I could see it in the stream of individuals running from the crowds. And yet the shouts remained rampant, ringing out after the matriarch had withdrawn.

Danaxt did not return to the seclusion of the Crimson Crown, but she instead guided her beetle to us, and beckoned to her gaggle of stern sages and warders. ‘Let us proceed,’ she ordered. The branch scrambled to do her bidding.

This queen of yours is impressive for somebody so frail. She is wrong, of course, and likely has more dust than blood in her, but at least she speaks well.

‘Not now, Serisi,’ I muttered as loud as I dared.

‘What are you muttering about, third-born?’

I turned to find the envoy walking close behind me. Okarin had better hearing than Misfit.

‘Erm. Nothing, your... Envoyness,’ I said.

Okarin rolled her wide eyes and I turned away mentally kicking at myself. Perhaps it was Serisi dancing a mocking jig. I subtly watched her hands roam over the string of white beads she carried before the demon bothered me again.

Are you this profoundly charming with all other mortals? Or is just with the female ones? Odd, how you are brave in some ways but a coward in others.

I fixed my eyes on the bloodwood’s trunk and surreptitiously tried not to slouch. I had plenty of time thanks to the slow pace of the silver-haired matriarch. We marched at such slow rhythm it felt like a funeral ceremony. My heart however, pounded as if I was being marched to execution after all.

‘Prepare yourself, Tarko. You’re about to enter the core of the bloodwood,’ Eztaral informed me in a reverent whisper. And rightly so. ‘Only a select few ever get a chance to see such things.’

At the base of the Branch of the Matriarchs stood great doors decorated with intricate and spiralling carvings. Sorcerers in ceremonial armour stood guard on tiered scaffolds. Warders at the doors sketched bows before going to work. It took twenty of them on either side of the door just to make it creak. We passed beneath bolts as thick as my head, and into a hallway that ran straight as a spear for the heart of the tree. Godseers in ceremonial masks of blue stone lined the hallway, bowing or knelt in respect. The walls had been polished to a glossy sheen. The polished wood shone blue, but from no glowing powder or vine-light, but a glow similar to that of nectra.

It seemed to take an hour to delve deep enough to reach Shal Gara's previous and forbidden core. To my curiosity, it was worth every ponderous, silent step. I filled it by watching the sages ahead of me. More than once I caught Sage Baran's critical glances.

Polished walls at last peeled back to form a crescent around three giant statues of flawless obsidian. Gorna, Alokaris, and Teltori were their sacred and unspoken names. To us mortals they were the gods of soil, rain, and sun, and they watched quietly over us as we entered. Their backs were to a sheer wall of what looked to be muddy crystal, not wood. A fierce blue light shone behind it, so bright it almost pained my eyes. A dull rumbling accompanied the tremble I felt in my feet. It was then I knew I stood at the very heart of Shal Gara, and stared at the raw power of nectra running through her veins. More godseers tentatively worked away at the crystalline surface. Slender, ornate drills of gold punctured the vein at the foot of each god-statue. Sandglass vats and vials of nectra were stacked in even rows. I longed to see one being filled, but all work had stalled in the presence of the matriarch.

Danaxt broke the reverent silence. 'Temach Atalawe, let us waste no time on ceremony and discussion, as several of our sages urge me to do. We shall test your... ideas, scholar.'

'As you order, Matriarch, 'Atalawe delved into her satchel and produced an armoured glove, completely made of leafleather and what looked like salamander skin. The same material the blacksmiths and sand-blowers used to handle their forges and molten sandglass.

Once firmly on her hand, and with all eyes upon her, Atalawe took a pouch from her belt and spilled its contents into her gloved palm. It looked like wood chips and sawdust. With her other hand, she ground two small sparkstones together until smoke trailed from the desiccated wood. The smell of pine and cedar infused the air. Atalawe held her hand high to waft the smoke towards the feet of the gods and their nectra. I must not have been the only one that felt a shiver in their hearts as Atalawe stepped closer and closer.

Minutes stretched. Whispers began to grow amongst the sages. Doubt crept between all those who stood and waited. I was not immune.

Atalawe tried another pouch of wood shavings, her movements noticeably rushed this time. She stood closer to let the smoke crawl up the gods' obsidian. When nothing happened a second time, she threw down the useless pouches and grabbed a third. That wood failed also, and Atalawe scabbled to free a wooden box from a pocket.

Eztaral approached cautiously. 'Atalawe—'

'Give me a moment!'

The wrangler snapped the lid from the palm-sized box and carefully scattered what looked like dust or ash. It had a profound rust colour, and Atalawe drew a line close to the nectra vein before stepping back to wait.

‘It is useless!’ cried one of the sages. It sounded like Sage Wasaqa to me, but I couldn’t drag my eyes from the nectra. My head throbbed with its rumble.

Your witch looks to have failed, Tarko. This oversized tree will not move. What a great pity.

‘Quiet, demon!’ I mouthed, before I almost jumped with the spark of an idea. ‘What is a demon’s essence?’

We have no essence, Serisi scoffed. We are beings of darkness and fire, of iron and bo—

‘Fire!’ I shouted, much to the loud concern of Wasaqa and Baran. Even Envoy Okarin regarded at me as if I were raving mad and had just spontaneously disrobed.

‘He cannot be serious!’ came the cries. Ignoring them all, I stepped from the crowd.

What are you doing, Tarko? Serisi asked of me.

‘What needs to be done.’

‘Tarkosi!’ I heard Eztaral bark, but I was too busy pulling Serisi’s claw out of hiding from around my neck. The moment it left my admittedly sweaty pocket and into the nectra’s glow, the thing started to hiss like a quenched coal.

Pel’s caution was barely audible. ‘Careful, Tarko!’

‘Somebody stop him!’ yelled Sage Baran.

I couldn’t have been more careful. I approached as slowly as you might approach a sleeping tharantos, if the hideous monsters ever slept. For a moment, Atalawe looked as if she might intercept me, but she held back.

‘A demon’s essence,’ I announced as I lifted the broken claw higher. ‘Fire.’

Traces of flame now ran across its dark surface. The closer I came to the nectra, the angrier it burned, and yet still its heat barely scorched me.

‘Tarkosi Terelta!’

