

12

OF BLADES

The Tereltas can trace their bloodlines back to the seasons of the demon wars. A lowly family, their place in the initial order of the Scions saw them rise to greatness and profit. Many Tereltas were merchants, living in the highest branches of Dorla Sel, Shal Gara, and Rasqax, with the longest-running family line one of celebrated warriors who fought in the Battles of the Bloodwoods.

FROM THE NOTES OF LESSER-KNOWN SCHOLAR TEMACH ATALAWE, 2294

Mulchport was wrapped in evening rain when we finally set foot on the town's planks.

Somehow, by an irritating trick of the gods, Sage Two Moon was there to greet us. He had a spyglass in his hands and bustled down a spiral of stairs to greet us, almost slipping several times. This time, he wore not a grin, but a face of panic.

"Bleeding trees! Thank the gods you've returned once more! I was keeping watch on the roads when I saw familiar faces and recognised your orokan!"

Eztaral waved her hands for calm. "What's the worry, Two Moon?"

The man bowed his head and tapped his chest three times. "Rogues dressed in red cloth and green masks. A dozen of them passed through Mulchport in the dark hours of this morning. Killed two in their rush to steal supplies and flee our warders, may the Three have mercy."

We Scions shared knowing looks.

"You know of whom I speak?" asked the sage.

"They are the Fireborn, Two Moon. The people we spoke of last time we were here."

Two Moon puffed out his belly. "They came here?"

"It looks that way."

"I won't have it!" Two Moon exclaimed. "Have you come to help?"

Atalawe patted his thick arm. "I'm afraid we'll have to disappoint you again. Not all of us can stay."

That didn't seem to be bad news to Two Moon. "But some of you can."

"These here." Eztaral pointed to all of the Terelta family except me. "Good warriors despite their tribes. They need to be kept safe. Unseen."

"Then Mulchport welcomes you with open arms!" said Two Moon, seizing Texoc and Deskiral in a hug that neither seemed to appreciate. By the smell of Two Moon, he hadn't bathed in some days. "You will have a room as long as you need it! And what of you, Eagleborn and sorcers?"

"And wranglers and workers," muttered Atalawe as she nudged Ralish.

"We were hoping you could help us," answered Eztaral.

"With pleasure!"

“Have there been any more sightings of demons while we’ve been gone?”

Two Moon nodded solemnly. His face changed faster than the weather. “One, I am sad to admit. It was seen yesterday. It did not come close and did not try to burn us, but a lancewing rider from Shal Gara spotted it.”

“Shal Gara? What was his name?” Eztaral demanded.

“Erm. Gaakaran, if memory serves. An eagleborn like you, my friend.”

“Where is he now?”

“Gaakaran? He was here for several days before he was joined by several nobles. Two sages, a sorcerer and a warrior with a jade sword. And an envoy, too! By the loam. Matriarch-blood in our very Mulchport.”

“Envoy Okarin, you mean?” I spoke up.

“That’s her! Though she didn’t speak to the likes of me. Curious thing. Kept working away at a string of beads in her hands as if counting something.”

“What is Okarin doing flying around the loam?” I wondered if she looked for us, and if she came to forgive us at the whim of her decrepit mother. Not that I would accept it.

Eztaral thwacked me on the arm to shut me up. “Where are they now, Two Moon?”

“Gone north to Dorla Sel. Gaakaran left with the retinue but circled back to warn us.”

“Where did he see it?”

“North and west. Thirty miles from here.”

“Then that is where we’ll go,” Eztaral ordered her Scions. None of us argued. However mad Eztaral’s plan was, we were all set on it. Me especially. I still hadn’t been able to shake Haidak’s grinning face from my mind.

“We need more supplies. Better weapons. Can you help us with that?” she asked.

“Surely!” Two Moon said, shaking Eztaral’s hand. “Anything for those who help Mulchport.”

When Eztaral had mentioned moving faster than the Fireborn, I had taken that as part of her rousing speech. I hadn’t expected her to seize Two Moon and push him onwards.

From warehouse to market stall we went, with Two Moon bartering with favours, promises, and mild-mannered threats for everything we were given. From baskets of fruit and salt meats to pouches of slingstones and arrows from the hunters, the Scions were stocked within an hour.

“I need a sword,” Eztaral said as we stood between colourful market stalls filled with yelling merchants.

“Mulchport’s not known for its weapons, Eagleborn, but there’s a smith who’s set up shop and refuses to move his table out of the thoroughfare. Makes a lot of gems for his exotic stock, so I hear.”

“Then lead us to him.”

Two Moon did as he was told and willingly so. He led us down to another level sheltered by thatch and rafters, where carpenters, weavers, smiths, sand-blowers, and leather-workers plied their crafts. Misfit, hidden beneath my leafleather cloak, poked out his head to chirrup at the noise. I gently pushed him back into hiding.

I was admiring a stall of flowers planted in soil and ceramic bowls, remembering the neighbour I used to torture, when Serisi hissed at me.

A shadow, Tarko.

I flinched at her voice. “What do you mean, a shadow?”

A shape above us. I saw it in the corner of your eye.

I stared up at the roofs, trying to spy anything but the dripping of rain and a dark forest canopy.

“You’re imagining things, Serisi,” I told her, noticing my mood was gloomier than the evening sky.

I am not. I saw a masked face.

Just in case, I kept my sling loaded in my hand and one eye on the heavens from beneath my hood.

The smith was a burly chap with knuckles made of callous and a black beard that had been singed in far too many places. Though he wore patchwork and more soot than cloth, his wares were immaculate. I had rarely seen obsidian blades so polished and shaped so evenly. Atalawe picked up staffs and spears, hefting each one for weight. Eztaral, Tesq, and Mother thumbed blades. Ralish tested an obsidian mattock, clearly missing her last one.

“No discounts, no favours,” rumbled the smith, the kind of fellow that let his work do the speaking. Unlike the others, he didn’t act like a trader. He seemed almost offended we were poking at his creations.

Two Moon swaggered up to his table. “But these fine people are Mulchport’s saviours. We owe them much, good chap!”

The smith shrugged. “Not I. Not from here. Gems only.”

Redeye grumbled. “Fireborn took all my gems,” he said. I snagged his eye momentarily. Serisi’s suspicion refused to leave my head.

“We have few gems, Two Moon,” admitted Eztaral.

“Then let us take care of that,” Ralish answered. “Right, Tarko?”

The Scions looked to me in surprise. Eztaral raised an eyebrow.

“Right.” I paused to drag the pack from my back. I took a fistful of gems from the pocket and clutched it to my chest to show them as they gathered around.

Atalawe plucked a red gem from my hand to see if it was real. “What in the loam, Tarko? There’s a sage’s ransom in here.”

“Let’s just say Serisi has a way with gambling,” I whispered.

“In that case, Tarko’s buying!” Eztaral stanchd any other questions with a clap of her hands and ushered me to the front of the group. “Mulchport’s fight-pits?” she muttered in my ear.

“Serisi has a knack.”

“Good,” Eztaral told me. “You should watch out. She’s starting to prove more useful than you are, Terelta.”

I didn’t need to hear that, but before I could complain, Eztaral clapped me on the back.

“Pay the man,” she said, before she went to peruse larger, more ornate swords. I was left to watch my gems disappear at a fantastic rate as the Scions armed themselves to the fangs.

I told you, Tarko, I want a sword. If I am to make a habit of being in your body—

“Which I wish you wouldn’t. I much preferred the dreamwalking, all things considered.”

—then I need a weapon of my own. Your stones and magic are useless to me. After all, these are my gems.

I could hear the smile in her voice. “This isn’t your body, Serisi,” I hissed, drawing the attention of the smith. “It’s mine.”

And what if we find ourselves in another situation like Stormbeaten?

I ignored her, looking at a knife that took my fancy.

Imagine where you would be if I had not saved you?

“I—”

Dead on a branch or food for those fish, I would wager...

I sighed perhaps too dramatically and cast my eyes across the blades. “All right. By the gods. If it’ll stop you moaning, which one?”

Serisi had already decided. *That one.*

I felt her attention focusing on a broad blade of black obsidian with beaten silver edges, an ornate ironpith spine, and a thick handle of carved bone.

Pick it up for me.

I did so.

Well weighted and balanced. A fine blade for being made of stone and wood. It will suffice.

“Gods,” I whispered.

“Hundred,” grunted the smith.

“And this one,” interrupted Eztaral, placing down with reverence a sword of four obsidian circles pinched between iron and wood. “This will do nicely.”

“Seeing as we’re buying so many...,” I began.

“No discounts,” muttered the smith, snatching the gems I had cupped in my hand.

Even though Serisi had won the gems, my hands had claimed them, and I felt deflated once they were almost gone. At least Ralish and the others looked content. We had bought enough weapons for a small war-party, and I now held a scant handful of gems. I could almost picture Serisi grinning inside my head, fangs showing. Perhaps it was because she felt more Scion than I did at that moment. Perhaps it was her first experience of generosity. Perhaps it was because she gripped the sword I held in my darkened fingers.

I feel... what is the human word? Content, boasted Serisi.

“Good for you,” I said, making the smith look at me as if I had insulted him.

I think I will have to gamble some more when the opportunity next presents itself.

Grumbling to myself, I left the Scions alone and busied my mind with other crafters instead. Ralish was still picking her weapons and spending the rest of our gems, and I sought distraction.

While I hunched in front of a smiling jeweller, my roving gaze caught sight of a pendant with a silver arrow with fletching of jade and a ruby head. The jeweller caught my eye and offered the pendant up for me to look closer.

“Never thought you one for jewellery, Tarko,” Mother’s voice whispered in my ear.

I quickly gave the arrow back. “I thought Ralish might like it, is all.”

“Your father Teyak only bought me things when he had done something wrong. Which was more than a few times, I have to admit. That wouldn’t be what’s happening here, now, would it?”

“No, I haven’t done anything wrong. She’s worried about me, is all. And with Serisi, normality is difficult. This feels like normality. Something I would be doing had Shal Gara not fallen, and I want to give that to her. She deserves it.”

“I knew I raised a good child,” my mother replied. “A strange one and a cause of much stress, but a good child.”

I matched her smile, and yet Mother must have seen the thoughts and problems hiding behind my eyes.

“And how are you and Serisi getting along? All is well?”

“Just fine.”

“That’s a crock of shit,” she said, nudging me.

“You’d only worry just like the others do.”

“That I would. Because anyone that loved you and with any sense would worry.”

“You’re brimming with worry even now, I can tell.”

“Constantly! But that’s a mother’s right, war or no war. Part of me wants to join you or forbid you from going,” she told me. “Yet I have to remember you’re the hero of Shal Gara, a finer sorcerer than I’ve ever seen with the power of an ancient demon behind you. I’ve seen what you and that demon can do together. Despite all the changes this bonding has put you through and what dangers I know you have to face, my trust wins over worry. And I trust you two are unstoppable. Don’t forget that, when you’re out there in the loam,” she replied. “Besides! I know that demon is too proud to let you die, so that’s some comfort. You hear me in there, Serisi? You don’t bring him back in one piece, and there will be more than harsh words had.”

I witnessed that trademark ferocity in Axera Terelta’s face. The kind that told me she would traverse each of the Six Hells to fetch me if she had to. I could tell Serisi believed it, too. I put my arms around my mother and squeezed.

“Do you trust the others?” I asked once she had let go of me.

Mother narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean, Tarko? Is this about Texoc? He’s said his piece—”

“No, not Texoc.”

“Then who?”

“The Fireborn told us there was one whom we would never expect. I tried telling Eztaral, but she doesn’t want to know.”

“I’m sure she doesn’t. What a prospect,” said Mother, looking over her shoulder. “I can’t think of anyone who would betray us.”

“What do you think of Redeye?”

“No. It can’t be him,” she said without hesitation.

I scrunched up my face. “Wait. Did you say *anyone* that loved me a moment ago? Who else do you mean?”

Mother smiled at me. “Buy the arrow, Tarko. It’s a fine idea.”

I watched her return to the others. Redeye caught my stare again. I ignored him, turning back to the jeweller and nodding. After she flashed a number far too fast on her fingers for me to count, I held out my hand. She picked the gems from my palm one by one, showing me each before she squirreled it away. With a beaming smile, she gave me the arrow in return. I turned it over in my fingertips, admiring how bright the silver shone against my darkened skin before hiding it in the pocket beside Misfit. The shrewbat squeaked in annoyance, climbed to my shoulder, and flew to Mother instead.

“Tarko!” somebody shouted my name. It was Atalawe, beckoning me with one hand and wagging a new spear with the other.

Before I could move, Serisi bellowed in my head.

Up, Tarko! Up there. There it is again!

This time, I saw it: a hooded figure was poised on the edge of the thatched roof, leaning far outwards and making a shadow of the rain. Rivulets poured from its hood and over a disfigured face that looked like... green stone.

“Fireborn!” I roared. “On the rooftops!”

I was not quick enough. As the words burst from me, the figure pounced for the circle of Scions with a long knife in each hand.

Confusion turned into pandemonium as Atalawe and Texoc were thrown to the boards by the impact of the assassin. Battling fleeing townsfolk, I rushed to throw myself into the fray. All I could make out was flapping cloaks, splashing rain, and a racket of baying voices. Blades flashed while the smith bellowed at the vicious quarrel to no avail.

“No fighting!”

In panic, I reached for the soil in the nearby ceramic bowls and hauled it to my grasp. I ignored the squealing of the crafter as her table of wares exploded and threw my fastest tendril spell into the middle of the battling Scions. Bodies went flying left and right as I split the fight apart. I saw Tesq and Atalawe wrapped around the assassin’s arm, trying to pry one knife away while Eztaral was cut above her eye and struggling to see, but she fought with tooth and nail to relieve him of the other. The eagleborn had already sliced his arm to ribbons, but the man refused to let up. Even when Inwar’s teeth sank into his ankle.

