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PRIDE OF THE BLOODWOOD

Don't believe the lies! Demons? What nonsense is this? It is mere excuse, I say! An excuse to cover up the massacre of Sheertown and the loss of our sons and daughters. Where is the proof of demons, I ask you? Struggling to find any? There is none, that's why! Even the deserters have been jailed for their lies. I saw them marched to the Burrows with my own eyes! Demons? You cannot and will not drape the mosscloth over my eyes!
FROM A SPEECH MADE BY A KNOWN OUTSPOKEN HEIR TO THE POLT FAMILY, ONE OF THE CASUALTIES OF THE FIRST DEMON ATTACK

Eztaral was a woman of her word. The clay vat of ticabo wine came rolling into the alehouse with a rumble so loud I thought the battle had started again.

The most demons had rightly fallen to Pel and his arrows, and though I most certainly contemplated drinking the whole thing myself, I announced that it would be shared. I had meant the Scions and my family gathered around the table, but the packed alehouse got the impression I meant everyone else, too. Warriors thumped the tabletops so hard bark cups flew into the air. Ale rained. Cheers put a ringing in my ear. I was barely able to raise my cup for all the hands shaking me.

Another half dozen hands gripped or patted my shoulder as the crowds shifted behind me. I looked up to more grins and avid nods. I raised my cup to each of them, too afraid to miss a single one in case this spell of celebration was somehow smothered.

Not all in the alehouse were second-born, but citizens of every tribe. The battle had demanded all of Shal Gara, from workers to healers. The glory was a cup all could drink from. And, even if you had spent the entire battle pissing yourself in a hollow somewhere, then there was always the relief of being alive. That was always worth cheering. It was a shame it had taken a demon horde to remind Shal Gara of that.

'To Elevate Terelta!' Pel yelled once more, and the whole tavern shouted my name. It was a feeling I wanted to get used to.

Wine slopped on my arm as Eztaral dipped our cups in the vat. 'Drink up before it's all gone. This crowd's drinking like it hasn't seen a drop of liquid in a whole season. And rightly so, I say. This is a fifty season vintage I will have you know, and that's the kind of vintage that you have to use all of the matriarch's blessing to get.' Eztaral beamed broadly. I almost dropped my wine when I realised that was the first time I had seen her smile.

‘Smell that?’ Pel asked of me. He was holding his cup beneath his nose. Something sharp had cut a line across his face.

‘Oh, here we go,’ Atalawe chuckled.

Pel looked shocked. There was a deeper shade of purple to his cobalt lips tonight. ‘What?’

‘We don’t all have your blind man’s nose, Pel. You can scent better than a barkwolf. Isn’t fair.’

With a wave of his hand, the beggar raised his cup to mine. ‘Try, Tarko.’

The air in my nose smelled of nothing but sweat, char, and the tang of spilled and forgotten ale. I took a deep breath. The sharp needle of spirits stung me first, then ticabo, and then right back to sweat again.

‘Nothing but berries, to tell the truth, Pel.’

Atalawe laughed. ‘See?’

Pel took a breath so deep I thought he was going to snort the wine. ‘I can smell the rain on the vines, the earth of the clay, and—’

‘And a ripe pile of shit,’ mother said with a smirk. ‘You have this wonderful trick, yet how come you never smelled how few baths you took all these seasons, then?’

Atalawe banged her fist on the table. ‘Ha!’

My sister had been staring over the brim of her cup at each of us as we spoke. Tesq had always been a watcher, not a talker. Either the battle or the wine had loosened her tongue. ‘Did you know we would survive today?’

‘Without question,’ replied Eztaral with a harsh snort. She kicked out a spare stool and thumped her boots onto it.

‘I thought we were all doomed,’ Redeye grumbled, before getting whacked by Atalawe.

‘Tarko?’ mother asked me. ‘Where you scared?’

Conscious we had an audience of eager ears beyond our table, I contemplated lying for more than one moment. I faltered when I remembered I was little good at it. ‘When I first saw them emerge from the wildfire, I thought we were done for.’

The low of hum of a collective murmur told me I hadn’t been alone.

‘But what choice did we have?’ I said, spurred on. ‘I’ve been given a gift. To curl up and cower would have got more than myself killed.’

Eztaral raised her voice. ‘Only a fool says she isn’t afraid of battle. I’ve seen plenty more than I should have and my hands still shake around my sword before I fight. And none of those battles had been against demonkind. A battle is a fight against fear just as much as iron and fire. Fear is what kills you and today we proved we are no longer afraid.’

A thumping of cups and feet sounded as Atalawe raised her cup to the raftered ceiling. ‘To Eagleborn Kraid!’

The cheer was more deafening than the last. A drizzle of wine splashed on the table as cups met in midair. I had to laugh at the abandon of it all.

Redeye was sourer than a lemon this evening. His scarlet eyes once more kept sneaking to me. ‘We proved we can muddle through, is all.’

‘Are you forgetting what we just did, brother?’ Atalawe hushed the sorcerer.

‘I can’t remember anything apart from the sounds and the snarling faces. It was all one horrible blur.’

Pel was still nose-deep in his cup. ‘Vivid as vinelight during the fight but a muddle of fog afterwards. It’s often the way, almost as if your mind doesn’t want the memories.’

Mother nodded. 'That's what Teyak used to say.'

Like leaves pattered by rain, the Scions nodded. Only I kept my eyes off the table and touring the crowd.

The alehouse was no ordinary alehouse. It had a name. Not only did it sit awkwardly in a crook of two upper branches, but at some point in its past, scaffolding had been built around it and never taken down, giving it the look of a nest. The scaffolding had only grown with the building over the seasons, sprouting new sections and wrapping further around the branches. As such, the alehouse had earned the moniker the Raven's Thievery.

From the many peeks I had taken through the doorway, it was the sort of place that drew more nobles than common citizens. On any other night but tonight, I'd heard it wasn't uncommon to see the highest ranks tasting the finer brews and ferments of Shal Gara. Noble heirs of the oldest families. Painted and braided sorcers. Eagle and ravenborn. Even a sage, once or twice a season.

I knew this well, and yet my insides still came taut like a noose around a neck when I saw Sage Kol Baran standing near to the Thievery's doorway. It was an old reaction, engrained as deeply as the core of the bloodwood.

Two of his own private warders flanked Baran's back. Masks of rusted stone, expressionless and blank, covered their faces. Haidak stood beside his father, but about as close as you might hold a bowl of rotten food. His mouth was working away but the words couldn't reach me over the clamour of the alehouse. I'd heard of godseers who could read lips from afar, but all I managed to discern was utter nonsense. And all the while, Sage Baran did not once look at his son. Only at me.

Mother had followed my gaze. 'It's been a long time since I saw that man's face,' she hissed.

Tesq swallowed her drink whole and held her cup out for more. 'What is he doing here?'