I fully expected highwarders’ hands to land on me at any moment. I was saved by a trembling beneath our feet. Dust trickled from the walls. A deep rumbling grew loud.

I flashed a glance at Atalawe, whose wild eyes were now accompanied by a wilder grin. I raised the claw even closer to the Three. I closed my fist around it and felt its flames blossom. Black smoke curled from between my fingers, but I held myself towards the bloodwood’s core. Three more steps were all it took for the constant wash of blue that painted us all to turn fierce and pale. Cries of panic climbed as I strained to keep hold of the shaking claw.

‘That’s enough, Tarko!’

‘Gah!’ The heat grew unbearable, and despite my efforts, the demon claw fell to the polished floor. It skittered about, marking the wood with streaks of charcoal black and sputtering with fire as if the bloodwood was living skin. A shiver ran through the hall that put jelly in my legs.

With a squeak of boots against worn wood, Atalawe slammed her ungloved hand onto the claw and lifted it from the wood. I snatched it from her palm and held it close. Though I could already feel its heat lessening, it had scorched Atalawe’s hand scarlet.

The shake in Shal Gara did not fade as equally. It was incessant and unmistakable against my ribs and hands. No imagination was required to feel the bloodwood trembling.

‘We did it, Tarko,’ Atalawe laughed through clenched teeth.

‘We did something,’ I replied, shielding my eyes I turned to find Eztaral silently challenging the sages to complain, but they were wary and silent. All except for one, and to my surprise it was the worker’s sage.

‘What have you done?’ moaned Sage Maku. The plump man’s jowls were trembling just like the innards of the tree.

‘Shal Gara understands!’ Danaxt intoned, in a voice deep and hoarse and remarkably loud. She fixed me with her red and squinting eyes. ‘Shal Gara understands what we wish it to.’

I picked myself up. The claw in my hand was on the edge of being uncomfortable to hold. A stench of burned leather and acrid sulphur filled the room. White light swirled between the necra blue. Without a word of appreciation or congratulation whatsoever from the matriarch, she and her highwarders hurried back into the polished hallway. Without a words, the Scions followed. Once we had emerged into the night, the matriarch raised her hands to the canopy. The leaves were swaying in an unfelt wind. The shiver in the bloodwood shook some of the smaller branches. The crowds had noticed, and their cheers had turned to worried silence.

Danaxt spoke to her entourage alone. ‘Tonight will at last earn your seats, Sages! Bolster and reassure your tribes. Keep peace and order. Sage Saronash and Sage Dūnekar, you and our daughter will aid the Scions in any way you can, and they you.’

For somebody who walked slowly, Matriarch Danaxt sure made a swift exit. So swift, I almost forgot to bow. As the highwarders swept the sages along with them towards the skyriser, only one sage held back. It was Sage Kol Baran. He ignored his son completely, preferring to point his painted nails at me. He clacked each one together before speaking over the rumble.

‘You might have impressed the matriarch, Terelta,’ he hissed, ‘but you have yet to explain how you are able to hold that claw while nobody else can.’

I had to bite down on my words to keep them unspoken. Envoy Okarin lingered in the cobalt shine spilling from the doors. It turned her eyes purple. They were already closing, and the column of light was shrinking on her. ‘Sage Baran!’ she called. ‘The matriarch would hate for you to tarry.’

Baran tried his best to look as if it was his own decision. He bowed low and lengthily to the envoy before he chased after the matriarch, sparing not a moment for his son.

Okarin watched him leave. ‘Though I hate to give that man any reason to gloat, he’s right. You have much explaining still to do.’

I felt a sweat on my forehead.

Eztaral bowed low and answered for me. ‘All will be answered, Envoy.’

‘It had better be, Eagleborn Kraid.’

We were left upon the branch, tired, quietly chewing on our thoughts, and watching the churn of the city below. Haidak was the only outlier. He was cursing beneath his breath and glowered at the matriarch’s skyriser, where his father was still watching us. Me, to be accurate.

‘We will speak to you eventually,’ grunted Eztaral. Reassurance sounded ill at home coming from her.

Haidak blurted something I only caught the end of. It sounded suspiciously like, ‘Lancewing shit!’ but he did not linger around to clarify. Looking mortified rather than furious, he stormed off down a road that spiralled around Shal Gara’s trunk.

Atalawe clapped her hands. She was already leading Pel in an opposite direction. ‘We have our own places to be.’

Eztaral followed without a word. ‘That we do.’

I clawed at the air. ‘Why does nobody tell me anything?’ I tutted as I followed them.



Every inch of Shal Gara was now a-tremble. Disbelief in the matriarch’s words had been forgotten. Now panic and a gaping streak of wonder gripped the city. Either citizens sealed themselves inside their homes and burrows, or gathered in crowds in the higher reaches to watch. Nobody living could had ever seen a bloodwood move, and Shal Gara seemed almost ready to perform such a feat.

I shared their feelings: fascination and fear in an intoxicating blend. And I had to more to worry about.

Atalawe led us along one of the lowest and thickest branches, where a leafroad thrust east into the darkness of the Swathe. The wrangler seemed driven by some need I hadn’t yet figured out. She clenched her fists over and over again. More than once I thought I heard a prayer on her quiet lips. I didn’t blame her: I was close to doing the same. Every twenty feet we travelled, the more the branch quivered. At times, I had to spread my hands.

Eztaral and Blind Pel walked behind us. The blind beggar had found some of his urka seeds. With his blue eyes, he didn’t need Eztaral’s arm but he still tottered uneasily, zigzagging from railing to railing. Pel was still far from healed.

We were alone on the branch. On Haidak’s orders scattered buildings and merchant’s stalls had been evacuated. All the warders and warriors had been pulled back to the trunk. A whole wall of them stood far behind us and watching. From their silent staring, it only confirmed this whole idea

of going out on the branch was a terrible idea to me, but it seemed important enough as risk the Scions.

‘Surely we don’t have long.’

‘Not long at all, by the way she’s shaking more and more. Gearing up to move, I hope.’

‘And yet we’re still moving forwards. Makes sense,’ I said, looking around at the smaller twigs that poked from around the branch’s road. Their scarlet leaves were waving back and forth as if bidding us farewell. I hoped they weren’t.

How exactly a tree moved was still one I had no answer to. Truthfully, I wasn’t sure if I wanted the answer. It made me feel even more insignificant than I used to.