My spell wrapped around the assassin’s torso. Mud snaked along his arms and encircled his neck. I clenched my fist as I stormed to see the damage.

I realised Texoc was facedown on the ground, hands pressed to a bleeding stomach and face a mask of pain. Blood eked through the puddles of rain. Deskiral was screeching at the top of her voice.

“I have him!” I yelled, pulling the Fireborn upright with the spell. He cried out behind his mask of blank jade. The cloak he wore ripped as my tendrils squeezed him like a pair of constricting vipers.

Kill him, Tarko. Teach him his lesson.

“Texoc!” I yelled. “Is he okay?!”

“Clear some space here, curse you all!” bellowed Eztaral.

Atalawe put hands to him. “Can you hear me, Texoc? Talk to me now!”

All I heard was my brother choking. Blood dribbled from his mouth. Atalawe raced through every bandage, poured every tincture she wore across her belt, cursing constantly. When Texoc began to convulse, she yelled in his face as she poured a powder across the wound. I was no healer, but I could see how useless her efforts were.

When Atalawe’s head came upright, her face was flushed and grave. “The Fireborn stuck him several times. I might be able to stop the bleeding, but the blade was poisoned!” she yelled. “If I knew which one, I might be able to save him!”

I saw Eztaral paw at her bleeding head and stagger to fall against the smith’s table.

“Eztaral!” Pel yelled as he and Ralish rushed to her side. Redeye stood useless and ashen.

My mother cried out, no words coming with the noise. Her fist did, however, striking the mask from the assassin and showing his face. Though blood smeared his mouth, he was grinning beneath.

“Which poison, curse you?” Mother demanded of the Fireborn. I squeezed him tighter so that his shoulder popped.

“Tell her!”

“Iron Icon be praised!” was all he whispered.

Tesq took out her new blade and held it to the man’s cheek. “Tell us now, bastard!”

“Texoc, stay awake!” Atalawe yelled.

“I’m sorry,” Texoc gurgled while we panicked over him. “I’m sorry for what I did.”

Atalawe bit the cork from a sandglass vial and forced it into his mouth. “Don’t start saying that shit now, curse it!”

As the chaos unfurled around me, I clenched my fingers, making the Fireborn cry out. “Your god can’t save you now,” I promised him. “But I can spare you if you tell us.”

“I’m ready to die.”

“Certain about that?” The spell wound tighter and tighter. I swore I heard a rib crack. I began to twist him like wringing a cloth.

“Which poison?!” I bellowed, Serisi roaring with me.

“Woefang venom and murkroot,” he gasped when the pain finally conquered his devotion. “But you’re already too late.”

Atalawe went to work, pouring more tinctures down Texoc’s throat and throwing vials at Eztaral.

“Drink it, curse you! Drink it now!”

Like a mad person, she toiled to save my brother even while his blood pooled around my feet. To the pattering of the rain and the muttering of onlookers, I watched through hot tears as Texoc fall still. His eyes remained on me as they became as glass, and the life behind them faded.

“Brother!” I shouted, but Atalawe fell back, bloody hands pressed to her face. Texoc’s body sagged.

“No!” came my mother’s shriek. Tesq had to hold her back from pushing her way into my spell and killing the Fireborn herself.

“Murderer!” came my cry. As the wrangler rushed to Eztaral’s side, I didn’t wait for my heart to be broken any further. I stared at the Fireborn, and by his wide eyes, he must have seen the death in mine.

I pressed my hands together. The spell followed my every move. Bones cracked and crunched. The Fireborn’s eyes began pop from their sockets. His face turned shades of red and purple, and yet I continued to squeeze.

Kill him, Tarko, Serisi whispered in my ear.

Hero or not, I wanted to. In the clutches of my spell, I could feel the percussion of my enemy’s throat crushing. One arm snapped back on itself under the force. With a sickening crunch, his neck snapped.

The screams of the crowd washed over me. Half of them ran. Half stayed to witness the horror. When I at last looked up, I found Two Moon standing with his face pale and his hands clasped. The Scions looked at the body with cold stares. Only Ralish looked at me, her eyes wide as the sky.

All I could do was run to Eztaral’s side and help Atalawe keep her conscious and upright. Mulchport murmured around us as we yelled her name.

13

GLOOM'S TROUBLE

Eagleborn, it gives me great displeasure and sadness to report the loss of the town of Squala. Only a pitiful handful of survivors remain and each of them is frozen in a state of terror. All save one. We found her fighting off a fisher vine with nothing but a sharpened stick and a rock. She is but four seasons old. I write to request that she be tested as per the Sorcer's Edict. I am sending her to you in Shal Gara in the company of four wilders. Her name is Kī Raxa.

A REPORT WRITTEN IN 1291 IN TENACHO, A BLOODWOOD LOST IN 1307. THIS IS ONE OF THE FEW SURVIVING MENTIONS OF KĪ RAXA BEFORE SHE BECAME A HERO

Five days, it took before we left Mulchport.

The town became a grave to me. I had grown thoroughly hateful of the place. Everywhere I went, the staring was rife. And not the flattering kind I had known in Shal Gara, but the kind of staring that was accompanied by whispering behind hands, knowing looks, and detours to give me a wide berth. Even now, with the Scions standing at the railings of the shaded walkway, we caught looks from passersby and those lingering on levels above.

I didn't exactly blame them; I had murdered a man in the middle of a market. It didn't seem to matter he had been an assassin. One who had taken my brother to the Six Heavens. Yet the stares of strangers branded me as more guilty than he was. On the first day, I had expected to learn how to ignore them, but they had only served to hammer my grief into fury.

The stares of Deskiral and Mother, however, I had not learned to deal with.

It had taken several days for her to speak to us again. Not from blame, but grief. She had worn the skin around her eyes to scarlet. Though Tesq and I also endured the fangs of grief, Mother's sorrow was deeper than I could imagine. The kind of sorrow reserved for the parent that is forced to bury their child.

Deskiral had yet to speak. Several times, we had to stop her from running into the loam so she could escape the void Texoc had left behind, and to escape the sight of us, no doubt. We knew she raged with blame. Even now, she stood apart from us, clutching her belly beneath an oversized black cloak.

Wrapped in a shawl despite the longsun heat, Mother stood on my right side, staring vacantly at the door of the Scornful Claw. Waiting, as we all did.

Five days, it had taken for Eztaral to escape the precipice of death.

The thud of a boot kicked the door open. To the sound of Maldahak yelling various rules that banned kicking, a pale and familiar face appeared in the doorway.

"She lives," Eztaral croaked. The woefang venom had knocked the eagleborn senseless for two anxiety-inducing days before she finally woke up, still one foot in the Hells, as Atalawe had put it. Even just a touch of the venom had ravaged her body and stripped her of her strength.

Eztaral's steps were shaky but she managed to walk without the wrangler's help. It was even more impressive that she did it in her armour. Though the Scion plate and her new sword hung heavy on her, she was determined as ever, not failing once as she approached us.

Eztaral grabbed my mother's hand first. Then Tesq's and Deskiral's.

"I missed it, didn't I?" she asked.

Mother nodded. Texoc's body had already been buried in the loam, returned to the earth he had come from. The funeral rites had already been said. The tears had been shed. All that remained was the Fireborn blood that needed to be spilled in his name.

Eztaral's voice was low and guttural and she recited the rites. "May the Three Gods of sun and soil and rain have mercy on his soul. May his body feed the forest that fed him and raised him. And by the Three, will we avenge him."

When Eztaral came to me, she did not hold my hand but stared at me square-on and unblinking. The scar across her green eye was still stitched and a dark purple.

"I would have done the same as you," she said. "There's a fine line between a warrior and a murderer, and you didn't cross it that day. Keep it that way, Terelta."

I tensed my jaw and held my tongue while I blinked back stinging tears.

Eztaral said nothing more in the way of goodbye. She was already marching stiffly towards the nearest stairs. Atalawe, Inwar, and Redeye drifted with her. Pel waited while Ralish and I touched foreheads with my mother and sister.

"You're lucky I'm letting you go at all." Mother waved her finger in my face. Misfit was perched on her shoulder with his blanket-like wings wrapped around himself. Once again, he seemed to sense the sombre mood. I scratched his head, and he condensed himself into an even smaller ball. His tail twitched in uncertainty.

"At least you will all be safe here," I said, trying to smile at my mother. Sage Two Moon had rounded up every single one of his family members – who seemed to count for half of Mulchport – and tasked them with guarding my the Tereltas every moment of every day until the Scions returned. And yet, it didn't mean I wasn't immune to worry.

"And you better come back to me," Mother replied. "Or else I'll—"

"Drag our ghosts back here and give them a piece of your mind?" I guessed. Her severe face broke into the faintest of smiles.

Axera Terelta seized me in a hug. "Or else. Show them they trifled with the wrong family, Tarkosi. Do us proud. Do Texoc proud."

"If there's anyone that can save us from this war, Brother, it's you," added Tesq as she wrapped her arms around me. Her eyes were also red-raw and her face defiant. "But I know how you can be. Don't let your emotions or your passion lead you into a corner you can't get out of."

I pressed my forehead against hers before I turned away.

"Kill them all for me. For Texoc," Deskiral muttered to us from afar. Her misted, furious gaze was lost into the forest beyond.

"Bring them back to me, demon," Mother called after us.

Tell her I make no promises.

"I die, you die, remember, selfish beast?" I breathed.

At least I have more say in the matter now.

"Hmph."

I caught Ralish's arm before we left.

“What is it?”

I reached into the pocket I’d kept closed for five days and fished out the silver arrow. To my dismay, it had bent in the middle, probably in the skirmish with the Fireborn assassin. I had even checked it a dozen times through the cloth.

“I got you this just before the Fireborn appeared. I was going to give it to you before, but with Texoc...” I trailed off, my throat closing.

“An arrow,” Ralish said, showing me a smile.

“It was damaged in the fight.”

“I like it even better that way. Makes it unique,” she replied as she immediately put the pendant around her neck.

“Take it as an apology for not telling you about Serisi. I know it’s been difficult being with m—”

“I’d rather take it as a gift, thank you very much,” Ralish tutted, putting her lips on mine.

“Hurry up!” came the hoarse yell of Eztaral, standing crookedly at the bottom of the stairs.

“You look good in your Scion armour, by the way,” I whispered, allowing myself to smile for the first time in days. It felt foreign on my face.

“You be quiet, Tarko,” she said with a smile of her own.

“Yes, Overseer.”

Eztaral led us gradually to the base of Mulchport, where Two Moon was fidgeting beside Grampus the orokan, hitched to our heavily loaded wagon.

“Are you sure I can’t convince you to stay, Eztaral?” Two Moon asked, following the eagleborn about while she checked on the wagon. She did two laps, but Two Moon still clung on.

“Not unless you have a demon hidden away somewhere we don’t know about.”

Two Moon looked horrified. “A demon...? I shouldn’t think so! Bleeding trees, no!”

“Then alas, we are needed elsewhere, Sage.”

I approached him, arms crossed. I could see his eyes sneaking to the dark veins around my armour’s collar. They had crept onto my neck on recent days. My fingertips had stayed darkened since Stormbeaten. “What you can do is keep my family safe, Two Moon, like you promised. Safer than anything else in your grubby little town.”

Two Moon took that as a compliment. “You have my word, Tarko. Safer than my own family.”

Pel put an arm on his shoulder, surreptitiously pointing him in the direction of the town. “Just keep everybody safe. That’s your fight. These are dark times, and they can get even darker.”

Two Moon nodded. “Yes indeed, Pelikai. Then fare well, all of you. Make our Swathe proud.”

“Gather around, Scions. Listen well,” Eztaral ordered us, while Two Moon still hovered a distance away, scarpering back and forth and all the while wringing his hands. “I won’t mince my words. You know what we need to do and what the stakes are.”

“Hunt and catch a demon. Show it to the Allmother. Save the world from chaos.”

“That’s about it, Tarko,” Eztaral nodded. “Questions? Complaints? Good, because I wouldn’t hear them if there were. We have a new member to greet. She already wears our armour and has already proved herself Scion in soul if not by name.”

Ralish stood tall next to me.

“Now she has to say the words.”

Ralish stepped into our circle, speaking first. Word by word, soul by soul, we Scions echoed her. The vow crescendoed until we all shouted.

“What is darker than night may never grasp the light. When Swathe’s days grow dire, we will stand against the fire. Where others will fall, the Scions refuse to falter. To Kī Raxa, to the Three Gods and their spirits, and the bloodwoods, we make this vow!”

“We make this vow!” we yelled again, stamping our feet three times.

Eztaral checked Ralish’s armour piece by piece. “You’re one of us now. I hope you’re keen for danger, because that’s our fate.”

Ralish patted the sharp mattock at her belt. “I welcome it.”

The eagleborn nodded. “You’ve chosen a good one here, Tarko.”

Ralish snorted. “I chose him.”

“Then north it is, Scions. No point sitting around here picking at our arses while demons await our blades,” ordered Eztaral.

To the rattling of wheels and the groaning of the grumpy orokan, we left Mulchport behind us. I looked back only once to see if I could spy my sister or my mother. Neither were visible, but I knew they were somewhere amongst the hazed lanterns and milling figures, watching.

Serisi dragged my attention ahead of us, where the forest was wreathed in mist and filled with the squawking of parrots.

“Ready, Serisi?”

Ready and eager. Let us put an end to this war and deliver death to all those who are deserving.

“For Texoc,” I uttered.

*

As though it somehow knew we had its best interests at heart – preposterous as it sounded – the loam gave us little trouble. We marched for two days straight without bother before Eztaral’s strength failed her. The spur of leafroad we’d travelled northwest on now dipped close to the loam, and we made a camp beneath the angle where it met the earth.