Pel doled out the wine, mostly for himself. 'I would say he's doing the same thing we are, celebrating a victory. Though I wager he saw most of the battle through his mansion's windows.'

'If he's celebrating, somebody should tell his face about it,' I said.

'Congratulating his son and our new friend Haidak perhaps.'

'Doesn't look it to me,' I muttered. It was then I found my father's name waiting on my lips. To the scrape of my stool and the inconvenience of several others behind me, I got to standing. Cheers were already mounting at the mere fact I was upright. Without hesitating, I raised my cup and my voice as one, and stared right at Kol Baran.

'To Teyak Terelta! Who saw this day coming many seasons ago!' I announced.

I doubted whether the warriors knew or cared what I was shouting for as long as it wasn't, 'to demonkind!' If any knew of my father or his legacy, they cheered all the same. The roar was the loudest yet, as if they competed with each raise of their cups.

Mother skewered me with her eyes. Her expression ran through a field of different emotions before she smiled softly. She drank, but said nothing. It must have been difficult for her to dismantle so many seasons of reinforced blame and resentment. Tesq looked less unwilling, more convinced, yet no cheer came from her.

'I don't know how long its been since his name was cheered like that,' Pel said softly, still with cup half-raised.

'I don't care,' I replied. 'It's time Baran learned he was wrong, just like Haidak has.'

'The lad helps win one battle and he's got the balls of a tharantos!' Atalawe laughed. 'That's more like it. A bloodwood's height away from the worker that complained all the way to Sheertown.'

The compliment passed me by like a drifting leaf. Like my mother and Tesq, I was too busy watching Kol Baran pull his feathered collar high and march from the Thievery. My smile was nothing short of triumphant.

‘One battle,’ said Redeye, barely audible.

‘What?’

Redeye shook his head. ‘One battle,’ he repeated.

Eztaral was not impressed. ‘What’s the matter with you, sorcer? There’s more doom and gloom in you than usual.’

Redeye struggled upright. He was short at his best, but hunching over the table on his splintered crutch made him look like a shadow at our table. ‘This,’ he said with a broad gesture to everyone around. ‘All of this isn’t right. We win one battle and we crack vats like we’ve driven a spear through every demon.’

Pel tried to intervene but the sorcer would not be silenced. ‘Keep your voice down, Redeye. This is no time for your complaints.’

‘We should be keeping watch, getting ready for the battle we know is coming. They left us be today, Eztaral. We didn’t drive them back, they choose to fall behind. Why by the bleeding trees you’re letting this happen while the enemy is right out there is beyond me!’

Eztaral stabbed her finger into the table as if it were a dagger. ‘And that is precisely *why* we celebrate, Redeye. Most of these people expected to die today, and the fact they didn’t is worth celebrating, not diminishing with doubts. Why cower them now, and send them back to the battlements thinking they barely scraped through – that they were lucky – when we can put victory in their very hands? How do we fight fear with more fear? If there’s some secret you’ve been keeping back all these seasons, and staying one step from a coward keeps you alive, then please do divulge. If not, then allow me to firmly remind you exactly it is that sits at the top of our order.’

Redeye’s splayed hands clenched one of his nectra vials, but only for a heartbeat. Redeye tucked his face under the brim of his hat and barged through the raucous crowds.

Atalawe rolled her eyes and wearily got to her feet. ‘Brothers, right?’ she said with a nudge to Tesq’s arm. Ordering Inwar to stay beside the table with a ruffle of the jāgu’s ears, Atalawe followed Redeye out of the Thievery.

I found myself on my feet again.

‘Leave him, Tarko,’ Pel warned me.

‘I’m not going after him,’ I said. ‘I have other... business.’

‘Again?’ Mother tutted at me.

‘Yes, *again*,’ I said, shoving my chair under the table. Since spending the whole battle with a bladder fit to bursting, I had spent a painful half an hour in a privy vacating it. It had gotten to the point that I wasn’t sure if I would ever stop pissing. Even hours later, my bladder seemed ever changed, as if it would take every chance it got to be emptied. I had visited the privy three times since.

Those who had already drunk themselves into a stupor lined the walls of the privy. Curtains divided up the latrines. Some fluttered madly with sounds of a different kind of celebration. I found a trough that wasn’t too filthy, and while I emptied my urgent bladder, I stared at a shadow of myself in the polished stone plate. The stone’s reflection was warped, with a crack running through one side. It gave my sorcer’s mark and new brands a strange lean. The wine had worked its warm magic on my stomach, and already my reflection moved more than it should have. Puffing hair out of the way, I met my own eyes as I spoke.

‘Serisi.’

The demon had not spoken to me since the battle. The defeat had silenced her.

‘Serisi.’

Nothing. Not a mutter sounded even at the very depths of my mind.

‘Come on now,’ I said to myself in the mirror. Privacy was the only divider that kept me from looking mad. ‘Are you sulking because we proved you wrong?’

As I moved my head, and let the warmth ripple across my face, I saw my mouth hooked and studded with fangs. A forest flamed behind me. I recoiled, spraying my hands, and cursed the demon in a growl.

A clay bowl of water sat beside the mirror. A spout trickled water into it, and I reached my red-dyed hands towards it.

The pain seared up my right arm. In the gloom of the privy, I saw blue light moving in my dark veins. I shoved my sleeve up my arm, wincing at the burning pain that ran through my bicep. The darkness had spread further into my flesh, now reaching past my elbow to my bicep. Threads beneath my skin that had once been blue were a grey, turning black. The envoy had been right: it was spreading, but to what end was a mystery.

I hurriedly unrolled my sleeve and hid my arm away. One last splash of the water confirmed the pain had not been a trick of my tired muscles. My scars seethed.

In the journey back to the table, I was thoroughly thumped and patted by anyone and everyone. Even workers I swore I knew from past callings such as the weavers and smiths. Their encouragement hit me like slingstones.

‘You did us proud.’

‘With you in our side, ain’t no demon touching Shal Gara.’

‘Gods ’gift, I say!’

‘Drink this ūlana grog with us!’

‘How do you it?’ one sorcer asked me, seizing my right arm. I flinched away instinctively. ‘How do you cast with no nectra?’

‘Just a gift I suppose,’ I muttered.

‘Can you teach it? Come on, you can teach it to me.’

‘No, I can’t,’ I replied brusquely as I escaped to the table. Eztaral stared at the onlookers until they melded back into the crowd.

‘Better get used to that, Tarko,’ said Tesq.

I accepted another cup of wine and decided to drain it. When I came up for breath, I laid the cup in front of Pel.

‘You made a promise,’ said I.

The shock in his expression was almost comical.

‘You promised me a story. Why it is that Pelikai Grum was disgraced from the sorcers?’ I asked. Eztaral was the only one who reacted, chuckling quietly into her drink and shaking her head.