‘We’re far enough, Atalawe. This branch is reaching its end,’ Eztaral called. ‘I won’t start this war tumbling from a great height into the loam.’

Atalawe acted as if she hadn’t heard the eagleborn. I on the other hand couldn’t have ignored her if I tried.

‘Atalawe.’

The wrangler stopped with a loud stamp of her staff. Candle-vines had been wrapped around one end. ‘He’s alive. You might not believe it, but I know he is. My brother is delayed is all,’ she whispered over the rumbling. *Redeye*. Atalawe still clung to hope.

The noise was now constant and still increasing. Beneath us, the branch split into its leafed and sprawled hand-like limits. The leafroad continued on into the Swathe through a hollow cut between the leaves. It hung suspended in midair for two hundred feet before resting against the tip of another tree and disappeared into the dark.

I ducked as something came crashing between the foliage around us. It was just a dead bloodwood leaf from above us. It thankfully missed the road, and continued to spin and spiral down into the unlit dark.

So there we stood, all in a line and staring into the night-gripped forest with our only solid ground ready to move at any moment.

That moment came swifter than I had hoped. The rumble of Shal Gara was interrupted by a deep boom that I felt hammer against my insides. A rending crash filled the whole city; the sound of wood being ripped asunder by an imitable force. My gaze flew upwards so quickly I hurt my neck. Shal Gara’s leaves were swaying back and forth, yet no wind was responsible. I could barely trust my eyes, but bloodwood was slowly beginning to leaning to the west. A higher leafroad was torn slowly yet inexorably from a branch. Wooden spars and ropes tumbled onto lower thrusts of the city. Lower down, more branches were dragging away from the foundations of roads laid centuries ago. They were powerless against the strength and sheer will of the bloodwood. With the noise a painful cacophony in my ears, I watched as a dozen more roads, paths, and rope bridges parted from Shal Gara. One of the surrounding trees cowered under the pressure. A rending snap tore through the forest as it began to topple.

And still, Shal Gara leaned ever more. ‘It’s not moving, it’s going to fall!’ I blurted.

None of the others had any words to speak. I saw their eyes grow wider. They weren't looking at me, or the destruction raining down, but downwards.

I had been too hasty.

By the Void and the Iron Icon, Serisi breathed in my head. She had been silent and brooding since I had used her claw against the core.

Past the Neathering and the ring of the Rootfort, the colossal and sweeping roots of the tree were moving too. While the largest writhed as if they dug deeper, others long buried exploded from the earth in clouds of dirt. The gloom of the loam was lit up flashes of reds, greens, and deep cobalt as fauna were crushed and thrown aside. Trees were crushed like twigs of dead wood. Vast sections of earth beneath Shal Gara churned.

While gawping somewhat like a newborn, and with my mind struggling to comprehend what my eyes were seeing, a convulsion shook our branch sideways. I found myself tumbling to my knees. Eztaral and Pel were not far off. Atalawe used her staff like another limb.

I watched the leafroad in front of us splinter. A crack shot through it. Ropes snapped like bowstrings and lashed the ground beside us. One smashed a railing to pieces.

'Our time is now, Atalawe!' Eztaral ordered.

'No!'

Eztaral reached for the wrangler, but Atalawe seized her hand and pointed it down the leafroad. Between the gloom and the sudden rain of splinters and leaves, I could see a figure running towards us. Well... *hopping*, to be precise.

'Redeye! Brother!' Atalawe screeched over the pandemonium.

One foot tucked to his arse, torn cloak trailing behind him, hands already stretched and reaching, the figure was not just racing time. Another shape dashed behind him, on Redeye's tail and closing. Even in the dark, I could see it wasn't human.

He was trying to outpace it. He was desperately trying, running in a hobble. His face was a mask of pain, but he pushed through it. All the while, the leafroad peeled from the branch, widening rapidly inch by painful inch, and whatever chasing Redeye gained.

Fearless or stupidly loyal, or perhaps a mix of both, Atalawe sprang forwards to help. Eztaral had already seized her arm. 'Don't you bloody dare!' she snarled. 'I'm not losing both of you!'

'He's not lost, curse it!'

Spars twisted as they clung to nails. Others sprang upright under the pressure. I threw my hands up around my head as a splinter grazed my neck. Pel almost fell, and would have, had it not been for the blade he stabbed into the road.

Don't you kill us now, Tarko!

Every one of us stretched our hands as far as we could and beckoned Redeye closer as if it could help. Atalawe thrust out her staff and yelled at the top of her lungs.

Redeye was barely a stone's toss away when the branch jolted. With a rending crash, the leafroad's last pieces separated from the branch. The gap yawned wider, and I saw nothing but darkness below. But the sorcer didn't care. With a mad yell, Redeye threw himself from the crumbling edge of the road.

For some reason, I was apparently the lucky one that he happened to aim at. The sorcer's weight struck me like a runaway wagon. He and I crumpled to the ground, the breath driven from us and wheezing from the impact. Eztaral hauled us both up with an expedience that crunched all the bones in my hand. I promptly collapsed back to my arse and tried to breathe.

'Inwar!' Redeye gasped while he struggled to stand. He barely had a thread of strength in him. 'It's Inwar!'

The void between the branch and the broken leafroad had grown wider still, now more than a spear's throw.

'Will he make it?' snapped Eztaral.

I sat up, aghast at the prospect of the jāgu tumbling into the night, but Atalawe was laughing with unfettered joy.

By the way the jāgu sailed through the air, huge paws extended, Inwar could have jumped twice the distance. He soared from the leafroad, and for a horrid moment, I thought he too might land on me just like Redeye. I coiled up, sure I was to be flattened, but the jāgu's claws thumped on the road close to my instead. His claws dragged a line in the wood. The damnable thing wasn't even panting.

Atalawe wrestled the jāgu to the floor, making Inwar roar with what I assumed – and hoped – was delight. She survived the tussle without a single scratch.

'Always showing off, aren't you?' Atalawe said, ruffling his tufted ears. She grabbed her brother next, making Redeye yelp. His legs were quivering, bending under his weight. His damaged leg looked suspiciously purple. The foot hung sideways at an angle that brought a stir to my stomach.

'I thought you were dead! Thought you both were.'