The rain that had followed us filled the evening air with noise. Leaves bowed and nodded at us as heavy raindrops fell from the natural umbrella a thousand feet above. A fire was sparked and supplies broken out: lizard meat to roast over the flames before it spoiled, clubfoot mushroom to boil into a soup, and roots and potatoes to bake in the coals. Atalawe passed around a bottle of Two Moon’s favourite spirit. It was a goodbye gift from the sage, something halfway between salt vinegar and sweet berry wine, with a dash of pure fire.

Eztaral took a sizeable gulp and bared her teeth. “Gaaah. What did he call that stuff?”

“Moon’s Shine,” I told her. Serisi somehow enjoyed it. I detested its burn, but it certainly made the aches disappear.

Reminds me of demonkind’s dasklak. Coal wine in your tongue.

“Makes the stars brighter and everything seem all right,” recited Atalawe.

“So that’s why Two Moon’s so bloody cheery all the time. He almost puts you to shame, wrangler,” said Eztaral.

Atalawe took another swig to catch up.

“We’ll start tracking demons tomorrow. I want us on the road before firstglow.”

“Joyous,” I said.

Eztaral settled back against a rock and waved a skewer of lizard in my direction. “Meanwhile, it looks like somebody has learned their lesson. I believe our dear Tarkosi Terelta has something to say to the rest of you.”

“I do?” I asked, momentarily tense.

Yes, you do, Serisi said. *It is time to tell them.*

I puffed my cheeks, far from in the mood for this conversation. “My bond with Serisi has apparently... developed. Though I can’t dreamwalk like I used to, when I fall asleep, or get knocked out like in the battle with the Fireborn, Serisi now takes over.”

“Takes over. As in takes over you?” Pel pointed at me.

I nodded. “This becomes her body, and I’m stuck in her mind.”

The old sorcerer blinked owlishly. “Like she did in Shal Gara, you mean, when she released Hatlu Ko?”

The soil spun around my arm to form Serisi’s horned head and shoulders. “But now I am a friend, not foe,” she whispered.

“Serisi’s fighting for us now, remember?” I added. “For balance against chaos and order.”

Redeye snorted. “That’s why you didn’t use magic in the fight in Stormbeaten.”

Serisi drifted closer to the sorcerer.

“I suppose so,” I replied stiffly. The Scions were unusually silent. Not a word was shared. Redeye poked at the dust with his curved knife while Atalawe whistled.

Pel, who normally believed in me the most, had a furrowed brow I didn’t expect. “And is this safe, Tarko? Does it hurt?”

Serisi faced me. “Do they still not trust me, Tarko?”

“It is taking a while to get used to,” I replied. “And it does not hurt, Pel. Hurts less than getting killed, I have to admit.”

Eztaral let Atalawe fetch her another skewer. “Judging by how Serisi performed against the Fireborn, and the fact it was *she* who brought up the baskets, I’m inclined to believe her.”

“Thank you,” Serisi interjected, grinning wide.

“And that’s why I’ve told Tarko and Serisi to hone this new power of theirs into something we can use. Starting this evening.”

“Right now?” I asked, just before I bit into a potato.

“Any objections?” asked Eztaral.

Serisi, of course, had none. I raised my hand. “One. How exactly are we going to start?” I mumbled around my mouthful.

“We can’t have you waiting to fall asleep or getting clubbed unconscious every time you want to switch with Serisi,” said Eztaral. “It has to be like a spell or a muscle you can flex.”

Serisi’s shape showed fangs of dirt. “I like the sound of that.”

“Are we sure about this, Eztaral?” Pel piped up. “This is a magic nobody in the Swathe understands.”

“I am, Pelikai. I’ve told Tarko that the moment this becomes a problem, it stops.”

“As have I,” whispered Ralish.

Pel looked unsure, but he held his tongue.

Redeye’s leafleather coat crackled as he crossed his arms. “Was not needing nectra and dreamwalking not enough for you, Tarko?”

“Jealous, Redeye?” Serisi asked.

“How am I supposed to flex this muscle?” I interjected. “Just wish it?”

Pel bobbed his head. “You tell us. Try.”

I threw up my hands. “That’s not useful at all, and you know it. I’m as clueless as the rest of you.”

“You can control it,” Ralish whispered in hope. “I know it.”

“All right, all right,” I sighed.

I folded Serisi’s spell away and hung my head against my chest. I tried to sleep, but I was far from tired. Plus, knowing there were six people watching me intently was incredibly distracting. After far too long a stretch of uncomfortable, pregnant silence waiting for something magical, I only skirted the edges of sleep.

“Maybe we’ll have to knock you out to get you started,” sighed Eztaral.

Atalawe got to her feet and thumped her staff in the mud, ready to clock me around the head.

“Don’t you come any closer, wrangler,” I warned her. “Let me keep trying.”

*

Gloom slipped to the velvet black of night. The fire burned low. Half the Scions drifted to sleep in their bedrolls. Inwar was competing in a snoring competition with Atalawe. Pel and Eztaral had grown tired of waiting on me, and they switched gems back and forth as they bet on flipping cups. Meanwhile, I sat nursing a throbbing headache on the far side of the fire. Ralish occasionally glanced at me from her perch, half in the rain, watching the forest with a bow on her lap and arrow nocked.

This grows tiresome! Are you trying, Tarko?

“Of course I’m trying,” I whispered. “I’ve been trying for hours, curse you. I’ve spent so long trying to resist you I’ve gotten pretty good at it.”

Then you are not trying hard enough.

“You take over, then,” I said, taking an angry swig of Two Moon’s shine.

Perhaps it is a lever both of us must pull.

I moved my lips in mockery of her voice. Childish, perhaps, but the demon was wearing on me. She was too eager to accomplish Eztaral’s task. Too keen to get ahold of my body again. I couldn’t help but be troubled by it.

Once more.

I pressed my eyes tightly together.

You are resisting me. This is important, Tarko!

“To you, maybe. I still haven’t decided if I want this. I can see the way Ralish looks at me. Even Pel. It bothers them, and I can’t—”

Selfish worm.

I flicked myself in the side of the head, regretting it moments later.

Look at the glorious carnage I wrought in Stormbeaten.

I winced with another memory of blood.

Tell me you would rather have lain on the floor, bleeding to death, while Ralish and the others perished at your side. And as for the worm-wizards in that Mulchtown, would you have fought them? I am the best of demonkind. You are the best of yours. Together, we are chaos and order in the same body. Magic and might. Might and magic. Is that not what you sorcers roar in battle? We are both,

Tarko. We are balance, and we could be a weapon the Iron Icon could never vanquish. A living weapon. Unstoppable, were your own mother's words.

In the darkness between the flicker of flames, I could make out a demon's jaws widening in anticipation. I saw the truth now.

"You want to matter, don't you?" I sighed, hating the excellent point she had made. "Just as I did in Shal Gara."

As you told the daughter of Shal Gara's withered old woman, Serisi replied.

"Okarin," I corrected her, then muttered grumpy nonsense into my fist as I gathered my arms around my knees and tucked myself into a ball.

"How are you progressing over there, Tarko?" asked Pel, before I could concentrate.

"Slowly," I grunted.

Eztaral inspected a gem in the firelight. "We're not leaving until he manages it."

"Nothing like a bit of pressure," I said.

"The sooner you make it work, the sooner you can all stop yapping and I can sleep," complained Redeye, his eyes still closed. "Visualise it. Find the calm to cast a spell and use that."

I do not want to listen to him.

"Anything to stop you whingeing," I told him.

With hands spread to the drier earth around us, I pulled Serisi out of the ground and brought her to hover over the fire. I closed my eyes, put my right hand up to Serisi, and let her press a fist of soil and soul against me. The spell was cold, the calm within me deep. A meditation befell me, where all I listened to was my own heartbeat. It started to race and not through my doing. I was a runaway skyriser with its rope cut.

The spell began to unravel around me and wrapped about my hand without my will. It climbed up my arm, but instead of panicking, I pressed myself further into a darker space behind my eyes. They burned hot as coals.

With a jolt, the spell collapsed altogether, blowing past me to scatter in the gloom. I felt my eyes snap open, but once more without my thought. I saw Redeye sitting upright. Pel and Eztaral put down their gems. Inwar growled low, his lip curling back to show his fangs.

I heard the words come out of my mouth. My voice, but not my words.

"Thank you for letting me in."

*

"Serisi?" asked Pel, blue lips pursed.

"About time," the demon said in a growl. There was grit in her mouth. She spat to the side. There was something satisfying about the action. She wondered why more humans didn't do it.

The voice of Tarko whispered in her mind. *It worked.*

Serisi nodded. "That it has."

"It's her," Redeye muttered. The demon couldn't help but notice his hand surreptitiously move to a nectra vial on his belt.

"It's the eyes. There's fire in them." Eztaral slapped her thigh weakly. "Well, by the Six Hells and all their bastards, you did it. And here we are with a demon at our campfire, and one without a voice of grinding rocks for a nice change."

"The nights of your world are too cold," said Serisi, drawing closer to the flames.

“How does it feel?” Pel asked her between rapid blinks.

Serisi clenched Tarko’s right hand, where the scars of broken nectra vials crisscrossed his palm. The veins that snaked up his arm shone almost imperceptibly. Not with blue, but with a parchment yellow of faint fire.

“Compared to demonkind, your bodies are soft like dough, weak, short. A wobbling bag of splinter bones...”

Tarko tutted. *All right, you’ve made your point.*

“...but it feels far better than being made of sand and stone. I am only a shadow in that magic. With his body under my will, I feel free again. And Tarko is stronger when I am in charge. Faster. Better with the sword and spear.”

“Couldn’t be much worse,” Eztaral said, before betraying a grin.

Tell the eagleborn I can hear her.

“He can hear you, he says.”

“Good.”

“Can you use Tarko’s magic?” Pel wondered.

I’ll be pretty useless if you can, Tarko muttered.

“I cannot. I am no wizard. I am a warrior, old sorcer.”

Pel was not done. There was a worry in the man. “How do we know Tarko is still in control?”

“He is not.” Serisi passed a hand above the fire. The flames stained Tarko’s fingers darker with smoke. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Ralish propped up and watching with a concerned face.

“Then how can we trust you to give him back?” she asked.

“Tarko and I bonded willingly, and together we are powerful, but I do not wish to watch this war from behind his eyes if there is another choice. I wish to be of more use. To fight with my own hands, to spill the blood and crush the skulls of our enemies. That is what I was forged to do. I have lived dozens of your lifetimes and fought more battles than you could not count, and I have seen that chaos only leads to more chaos and the death of my kin. I swore to you I would stop the Iron Icon from cursing this world or my kind to such a fate, and in this body, I can keep that oath.”

But...? Tarko hissed at her.

“However,” Serisi growled. “Even if I wanted to make this body my own, it feels as though Tarko has power over the switch. And even if that were not true, I do not think I would be able to suffer Tarko’s complaining for long.”

Pel’s frown broke and his blue lips curled into a faint smirk.

And now you’re making jokes. Getting a little too comfortable, aren’t we?

“We will trust you, Serisi,” grunted Eztaral. “It is simply that last time this happened, Shal Gara ended up falling, so you can forgive a little doubt.”

“You will see,” said Serisi, baring Tarko’s teeth.

“Prove it,” said Ralish. “Prove he can take his body back.”

“Tarko?” Serisi asked.

Happy to, Tarko said, already straining by the sound of it.

Though it took some time, it began slowly in the fingers. Serisi felt herself pulled from Tarko’s form like peeling the skin from a navik. She did not fight it, but she did not make it easy for him. It was merely a test, she told herself; an innocent test. But despite her efforts, the night encased her, and once more she was staring through Tarko’s eyes.

*

“By the loam,” I hissed. “That isn’t a pleasant feeling.”

Content now, Tarko?

I was. I had the control that I feared was slipping from my grasp. My skin still prickled at the prospect, but the demon had proven herself. It was my power, and I was already starting to feel its allure. It was certainly a better option than dropping dead in battle. A fail-safe, the carpenters and architects called it, and Serisi could be mine. However, I could have done without the headache that hammered me.

Pel was peering at me. “Is that you, lad?”

“Of course it’s me,” I snapped.

“Good,” said Ralish.

“Serisi was right: it’s difficult and slow, but unlike the dreamwalking, I can control whatever magic’s making it happen.”

Eztaral clapped her hands. “Then you’ve passed your first test, and now that’s done, I can finally get some bloody sleep. Redeye, you’re on first watch.”

The sorcer grumbled indistinctly as he rose, wrenched up his hood, and wandered out into the rain. I moved to follow.

Ralish caught my arm at the sight of my scowl. “What is it?”

“Give me a moment with Redeye. There’s something we—I want to ask him.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Just a doubt.”

Ralish nodded, and I wasted no time in following the sorcer out into the rain. A sting shot up my right arm at its touch. The pain was sharper than it ever had been. I covered my arm with my other hand and felt a heat to my darkened skin. It was a bizarre sensation. I had to clench all of my body to make sure it still belonged to me.

The sorcer was standing next to the root of a giant narin tree. Its pale fronds hung above our heads in a circle that must have stretched hundreds of feet. Lizards and rodents scampered through them, arguing in chattering voices.

“Enjoy watching people while they piss, do you?” Redeye asked, at the squelching of my feet on the mossy loam.

“Not in the slightest. Thought you were keeping watch.”

“I am. Why are you out here?”

Ask him, Tarko.

“You might not think we notice, but we can all tell when you’re listening to your demon, you know,” said Redeye. “It’s obvious once you see it. A far-off look, mouth gawping like a musktooth fish.”

“Why did you fall behind when we were trying to escape Stormbeaten?” I said, doing as the demon wished. Even now I heard my mother’s adurance in Mulchport, but it hadn’t shaken the creeping feeling of doubt. Bathnarok’s mocking words echoed in my head louder than Axera Terelta’s. I remembered the red stone mask of the third Fireborn lord, glowing in Faraganthar’s flames that night beyond Shal Gara, and tried to imagine Redeye behind it.