‘I did... didn’t I?’ Blind Pel murmured. Blue teeth pulled at purple lips. His blind eyes looked around. No doubt nectra flowed through them. Pel was never without his urka.

‘Alright then. So you shall have my story.’

My mother got comfortable, elbows on tabletop. 'I've never did hear this story.'

Pel swilled his wine. 'You've heard of the Scorch Wars however, just like we all have. A hundred battles and skirmishes they say we fought over those seasons, and many times that of marauder dead. They kept coming, we kept cutting them down with magic and obsidian. You remember, Eztaral.'

Eztaral nodded. 'Far too well. Poor bastards driven on by mad warlords. The lancewings squadrons speared them as if they were target practice.'

'They got what they deserved, some say, others would tell you it was glorious battle, and in some ways we all thought it was. But as in all battles, atrocities worse than the simple matter of driving an arrow or blade into another were wrought. The stories have been forgotten much like the stories of demons, but much of Firstwatch was rebuilt by enslaved marauders and Scorchfolk. Villagers that had no place in the war, nor had raised a hand except to defend themselves when we struck back. We forced them to work and called it penance. It was one of Shal Gara's darker moments. And so it was I met Felixal.'

Pel finished his wine. Eztaral had another waiting. The conspiratorial feel to the table grew as we bent closer. Pel was a loam-fisher of a storyteller, and we were fruit on his hook and line.

'She was the mother of two children lost to the war. Slain by wranglers and barkwolves, but that's another story that Atalawe is more fit to tell than I. Felixal was a fierce soul, quiet and hateful to all that wore Shal Gara colours. Rebellious. One morning, halfway up a leafroad amidst planks and nails, she stopped working. The foremen kept whipping at her, but she took every strike without a blink. Sixteen lashes had ripped her back to shreds before I managed to stop them. She broke one's arm in the process. I told them she had been punished enough, but the headmen and a certain Painted One Dūnekar saw fit to throw her in a burrow. Felixal was trouble. She did not fit their idea of order, you see,' Pel said with a sigh.

The ache in my jaw caught me off-guard. I hadn't realised I had been gritting my teeth so hard.

'A week went by before I got the chance to reach her burrow cell. I went to apologise, to tell the truth. It was for my own guilt over what we did in the Scorch, I know that now. She was the face and voice of all the dead I'd sent to the Hells in the wars, and one I could beg forgiveness from. I'll never forget how stupid I sounded. Felixal thanked me by spitting on my armour, but to my foolishness I went back other times. Night by night, she, well... I wouldn't say she warmed to me, but perhaps didn't hate me as much as the others. I would tell stories. She would mock me, telling me of the wonders of the Scorch, and all the ways it was better than the strangle of the forest. I brought her food, though it was never cooked enough for her. We spoke of her children, and she was not alone in shedding a tear. Guilt is a rope around your waist pulling you along its path. As powerful and sturdy a rope as love, rage, or revenge, so when she asked me to free her, I did not deny her. It took another week to plan it. I would clear the path, and she would escape from the Loamsedge into the Scorch. Another week to wait for a day of fog,' said Pel, hesitating. He stared at nothing but the table beneath his hands.

'It wasn't until after her cell bars had swung open that I knew my mistake. Felixal had spent her incarceration scraping sawdust from the inside of her cell. Her nails had been driven almost bloody to do so, but it was with that handful of dust she escaped me. She threw it in my eyes, kicked my legs from under me once I was blinded, and sprinted away. But instead of heading for the Scorch, Felixal made straight for Dūnekar. The stake of wood she'd fashioned almost took his life that night.

I heard from the warders after that she had pounced from a branch, and stabbed him twice in the back before the blades and spells caught her. Because of me, Felixal died right there in Firstwatch. And for my crimes of letting a prisoner escape, endangering my fellow sorcers and almost getting Dūnekar killed, I was cast from the tribe and banned from the sorcer tribe. Dūnekar and I still both wear the scars from that day. His healed, but the dust that Felixal had filled my eyes left their mark. The blindness struck me a season after, almost to the day. If I had only left her in the burrow, we might all be alive. Everything would be different. That is why I do not deserve to wield nectra any longer. It has been so many seasons I don't know if I can.'

'And chasing the possibilities of the past is a leafroad to nowhere but insanity, old friend,' said Eztaral. 'Trust me.'

With a slap of his hands on the table. Pel switched his moods as if pulling back a hood. He grinned blue teeth. 'I know that better than most.'

'Three Gods,' I said. 'I'm sorry I made you tell that story.'

'A bet's a bet, young Terelta!' Pel proclaimed. 'Besides, it would not have stopped the demons from arriving. All roads lead to inevitability. It was Teyak who convinced Dūnekar not to have me hanged, and that's why I owe him my life.'

Eztaral cleared her throat. 'Teyak saved me also. He kept me sane in the ranks day after day, not to mention stabbed a brute of a marauder just as he was about to finish me off. I was nothing but a wilder at the start of that war.'

'Enough of this mire speech, I say,' announced my mother. 'Eztaral is right.'

Surprise broke Eztaral's practised metal exterior. 'I am? Don't think I've ever heard you say such a thing.'

Mother nodded. 'You likely haven't. Maybe the wine has loosened my tongue.'

Tesq tried to thump her hand on the table and missed. 'Precisely,' she said. I had to smile at my sister.

'Though maybe not too much more for you, daughter,' said mother, and Tesq puckered her face.

Mother looked about, catching the eyes of fellow warders and warriors. With her fist, she began to strike the table. 'I know you remember the songs, Pel. And you, Eztaral. I heard you and my husband singing them many a time.' She cleared her throat and unabashed, uttered words I had only ever heard belting from the barracks of second-born.

To me, singing was the quickest route to the familiar and much avoided town of embarrassment. The only way I would ever sing was in the company of others who were louder and ever more tone deaf than I am. Even when the song was taken up by the crowds, I faked it, mouthing words I half know. Mother was like I had never seen her, singing at the top of her lungs. It was the second-born in her showing its colours, and it was a fine thing to see. Pel closed his eyes as he spoke the lyrics as poem. Eztaral banged her cup and joined the roar.

The crowd swayed back and forth to the flow, and I smiled as I saw others acting the words, grabbing each other to sing as loud as possible into each others' faces.

Not all joined the deafening chorus, however. As the warriors shifted like the trees in a gale, others could be spied. Their mouths were shut, their eyes keen and their sips measured. They looked no different. They wore no lizard masks and brandished no copper knife, just warriors and workers

and plain others, but for whatever reason, the frivolity didn't touch them. Many, I realised, were staring at me.

The attention was a kind I didn't enjoy, and I found my stare longing for the door. It was then that I saw Ralish beyond the Thievery. The glimpse was so brief I wasn't sure if it was here, but I jolted from the table.

'Everything all right, Tarko?' Mother asked of me instantly, yelling over the crowd.