'Almost,' Redeye whispered. He was still out of breath, but now with relief as well as exhaustion. He looked the way he had come, and shook his head in awe. As did we all. The leafroad was now gradually fading into the darkness as we withdrew. I could have run faster Constant grinding and crashing came from the roots of Shal Gara, where trees crumbled before the bloodwood's unimaginable weight. An empty void seasons in the making was left behind us. Leafroads hung and swung back in forth in tatters. Trees stood bent and broken. A great churn of earth could be seen in the sea of light the bloodwood. Atalawe had done it. Shal Gara was moving, in complete disregard for whatever its citizens believed.

'Bleeding trees and all the Hells,' Redeye grunted. 'What did I miss?'

I blew a sigh, not knowing how in the Swathe to begin answering that. All I stared at was the orange glow far closer than the horizon. The forest was already aglow with fire, and then and there I

felt the twitch of my cheek. I refused the impulse, but in my head I somehow felt the widening smile of a demon's jaws.

18

OF THE FIRE WITHIN

Frogs? Keep your frogs and their stringy meat. Naught is more delicious than a roasted haunch of loamtoad! So greasy. So rich. So sumptuous. Just be sure to wash your hands after you peel off its poisonous skin. Far too many cooks have killed a customer or two – or themselves – in their haste to serve their toad.

FROM THE COOKING LECTURES OF KALABASQA, 1694

‘Concentrate, Tarko!’

Clay pots shattering was the music to Pel’s voice.

The spell died away. I finally remembered to breathe and sucked in a cloud of dirt as I did so. Eztaral thumped a hand on my back and made me choke some more.

‘Too slow!’ she announced while marching to the far side of the Scion’s Den. ‘While you’re trying to find the wherewithal to summon your spells, a demon will be striding towards you, iron sword raised and flaming, eager to slice you from gizzard to groin. If you can’t even control yourself here, surrounded by friends, then how are you supposed to do so in battle?’

I got up, smeared dirt across my face, and readied myself again. I had been training since before firstglow. Eztaral had appeared for but half an hour, and had spent it liberally shitting on all I thought I had accomplished that long morning.

‘Eztaral, perhaps we should rest for a moment,’ suggested Pel, removing the kerchief from his bruised face. The smoke from the encroaching wildfires had grown thicker in recent days. Pel wasn’t the only one whose throat it scorched.

‘The demons aren’t resting, Pelikai. Why should we? Again!’

Atalawe barely had time to set up some more more clay pots before Eztaral came at me. Not charging, but not hesitating either. Her sword had been set free from her hip. The crescent obsidian blades that curved across its face glittered as Eztaral weaved a dizzying pattern in front of her.

I stood my ground and tried to ignore the eagleborn. I spun the dirt in front of me, bundling it into spheres ready to hurl.

‘Cast your spells, earth reaver!’ Eztaral roared at me.

The spell faltered as my calm eroded. I rushed the magic but it only resisted me. I dug even deeper, narrowing my eyes on the clay pots and blocking out the sound of feet.

I managed to fire one dart of earth before Eztaral’s sword stopped an inch from my cheek. Not only that, but I had missed the pot as well.

Eztaral exhaled through her nose. I felt the hot air on my cheek. That close, I saw her one crimson eye bore golden flecks.

‘You have a lot to live up to, Tarkosi Terelta,’ she said. With a tut, she withdrew and marched around the clearing in a circle.

‘You push him too hard,’ I heard old Pel hiss.

Eztaral looked disappointed. ‘And you put too much hope in him. He is no Teyak.’

Pel shook his head adamantly, almost dislodging his turban. ‘And neither was Teyak until the time came.’

Being ignored lit a fire in me. ‘You know I’m right here, don’t you? As for being my father’s son, I don’t know anything about him aside from the lies I’ve heard and the truths you’ve told me. So forgive me if I’m not living up to an expectation I have no understanding of.’

Eztaral glared at me. ‘Fine. I apologise. I will not drive you as hard. Forgive me if I care too much about saving Shal Gara and the rest of the Swathe. I had thought given your ability you would be much more use to us.’

‘Why is it whenever you try to apologise it always sounds like another insult?’ I asked.

Eztaral knew I was right. I could tell by the way she stormed off.

‘Call it guilt over Sheertown. Call it caring too much,’ Pel whispered in my ear as he guided me away.

‘I call it irritating. I’m trying my best.’

‘Your best, Tarko, is much more than you think it is,’ Pel assured me. ‘If I am to be honest, I’m not the only Scion that harbours a hope you could be a power against the demons that we sorely need. You have an ability we can’t deny.’

‘So you think I’m some kind of hero?’ I asked hesitantly, not wishing to believe it myself. It sounded like it came with a lot of responsibility along with the glory. Pel put me back in my untrained place with a laugh.

‘Confidence can be a poison to those who aren’t careful. I will tell you when I know, Tarko.’

‘As useful as ever.’

‘Take a moment, Tarko. You’ve been here since firstglow. When was the last time you ate?’

I tried to remember. ‘Perhaps yesterday?’

Pel pressed a scattering of green gems into my palm. 'Get yourself some food. You're pale in the cheeks. Come back when you're fed and rested.'

I cast a look to Eztaral, who was absently drawing shapes in the dirt with her sword. I felt as I had disappointed her somehow. What bothered me is why I cared so much.

Taking Pel's advice, I trudged from the Scion's Den, alone and wondering if I actually deserved a place there. It was strange, to want something so deeply, and when only to grasp it, feel undeserving of it. There was a paradox I didn't understand but hated. I had expected the world through a sorcerer's eyes to be bloodwood-tinted. The colour was more like sewage.

Free of the Scion's Den, Pel's teaching, and Eztaral's baleful stare, I felt as though I had escaped the Burrows afresh. A worker traditionally only had the evenings to themselves. It was a treat to have such freedom in such busy daylight hours. And busy was the word. The tremor of feet ran through Shal Gara as much as the rumble of the bloodwood's path through the forest. The city was alive in more ways than one.

I practically jogged to the railing to stare down the bloodwood at the passing earth. I was not alone in my gawping. Half of Shal Gara seemed to be doing the same. The railings of leafroads and branches and platforms were crammed with people equally as fascinated and befuddled.