“Has she been telling you stories, your demon? Figures,” Redeye snorted. He avoided my gaze and stared into the dripping gloom instead. “Don’t think she’s ever liked me.”

“Serisi showed me. Why did you hang back?”

“Fireborn lies have got you rattled, haven’t they?”

“I feel it’s more to do with the needless death of my brother,” I whispered fiercely.

“Texoc’s death hurt us all,” the sorcer grumbled, thumbing the two glowing vials at his belt. “And if you have to know, I was collecting fallen nectra from dead sorcers. All the good it did me.”

“Dead sorcers.”

“That’s what I said. Apparently you’ve got a problem with that.”

Tarko?

“What is that?” I asked, pointing past Redeye to the north. Two slanted eyes were staring at us between the rain, half a dozen trees away. They were like the shining eyes of a barkwolf, but they stood too high. The orbs held a sickly green light that put a shiver down my back. None of the light from ferns and sparse candelvines could banish the shadow that surrounded them. When they finally moved, they slid towards us through the foliage without rise or fall. A faint mist curled around an obsidian shape made of shadow.

“Navik?” Redeye asked.

It is not navik.

“Serisi doesn’t think so,” I told him.

The creature flowed over a fallen branch, disappearing momentarily between a patch of ferns. We waited in silence, suffering the rain, and straining our eyes so that we didn’t miss a blink.

When at last it emerged, it was not from the ferns, but rising above a root on limbs of shadow, much closer than before. Its eyes fixed us hungrily, while I saw a black and toothless mouth hang open so widely it must not have owned a jaw.

“Shit,” Redeye said, backing away without taking his eyes from it.

“What?” I flexed my magic as he reached for a vial.

“Atalawe!” Redeye yelled at the top of his voice.

“What is it?” came Eztaral’s shout.

“Wake Atalawe, curse it! Tell her we’ve got trouble!”

Eztaral was already limping towards us, one leg asleep. “What’s going on, you blood-eyed grump?”

“Tell her there’s a gloomsprite out here!”

Eztaral immediately yelled for Atalawe.

A what, Tarko?

“A gloomsprite,” I breathed, as my skin ran cold.

14

TAIGANATRAX

Never trust a god that promises you everything.

FROM "HONESTY OF HIERARCHY," A SCROLL BY ANONYMOUS HERETIC KOJI

By the Void and all the worlds beyond, what is a gloomsprite?

I'd heard stories only. Tales from the loam and warders on the darkest, deepest patrols.

"Creatures that come to steal the skins of the living, curse it!" I snapped, already quite sure I didn't want to give up mine. I retreated in a backwards run. The gloomsprite advanced on us, creeping on all fours across the moss and drifting through bushes. I swore I heard the growing whisper of many voices, as if the trees gossiped about us.

I strongly suggest we kill it.

"I intend to kill it, don't you worry," I said, throwing a quick spell in its direction. It was nothing more than a crashing wave of dirt. The calm to refine the spell proved difficult, and the gloomsprite seemed unperturbed. It increased its pace, beginning to run towards us.

Tarko!

"Easier said than done, Tarko!" Atalawe hissed behind me. "And they aren't so much creature as ghost. A shadow-being. A leftover from the first shadows when the gods formed the world. And as for wanting your skin, they're far more interested in sucking the soul out of you."

I wondered if that was why it seemed particularly interested in me, the body with two souls crammed into it.

"You can forget about your weapons. Not unless they can cut shadow! Eztaral!"

"Here!" said Eztaral, hurrying forwards with the others. Each held a torch high. The flame was already cowering in the rain. The firelight flooded the patch of forest, and it was enough to make the gloomsprite veer around its light, but not enough to deter it. Its whispering became a constant hissing, many voices layered over one another, and it chilled me to my bones.

Atalawe finished tying a string around a bundle of bark chips and what looked like grass and thrust it into Eztaral's torch.

"Come on, come on!" Redeye urged them. Every one of us held a hand or corner of a cloak above the torch while the wrangler tried to coax the bundle into burning.

"Atalawe!" I yelled as I saw the shadow brave the light to reach for us. It turned my stomach to witness arms twice as long as they ought to be and a dozen grasping fingers on each hand.

With a sharp puff of breath, smoke bloomed, and we recoiled coughing at the acrid smell. Sheltering it beneath her hand, Atalawe thrust the smouldering bundle at the gloomsprite.

"Take that!" she shouted.

The effect was immediate. The shadow recoiled with a piercing whine. Its jaw swung about as it darted left and right, trying to avoid the smoke.

"It's hungry, all right, but it won't try us now," said Atalawe.

“What is that stuff?” Ralish asked through watering eyes.

“Blue cedar and akiga leaf. Simple and ancient but effective. My mother taught me that gloomsprites can’t stand it. It withers them. Look.”

We followed Atalawe’s point. The sickly pale mist surrounding the shadow faded, as if its very form evaporated. The whining continued as it reared up to stand tall and thin as a spear. Its many claws hung down by its side as it backed into the undergrowth. Only its eyes remained.

Atalawe laughed. “See, aren’t you glad to have a seedwitch by your side?”

Never thought you could win a battle with plants, whispered Serisi.

“What’s with you, Serisi? Do you fear ghosts as well as heights and water?” I asked.

I do not fear anything, she hissed. *We demonkind simply do not like phantoms and spirits. There was a world we tried to conquer that was naught but spirits. It remains the only world the Voidborn retreated from.*

It was then that another similar whine came from the other side of the leafroad.

“Three Gods!” Atalawe snapped as she ran back to the fire. Thrusting the burning herbs into Pel’s hands, she threw another handful of them on the fire and began to waft it with a blanket in all directions. Though the smoke made us wince and cough, it was preferable to the alternative of having our souls stolen.

In a tight circle around the fire, each facing outwards, we watched the forest with stinging eyes. Within an hour, not two gloomsprites, but five came to stalk us. Beyond the torches we staked under the edge of the leafroad, we could see their green eyes prowling the darkness. One sat under the darkness of the road’s struts, a stone’s throw from our camp. I knew that because we threw quite a few stones in a poor attempt at scaring it away. The stones passed right through it, and the gloomsprite remained hunched on a boulder, motionless, just the right distance away so that its body was left to imagination.

“What’s the plan, Atalawe?” I spoke up after Serisi had asked me five times.

“We wait until firstglow. Clue’s in the name: gloomsprite. They stick to the darkness as much as they can. The sunlight drives them away, and we won’t get much of that now we’ve left the leafroad. With any luck, we’ll find thinner forest, or they’ll grow bored of us.”

Pel voiced the question that I wagered lingered in all our minds. “And how much akiga and cedar do you have to keep them at bay until that happens?”

Atalawe held up a small cloth sack. “Two fistfuls, maybe.”

“Then tell me magic hurts them?” the old sorcer asked with a hopeful face.

“Not that I know of. Only silver, gold, and star-iron can hurt them, but not kill them.”

My sword has a silver blade.

Although I looked down at the new sword on my belt to check, I kept quiet.

Tarko?

“I’ve got this,” I growled. I still needed to matter too. Balance is what Serisi had asked for, and that was what she would get.

“Do you indeed, Maven?” Eztaral asked. Her eyes were closed and her weakened body curled around the fire.

“Ever the hero,” muttered Redeye.

“Precisely,” I shot back. I took a breath, thinking fast. “When the sun goddess rises, we’ll march fast and together, sharing bundles between us. Nobody goes anywhere alone. If the Three are smiling in the morning, we’ll lose them in a clearing or a rift in the trees. We’ll use fort and rush spells to cover

our escape. If not, we can find more cedar and akiga as we travel. And if all that fails, then..." I patted Serisi's sword. "I have silver right here."

Eztaral opened one eye as if to check it was really me. "Well said," she said. "That's exactly what we'll do, Scions. If you aren't on watch, then get some sleep while you can."

Ralish rested her head on my lap while I stayed awake. Feeling both my trepidation and the demon's shivering through my insides, together, Serisi and I kept watch on the forest and the unwavering, ghoulish eyes that watched us back.

*

I was wrong.

Despite all our hope and best laid plans, the gods did not smile. They practically grimaced. The forest did not grow thinner as we hoped. Instead, it grew almost impassably thick, making the sunlight scarce and our journey a constant and arduous battle.

The gloomsprites were tenacious, I had to give the bastards that. It was past midday already, and the shadows still trailed our every move, showing no signs of growing tired or bored. Over and over, they closed in only to be chased away by the smoke. The Scions were drained from the lack of sleep and constant vigilance. Despite my exhaustion, I barely trusted myself to blink. The creatures always seemed to advance or move when they were not being watched, and I was convinced their constant whispers were driving us mad, one by one. Whether it was their voices or the way they moved, the gloomsprites seemed to ooze a terror that hadn't let go of me or the others since the first showed its gaping face.

But most concerning of all, however, was that we were quickly running out of our only weapon.

"Careful," Ralish said as she nudged me and kept my head from drooping. Her hand clutched me as a gloomsprite dashed through the dark undergrowth alongside the wagon, making Grampus startle.

I rubbed my aching eyes and tried to count them once again. At least a dozen followed us now.

Redeye was twice as grumpy as usual. "A fine idea, this was."

Pel was trimming the fletching on his arrows, hands moving without the sight of his eyes. "At least we can be thankful the rain has finally stopped."

And yet the clouds still remained, hiding more of the sun goddess' light from us.

"Here one comes."

As the wagon passed through a darker patch of path that led beneath vine fronds, a gloomsprite scuttled closer. Eztaral blew the smouldering bundle in her hand to waft smoke in its direction. The gloomsprite stopped short with another haunting whine. Its many fingers pawed at the dirt as it barely retreated.

"They're getting braver, I tell you."

"Stow your doubt, Redeye!" the eagleborn barked. In her other hand was a flaming torch, and she kept it constantly moving back and forth. "I don't want to hear it today."

"Last handful of cedar and akiga!" warned Atalawe, making my hot skin prickle. She was perched behind us on the wagon, frantically making the last warding bundles while the whispers grew around us. The shadows reached for the wagon as if they knew our weakness.

I watched a gloomsprite drift into the lower branches of a tree ahead of us. With a snarl of exhausted exasperation, I took out Serisi's sword and stood tall on the wagon. I had been nurturing a burning desire to kill something since Mulchport. Fireborn or not, this gloomsprite would do.

The monster hung its arms low like a fisher vine. Though its form was burned away by our smoke, it refused to recoil. I made the creature regret its boldness with a swing of the blade. The silver cleaved through the shadow, but instead of feeling thin air, I felt the blade catch on something that felt brittle as bone. The resulting whine was nauseating.

Another hand came clawing for me, and I ducked in time to seize a torch and force it into the branches. Sparks flew, but the shadow retreated.

If you insist on doing this yourself, then plant your feet better. Swing with your hips, not merely your arms—

"That's quite enough of that, demon," I hissed. "If I had silver slingstones, you wouldn't be telling me anything."

"Another!" yelled Ralish, instinctively taking aim. Her arrow flew straight through the advancing gloomsprite. I seized a dying leaf bundle from her side and hurled it madly at the nearest gloomsprite. To my dismay, the creature simply vanished into the undergrowth.

"Sword!" Eztaral called out. I flung the silver sword to her. She caught it in time to swing it into the gloom that crowded her, slicing fingers from shadows.

Let me out, Tarko. I can help.

"Not yet," I told her, seeking my magic instead. Raising my hand, with veins shining nectra blue, I breathed out hard, trying to still my nervous heart. When the magic flowed, I pulled columns from the earth around us, but it only served to stall the gloomsprites, not stop them. Pel and Redeye, their eyes aglow with nectra, couldn't stop them either. The gloomsprites endured every rushing wall of earth and ignored every dart of water and dirt. Even the fort spells we built around us were clambered over or run around.

"Gods, how do we fight these thing?" I growled, exasperated. The terror was growing more potent. The air had become chill. Not a breath of wind disturbed the leaves or carried our smoke.

"Hold your ground, Scions!" ordered Eztaral as we frantically wafted every smoking bundle we had as if we swatted at gobflies. Cinders floated serenely over our panic. The orokan began to trot, complaining with frightened grunts. Those of us beside the wagon were forced to run.

My sword, Tarko!

"Fine!" I relented and told myself sternly it was not a coward in me seeking to escape. While whispers and the thrashing of undergrowth filled my ears, I clamped my eyes shut and reached out a hand as I had done before. I felt cold air rush around me. I didn't feel the touch of earth this time, but instead, I felt Serisi pressing back. No matter how I tried to force my concentration, the strange magic kept slipping from my grasp.

Tarko?

"Watch out! Don't let them touch you!"

I wrenched open my eyes to find a grasping hand reaching from a wall of vines. Its shadow grazed Ralish, and in livid panic, she drove a bundle into the gloomsprite's yawning mouth.

"Bastard!" she screeched.

I unconsciously hurled my magic at its recoiling shadow. Dirt crashed into the foliage, snapping branches. At the same time, a wave of wind buffeted me, driving the smoke outwards from the wagon. Smouldering bundles were gusted from our hands in flashes of flame.

The waft of smoke bought us moments only. The shadows flooded inwards to claim the wagon and our souls before I could even take a ragged breath.

Eztaral's voice filled my ears. "Here they come!"

When all seemed hopeless, with shadows poised over us and our smoke dwindling to nothing, the gloomsprites abruptly halted. Their whispering mouths grew frantic. One by one, their grotesque fingers and spidery limbs receded. We waited, all frozen with worry that the spell would break at any moment.

With a feeble whine, one of the gloomsprites faded into the shadow of a tree and disappeared. The others followed the first, a gloomsprite at a time, until the darkness receded. The air lost its cold edge.