'I thought I saw an old friend. Might get some fresher air,' I said, though such a thing was hard to come by with the constant smoke lacing the air.

'None of us should be alone,' warned Mother.

'Your mother is right,' Eztaral said.

Pel began to rise. 'I'll go.'

'No, old man. You and I need to talk about your magic,' ordered Eztaral. 'Inwar will go with you.'

'He... what?' I objected. 'I can't control this thing.'

But Inwar was already trotting for the door as if the jāgu knew better. The fearsome beast cleared quite the path even in that packed alehouse.

Eztaral chuckled. 'Don't worry, he'll control you.'

It most definitely seemed that way. With pats raining on my shoulders. I followed the beast from the door and found him sat on his haunches, tail swishing as if I was slowing him down. He yowled at me between his crisscross fangs, but as I peered through the crowds for Ralish, he followed sure enough.

The song had spread to those who couldn't squeeze into the Thievery. The circular platform around the branch and trunk was full of stamping feet. Two lancers were duelling with their swords in a thick circle of onlookers, accompanied by cheers and laughter. Amongst that crowd, I found Ralish with crossed arms and a half-smile fixed on her face in admiration of the show. Her workers' clothes were burned black all along one side. Not severely enough to wound, though, and I got the feeling Ralish wore the char with some pride. As I pulled at the folds of my Scion's leafleather – and quietly thanked the gods I wasn't wearing the armour she had mocked – I made my way towards her.

I was barely feet away when a gap-toothed third-born barged in front of me. His eyes searched my face as if it was covered in glyphs.

'It's you, ain't it?' he said, extending his hands to grab mine. 'The lad they're saying won the battle for us.'

I tried to avoid him but the chap was persistent. 'I helped, is all.'

'Nonsense, my brother's a mudmage of twenty seasons and he said he can't cast half as well as you. He saw the whole thing, and—bleeding trees!' he yelled upon seeing Inwar stalk up to my side. His shout drew looks from all around, including the attention of Ralish. I stood taller for some reason.

'That bloody thing ain't right for a pet. Should have a muzzle on like the barkwolves do,' he said.

'You'd lose your hand before you got anywhere near him,' I said loudly, echoing what I remember of Atalawe's warning on the Emerald Causeway, the day this had all started. I inwardly tensed as I reached to pat the jāgu between his tufted ears. Sat on his backside, Inwar almost reached

my shoulders. I saw the ripple run through the ridge of hair along his spine, but otherwise he tolerated my touch.

The man bobbed his head in thanks and quickly rethought his urge to speak to me. Others gave us a wide berth, but still the thanks came in raised fists or nods. Either news travelled swiftly, or I had made quite the impression.

Ralish was staring at me. The smile had flattened. The fact a jāgu sat beside me licking at its sickle claws didn't seem to draw a single blink from her.

'If it isn't Tarkosi Terelta,' Ralish said, her tone the painfully fake kind of cheery. 'I'm surprised you could find a little time away from celebrating and toasting your own success to come idly wander the branches with us worker folk. Too busy making a real difference, I suppose.'

'I wanted to apologise about that,' I blurted.

'You did, did you?' Ralish said, moving away from the fight and through the crowds to look at the fortifications burning with vinelight and fireworm and torches. Ash mottled her hair. 'And what exactly would you be apologising for?'

'For not explaining myself better,' I began, hoping that was the right reason. 'I didn't mean what I said outside the nests when I saw you last. I couldn't tell you for risk of sounding utterly mad, but now you see what I was involved in.'

Ralish chewed at her lip in brooding suspicion. 'Demons and magic, or so it seems. They've made you a sorcer, I see.'

I looked at my hands, once more forgetting their new hue. 'That they have. Sage Dūnekar made me an elevate an hour before battle.'

Ralish didn't comment. She instead turned her face to the glow of the ever-present inferno at our backs. She left the talking to me, and I stammered for something to say. Serisi might have been ignoring me, but I could still feel her glaring from within with the judgement of silence.

'I... erm,' I began, a wonderfully strong start.

'Nobody's worrying about lice now,' said Ralish. 'I can tell you that. Soon as Shal Gara started to move, they bolted. Now I'm part of the fire crews. No different really: its tough work that nobody pays attention to despite us saving their arses.'

I winced.

'I hear I should be thanking you, judging by the gossip running up and down the city. They're calling you some kind of saviour.'

My smile pounced before I could drag it back. 'What have you heard?'

Her laugh was harsh. 'If you think for a moment I'm massaging your ego, or thanking you for anything, Tarko, you're more of an idiot loamer than I thought you were.'

I swore Inwar laughed at me. He certainly snuffled and panted in a way that sounded like laughter. Wrinkling my nose, I followed Ralish's gaze to the fires, and hoped silence would be better at speaking than I was. While I waited for a good idea, I heard a cheer erupt from the Thievery.

'Tarko!'

Mother came bustling through the throngs with my sister in tow. She pretended as if Ralish wasn't there. 'Take your sister home. She may have inherited your father's penchant for drink but not his resilience for it.'

Tesq grinned at me lopsided as she had forgotten I had existed for a moment. If I wasn't mistaken, there was a small fleck of vomit on her chin. I winced.

'And who is this?' Mother asked of Ralish by my side at last.

‘Overseer Ralish Lahni,’ she bowed her head low. ‘I believe you knew my father.’

‘I believe I did. Malam Lahni. A fine warrior in his time, gods keep him. And how did you two meet?’

Ralish smiled broadly. ‘Tarko spent a day in the louse mines before... whatever happened to him.’

Mother’s gaze switched between us while my sister hiccuped loudly. ‘Louse mines. I thought you were working the nests.’

‘Oh, he was fired,’ Ralish explained.

‘Will you look at the hour,’ I said. ‘Let’s get you back to the Den, Tesq.’

‘You be careful,’ Mother told me with a wry look. ‘There’s more than demons to worry about.’

‘Yes, Mother.’

My sister was quite content to let me do most of her walking for her. I turned to Ralish before I left. ‘I’m sorry again for what I said.’

Ralish did nothing but fix me with her sky-blue stare. With Tesq under one arm and Inwar by my side, I made my way downwards to the Den.

With the skyrisers being repaired, I was sentenced to a slow and meandering walk through busy workers, wandering revellers, and warriors in tired-looking ranks, waiting their turn at the ales and wines.

Tesq seemed happy enough to stumble about and hum off-key lines of the song. I kept my wits about me, and quietly battled with the wobble the wine had put in my own balance. The lights had a halo of thick smoke about them. Ash drifted on the parching breeze.

With the celebration in the high reaches, the Midern was muted. The battlements were full of murmuring ranks of waiting warriors, but the platforms and roads around the trunk were emptier.

‘I’m not jealous, you know.’ Tesq slurred in my ear as we passed through a darkened tunnel between two branches. ‘Life’s changed for us all.’