From what I could tell, or guessed with utterly no applicable knowledge of the Swathe's fauna, was that the roots acted like limbs. Instead of walking above the loam, the bloodwood churned through it, like a hand-plough carving through highfield soil. The trail it left behind was littered with fallen trees and a gutter of rich black earth. Birds and lizards flocked to feast on the huge worms the tree had dug up. Murmurations of boisterous waifs fought with crows and magpies. More followed Shal Gara, or roosted in the branches in their thousands. There were large ravens, too. Some of the far mountains, by the looks of them. Some were almost as tall as a man.

Ignoring my rumbling stomach, I walked around the bloodwood to see where Shal Gara was going. I found another railing to lean over. A hundred others alongside me did the same.

Due west was Shal Gara's path, and it was unwavering. The Swathe stood no chance between the might of the mile-high bloodwood. I watched as trees collapsed before Shal Gara and were swallowed by the churning, complex roots far beneath. Part of me wanted to stretch my freedom and wander down to the Rootfort, but I could imagine Eztaral hauling me back to the Den by the scruff of my neck.

Shal Gara had travelled a good distance through the night. A dozen miles, or so the chatter around me said. It was a steady and unwavering pace, but it wasn't enough to outpace the smoke. A wind brought it streaming from the east. Not a patch of blue shone above the Swathe. A dull orange had replaced it, and sun I could glimpse above was yet again a disk of rust. Its haze shrunk the world down and made the rest of the forest's but a dream, lost to yellow haze.

'Serisi, 'I muttered.

No answer.

'You're quiet today.'

And you are too busy with being a hero. First your wizard ways, and now moving a bloodwood. You have flourished while I am left with nothing but watching. Waiting.

There it was again: the reminder that we were still enemies within one body.

‘You know? Some might call that spying.’

You were the one who brought me here.

As I leaned over the railing, unwilling to blink in case I missed any detail of Shal Gara’s movement, I expected Serisi to remind me of my promise to free her and separate us. Surprisingly, she remained unusually silent on the matter. She was distracted. Perhaps the dreamless night had left her in a stupor, much as it had me on my slog up the bloodwood to the Scion’s Den.

A shiver ran through me from boot to scalp as Shal Gara broke something beneath her roots. The dull bellow rang out through the forest of woollen smoke. On a platform below us, a gang of workers had taken to cheering every time Shal Gara crushed something. Their bar for being impressed was incredibly low, but it still made me smirk. ‘Tell me, Serisi,’ I said, while watching one of my fellow third-borns punch the air and whoop as a narin tree burst into a cloud of splinters. ‘I’m curious to know what a demon thinks of all this?’

I think, Serisi hesitated. I think nothing. It is as disgustingly green as always. The taste of smoke barely covers up your mortal stench.

The demon’s conviction seemed frailer today. I tapped my own temple. ‘I know you well enough to hear a lie when you tell it, Serisi.’

You do not know me, Tarko. You do not know my mind.

I chuckled to myself and drew a stare from a nearby onlooker, a first-born like my sister. I pointed down to the loam far below as if that was what amused me. He eyed the nails on my hands and frowned. It drove me further along the railing to another space. ‘You can’t con me, Serisi. I can feel you staring through my eyes. I can hear your muttering. It doesn’t sound much like complaint or disgust to me. It sounds quite the opposite.’

Serisi hissed like a snake. A pain ran around my skull and made me shut one eye in a wince. It was sharper than when she had tried to hurt me in the forest. I wondered whether she was getting stronger, just like I seemed to be.

‘Come on now,’ I urged her with a snicker. ‘Despite our differences, I’d call us closer than most. You can be honest with me.’ Other curious ears had heard my muttering over the bloodwood’s rumble. Everybody was concerned by a madman, and so I nodded politely, put my hood over my mess of hair, and went to see about a way to silence my stomach.

You will gloat.

‘That’s not my style.’

The demon growled. I heard her teeth clicking, claws drumming in indecision. *I am... confused, is what it is. And I am not used to such a feeling, therefore I hate it. It feels like a*

mortal weakness to me. One that I have no doubt inherited from you, and being in this sack of meat.

‘Charming. That sack of meat is my body. And what exactly confuses you?’

I did not expect to be so... impressed. Our kind learns all about your world from our elders, and how rife with existence it is. That much is true, but you are not the mindless beasts that you are described as. You are not mindless navik, you are no simple worms scratching holes in the earth, or insects to be squashed or—

‘Alright, I get your point. No need to rub it in.’ I tutted. I certainly felt like an insect that day; one clinging to the back of a giant beast.

I see now that what I was told of your forest was wrong. Your city is full of spectacles I did not think to ever imagine. There is so much life here. At first it was too tangled. Brash. Disgusting. And the stench... Every inch of this tree drips with things I should loathe, and yet I stare at it through your eyes with intrigue instead. I find myself failing to hate it as I should, but rather I wish to know more. She grunted abruptly as if she had disgusted herself. Her shiver ran through me. I blame you and your mortal mind. It must be weakening me, and that I refuse to let happen.

While she spoke, I roamed a wall of kitchens with leaf-thatch cones for roofs. In front of one, a spit was squeaking above a bed of coals. A fat scholar snake – so called for the eye-shaped patches across its body – had been skinned, boiled free its poisons, and was now crisping up to sit between loaves of barkflour bread. Beside it perched pickled mushrooms big as my hand, and cakes of red moss and yellow berries. My mouth was watering so much I almost dribbled on the counter. Serisi grumbled as loudly as my stomach.

What is this despicable rumble within your belly?

‘It’s hunger, demon,’ I whispered.

Laying one of the gems down before a cook with dark hair braided down to his waist, I asked for a slice of the snake. As I waited for the cook to go about his work – taking an embarrassing amount of pride and labour over a sandwich if you asked me – I stared into the bed of coals. The wind chased colours of red through their grey husk. Once again my demon-laced imagination conjured a face within the fiery pit. While my skin prickled in the heat, I watched a patch of the coals crumble, revealing a pair of eyes. A sickle-smile curled.

There you are.

The coals glowed as if a mouth spoke, but the whisper was in my head.

‘Here I am,’ I breathed, staring around at the crowds around me. The cooks were busy dashing about their narrow kitchen and their clay pots and pans. A nearby armourer was striking a piece of leaf leather as if it had personally insulted him.