I did not voice my confusion aloud, for fear of tempting the gods' mercy. It seemed the silence was an unspoken agreement. We all traded bewildered looks. Relief hadn't even begun to sink in when Serisi whispered in my head.

There is ash on the air. I can taste it.

I sniffed, noticing a scent I had long since become accustomed to. The smell of flames eating at wood. The stink of sulphur and charcoal. The odour of a demon, and the revenge I was longing for.

"Demon," I whispered. "Somewhere nearby."

"You sure?" Eztaral asked me, voice low and cautious.

Atalawe put a hand to Inwar's back. He was poised and pointed north, nose raised to the sky. "Inwar can smell it too."

Eztaral twirled the silver sword before handing it back to me. I swore her hand was shaking, and I blamed the woefang venom. I dared not blame anything else.

"Then call me mad, but I'm glad for it," she said.

"Maybe a moment to catch our breath, Eztaral?" said Atalawe, even though it was the eagleborn whose lungs looked spent, not the wrangler's.

Eztaral shook her head. "Absolutely not. This is no time to sprawl in the loam and count our blessing, Scions. The hunt is on. The sooner we capture our demon, the sooner we can get out of the loam."

"What's the plan?" I asked.

Eztaral pointed up at the trees overlooking the path. They were stout white pine and proud with bushy needles. "The bait trick."

"Who's going to be the bait?" asked Atalawe.

"Our fine orokan here," Eztaral answered.

"If that demon harms a hair on Grumpus..."

"He won't get the chance, Atalawe. Not if our sorcers are keen-eyed and quick enough."

Pel, Redeye, and I nodded.

Eztaral watched the birds scattering through the lower branches. "Move quick, Scions! We won't have much time. And Tarko, I know you might feel like it, but try not to kill the demon."

With a willing snarl, I hauled my tired body from the wagon and seized the bundles of rope. Pel and Ralish fired skinny twine over branches to lead our ropes higher. We aimed for the wide branches directly over the wagon. Once we had climbed high above the loam, our spears were passed up. Ironpith chains were dragged in a square in front of the wagon and the chuntering orokan and covered up with leaves. Atalawe left some roots for Grumpus to gnaw on and tied his harness to the ground with stakes. And all the while, the smell of ash grew stronger on the breeze.

Perched in the tree, obscured by foliage, I found my footing and forced myself to wait. Serisi ground her fangs in my head while the moments passed.

“Will you please stop that?”

If you insist.

A loud crash and the squeal of an animal silenced the forest. Birds ceased their chirping. A lone antlak galloped across the path. Strings of ivy trailed from its crown of antlers.

I watched the space where it had escaped the undergrowth. A patch of blue flowers shook gently. As I bent all my concentration on them, I saw the petals turn to black curls and cinders.

The demon is here.

The other plants surrounding the flowers caught flame and fell to ash, unveiling a burly demon crouched amongst the burning bushes. Fire trailed about its legs as it stepped forth into the clearing around the path. It took a moment to sniff the air before it clapped eyes on the orokan and empty wagon. The breeze blew in the right direction, keeping the scent of our trap downwind, though it had the unfortunate result of bringing us the demon’s stink. I was forced to breathe through my mouth.

I know this Voidborn. She is older than I. A distant cousin, you would call it. Taiganatrax. She’s been known to make prey fight each other for sport.

“And by prey, you mean...?”

Anyone the Last Clan conquers. You, for example.

With teeth clenched to the point of cracking, I kept my magic just beyond my touch and ready to surge.

The demon was hesitant, creeping forwards in a hunch, claws spread. Each finger was tipped with an iron blade. Wire ran about Taiganatrax’s fingers and arms, in places digging into her bone and grey leather skin. Fire blistered across the cracks of her shoulders.

Grampus bucked against his harness and the stakes trapping him in place. I didn’t blame him; Taiganatrax spread her hands and claws wide as she approached. Smoke billowed from her open jaws.

“Scions!” came the order.

Chains snapped taut beneath me. Atalawe and Eztaral pulled their links hard to ensnare Taiganatrax’s legs. Ralish and Pel fired a volley, aiming for the demon’s eyes, but the beast was swift to clutch her blades in front of her face. The arrows rebounded and broke with clangs and sharp cracks.

It was magic’s turn. I sought my power, dragging at the earth. My spinning tendrils of dirt seized one of the demon’s arms. Redeye lashed the other.

Before Pel could deliver the decisive end to our ambush, Taiganatrax momentarily sliced through Redeye’s spell, managing to swing her iron claws at Eztaral. The eagleborn barely avoided them clipping her head, and they cut four gouges in the tree at her back.

The chains gave way as the demon struggled. I redoubled my magic, hammering Taiganatrax with a rush spell before I pressed the dirt around the beast’s legs. Redeye encased both her arms. I put a tendril around her neck and squeezed. Taunting memories of Texoc falling in the market filled my mind. I wanted to snap this demon’s spine. It was Pel’s spell that stopped me and felled Taiganatrax: a thick column of water clobbered her in the face like a shimmering fist.

While the Taiganatrax spluttered and retched and smoked, Eztaral swooped in with a long-bladed spear and held it to her throat. Atalawe pressed another to her ribs. Ralish had her bow drawn and an arrowhead aimed straight at the demon’s face.

“Be still, demon!” Eztaral bellowed.

Taiganatrax clanged her blades together before I gripped her tighter with my spells. I heard bones crack but I didn't stop; only my smile spread.

"Tarko," hissed Eztaral, catching me before I went too far.

"*Dastak trishish*," Taiganatrax spat.

She calls you something that translates to half weakling, half... morsel. One that deserves to be eaten.

But the captured demon was not finished. "You dare to bind me, worms? I shall make a kilt of your hides! I will feed you your own limbs before—"

"You will shut that ugly face of yours, is what you will do," threatened Eztaral. "There'll be no talking, No threats. No promises of disembowelment and torture, as I know you demons are wont to do. You'll stay silent, or you'll feel the full force of this water sorcer. I know your kind aren't fond of the stuff. Do you hear me?"

Taiganatrax merely growled.

Eztaral raised a finger. "Pelikai."

A tendril of water poised over the demon's face, shaped like a giant axe.

"Hear me better now, demon?"

Taiganatrax bared her fangs. "I hear your pitiful words, worm."

Once the ropes and chains were gathered, Redeye, Pel, and I were free to descend. We kept our magic around the demon while she was wrapped tightly. Chains were woven between her blades. Even her jaws were bound.

"This one is called Taiganatrax, I'm told," I said, as I marched around the beast. "A distant relative of Serisi's."

Taiganatrax looked at me with fierce intrigue. Eyes of flame followed my every move. She grunted something behind her gag of rope.

Pel and Redeye's spells forced her upright and to the back of the wagon, where her bonds were tied. Grampus, now free of his ropes, looked behind him and then at us as if we had gone mad. Perhaps we had, but at least we had won the day.

"Well, that was fine luck," Atalawe said. "A swift hunt."

Pel let his magic fade. The blue shine remained in his eyes. "Almost too swift."

"I don't care," said Ralish. "I'm not goin' to question it if the Three Gods are finally deciding to smile."

"Me neither," I answered in a hoarse voice. I was starting to believe it was Texoc's spirit that smiled on us instead.

Redeye insisted on keeping up his spells. He was hunched from the strain. "And so now we're supposed to walk the demon like this all the way to Dorla Sel?" he asked. "What about when Pel needs to rest? What if we run out of nectra, which we're dangerously close to, by the way?"

"Got a better idea, Redeye?" Eztaral challenged him, dusting her hands. "Would you rather to go back to Stormbeaten, where Fireborn are lurking on every street and sage's seat?"

The sorcer shrugged. At last, his magic also withered away.

"I will go right ahead and take that as a firm no. When Pel needs his beauty sleep as he so desperately does, then you or Tarko and Serisi will watch our new friend. Does that work for you?" Eztaral snapped, turning around to level a finger at Redeye. "You know, a little bit of belief would be appreciated once in a while, Redeye. Am I mistaken, or do I remember you taking the vow just like the rest of us?"

Serisi rumbled in my head.

Redeye took some time to answer. His crimson stare did not flinch under the eagleborn's wrath. "You're not mistaken."

"Thought not," said Eztaral. She retreated to the wagon, and though she tried to hide how exhausted she was, we all saw the shake of her hands as she hauled herself up.

Eztaral cracked the orokan's reins and the wagon lurched forwards. "Pel, I want you watching every step that demon takes. The rest of you watch the loam. We're heading into the deep Swathe now, and I won't have all our hard work ruined by tharantos, gloomsprites, or worse."

What could be worse than those? asked Serisi.

I rubbed my chin as I met the captured demon's eyes once more. "Whatever it is, I'm ready for it."

15

PRISONERS

The Allmother, or Grand Matriarch as some call her, must be chosen from a circle of all the matriarchs, just as the first Allmother was chosen during the time of the wildfires. The first Allmother brought solidarity and leadership and ultimately preserved the Swathe. An Allmother has held the throne of Dorla Sel ever since, and it has made the bloodwood the capital of the Swathe. Today, Dorla Sel is home to the Temple of the Three, the Grand Harvest, the Tournament of Sorcers – or the Forging as it has become known – and it is where all envoys must travel to ascend to the title of matriarch at the blessing of the Allmother.

“ON THE NATURE OF BLOODWOODS” BY TEMACH LILO

I refused to tell him to his face, but Redeye was right: to say keeping a demon prisoner was a difficult task was a dire understatement.

Twice or more a mile, Taiganatrax would veer off to one side, pull at the chains, force the orokan to drag her, kick rocks at us, or anything she could to be troublesome and vexing.

Every time, we threatened her or knocked her with a spell, and every time, she pretended to give up her efforts. It was exhausting. By the end of the first day, we ached to make camp.

Where a disused leafroad met the loam, we called a halt. Even then, Taiganatrax played her tricks. We tied her between two overhanging trees and kept her leashed to the wagon, but she insisted on shaking the boughs, dropping leaves and caterpillars on us as we tried to put up our tents and fire. She laughed all the while, infuriatingly unafraid.

“Are you sure we can’t knock her unconscious for the rest of the journey and drag her?” I asked. “I’d be happy to try.”

Atalawe smiled wryly. “For the third time today, Grumpus can barely drag the wagon, never mind her.”

We demons do not simply fall unconscious like you humans do.

I kicked at the moss beneath my feet. “Ugh.”

Taiganatrax seethed. The fire burned in the cracks of her skin. The ropes started smoking.

“Pel, she’s doing it again,” Atalawe called.

Pel didn’t get a chance to wield his magic. Ralish doused the demon with a bucket of water, making Taiganatrax shriek and me smile.

“Bitch is driving me mad. Just one moment of peace. That’s all I bloody want, I tell you.”

Either fearing another bucket or at last growing bored of her own antics, Taiganatrax fell still. I was happy to finally enjoy a moment of peace.

“This better be worth it,” Pel muttered. His head was tilting to the side as he gave in to sleep.

“Come on, old man,” I said, helping him up and lighting a torch with a sparkstone. “Let’s take a walk and wake you up.”

“I think I would prefer a bedroll beside a crackling fire, young Tarkosi.”

“We need you to stay awake until this demon tires. We’ll scout that leafroad.”

“Maybe you could train while you wag those mouths,” called Eztaral.

“Gods,” I sighed, once my back was turned.

Pel walked stiffly but waved my help away. “Just been sat too long, is all. And you mind your cheek now. Eztaral’s pushing us harder to prove she’s made the right choice, that is all. That is why Redeye got served a platter of verbal abuse yesterday.”

The old leafroad was overgrown with ivy and trailing vines. Ahead of us, some kind of old fort arched over the road. The structure remained, but all the life had vanished from it. Its triangular windows stayed dark no matter how hard I challenged their shadows to show me green gloomsprite eyes. Further beyond, the leafroad rose up to a reassuring height. Here, we were only a short drop from the loam. The ankle- or leg-breaking kind, rather than the deadly, body-turning-to-mush kind.

“I didn’t just want to bring you out here to chat idly, Pel. I had something I wanted to tell you, but haven’t had a chance since we got to Stormbeaten, what with the Fireborn and Texoc.” I drifted off for a moment.

Tarko.

I found Pel’s hand on my shoulder. “What’s on your mind, lad?”

“I did it again, you know,” I said.

“Switched with Serisi?”

“No. What I told you about before you left for Stormbeaten.”

It took Pel a moment to realise. “Gods... Controlling fire?”

I nodded. “I think I managed to do it again. Twice now, maybe.”

“And you know what I said before: that it’s highly unlikely. State your evidence, lad.”

“I believe the demon magic inside me is helping me wield more orders than just earth. Kī Raxa controlled fire. And Faraganthar told me that she also had a demon within her, remember? What if that’s how she wielded the fourth order of magic, and what if I’m able to do the same?”

“Evidence,” Pel repeated.

“Before we came to join you, we fought a demon in the loam. I pulled its fire towards me. Serisi saw it.”

And yet I still do not believe.

“And again with the gloomsprites, I felt like I made the bundles burst into flame.”

“Accidents are not the same as abilities. If I’m to believe, you have to show me you can do it at will, just as you can with earth. The torch is there. Show me now.”

“As you wish,” I said, balancing the torch against the leafroad’s railing.

You are going to embarrass yourself again with this, Tarko, Serisi told me.

“Maybe I will,” I said, uncaring. Instead, I took a breath and reached for the flame with my right hand. My fingertips had stayed the colour of charcoal since Stormbeaten. I watched my scars and veins shine blue as I flexed my fingers. I kept my squinting eyes on the torch until they began to water. I held my breath until my lungs burned and my head pounded, and still the torch refused me.

Before Pel could say anything, I took another breath and stepped closer to the flame.