I chuckled at that. At least one person had forgiven me that night. ‘That it has, sister.’

One branch before the Den, we gained some company. Footfalls, both loud and catching up echoed against the buildings. I saw Inwar’s ears flatten to his skull.

The footsteps clattered over each other, proving there was more than one person behind me. I heard the faint rustle of whispers.

Fireborn. It must have been. I felt a prickling heat run across my brow. My heart faltered in its rush to beat faster. I knew Tesq still had her new sword at her hip; I swore the blasted thing was slowly wearing a hole in my coat.

It was only when another figure stepped out to block my path that I stopped. Inwar hunkered into a crouch and growled deeply. I turned around to see five more behind me. They wore mosscloth masks over their mouths, as many did against the smoke. No snarling jade. No copper lingered in their gloved hands. Instead, they carried long clubs, and several of them had the faint glow of nectra in their eyes.

‘I don’t suppose you’re here to ask me directions,’ I asked them. Eztaral’s words about fear echoed in my head, and I unclenched my fists to find the calm inside me. My sling was still at my belt. I had taken to keeping it loaded since the Night of the Copper Knives.

A ringleader emerged, a burly man with heavy breath and a waft of roast meat and wine about him. ‘You’re the one they call Tarkosi Terelta,’ he accused me.

'Depends what you want with him.'

'We're here to tell him he's a freak,' blurted another in a reedy voice. 'A perversion of nature that shouldn't be tolerated, let alone be part of the sorcer tribe.'

I shrugged. 'In that case, you have me mistaken for somebody else.'

The second man smacked his palm with his club. 'He's got a mouth on him, Forda,' he snarled.

They were sorcers, not Fireborn; my new tribe turned against me in fear and jealousy. That maddened me. 'I dare to help Shal Gara survive,' I snapped back. 'What nonsense is this that you want to fight me when the real enemy is out there? I'm one of you.'

My shaming only riled them. The hate came spewing.

'You're not one of us. You've no idea what it takes to be a sorcer.'

'How dare you wield magic like you're one of us. You're a freak! You ain't natural, I say.'

'That's right. We don't know what you're capable of.'

'For all we know, you've made a pact with those demons!' hissed the ringleader. 'That's where you've got your magic from.'

'Lowly mudmagic, too,' growled another.

Their idiocy was astounding.

'Don't suppose you're in any state to fight, are you, sister?' I whispered to Tesq.

Tesq's head rolled around her shoulders. 'You want a fight?' she slurred.

With slow and scraping steps, I edged to the railing and leaned Tesq against it.

'If you don't want to get hurt,' I told them in my finest impression of Eztaral, 'I suggest you walk away.'

Inwar reiterated my point with a snarl.

One of the idiots nudged the ringleader. 'You didn't say he'd have a beast with him.'

'He doesn't matter!' he growled. 'We'll teach him a lesson all the same.'

And with no more luxury of conversation, the sorcers approached.

Inwar almost put a stop to them right there and then in one swift move. He pounced on the ringleader and promptly ripped his cloak and back to shreds. The man's howls were piercing.

In the moment of distraction, I swung my sling at the nearest man's head. I fumbled the blow, the stone glancing off his haw, but I put him on the floor just the same. Inwar was fending off a frantic beating from the others with wild lashings from his claws. I hit them with as much magic as I could muster in an instant. With my outstretched hand, I clouded one sorcer with dust and ash before she could summon her magic, and swung for the next: the fellow with the reedy voice.

He was a crafty one, bending under my aim and whacking me in the ribs. The Scion's uniform and the demon's strength running through me halved the pain I should have felt. I moved not in thought but through Eztaral's training. I clasped the club under my elbow and thwacked the sling across the man's face. He fell away bleeding, but as I swung for him again, he clawed a hand. An abrupt wind battered me backwards.

I raised a dart spell against him but not a speck of dust reached the bastard. Instead, I rolled away in the direction of the wind blast. As I turned, I saw one of the sorcers poised over my sister with a club. Tesq was berating him for something, pushing her hands in his face and doing a surprisingly fine job of keeping him at bay. I ran at him in three great strides, and with protective

ferocity powering me, I jumped to drive both my feet into his chest. There came a cry of pain, a loud crack as the railing behind him snapped, and then an even louder, more harrowing scream as he hurtled downwards.

Tesq managed to help me up before almost tumbling into the smoky void herself.

‘Rude,’ she muttered, before trying to draw her sword.

Wind battered me from both sides once more, holding me in one place. I heard Inwar roar as another sorcer managed to draw blood from his side with a sandglass dagger. It did nothing to cow the jāgu. In fact, quite the opposite: it drove him into a murderous fit. The sorcer did her best to run before Inwar broke her neck between his sabre jaws.

With Tesq battling to stay upright, and my inability to put another foot forwards, I reached out with my hands. The ash was a blizzard around us, and as the air carvers kept their focus on me, I built my spells behind their backs. A simple column of ash and dust was all I could raise under such onslaught, and just before they ripped the air from around me, I clobbered them with as much force as I could.

As the sorcer to my left immediately crumpled to the wood, I was blasted to the side. The other had somehow fended off my spell. The miss enraged me. I assailed him with every flake of ash my magic could seize. Splinters of bark even tore from the trunk beside us. The sorcer’s spell became a ragged wall of detritus.

A cry was about to tear from my throat when the wall of air dissolved. The sorcer was there, cross-eyed and clutching at his head. It took him a moment or two to topple into a heap. Ralish stood behind him with a now broken and distorted fireworm lantern. The fluttering insects within scattered across the wood like cinders.

Ralish stared at me, one eye narrowed. ‘I see you’re still struggling to make friends wherever you go.’

Before I could reply, a limp weight fell against my shoulder. It was Tesq. She squinted at Ralish and then regarded me with a very serious but unavoidably glazed look. ‘Who’s this one?’

I couldn’t help but grin.

24

SHIFTED WINDS

Let them sing the praises of Kalabasqa's Brew. Let them toast with the sourness of vinewine. Let them swill what they please, for once Besh 'ōs fortified ticabo wine, matured for twenty seasons in the deepest of cave shadow, touches their tongue, there is no equal.

FROM A POSTER SMEARED ACROSS KALABASQA'S FERMENTING HOUSE

Ralish did not seem overly impressed with the Den, nor what I told her of the Scions. She stayed mostly silent, nodding occasionally, and otherwise studying everything.

I blamed the evening's end. Violence tends to put a dampener on most things.

Once we had subdued the groaning sorcers, it wasn't long before warders, warriors, and all manner of others came running. Far too late to be of any use but mainly gawping and asking me questions, but at least they kept the binds off me. They likely feared demons, but they were no less outraged to find traitors attacking one of their own. In a time of war, no less.

'On the eve of our first victory! How dare you?' one lancer yelled as he bound a sorcer's hand.