I released I had never stopped to see the intricacy in my own world. Its people had always marred it for me. My Bloodlaw duty had hidden it behind a gauze. It was a pride born within me, and much like my skin, hair, or bones, I took it for granted without paying any attention. I stared around at the colours abounding across the small marketplace. The bloodwood was a marvel, one

that apparently even a demon could recognise. ‘So you’re starting to realise your enemy has got some worth. The insect might not be worth crushing after all?’

As I said, it must be a weakness of some mortal ilk. A foul wizardry of your forest. I do not like it.

‘You’re just educating yourself.’ I chuckled. Winning over a demon might actually be possible all along.

Whether Serisi was growing the ability to hear my thoughts, or she knew me as well as I thought her, she snorted.

It will not matter. My father will come anyway, either for me or to avenge me. He will not suffer such weakness. He will burn this tree to its roots. There is your education, Tarko.

The demon’s tone caught me. I wouldn’t have called it sadness, perhaps ‘Teach me some more then. What I want to know is why do you crave such destruction and chaos?’ I asked.

Chaos is not merely destruction, Tarko. You have made that mistake before.

‘Could have fooled me. What do you call what’s left of the Loamsedge, Firstwatch, and probably a hundred miles of the Swathe by now? Destroyed by fire, I imagine. Why don’t you consume what’s in your world instead? What gives you any right to take what’s ours?’

The coals flashed, drawing a stare from the cook. *This forest is not yours, Tarko. You seem to believe that, but all I saw was it trying to eat you. I bet this tree could shake you all free if it wished.*

I had to confess – just like the idea of a bloodwood moving – that appalling thought had never crossed my mind.

Serisi’s fire-eyes avoided mine, watching another passerby that already had two handfuls of cakes but was eyeing up another. The demon’s mouth contorted with another shuffle of coals, grimacing. *And you know nothing of our Starless Plains, she growled. Nor of the curse of our own making that is driving us from it.*

‘Then tell me.’

Serisi sighed, and to my surprise, relented. *The oldest songs of the void say our lands used to be a world of life beneath a brighter sky. My kind were said to have plundered it for its riches. Felled the trees, broke the mountains into rubble, and turned the red rivers to gutters of bone, all in worship and sacrifice. We ascended to such power, built our own cities, but meanwhile our great machines worked day and night, ever thirstier. Our monuments crumbled. The fires grew cold. We drank our world dry, Tarko, or so is the blame the Iron Icon lays at our feet. It is he that demands glorious war, and so, as one horde, we survived by walking the now Starless Plains. We walked for centuries until we found the doors into worlds beyond ours, still rich with life. To the call of chaos, we plundered them also, and for a time, we prospered once more, but the eternal fire of the Iron Icon commanded more sacrifice. More worlds fell before us, but it was not enough to sustain our world. As our lands splintered, our towers fell, and our machines rusted, pieces of our world began to crumble into the void. They crumble still, where the remainder of the Last Clan and the Iron Icon waits for our victory.*

‘I’ve already seen it in my dreams,’ I breathed.

And that, Tarko, is why we are here. Your world must be conquered to save ours. With the plunder of your forest, and the nectra in your tree, we can open a door to the Starless Plains and return to rebuild.

I hated her in that moment. ‘Selfish.’

‘Conquest.’

Serisi and I locked gazes until the cook’s blackened shovel carved her face in two.

‘You alright, son?’ the cook asked of me while he raked the coals. In his other hand he was holding out a thin piece of bark. The slab of bread and meat waited atop it. The traditional trio of venoms and sauces had been slathered all over, and it was in danger of dribbling onto my hand.

‘Just fine, thank you,’ I said, moving away into the marketplace to find somewhere to sit.

‘Tarko!’ brayed a voice next to me, making me almost drop my bark plate.

It was Juraxi, of all people. I barely recognised him in his Shal Gara warder’s uniform and armour.

‘Well, look at you,’ I said. ‘A warder again.’

‘Dark times and all that. Shal Gara’s seen fit to take me in.’ Juraxi stared out across the marketplace to the forest that ambled past, far below. ‘I can barely believe what I am seeing.’

I was glad I wasn’t alone, but Serisi’s words weighed on me. ‘Boggles the mind, doesn’t it?’

‘Are you alright, Tarko? You look like you’ve seen a demon.’

I flinched, but Juraxi’s broad smile reassured me.

‘No, just distracted is all,’ I said.

‘A lot to take in isn’t it? First that demons exist and now suddenly the tree moves? It’s almost too much for the mind to handle.’

The man was speaking my tongue. Speaking my thoughts, even. I couldn’t help but smile at knowing I wasn’t alone in my feelings.

‘What’s the plan?’ Juraxi asked, plain as daylight.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, you seem to have fallen in with a group that’s more knowledgeable than most on this subject. That wrangler, for example, and that sorcerer you were with.’

I felt seen in that comment. To be freed from a worker’s life was one thing, but to be recognised as something other was a treat to me. I couldn’t help but stand straighter.

‘I don’t know much, to be honest.’

‘Juraxi!’ came a call, one that I recognised immediately. It was my mother, wading through the crowds to join Juraxi and I. She looked between us, frowning as always.

'You know each other?' Juraxi asked.

'He is my son, 'my mother answered. She thumped her obsidian bladed sword down on the wooden floor and stared me up and down. 'Not that I recognise him these days, but that's him.'

'If I may be so bold, madam, 'Juraxi began. 'He survived the demons where few others did. Even got clawed by a demon and lived to tell the tale. Not to mention surviving in the loam for a whole night alone.'

While I appreciated Juraxi's efforts, mother stated at me as if I'd spat on her boots.

'You didn't tell me *that*, Tarko.'

'Slipped my mind, maybe. 'I made a weak motion towards the wound in my shoulder and hand.

Mother grabbed my hand. 'Looks two weeks healed, not recent.'

'Maybe I heal quickly, 'I said. I felt Juraxi staring at me. The weight of his eyes was intense.

'What is it the matriarch has you doing? I've never seen anything get you up before firstglow so willingly before, 'mother commented.

'Training, 'was all I said.

Juraxi smiled, shook his spear and shield in salute, and was wise enough to make his exit. 'Well, it was fine to see you again, Tarko Terelta, 'he said. And, turning to my mother, he added, 'I'll be waiting on the main leafroad, madam.'