Fire is not about calm. It is about anger. Zeal. It has nothing to do with nectra.

“Oh, and what do you know of magic?” I hissed at Serisi. It was in that moment that the fire leaned in my direction. It did not reach for me, but I felt its hot air waft over my face. I didn’t dare put down my hand, and I managed to keep the flame leaning for several heartbeats before it returned to normal.

A mere forest breeze.

“Shut up,” I said, clenching my hand over and over. It felt hot.

Pel held his hand in front of his mouth. “What is she saying?” he asked.

“That it was the breeze.”

Pel’s eyes had not left the flames.

“What is it, Pel?”

“It doesn’t make sense.”

I felt my smile begin to grow. I clenched my fists and shook them. “I bloody knew it. I can control fire—”

“No,” said Pel, shattering my hope with one word.

“No?”

“You can’t control fire,” Pel muttered.

“But you just saw it.”

“Serisi is right. Night breezes, Tarko.”

I stared at him, caught between breaths. I pointed at the flame. “You don’t believe me?”

Pel grabbed at my hands. Had I not known him from birth I would have pulled away. The old man looked at them with his faintly glowing eyes. “Your skin looks ever more poisoned. By the nectra or the demon taking over your body, I don’t know what. Look at your fingers: they’ve turned the red dye black. I swear the more you use it, the more it seems to use you.”

Pel reached for my chin, where black veins hid in the shadow of my jaw. This time I did recoil.

“And I thought out of all the Scions that *you* would be one who believed in me,” I told him.

Pel did not answer me. He looked as though he tried to, but nothing came out of his mouth. I turned back to the camp.

“I didn’t hear much training!” Eztaral called to me as I stormed past her to sit before the demon with the fire at my back.

“There’ll be no training tonight, Eztaral,” I said gruffly. “You can ask Pel why.”

Ralish sat beside me, so close our armour grated. Another bucket of water sloshed onto the ground in front of her.

“See this? Yeah? Then keep quiet and still,” she ordered the demon.

Taiganatrx grumbled and cursed extensively, but the threat seemed to work. Her bone skin was scorched grey and blistered with black blood and fire. Steam still rose from her shoulders.

“I know that face. What’s the matter with you?” Ralish asked me.

“Pel doubts that I can wield fire. And he said the poison in my veins is getting worse. I tire of it all.”

“I believe you,” she offered, one eye still on the demon, “and that’s what should matter. You’ll show them different like you did in the beginning. Like you did in Shal Gara’s last battle.”

“I don’t deserve to have you,” I muttered, still unwieldy with compliments.

“No, you don’t,” she said, tracing the patterns on my neck. “He’s right, though.”

“About what?”

“The darkness is growin’, like I told you in Stormbeaten. And with Serisi able to take over your body... Well, the old beggar is just worried about you, as is his right. And mine. Difference is I trust that you won’t let whatever’s happenin’ to you get too far and lose yourself. That you’ll stay the same Tarko I chose to follow,” she said. “Besides, I think I overheard Axera threatening to strangle Pel if he didn’t bring you back.”

I looked behind me, to where Pel and Eztaral were huddled in what looked to be a quiet yet heated discussion.

“I’ll show Pel he’s wrong,” I growled as I slid a glove over my hand and pulled my collar up. “I’ll wield fire. And with it, I’ll make Haidak and his Fireborn wish they had never left their mothers’ wombs. Serisi is right: I am a weapon, and I have no intention of failing again. Not like I did with Shal Gara. Not like with Texoc.”

Ralish squeezed my hand. “Texoc was not your fault,” she said. “And you won that battle, Tarko. I have every faith you’ll win the next one. And the next. You’ll have to, because I don’t intend on burnin’ in demonfire.”

“Trust me, Ralish, I won’t let that happen. Otherwise who else would keep me in check?” I replied, matching her wry smile. Behind it hid a ferocity. To imagine a world without her was too dim a future to consider.

“A pretty picture,” growled a demon’s voice in Swathe tongue. I was about to tell Serisi to leave me alone when I realised Taiganatrax was staring at us with a leer on her face. Her red glow spread across the grass.

“You creatures are pathetic,” she told us, her voice low and guttural. “Even your language is measly and weak.”

“And yet we’ve captured you, haven’t we?” I shot back.

“Are you the one they call the hero of Shal Gara? I expected a greater worm than you. *Shrugek.*”
She calls you a wretch.

“Is the traitor still lurking in you, as my kin tells me?” Taiganatrax asked.

I did not answer. No satisfaction would be given.

“I take your silence as proof, worm,” Taiganatrax cackled. “I will take great pleasure in peeling that traitor from your skin and bringing her before the Iron Icon myself.”

“Silence, demon,” Eztaral ordered as she came to sit on the log on my other side. “Or else you’ll get another bath.”

Taiganatrax simmered down, but it was not because of us. She turned her head to the dark sky between the treetops.

I hear thunder, Tarko.

As did I. Faint and distant, and it came with no sign of lightning on the canopy’s horizon. It did not peak and fade, but stayed constant. And it seemed to be growing closer.

“Lancewings,” Eztaral whispered.

Crouching low and covering the fire, we all turned our eyes to the canopy. Faint shadows were all I saw, racing through what I could see of the clouds between the trees. The noise of wings began to fade away.

“They’ve gone to the south, whoever they were,” Eztaral whispered.

“Fireborn, knowing our luck. We can’t keep this up for long, Eztaral, I’m telling you,” muttered Redeye behind us. Pel had disappeared into in a tent.

“And we’re telling you to be quiet, Redeye.” Atalawe poked her head out from her blankets to hiss at him. “You need faith. They’re more likely to be bloodwood patrols or others travelling to the Forging in Dorla Sel.”

Eztaral did not respond to Redeye’s doubt. “Go to sleep, both of you. Pel will take a later watch. Tarko and I will take first.”

Though I'd been incarcerated twice by now, I had never kept watch on a prisoner before. Unlike the trepidation of a hunt, having the prey already captured made it harder to stay awake. The travel and torture of the demon had exhausted me.

Even though Taiganatrax spent most of her time competing with us to see who could scowl the longest, I felt my eyes drooping. My head followed after them. Perched on the ground with her back against the log, Ralish nudged me the first time, and the second, but by the third she gave up. Mostly because she too had let her head fall to her chest. I was powerless against the call of sleep, and my eyes fell like stones dropped from a bloodwood's height.

*

"At last," Serisi growled as she felt her power seeping throughout Tarko's body. She stretched her arms, relishing the clicking of knuckles in her right hand. She let the sling she found gripped in her other hand fall to the earth. Instead, she felt the sword handle at her hip and shifted out from under the weight of Ralish leaning on her shoulder.

Eztaral now sat several feet away, the obsidian sword on her lap, running a sharpening stone around the circular blades. "I was wondering when you were going to show," she said.

"Tarko sleeps," Serisi said, sitting opposite the eagleborn.

"Normally, I would have given him the back of my hand for falling asleep on watch, but things have changed, haven't they?"

"Irreparably."

Eztaral placed the sharpening stone on the log. Serisi swept her sword from its sheath, making the eagleborn tense. Serisi watched the woman's knuckle whiten around her sword handle. She needn't have worried, for Serisi placed the blade across Tarko's armoured lap and started to use the stone. Normally she would have used forge-hot claws to sharpen the metal, but a stone would do. Eztaral watched her technique.

"We need to interrogate Taiganatrax," she said at last.

Serisi did not answer as she tested Tarko's thumb against the blade. A thin trickle of blood showed, and the pain was slight. Serisi savoured it.

Eztaral hadn't seen. "We need to know what Faraganthar's surviving demons and the Fireborn are plotting, and seeing as we have a demon trussed up and posing no threat, I can't think of a better time to do some questioning."

"She will not tell you anything."

"That's why you're going to do it, Serisi."

Serisi snorted. "Am I?"

"Tarko and you are one and the same. That makes you a Scion by extension, and surprise: that means you follow my orders."

"I have—"

"Seen a thousand worlds and fought even more battles, I know. If we are to trust you, then you are to trust me. Call me a worm, if you will, but promise me that."

Serisi put the point of the silver blade in the log and stood. Tarko's body was heavier than usual. Stiffer. The boy must have been tired. Under Eztaral's watchful stare, she approached the demon. Serisi let Taiganatrax stare at her. At first she tried to spit fire, but that was before she noticed the flame in Serisi's eyes.

“There you are, Voidborn. Look at what you have been reduced to, *karketh*.”

Serisi raised her blade in warning. “You call me traitor, yet only I have seen the truth. I fight to keep the Last Clan alive. The Iron Icon would have had my father destroy this world as we did our last, and the Voidborn would have perished with it.”

Taiganatrax was incensed. “Lies! Lies spewed from an enemy’s mouth.”

“It is the truth,” Serisi snarled. “The God of Chaos is a false god whose hunger knows no bounds.”

“This world has poisoned you, Serisianathiel.”

“This world? This forest is chaos and order bound as one. This world taught me the futility of our devotion to chaos. How many of our kin have been slaughtered to build the doorway? How many more for the thirst of the Iron Icon? We have become slaves in his claws. I alone saw the fear in my father’s eye, and I will change the Last Clan’s fate.”

“Falsehoods!” the demon roared. Taiganatrax heaved against her chains. Serisi heard the cracking of a tree. She marched forwards, swinging her sword under Taiganatrax’s sharp chin.

“What is this child’s toy? Kill me if you wish, *karketh*! I will become dust in the Void, basking in the fire of the Iron Icon. I gladly die in the name of his victory!”

Serisi baited her kin. “What victory? My father has already lost. The doorway cannot be opened.”

Taiganatrax bared her teeth. “Your mind is too small, Serisianathiel. The war has not yet started. You will see soon enough: the doorway will live again. The Iron Icon himself will rise from its fire. He has told us with his own voice.”

“Impossible.” Serisi forced a laugh, wanting more. “You that survive are dead or dying.”

Taiganatrax cackled. “The magic of the worms is stronger than you could know. Those born again in the fire have glimpsed the true face of chaos and bowed to its will. Even if we Voidborn should perish, they work the Iron Icon’s will now.”

Serisi looked over her shoulder. Eztaral’s eyes were black and shining. “These Scions will stop the Fireborn. As will I.”

“Weaklings! You are alone! The whole world turns against them even now. The red worm has promised it. These wretches will cower before the Iron Icon and welcome his fire willingly.”

This time, Serisi’s smile was genuine. “And look at you, Sister. The anger in you has made you speak too eagerly.”

“*Karketh! Raskaa asha!*”

Serisi let the demon’s insults pelt her harmlessly as she walked calmly and with swagger back to the eagleborn.

“You heard her?” she grunted.

Eztaral nodded. “I definitely heard it, I just didn’t understand a great deal of it.”

“*Karketh* means ‘traitor.’ Just as the demon prince Bathnarok said during our last hunt: the Iron Icon clings to this world by a thread. Somehow, he speaks to my surviving kin and the Fireborn. Taiganatrax mentions a red worm.”

“I would bet a pouch of gems that is our good friend Haidak Baran.”

“She also warns that the doorway will live again. That we are alone. That the Fireborn will not rest. That they turn the Swathe against us so that the Iron Icon will be welcomed with open arms.”

Eztaral ruminated on that for a spell. To the muttering and fuming of Taiganatrax, Serisi watched the eagleborn think.

“What is in your mind?”

“The worst,” was all she said. With a flourish of her sword, Eztaral held it to the firelight.

Serisi watched the flames play in its stone. “What is its name?”

“What?” Eztaral gave her a sideways look.

“Your blade. All good weapons need names. My last sword was one of fire. In demonspeak, it was *Ashazeneth*. Worldsplitter,” Serisi said.

“Subtle.”

Serisi held up her silver sword. “This, I have yet to learn its name. I will know once it spills blood.”

Eztaral was staring at her blade, swivelling it around in her palm. “Marrowthirst,” she whispered. “The name of Kī Raxa’s sword.”

“A fine name,” growled Serisi, giving an old Last Clan blessing made over newly forged blades. “May it spread fire and sow death.”

The eagleborn nodded and pressed the flat of the blade to her forehead. “I feel it will have to, to save the Swathe. And I worry that they won’t just be the lives of demons, but those of my kin and my tribe. That isn’t the war I wanted to fight.”

“Haidak Baran has forced our hands.”

“That he has, demon,” said Eztaral, as she got to her feet. “And I will make sure he regrets it.”

“I do believe there is a queue.”

“Tough.” Eztaral stared up at the speckle of stars between the canopy. “I made Haidak the warrior he is. I will unmake him.”

Serisi bared Tarko’s teeth as if they were her own fangs.

*

“Why do I have a cut on my finger, Serisi?” I asked my demon, half-whispering while I examined the scab on my thumb.

An accident while I was sharpening my sword. I blame your weak flesh. We demons do not worry about such things as minor cuts.

I frowned. “And I suppose you don’t care about infections, either. Gangrene. Mulchrot.”

Should I? I do not know of these things.

“Whatever you said to Taiganatrax last night, she’s angrier than she was yesterday.”

Do you not remember?

I could only remember fragmented dreams: the captive demon’s face looming far too close for my liking. A sword named Marrowthirst. Words of a red worm and the Iron Icon rising from fire.

“She said the doorway will live again,” I whispered.

An empty promise.

“Let’s get going!” ordered Eztaral as she came marching around Grumpus. She had awoken in a dark mood. She was not alone. The Scions’ state was subdued. “We’ve got miles upon miles to cover, and morning’s wasting away.”

Morning was doing nothing of the sort. Firstglow was a faint blush to the fractured sky. The stars were still shining. A single ray of the sun goddess’ light had yet to touch even the tallest treetops.

“Tarko, keep your magic ready, but I want you concentrating on your switching. If the demon acts up, Serisi can talk her down. Pel, now that you’ve had that much-needed beauty sleep of yours, I want you keen and listening and with your spells ready sharpish.”