'It'll be the Burrows for the lot of you loamers, I bet!' he cried. 'Just you wait until the matriarch gets to see you kneeling before her.'

As somebody who had experienced that firsthand, it was exactly what they deserved. Although they had come away beaten and bloody, I was still bruised on the inside. I had expected to be hated by the demons, not my fellow citizens. Never mind sorcers.

Though it was said Eztaral and Pel were being fetched, I did not want to wait. By Inwar's pacing, he felt the same. Tesq was getting heavier. As I had made my exit, Ralish looped Tesq's other arm about her shoulder and walked with me without a word, even when I thanked her.

So it was that Ralish stood in the centre of the Den, staring in circles at its walls, and listening to the faint snore coming from Tesq's hollow. Between the dim glowing paint spread around the walls, and the lanterns that refused to wake up no matter how I shook them, the Den was dark. The falling ash had drawn a grey circle at the Den's centre. Inwar sat nearby in the shadows, licking the blood from his claws.

While I struggled to find anything resembling a beverage, Ralish drew patterns in it with her foot. ‘Out with it then, Tarkosi,’ she asked me so abruptly I banged my head on a wooden overhang. ‘I’ve heard the blabbing tongues like the rest of ’em. They say there’s a sorcer who doesn’t need nectra,’ Ralish said, after a short while. ‘I guess that would be you.’

I nodded.

‘How is that even possible?’

‘It happened during the Sheertown massacre,’ I said, showing her the scars on my right hand as if the answer was written in my palm. I made sure to keep the rest of the dark veins under my sleeve. ‘Something happened when I came face to face with a demon. All I remember was wanting to be anywhere else, and having no other choice but to take my chance drinking some stolen nectra.’

‘Stolen nectra? Didn’t have you pegged for a thief, Tarko. A layabout, maybe. Useless perhaps.’

‘You thought so little of me?’

Ralish smirked. ‘I did.’

‘Borrowed would be more accurate. Maybe it was some magic in me, maybe some magic of the demon’s, but whatever happened put nectra in my veins and kept me alive. I woke up under the rubble and escaped into the forest.’

There was a long pause before Ralish snorted. ‘And why’d the Three in all their almighty wisdom see fit to give you, a barely passable worker, such a gift?’

I tried to ignore the jibe. Counting Serisi as a gift was difficult yet undeniable. I shrugged. ‘I’ve been asking myself the same thing, but I’m not going to question it. There’s far too much danger around us to waste it.’

Ralish said nothing to that. At last, I found some of the matriarch’s finest wine in a crate and filled two cups. I handed her one and stood within the light of the open ceiling above us.

Ralish sniffed the wine deeply as Pel had done. ‘And so why would those sorcers attack you if you’re the oh so very noble saviour Shal Gara needs? You didn’t answer the lancer’s questions, but I’d sure like to know.’

‘In truth I don’t know. I’d say they were scared. Or jealous, though they had a funny way of showing it.’

‘You think a lot of yourself these days, don’t you?’ Ralish accused.

‘Not me. They were the ones who called me a freak of nature. A perversion. Dangerous.’

Ralish looked at me as if she was still trying to work that out for herself. A nearby bench took the weight of my tired legs. Ralish watched the ash streak across the canopy. Once every so often, a wildfire spark would drift through the grey flakes to chase the bloodwood. I confess, I watched her more than the red, false sky.

‘Dangerous. In the mines you could barely look at a louse, let alone wrangle it,’ she chuckled.

‘A lot changed quickly. Far too quickly for my liking. First being kidnapped, then surviving the war-party and Sheertown, then the Scions and the training, and now war. Perhaps I am dangerous,’ I replied, trying my hardest to keep the smile from my face. ‘But then again so are you, after what you did tonight.’

‘That loamer should have watched his back.’

‘And after what you told me in the mines.’

Ralish looked at me sideways. ‘Which was?’

‘That you killed a man.’

‘Ha,’ she snorted. ‘That.’

‘So it was a lie?’

‘How dare you, Tarko. It’s true enough. How many have you killed now though? Maybe a demon or two even?’

‘No, you don’t get away with it that easily,’ I smirked. ‘What happened? You never did tell me.’

Ralish waggled her wine in my face. ‘Because you never turned up for another day.’ She huffed before readjusting herself.

‘I would have,’ I admitted. ‘I thought I had found my calling. A headwoman who didn’t treat me like orokan shit, and an overseer that actually understood me. Maybe not agreed, but understood.’

‘Is that so?’ Ralish said between noisy sips. ‘I used to agree, I suppose. I was all angst and rebellion when I was the rank of a hand, too. I realised early that not everybody who had a higher rank deserved it. You could thank my first overseer for teaching me that, when I worked the highfield harvest. He was the kind who is given a pinch of power and thinks he’s a sage because of it. You probably met a few yourself. Some people just enjoy power, don’t they?’

I nodded, knowing the feeling all too well.

‘Some belittle and punish others not only because they can, but it’s the only way they can feel better about their own miserable lives. Others were treated like shit, and so they act the same when they get a rank. This overseer – Axabar Umish was his name – was a different type of scum. He got *enjoyment* out of the way he treated us hands. He carried a switch with him constantly, and every time he drew blood with it, I saw him licking his lips. Even the headwoman couldn’t curb his cruelty. She tried once and was replaced the very next day. Turned out Axabar was of a noble family that were all as atrocious as he was. Weeks go by, and each day he steps a little further from cruel to simply evil.’ Ralish lifted the sleeve of her burned tunic and showed me long welts across her upper arm, seasons healed.

‘The more he beat us, the angrier I got, until one morning a greenhand worker barely fourteen seasons got a beating so bad Axabar blinded him in one eye. When the boy was in such pain he couldn’t work, Axabar kept hitting him until his switch broke and he used his fists. We all just watched out of fear. Not one of us moved out of fear. Poor greenhand was never seen again in the highfields. Heard he was beaten so bad he never talked or saw right again. The week after, I heard

Axabar making a joke about the boy, and all my anger came to the boil. I'd had enough of Axabar, the highfields, even the whole bloodwood. I walked straight for Axabar and punched him square in the nose. I didn't stop there. I just kept hitting him until all too quickly we were at the edge of the highfields, and Axabar was crashing through the railings, screeching like a quillhog as he fell.'

'So it was an accident?'

'Six Hells, no,' Ralish scoffed. 'I knew what I was doing. When the other overseers and headmen came running, not a soul said a word of blame. An accident, they called it, and an accident it stayed. My fellow hands might have saved me from the Burrows or from hanging, but they still dismissed me to the gloomfarms as punishment. Such is the way of the Bloodlaws. And surprise: the overseers were no different in the gloom. Only when I worked up to the louse mines did I find a headwoman that didn't deserve strangling, and by then I'd made my peace with my place in the bloodwood. There's no fighting it. No changing it, or so I thought.'