Mother nodded without looking, staring only at me. Her eyes roved my face. At last, she reached out a hand and tussled my hair. I pursed my lips, but didn't stop her.

'I'll be fine. Pel and Eztaral have my best interests at heart.'

'They might not be my interests, 'said mother. 'But I understand. You'd best come home at a decent time tonight. I don't trust much after you Scions moved the tree. 'Mother looked beyond me for a moment. 'How on earth you managed it, I don't want to know. It isn't natural. Too strange for me.'

'That might be, but it's the best chance we have against the demons.'

'Demons. 'Mother shook her head. 'You remind me too much of your father.'

It was then she turned away, but not before I said my piece.

'He wasn't who you think he was, 'I interjected. 'I found out what he believed in. What he was, instead of the drunken lump he remember him as.'

'You don't what you're saying, Tarko. I knew what your father was. More than anyone else did, even Pel. Even Eztaral. Whether he was right or not, he still abandoned us for a reason that ruined us. It doesn't matter that he was right, but what he went to prove it. He should have been smarter. More patient, but no, 'she told me, shortly before escaping into the crowds. The last thing mother said to me was, 'I better see you at home.'

Jaded, I stuffed the snake sandwich into my mouth and stalked back to the Scion's Den.

□

By the smattering of highwarders standing around the doorway, we had regal visitors. After eyeing my sauce-stained lips along with my Scion threads, they let me pass on into the Den. I made sure to wipe my hands and lips as quickly and efficiently as possible as I weaved through the dark.

There was no matriarch, like I expected, but it was her daughter Envoy Okarin that stood awaiting me, arms crossed across her chest. Her favoured string of white beads was strangled in one hand. There were no braids framing her face today, but her sable hair was waxed back into a tail and pinned with lancewing feathers, and it only complimented the sternness of her face.

Alongside the envoy was the stretched pig that was Sage Dūnekar. One blue hand held a handkerchief across his mouth to keep from breathing in the smoke-laden air. Sage Saronash, the Jade Wolf, was there also. Her wooden hand was on her famous sword, and she was currently in a staring contest with Inwar. I got the strong sense this was not a friendly visit.

Thankfully, Eztaral, Pel, and Atalawe were standing between them and I. Redeye had appeared, leaning heavy on crutches. His leg had been bandaged and set with splints. The man looked utterly exhausted.

'Here he is, 'Eztaral tutted, immediately confirming my thoughts. 'At last.'

I barely remembered to bow. 'I wasn't aware that anybody was waiting for me.'

'This isn't just anybody, boy, 'Eztaral remarked in a whisper. 'The envoy and several sages have come to check up on our progress. Though, if you ask me, there's something on Dūnekar's mind that I don't like the look of, not one bit.'

'Probably my presence, 'Pel said, licking blue lips. 'He's held a grudge against me ever since I was disgraced.'

'More like why Tarko can use magic without nectra,' added Atalawe. 'That's my wager.'

Redeye blinked owlshly. 'What did you say? That's impossible.'

The envoy's imperious voice echoed around the Den. 'Our time is precious, Eagleborn Kraid.'

Eztaral bowed. 'Of course, Envoy. Sages.'

Dūnekar spoke first in his usual thrilling monotone. 'Now that you are all here, perhaps you can answer a question for us,' he said, looking at everybody but Pel. 'The warders still swear on the bloodwoods and the Three Gods that a sorcer attacked them in the loam when they arrested you. An earth reaver.'

The Jade Wolf spoke up. 'We hear your earth reaver returned last night in the nick of time.' And as you were of the water order, Pelikai—'

‘And therefore forbidden to wield magic any longer,’ Dūnekar interjected.

‘We have many questions for you Scions.’ finished Okarin. ‘Particularly you, Tarkosi Terelta. For instance how you can hold that demon claw when it burns anything else it touches.’

Atalawe chuckled. ‘Anything else?’

‘Stow your cheek, scholar,’ warned Dūnekar.

Okarin approached me. ‘Speak the truth, or we will be forced to have a more difficult conversation.’

While I thought of something to say, Eztaral answered for me. ‘The boy has a certain ability which we have been exploring—’

‘I can wield spells without nectra,’ I blurted. I felt the need to speak for myself. Eztaral and her caution could go to the Hells.

Dūnekar did not splutter. He did not laugh. He did not look angry. ‘Such things are impossible.’

‘With all due respect, Sage, although I don’t know much about what’s happening to the Swathe, it’s been a week of impossible things.’ I showed them my wounded hand and the blackened scars across my palm. To my shock, the envoy seized my arm and dragged back my sleeve to trace the dark veins that stretched halfway up my forearm. In the fainter, smoke-thick light of the Den, there was no denying the faint blue glow.

I tried to pull back my hand, but the woman’s strength surprised me.

‘Was the vial of nectra full?’ Okarin asked.

‘That it was.’

‘Surviving this is no simple feat, Tarkosi Terelta,’ she told me. Her crimson eyes fixed me with a stare. I found little emotion behind those eyes, and I was scared to hold them for so long, but at the same time I couldn’t look away.

‘Those who do survive such accidents are usually crippled from their narrow escape,’ said Okarin. ‘What makes you so unusual?’

‘I’ve been asking the same question myself, Envoy. All I know is that I was a sorcer from birth like my father Teyak.’

Sage Saronash agreed. ‘He was a powerful sorcer.’

‘He was another disgrace to the sorcer tribe,’ muttered Dūnekar.

I continued in a voice straining not to growl. ‘I was marked but then a certain family dispute, you could say, had me removed from the tribe. I was made a worker instead.’

‘The tribe doesn’t make mistakes,’ Dūnekar interrupted. He looked to Pel while he spoke to me. ‘Not willingly. If you were removed from the tribe it was for good reason or that you had no ability with nectra. That is a fact.’

I bit my tongue. While I was wondering how best to explain, it was Saronash who spoke.

‘Let’s see it then, ’she suggested. ‘Why argue when we can see such a thing with our own eyes?’

Dūnekar grabbed me by the cheeks, punched between finger and thumb. A wholly unpleasant experience given his clammy fingers. While I made a faint murmur of complaint, the sage looked between my eyes and lips. ‘He has no nectra in him. No urka.’