Redeye huffed while he untangled ropes. “We’re on our last two vials of nectra, Eztaral. I told you we’d run out.”

“That’s one each, isn’t it, Redeye? Why don’t instead of complaining, you make. Them. Count.” Eztaral crossed her thick arms. “Or perhaps you’d like to moan louder so our demon prisoner can hear?”

Redeye shook his head. Taiganatrax was slumped behind the wagon, still leashed to the trees and lost in a hateful daze.

“We’ll find more on the way. Ralish and Atalawe, I want you up front with arrows and spears ready. Let’s get this wagon moving.”

Once the demon was in tow, Eztaral took up Grumpus’ leash and tried to pull him forwards. He didn’t move until Atalawe clicked her tongue. With Pel sitting at my side with his sole vial of nectra clutched in his hand, the wagon lurched northwards.

“I’m sorry if it seemed like I doubted you, Tarko,” Pel whispered after the first mile, looking sheepish. His clouded eyes held no glint of blue in them. He put his hand on Inwar’s head and ruffled his ears. “I worry about what this war is doing to you. As such I am cautious. I regret pushing you so hard in Shal Gara. My desperation got the better of me. There are moments when I wish these times had passed us by and fallen on shoulders other than yours instead. Shameful thing to say as both a Scion and an old warrior, but it’s the truth.”

Perhaps the morning wore on me also. Gods knew the sleep I had grasped had been the broken and unrestful kind. I pawed at crusted eyes and scowled at my scabbed finger once again. “I don’t worry. You once called me Kī Raxa reborn and you were right. I’m who the gods chose to fight these demons, whether by fate or accident, and I won’t shirk my duty. I intend to do whatever it takes to put an end to Haidak and his Fireborn. To keep everyone alive,” I replied, repeating my promise I’d made the night before.

“And that, lad, is what now concerns me,” mumbled Pel.

Speaking of demons, our captured creature was staring at us balefully. Her claws, though still bound, tapped together in a bothersome rhythm.

Inwar’s gaze rose up to face the canopy. His whiskers twitched. I felt his growl reverberating through the wood of the wagon. At first I thought it was the family of wild orokan suspended upside down from the highest branches, pawing at fruit and seeds, but he stared the opposite direction. A faint droning could be heard, more than the breeze blowing between branches.

“There are those lancewings again,” Pel said, putting his sharp ears to use. “Must be patrols from the nearest bloodwood.”

“Where is that?” Ralish asked.

“Azcalan,” Atalawe murmured. “A bloodwood I’ve tried my hardest to avoid.”

I’d never heard of such a place. “Why?”

“Because it breaks my heart to see her. Azcalan is infected by some poison, parasite, mould, or disease that halts it from growing or producing nectra. We scholars have tried to solve the mystery for generations, including my mother the seedwitch. Our journeys here haunted me as a child. There is something wrong with that bloodwood. Something evil in its roots.”

Before Atalawe could tell me more, a lancewing clipped the trees above, sending birds squawking and leaves spinning.

“Form up, Scions,” ordered Eztaral. “Pel. Watch that demon.”

Taiganatrax had also turned her head. She watched the treetops with a foul sneer. “*Daraza kethik!*” she snarled at me.

I heard the demon speak its harsh tongue. I heard every guttural consonant, and yet somehow I understood it. “We aren’t letting you go,” I snapped at her.

“How did you understand her?” Pel asked me.

I was about to ask the same question, Tarko.

I shrugged. “Don’t ask me. I’m starting to grow bored of questioning all the strange things that are happening to me. I just blame Serisi.”

Charming. I blame the magic. It is much easier. But look at Taiganatrax, Tarko. She looks weak, cowering before the sound of your giant birds.

Taiganatrax had every right to be. Lancewings were formidable creatures and faster than a streaking star. But Serisi was right: the demon was snarling and uttering to herself, crouched and clawing at her bonds.

“It’s a lancewing patrol, nothing more,” I told her.

The gods, in their everlasting wisdom, chose that moment to prove me terribly wrong.

A lancewing came bursting from the canopy. With its wings pinned back at its sides, a black-clad and beak-faced rider pressed to its back, a spear jutting out past its beak, it hurtled like a slingstone. Not for our wagon, but for our prisoner.

Taiganatrax managed to pull the wagon backwards a dozen paces in her effort to escape, but the spear still found its target. Our shouts of threats and warnings counted for nothing. The demon was impaled through her ribs. With her screech rising above the droning wings, Taiganatrax was sent sprawling against an ironpith tree. The lancewing had already flared its tremendous wings to dart vertically upwards. It evaded every branch with ease as it escaped into the sky.

“Six Hells!” howled Eztaral. “Did you see their colours?”

“They’re not from any bloodwood I recognise, Eagleborn!” Atalawe responded.

The Fireborn would not kill one of the Last Clan, surely, Serisi told me.

She was right. I began to spin my sling as Pel broke the cork from his vial and put it to his lips. “To the Hells with this! I smell trouble, Eztaral!”

“When do we experience anything but?” Redeye yelled.

More lancewings dashed overhead. Leaves hailed down as the giant birds crisscrossed the false sky. A second spear pierced Taiganatrax as she fought to get upright. A third hammered into the earth far too close to our wagon for Eztaral’s liking.

A brawny rider upon a huge purple lancewing swung close to get the measure of us, her spear raised. A shrill cry emanated from behind her ghoulish mask of dappled crow feathers, bones, and glowing green gems that had the look of insect eyes. The cry was taken up by the rest of the riders, dozens of them now, and their haunting noise filled the forest.

That is a battle-cry if have ever heard one, Tarko! Prepare yourself!

“Fight, Scions! I won’t have our hard work ruined!” Eztaral bellowed, running for Taiganatrax.

“Who are they? Rogues? Bandits?” Ralish asked me.

“I have no idea!” I hissed before I summoned my magic. It rushed to me, powerful and eager to prove itself just as I was. My right hand glowed with light beneath the cuff of my glove. Stones skittered around the wagon as I dragged fistfuls from the earth and hurled dart spells into the sky. Every one of them missed a lancewing by a feather. Serisi emerged from me in her dusty form, taking swipes at the birds that flew closer and jabbed at us with spears. The sight of the construct spell only

seemed to enrage the riders further. Their shrill cries grew louder. Pel was forced to keep a shield of water whirling above Taiganatrax, catching spears and slingstones.

The problem with lancewings was that the birds were preternaturally fast. To an infuriating degree. They were as brash as a thunderclap and yet elusive as smoke. They could twist around an arrow as if they'd been expecting it for hours. Not a single blade or spell could do more than graze them.

I imagined that this was the reason Redeye lost his temper. The sorcer marched out from the wagon, eyes burning and ground cracking beneath him. He lashed at anything that moved with tendril spell after tendril spell. The onslaught was too much for my eyes to take in, and it appeared I was not alone. Whether by luck or design, one whip-like tendril managed to make one of the birds swerve through the air with a piercing shriek. The rider caught the spell instead, and was ripped from his saddle, narrowly avoiding a tree trunk.

Our attackers might have hesitated in surprise, but they were far from put off. *Enraged*, would be the most accurate description. The brawny rider came hurtling towards Eztaral, leaping from her lancewing's back. Other birds dropped to the loam like rocks. Riders of black feather masks studded with bone beaks and eye-like gems came streaming towards us. It was a mistake; the loam was our domain. Redeye and I gave them earthen walls to climb and knocked them flat with crashing waves of dirt. Tendrils threw them into the branches, where only their birds could rescue them. Dart spells cracked ribs and spears.

More warriors landed atop the wagon and caught Atalawe and Ralish off-guard. I had Serisi bat them from the wagon with the back of her claws. She mimicked my shout with a roar of grinding earth, driving the attackers back before they swarmed at us again.

"Death to the Fireborn!" yelled their crow-masked leader. I saw her wielding a leaf-bladed spear that was locked against Eztaral's blade.

It took a heartbeat for the realisation to hit the Scions.

"For the love of the Three, everybody stop for one cursed second!" I yelled, knocking half the riders flat with a burst of magic. "We aren't Fireborn!"

Atalawe joined me before another blade could swing. Her left side was soaked red, as was the hand clutching a wound between the pieces of her armour. "The demon is our prisoner!"

The woman leaning into Eztaral's blade chuckled deeply. "Your words will not deceive us, traitors!"

"We are fighting the same fight!" Atalawe yelled.

The attackers chanted in fearless unison, over and over, closing in instead of relenting. Their rhythm punctuated the encroaching drone from a score of lancewings above us.

"You put down your blades first. We will see. We'll find out who you are," said Crow-Face.

Eztaral did nothing of the sort. "We're telling you the truth. This demon is a prisoner to be delivered."

With a clench of the rider's hand, the chanting fell still within a blink. "Your demon is already dead."

One by one, we turned to stare at the form of Taiganatrax. The fire in her eyes had been extinguished. Her body was currently beginning to smoke and decay into dust, as all demon corpses did. I felt the sour frustration inside me. I was not the only one. The dirt floating around Redeye vibrated with his anger. Pel's spells of water spun furiously around his hands. My magic stretched out between the riders. Serisi swiped at their blades as they sought to jab at us.

“Tarko,” Ralish hissed at me. “Do something!”

Crow-Face laughed at our clenched jaws. “You are surrounded, Fireborn. I recommend you surrender, but if you wish, we will gladly put you out of your miseries and feed you back to the loam.”

Eztaral raised her sword as if she were aiming to strike at the rider. I could see the frustration burning in her. Those surrounding us fell eerily silent as our fate was weighed in her hands.

Part Two

16

THE CLOUDRIDERS OF LOSTRIVER

Lancewings might have speed, but they are not alone in the skies and are merely one of the many mighty birds that belong to the Swathe. Some crows can grow to lancewing size. Vultures, also.

Swathe ravens, however, can grow even larger, and often pose a threat to lancewings when grouped together or high above the loam. Larger and fiercer still is the eagle. But mightiest of all that roam the skies is so rare as to be myth. The thunderbird, they call it.

FROM THE STUDIES OF ORAKAL ALAMSA

Marrowthirst fell to the loam with a metallic crunch, landing point-down in the mulch. The choice looked as if it withered Eztaral. But as my heart fell with her blade, I saw the will of iron in her stare even as the spears came to press against us. I stood close to Ralish and moved Serisi's form to curl protectively around us.

"We are not Fireborn!" Eztaral shouted. "We are the Scions of the Sixth-Born."

Crow-Face shook her head. "Never heard of you."

Atalawe shoved a spear from her face. "We're enemies of the Fireborn. We fight them still. In fact, that's what we were in the middle of before you interrupted and ruined it all."

"We're exiles of Shal Gara, curse it," Ralish snarled.

Crow-Face stared closely at us. I could see dark wooden eyes in the holes of her mask. They roamed over Serisi's form.

"What did you say?" she asked in a stony voice.

"We're exiles of Shal Gara," repeated Ralish.

The air grew even staler. The mood forced hearts to racing.

Crow-Face looked amongst us. "Well, by the Three! Why didn't you say so before?" she yelled, thudding her spear into the loam.

"What?" Eztaral asked.

"You believe us?" I hissed, bewildered in my relief.

"I have a nephew in Shal Gara!" the rider announced. "He has told me of Shal Gara's great journey and battle, of the Fireborn's betrayal and a demon king's fall. Of brave warriors exiled despite saving their bloodwood. Put up those spears, all of you Cloudriders! These are friends. Strange friends, I admit, but I won't have them harmed." She gave Serisi another lasting look.

Our attackers retreated. Some looked disappointed, cheated of a kill. It took Redeye several moments to still his spells and calm himself. Murder glowed in his eyes. I knew the feeling. The

magic still thrummed within me, as did the battle-lust of Serisi. I felt it stronger than ever. Its heat crackling over my skin.

Do not trust them, Tarko. I do not like their smell, Serisi whispered in my mind.

“What is your name, warrior?” Crow-Face asked our narrow-eyed leader.

“I am Eagleborn Kraid,” Eztaral growled, still wary and hands near her sword. “This is Atalawe, wrangler and seedwitch. Overseer Ralish Lahni. Tarkosi Terelta and Redeye of the sorcer tribe, and Pelikai Maladaq, Scourge of the Scorchroad.”

“Your names are known to us,” Crow-Face proclaimed. “What fortune indeed that we have found you.”

Fortune was a strong word with spears still cautiously pointed in our direction and our plan lying smoking in the dirt.

“Spears up, I said, ingrates!” yelled the rider. “Bloody Hells.”

“Who are you, and who exactly is this nephew of yours that we should be thanking?” Pel asked of her.

“That would be Eagleborn Ren Gaakaran. Do you know him?”

My eyes widened.

“Very well,” replied Eztaral. “We fought side by side in the Scorchwars and in the war for Shal Gara.”

“Just as he said, and so I know you speak the truth.” The rider at last removed her mask of bone and feathers, showing us a broad face and a sharp chin halved with a tattooed strip of white paint, like a lost caterpillar. Her bald head was striped with charcoal. A scar interrupted her lips, giving her a permanent, if not friendly, sneer. The tattooed tree of a first-born stretched up her neck. “And I am Caraq Gaakaran, daughter of Noluk, wingmaster of the Cloudriders of Lostriver.”

Redeye grunted. “Quite the mouthful.”

“I do not see or hear any river,” grumbled Serisi aloud in her voice of stones.

The spears came rushing back in moments.

“Riders!” shouted Caraq.

A fierce whispering spread amongst the Cloudriders.

“Your construct spell speaks,” she said, her face devoid of discernible emotion.

“A trick of the mind,” I said, keeping the shine of my hand hidden under my vambraces. I dissolved Serisi’s shape and let her spell die around me. Ralish quietly brushed dirt from her shoulder.