Ralish met my eyes then.

'Then you came along. I thought you were all talk, but here you are. A worker who defied order to become a sorcer. A worker who stands side by side with sages and envoys. A worker who fights demons. You've changed it all.'

I made a face, feeling the need for modesty. 'It's all a mistake.'

'What?'

'It was an accident. Surviving Sheertown, the nectra, my magic? All the luck of the gods. The demons changed the Swathe, not me.'

'Funny. I thought I heard the bloodwood shouting your name.' Ralish smirked. 'Perhaps I should be thanking them, instead,' Ralish smirked.

'I thought you said you had no intention of thanking me.'

'And I don't.'

It was then that Ralish leaned forwards to bring her lips to mine. She must have heard my heart thudding against her own chest, but she did not pull back. My hand clutched at her raven hair before she broke away. Swilling the last of her wine, she got to standing and made for the doorway.

'Whatever's got into you, Tarko, don't let go of it,' Ralish said, flashing me an opal and altogether enticing look.

I watched her go with my teeth tapping together, feeling guilt mix with the thrill in my gut.

If only she knew the truth, came the faintest whisper in my head, and I snarled as I pushed myself up and towards my bed.

□

This nightmare did not strand me in a forest gripped in inferno. It did not drown me in fire as it had before. It began in a blizzard of ash.

The worn wood of Shal Gara's walkways were thick with it. Bare feet scuffed deep prints. My hands reached for railings and bark walls that constantly avoided my touch. Not a soul trod the darkness with me. Shal Gara was bare as picked bones. Shadows scuttled away from me on insect legs.

A dim light was all I followed. A lantern burning deep in the charcoal haze. It grew with every silent step I took.

When at last my feet found an edge to the deck, and a railing nudged me in my stomach, I looked down on a black and crippled forest. Every tree was a skeleton of its former self. The bloodwood beneath me snapped them to ash in its merciless march.

It was not a lantern that hung before me, but the glow of fire. It stormed from the south like an arm reaching a mighty blow. Inexorably, it came for Shal Gara. My home. Demons and navik charged unchecked, riding a rising wave of flame. Leading them with two swords raised to smite me was the demon king Faraganthar.

No matter how I tried to run, my feet betrayed me. No magic came from my hands. The heat scorched the skin and meat from my bones before the demon's jaws fell upon me.



My piteous yell was cut short to a muffle yelp by the wood hitting me in the face. With bleary eyes I slowly made out the floor I was pressed against.

I had fallen out of bed face first with my legs still trapped in mosscloth. Very elegant and impressive indeed, for one warriors and sorcers had been toasting all night.

The mere thought of wine simultaneously brought a dire thirst to my mouth and a pounding headache waltzing into my head. I groaned and cursed all things fermented.

Clothes were dragged from different directions, but before I could dress myself, I couldn't help but notice the dust spread across the floor. Fine ash dust, the same as was on my feet. The nightmare reared its head in the daylight for a brief moment, but it was easier to blame the constant ash spread across the Den than let the dream creep further into reality. They were already much more vivid than they had begun. But my flesh was still attached to my bones. There wasn't a burn or scratch other than what I'd earned in battle, or the fight with the sorcers. Just a few on my shoulder and neck that I didn't remember receiving in the blur that was the end of the night. By the pounding of my head, the wine was my only true injury.

The Den was quiet. A table stood off-centre. Pel perched on a stool and had his feet up on a sack. He was busy carving a clubfoot mushroom just like he had as a beggar outside my cottage. Tesq sat at the table by his side. She was smoking some of the stone pipe that I had seen Pel smoke on occasion after heavier nights on the urka seeds.

'Good morning, Tarkosi,' Pel said, bending an ear towards me. 'I assume that was you that fell out of your bed.'

‘Correct as usual,’ I said in a slight rasp.

‘And how was your evening, little brother?’ Tesq studied me over the coiled smoke of the pipe.

‘First time I’ve been that drunk, I can tell you that,’ I breathed, wincing at the light.

Pel pushed a clay bowl of water towards me, along with a few bearing dried fruits and seeds. Others with thick maize and rice porridges with sliced frog meat or roast vegetables. Compelled by a ravenous stomach, I practically dove for the latter.

‘And what of our visitor that you brought so willingly into the Scion’s Den?’

‘Her name is Ralish,’ I muttered. ‘An overseer from the louse mines.’

‘Fun night, was it?’ Tesq smirked at me.

I responded with a scowl and a flick of a seed across the table. I vowed you were never too old or too important to throw food and objects at a sibling. ‘Nothing like that. Ralish is a friend, I think. Maybe. I can’t figure it out. All I know is my fight with the sorcers might have soured my chances of anything more.’

Tesq almost dropped the pipe. ‘The sorcers. I thought I’d dreamed that.’

Pel tutted as he rescued his pipe from my sister. His voice was twice as deep with the smoke he inhaled. ‘Oh no, Tesq. Three dead sorcers would disagree with you, if they could.’

‘Three dead?’ I asked.

‘Nobody that didn’t need hurting,’ Pel reminded me.

Tesq turned paler. ‘Did I... kill anyone?’

‘You handled yourself pretty well for a person that could barely walk,’ I said.

Tesq couldn’t decide between a grin and a grimace.

‘News got soon back to the Raven’s Thievery, and Eztaral and I have been up since before firstglow seeing to the sorcers that attacked you. The Envoy Okarin didn’t wait for her mother’s order, she had the three survivors locked in the Burrows within several hours of the attack,’ Pel informed me. ‘But it goes to show we now have to fight stupidity as well as purposeful treachery. Don’t be surprised to find some extra warriors outside the Den keeping watch.’

‘I’m not going to lie, I had expected more of a scolding. I hadn’t much of a choice but to fight them, but I—’

‘You and Tesq are alive. You proved yourself well. Eztaral and I are the ones that are angry we let you go with only Inwar for protection.’

‘Where are the others? Is Mother here?’ I asked.

‘She’s sleeping. As is Atalawe. The ticabo vat was deeper than we expected.’

I had to smile. My mother deserved to sleep for more than the usual hour or two she was used to. ‘And what happened to Redeye?’ I said around a mouthful of porridge with a complete abandonment of manners.

Pel shrugged. ‘Hasn’t surfaced yet, but I’m sure he will. Atalawe didn’t speak much of it.’

‘Could he...’ I stopped myself. ‘I mean... How long have you known him?’

‘About twice as long as you’ve been alive, Tarko. Atalawe’s mother was a Scion who trained me in the art of the bow. The half part of the half-sibling has never mattered much to either of them. They’re too alike. So if you’re about to ask whether we should be worried about Redeye’s loyalty to the Scions, I would think very carefully before you go accusing people I’ve known since their birth.’

I had got my scolding at last. Pel smoked in silence.