‘You’re bloody right he doesn’t, ’Pel muttered, and Dūnekar remained silent.

The old beggar’s confidence bolstered me. Eztaral had a different tactic for inspiring me. She pushed me into the centre of the Den and whispered, ‘Don’t screw it up, boy.’

Screw it up. I like this word.

‘Why, thank you. Very helpful. Do you give your warriors the same treatment?’ I uttered.

‘You bet I do.’

She’s right, Tarko. Don’t screw this up. I can feel their suspicion.

‘Shut up, ’I muttered, drawing a sharp double-take from Eztaral before she left me standing alone and rejoined the others.

Atalawe had set up the clay pots once more. With the burden of the stares heavy on me, I prepared myself with fingers spread but not rigid. I half-closed my eyes and fixated not on the dirt beneath me but the clay.

I felt the swirl of dust around my fingers. Rocks tumbled and sand grated. With a practised motion I brought my hands together, all the while keeping my focus narrow as the head of a pin. With the dirt amassed into an orb, I split it into three shivering shards, took far too long to balance them, aimed, and hurled.

Two out of the three clays collapsed into shards. I shot a look to Dūnekar to measure how impressed he was. The sage simply crossed his arms.

‘It’s true, then, ’said Okarin. I stood tall and nodded my thanks.

Sage Saronash clapped her hands together, just fast enough not to be mocking. ‘None of our stories tells of any sorcer that can do such a thing.’

‘Not all our stories have survived the thousand seasons since the demons last invaded. There are others we Scions have kept alive in our minds. Such as Kī Raxa. She purportedly had no need for nectra,’ Atalawe spoke up.

‘Purportedly, ’Dūnekar echoed.

‘It means supposedly.’

Dūnekar glowered.

‘I think the sage knows what it means, Atalawe. ’Eztaral whispered.

Atalawe shook her head. ‘Whatever you believe, Tarko could be – *is* – an asset against the demons we sorely need. Maybe even deserve. The Three Gods have seen to gift him these powers.’

Envoy Okarin was squinting at me, her fingers now shuffling over her beads. ‘But for how long?’

‘Excuse me?’ I said, holding up a finger.

Okarin pointed at my hand. ‘You had no such darkness in your veins when you stood in the Crimson Crown. I saw for myself. Your wound is festering, perhaps not on the surface, but the nectra eats at you from within.’

Atalawe was quick to see for herself, striding to check what the envoy had seen. Her eyes went wider than I wanted or liked. ‘When were you going to show me this?’

An inconvenient stutter interrupted my excuse. ‘I didn’t think it was important, because I feel better than ever. Stronger than ever. With all due respect, you’re wrong, Envoy Okarin.’

Atalawe pinched me, but I refused to stand down.

Dūnekar had an excellent knack of keeping all emotion from his tone, and yet still managing to shame me with all the finesse of his logic and words. The man spoke like an assassin would slip a blade between ribs. ‘Envoy Okarin is trained in all arts of the tribes, from the forest-lore of the healers, to the dreamwalking of godseers and the finer points of magic and weaponry, Tarkosi Terelta. What expertise do you bring, worker?’

I shrugged back my sleeve rebelliously. ‘I know how I feel.’

‘Sage Baran is right, you are nothing but an upstart.’

‘That is enough, Sage Dūnekar,’ the envoy said.

‘Okarin...’

The envoy shot him a forceful look. ‘You dare address me as if I am still your student, Sage?’

Dūnekar did not flinch. ‘My apologies, Envoy. I meant no disrespect,’ he said. His flat tone sounded like an uninspired actor rehearsing lines. There was barely an apology in it that I could hear, but the envoy forgave him with a slow nod.

‘Call it hope. Call it desperation,’ said Okarin, shuffling the white beads between her hands. Her bewitching eyes searched mine. ‘But I know enough of the Three Gods and their spirits to know they saw fit to keep you alive, Tarkosi, and to give you a power worthy of a weapon. I also know well enough not to ignore their suggestions. As such, may the Three Gods see fit to keep you, and all of us, alive a little longer. We will see each other again soon, I’m sure, *Initiate Terelta*,’ she announced.

The title caught me off-guard.

‘Wouldn’t you agree, Dūnekar?’ Okarin looked to the sage expectantly.

‘It appears I would have to,’ Dūnekar replied in a grunt.

‘Then so it is! You are a sorcer now, Initiate Terelta. Do not let us down. All of Shal Gara will be watching,’ Okarin told me before summoning her entourage and departing without another word.

A creaking, rumbling quiet filled the Den in their wake. I stared at the Scions one by one, silently swelling with pride until Inwar sneezed and broke the spell of silence.

‘Well by the loam! Looks like you impressed them, Tarko.’ Atalawe ruffled my hair. By the glances she snuck at my right arm, I could still tell she was

It was Pel that looked most proud. ‘And rightly so. An initiate, Tarko. You’re a sorcer, lad!’

‘A sorcer with a lot of work to do and a long way to go,’ Eztaral muttered.

‘Eztaral,’ Pel chided. ‘The boy’s trained hard.’

‘Fine.’ With much crossing of arms and grumbling, Eztaral’s usual sharp and bladed exterior faded until she found the will to slap me on the shoulder in congratulation. It was a firm thump, and peculiar how the force barely moved me.

‘I can tell how hard that was for you,’ I said with a grin. ‘I won’t gloat.’

Eztaral’s moment of kindness was startlingly brief. The sarcasm landed on my like a fallen branch. ‘How kind of you! That is much appreciated. And while we’re patting each other’s backs, I should also say thank you for interrupting me a moment ago. There I was, about to explain it gently and gradually, perhaps to ensure that our secrets are kept safe from those who would work against us, but your way was much better, I’m sure. No matter! Now, before we all start congratulating each other on how many clay pots we’ve broken, or Tarko gets too giddy over all the blood going to his swollen head, how about we do the only thing we can do, and get back to work?’

‘If I didn’t know better, I’d say somebody was jealous,’ I smirked, refusing to let her words override the envoy’s.

Eztaral had been striding away from when she curved back around and flourished her sword. ‘Fortunately, you don’t.’

Stretching my hands to the earth, I tried, somewhat uselessly, to find some calm.

‘Again!’