“Gaakaran has spoken of you also, Tarkosi Terelta,” said Caraq. “And as for your question, you would not see or hear our river. That’s why it’s lost.”

A clap of her hands turned the riders away from us. The lancewings pirouetted down to the loam in their droves. I counted thirty before Caraq picked up her spear and ushered us away from our wagon. Eztaral looked remarkably uncomfortable as the woman threw an arm about the eagleborn. The rest of us followed in their wake, each as wary and as twitchy as the next as we walked amongst the tall lancewings and their riders. They stared at us as we passed. I still burned

hot and was far from afraid to stare back. Now they were still, I saw the streaks of paint across the lancewings' feathers and faces, and the decorations of bone and glowing gem that hung from their saddles and necks.

"I hope you have no fear of flying, Eagleborn," I heard Caraq tell Eztaral.

Ralish looked at me with a deep furrow on her forehead. "What did she just say?"

I also wish to know. The demon sounded concerned.

"I think we'll be travelling by lancewing."

By the dead and Starless Plains, Serisi cursed.

"Three Gods." Ralish's face was a storm. "I think I'd rather fight my way out of this than fly out."

I couldn't deny a slight anticipation. Although Shal Gara's nests had taught me how vexing and mischievous the giant birds could be, and Haidak's lancewing had tried on several occasions to kill me, I remembered the breathlessness of my first flight. It was otherworldly for a creature of hands and feet as I was. In my worker's bones there was still an old jealousy, born of watching lancewings circling the bloodwood.

"I didn't know you were afraid of flying?" I asked Ralish.

"I'll have you know I'm afraid of falling, especially off the back of a bird hurtling at the speed of the gods through thick forest. I don't want to be a mangled heap on the forest floor, thank you very much."

"Well put," I said.

We neared a monstrous cedar with broad ridges for roots. One turquoise-and-yellow-striped lancewing was perched above us. "You're mad to bring them with us, Caraq!" called its rider. "You trust too easily."

"And you're as troublesome as you are ugly, Ogarosh. I believe in the word of my family, as I would you and yours. That is the way of it. I won't cast out friends and saviours and leave them to the loam," Caraq yelled back.

"Friends? Saviours! Please. Even if what Ren said was true, then look what they did to their last home. Lostriver is sacred, curse it."

"Nothing is sacred anymore. Not to what's coming. Time you got that into your thick skull instead of bothering me with your doubt."

But it seemed Ogarosh's skull might have been too thick. "And what about the rider they knocked from his saddle with a lucky shot? They broke his back! Who's going to pay for that?"

"And we threw spears just the same. Now cease your bickering! A person with a face as hideous as yours shouldn't talk so much," Caraq ordered in a harsh bark. I appreciated her style. It felt strangely familiar. And in all honesty, Ogarosh was a man of little beauty. He had far too much face for his small, rodent features.

Caraq beckoned us to half a dozen lancewings perched without riders. "Your saddles await."

"I'm not riding one of those," Ralish said.

I also refuse, Tarko. You promised me after our first flight on one of these birds it would never happen again. We will walk.

“You’ll have to,” Caraq said, nodding encouragingly. “There are no paths or leafroads that lead to Lostriver. Only thick forest, sheer cliffs, and white waters. Unless you want to spend two weeks battling strangling thickets and ravines, a lancewing is the only way to reach our home.”

Serisi snarled within me. I could feel her writhing about, as if she tried to break free.

Ogarosh crowed once more. “Don’t forget the blindfolds, Caraq.”

With a tut, Caraq handed us each a blank mask without eyeholes. I held mine and wrinkled my nose, irked that I would be flying blind.

“I apologise,” Caraq said to us. “Lostriver is our secret, and we prefer to keep it that way.”

“We will obey, won’t we, Scions?” Eztaral ordered us.

I will not.

Atalawe was the only one who seemed as quietly excited as I was, even with the prospect of a blindfold. She and Pel shared a saddle. Eztaral and the rest of us had a bird to ourselves.

Ralish pulled on the saddle’s leg-straps so tightly I swore she was trying to sever her thighs. Her bird turned his head to chirrup at her, either mocking or encouraging; I couldn’t tell.

Mine, a larger bird with a ridge of black feathers and white stripes, seemed to be nervous of me. She switched from one foot to the other, chirping like two stones smacking together. I reached to climb to the saddle, but the demon made my hand twitch.

I will not do it! Though I marvel at many things in your world, Tarko, flying is unnatural. Abhorrent, Serisi complained.

“You heard Caraq,” I whispered as I forced myself forwards. “We don’t have a choice.”

This is outrageous.

Hands grasped mine as I was lashed to the saddle. I struggled a little at first, but Caraq cautioned us. “So you don’t fall. And so you don’t decide to wave your hands in the air and get them caught on a passing branch. Just ask ol’ Golloc over there,” she said. Her pointing was not subtle, and a man waved back at me with half an arm and a wry grin on his face. After that, I was more than happy to have the rope around my wrists.

Serisi growled as my bird tested its wings. The vibration shook my bones and put a rattle in my armour. One by one, the riders put on our helmets, and I tried my best to ignore the smell of burned sap and musty feathers. One misplaced quill insisted on poking me sharply in the ear.

I suppose I should be grateful I do not have to witness the hideousness of what you are forcing me into.

It was – much to our dismay – infinitely more terrifying not knowing when the gut-wrenching loops and drops of our flight were coming. Our first rise into the air was as sedate and peaceful as the climb of a skyriser. In the next moment, a blink after Caraq’s shout, I felt as if I was shot from a bow. Even with the ropes, both Serisi and I clung white-knuckled to the saddle’s handle. I was upside down one moment, blasting vertically into the sky the next, and then seeking the earth in mad, sickening dives all in the space of one terrified breath. I felt like I was a flea on

the lancewing's back, and it was trying to shake me loose. When I finally stopped yelling, I could hear Serisi's screeching between my ears. Ralish was either strangely silent or drowned by the storm of wings around us and whiplashed foliage.

It could have lasted a minute. It could have been an hour. All I knew was that I was yelling my head off when the bird finally came to a halt and fell still, and that I was glad to have straps around my wrists and legs. The dizziness would have knocked me from the saddle otherwise.

As the clamour of wings died, shouts arose from all around me. I heard the roar of rushing water. I could feel a faint spray on my face, so fine it didn't sting me much. The air was damp and cold. A fine change against my hot skin.

"Ralish?" I called out. "You alive?"

"Why do I want to do that again?" I heard her gasp between breaths. I could almost hear the grin behind her mask. "I can finally see why the lancers always acted so smug all the bloody time."

"Walking is going to feel far too boring from now on," I said.

You can both shut your mouths. I never wish to do that again. Ever, Serisi seethed, her voice hoarse and small as if she was on the cusp of vomiting. *Where are we, and why do these feathered urchins insist on keeping us bound?*

Caraq boomed the answer to us as our helmets were removed and our hands thankfully untied.

"Welcome, Scions, to the town of Lostriver, forgotten by the Swathe that shunned it!"

The light singed my eyes as I tried to take in my surroundings. I had expected trees, but all I saw was stone. We were not in any tree. We were not even in the loam anymore. We had delved deeper than loam.

"We're underground," I wheezed, my chest abruptly tight. I saw Ralish shiver as I did. For a tree-dweller, I was used to living a mile up. I still struggled with the idea of flat towns, never mind delving beneath the soil and rock. It was hideous.

Calm yourself. We seem to be in a canyon, nothing more. Have you never seen a canyon before?

"I was born in a mile-high tree, what do you think?"

Serisi was irritatingly right. Opposing walls of ashen rock rose up either side of us, leaving a gap big enough for decks and walkways, but perhaps only a spear's throw wide. I followed the sheerness of the walls upwards to a strip of green canopy. Logs and fallen trunks of lesser trees crisscrossed the narrow sky. Faces and glyphs had been carved into their deadwood. Rope ladders and skyrisers and strings of pennants swung in the cold breeze between them.

In hollows, nooks, and sconces, lancewings had made their nests. The noise of them chattering was almost as raucous as the rush of water. I staggered to the nearest railing and found a river churning below us, one of white water and foam. Skinny white roots from trees above snaked down to drink at the churn that never stayed still. Moss grew on every available surface. It bothered me deeply to see huts clinging to the cliff walls and people with poles trailing ropes in

the river. Pink fish came wriggling from the furious waters, trapped on hooks. Beyond the walkways, a mist clung to the canyon walls.

Other than the huts, only a handful of longhouses and buildings balanced on the fallen branches. Lostriver did not look like much of a village, never mind a town, and was not nearly large enough to offer a bed to all the riders around us.

Wind battered me as the lancewings rose up one by one and hurled themselves along the canyon at frightening speed. Where the river faded into the mist and a rumble emanated, they disappeared as if they were swallowed by the waters.

“Worry not,” Caraq chuckled as she noticed my bewildered face. “There’s more to Lostriver than just what you see here. Come.”

“I hope it reaches higher rather than deeper,” Ralish told me quietly, breathing hard as we began to walk. “I feel like I’m back in the louse-mines, only I can’t simply walk out to get some fresher air.”

I knew how she felt. My lungs felt heavy and my skin itched. What bothered me most, however, was the lingering stares of the score of riders that had stayed behind to accompany Caraq and keep a watch on us. The pinched face of Ogarosh studied my every move.

You have never been underground, Tarko?

“No.”

Strange, for a worm, she snorted.

“I’ve never seen such a place,” Atalawe whispered as we walked. She was fascinated with every chisel mark and bent nail. She may have fought like a warrior and made herbs perform their secretive magic, but she was a scholar first and foremost. “How long has this been here? Wherever here is.”

Caraq waved her spear from the narrow sky to the river, proud of her domain. “A hundred seasons, maybe more, before it was abandoned. I came here when I was a child forty seasons ago, when my family was first exiled from Shal Gara.”

“Exiled?”

“Just like you, Eztaral,” said Caraq with a grin and two sharp thuds of her spear on the wood.

Spray washed us as we travelled a walkway that hugged the canyon wall. I was so morbidly enraptured I barely listened to what the rider had to say. I hardly felt the pain of the water’s touch. The longer I stared at the thrashing rapids, the more I could feel the demon squirm with dislike.

“My mother the scholar was a thief, you see, and Matriarch Danaxt had the whole side of our family punished with exile,” Caraq was saying. “My third-born carpenter father Noluk came here after following an old rumour and an even older map and found this place rotten to the bones. He rebuilt Lostriver, found kindred spirits to help grow it like any bloodwood, and even bred the first lancewings. And here we are. He always said Noluk ended up with a lot of luck, and I am proud to be his first-born.”

Our tour had come to a thick bridge that crossed the canyon, and there, the roar of water became deafening. I could barely hear my own demon never mind the voices of the others. Caraq

beckoned us to the railing. I could feel Serisi straining to go any direction but forwards, but she was in no control of me now, and my curiosity was a force I had never managed to deny.

The deck was slick with water and moss. Rusty nails sat slightly proud to give our boots purchase. Beyond the soaked railing, the wall of mist that refused to fade. It rose like steam, but it was cold to the touch.

Caraq noticed my lofty gaze and pointed a finger below, where the river simply... *ended*. The tumultuous rapids came to a cliff and tumbled down into depths I couldn't figure. My eyes could not keep up with the turquoise and blossom-white flow. It looked as though some god had trapped a Stormbeaten wave in perpetuity and cursed it to fall forever.

I had heard of waterfalls. Shal Gara's canopy had given birth to several whenever it rained. The word had not impressed me before, but I realised in that moment it all depended on how much water and how large a fall. A rainstorm powered over that precipice with every heartbeat.

A pair of lancewings exploded from the mist, rising up between the fallen trees to the strip of sky. It was there I saw our wagon being lowered into the canyon, along with one extremely bewildered orokan. Both were suspended from ropes clutched by six lancewings and a handful of large piebald crows.

With the wagon and Grumpus swinging back and forth expertly between the bridges and walkways, they descended past the walkway and were swallowed by the mist. Poor Grumpus' eyes were wide and his fur wild. He looked like a wet rag folded over a railing, claws dangling limply and yowling with every creak of rope.

"Ha! Never thought I'd see an orokan fly!" Atalawe cried. "Grumpus is going to be far from happy about that."

Caraq raised her spear to them in salute, and as the dozen lancewings came together, the draught of their wings pushed the mist-cloud aside. For the first time, we saw Lostriver in all its glory.

It was far from a collection of shacks and huts wedged in a canyon. An entire town larger than Mulchport spread out before us, lining the deep blue pool of the waterfall's cascade and the river that stretched on into the canyon, flowing calmly. Fronded narin trees grew along shallow banks of jumbled, fallen rock. Their fallen leaves spun in the water, clinging to those who washed clothes or bathed or to the waterbirds swimming together in tight, jabbering flocks. Stacks of walkways and buildings spanned the bubbling water. Lancewing nests were built right alongside the houses, Sometimes under the same roof. The black eyes of two-score caves watched us from the cliff walls, filled with lancewing beaks and bright umbrellas to keep the spray at bay. I saw people milling along the paths and decks, wearing vivid colours and patterns that belonged to no bloodwood that I knew of. It was as if several barrels of paint had come crashing over the falls at some point and spattered the whole of Lostriver.

If I hadn't known better, I would have said the blindfold had taken me to another world. A doorway into a place without war. Without falling bloodwoods, betrayal, and dead brothers.

“Look upon what few in the Swathe will ever glimpse, my friends. A place of freedom. No matriarch, no sages, no Bloodlaws,” boasted Caraq. “A place of secrecy and safety amongst the control of the bloodwoods and danger of the loam.”

“Who are all these people?” I asked, enraptured.

Caraq turned to me, showing off a missing tooth with a wide grin. “They are like you and I, Tarkosi,” she announced with pride. “We are all exiles here.”