The eating proceeded in silence until I felt compelled to tell the old man. My own nonsense or not, I couldn’t take the chance. ‘I had another one of those nightmares.’

‘Dreamwalking again?’ Pel’s brows climbed up his forehead. I thought that would be the end of it, but he seemed curious. ‘And what was it this time, Tarko?’

‘Something I can’t get out of my head. A wave of demons attacking from the south, reaching out and around Shal Gara like a sickle knife.’

‘A concentrated attack on one flank.’

I waved my spoon in a circle before nodding. ‘I suppose you could put it like that, why not.’

Pel’s fingers found the dried fruits, and he chewed as he watched me carefully, despite his stare pointing past my shoulder. ‘From the south, you say?’

‘This was the most nightmare vivid yet. I could have sworn I was standing on the south side of a leafroad staring right at them. I could feel the heat burning the skin from my hands as I held them up.’ The shiver that convulsed me shut me up.

‘When?’

‘I don’t know. It was dark in the nightmare, that was all. Not night, but a day shrouded in ash.’

‘Just like today,’ Tesq whispered, her eyes glued on the hole in the Den’s roof. Half the colour of the canopy had been shrouded in ash.

Pel rapped his knuckles on the table before getting up. He was already bustling to the racks of weapons. ‘You had best get your armour on, Scion, because if my old nose and ears aren’t right, the winds have already changed. Eztaral and Haidak should hear of this as soon as possible.’

‘You believe in these nightmares?’

‘At this point, I’ll believe in anything if it keeps this bloodwood standing.’

Before I could follow Pel’s orders, Tesq bounced a seed off my head. ‘Tarko.’

We stared at each other for a moment before she blinked. ‘Thank you for saving my life, no doubt,’ she said.

I could count the number of times my sister had ever thanked me for anything on one finger. And while I became incredibly aware of the porridge still clinging to my face, I smiled back at her. ‘You stay alive, now.’

‘And you, not-so-little brother.’



Misfit helped me in no way. The shrewbat stared at me as I attempted to don my Scion's armour. I had got the boots and kilt on, but I had paused somewhat with my torso bare and an itch in my mind.

'Serisi, 'I muttered to the emptiness of my room.

For a moment, there came no answer. When it did, it came in the form of a hissing squeak from Misfit, camped in a small nook of moss I'd made him. He wasn't happy with his new surroundings but at least he didn't scarper at the faint presence of the demon. That was all the response I got.

'Fine. Suit yourself.'

As I raised up my breastplate, I saw the shadow across my upper arm. The black veins had continued to spread across the angle of my upper arm. Some were already creeping onto my shoulder. I checked in the polished slab of stone in the corner and saw threads of darkness reaching for my neck like a miniature tree branch. I would need a scarf to keep them out of prying eyes.

My heart clenched harder and faster as I poked at my poisoned veins. No pain came, even when I pressed the bruises from the fight. They were dimmer than they had any right to be. Instead, I felt a buzzing strength running through me.

It was a shame I didn't feel any sharper when it came to my intelligence. Whatever the wine had done to me, it took me twice as many mistakes as usual putting on my armour. When I emerged from my hollow, Pel was gone. As was Tesq, but I heard a vague sound of vomiting coming from the closed doors of the hollows. With leafleather creaking, I made my way from the Den and was surprised to find not Pel but Juraxi hovering near the entrance. The burns across one side of his face had healed some more, but the scars looked like they would never fade.

'Juraxi?

'Young Tarko. There you are. Pel has gone ahead and asked you to catch up, 'he said without any explanation. He wasn't the only warrior lingering about: a good number of lancers and sorcers stood guard on the branch. They didn't look the most polished warriors I had ever seen, but every one of them looked as if they had no qualms cutting throats.

'And what, without trying to sound rude at all, are you doing here?' I asked.

'No offence taken. Eagleborn Kraid wanted trustworthy souls standing watch. These are all old friends from the Scorchwars, or so they tell me. As for me? You, Atalawe, and your mother saw fit to help me. I'll do the same for you if I can.'

'Then in that case I'm glad you're here.'

Juraxi's lopsided smile broadened. 'As am I.'

With a mouth empty of words, I gave him an awkward nod, but before I pressed on he caught me by the arm.

‘Say,’ Juraxi spoke in a quiet voice. ‘I didn’t want to mention it to anyone else, but I found you wandering in a circle last night in the Den. You were walking in your sleep, Tarko. That’s a normal thing for you, right?’

My immediate reaction was to laugh, even though a twitch of dread stabbed me. ‘Ha! Yes. Yes it is. I haven’t done it in seasons. Guess I should blame the ticabo wine,’ I lied.

Juraxi chuckled. ‘Had me worried me for a moment there last night, I tell you. Well, Tarko, make sure you stay alive now. We’re counting on you.’

‘And you, Juraxi.’ I held my wavering grin as long as I could before turning away. Instead I bit my lip. I had never sleepwalked in my life. In our old cottage of hatches and ladders, if you walked in you sleep, you fell in your sleep. I appreciated Juraxi’s silence and the explanation for ash on my feet, but the horror of stumbling around the Den in my sleep, doing gods knew what, disturbed me. I wholeheartedly blamed the wine. It was turning out to be a crucial scapegoat today.

‘Serisi,’ I whispered once again, but the demon stayed mulishly silent.

The day was bleak and far too similar to my nightmare for my liking. Pel was right: the wind had shifted. A scorched smell had come with it. The wildfire chasing us glowed behind the thick smoke.

Ash had to be constantly cleared from every deck and platform by crews of workers. Warders at intersections shook themselves like birds shivering in the rain. Three Gods did I miss birdsong, and the croak of frogs and lizards. I hadn’t realised until that moment, and tutted at myself for ever cursing their firstglow songs dragging me to work. They had long fled the bloodwood. The barkwolves and orokan hard at work alongside their masters was the only animal life left in Shal Gara and most likely the forest for miles around. It was a measure of life already sucked from the tree, and today, draped in ash, charred in spots by demonfire, Shal Gara looked half-dead. It struck me in the gut like a dagger. I made purposeful detour to try to find Ralish at the louse-mines. They were shuttered, of course, but I knew of no place but of her home branch. Even there, I saw nothing of her, just the grey smear of smoke and dirt that covered every inch of the bloodwood.

At least Shal Gara’s citizens were not so ashen.

If I had expected the branches to be full of sullen and hungover citizens, I would have been deeply mistaken. The tribes shone in all their separate facets that day. Warriors ran drills over and over across the branches. Workers of every calling hauled supplies and materials back and forth side by side. Healers spread themselves across the branches, showing each other the tricks of staunching burns. All separate, but still obstinately together.

‘Serisi!’ I breathed. ‘You had better speak to me, demon.’

No voice rang in my head but my thoughts.

‘Are you going to ignore me forever? I have questions, curse you.’

The demon’s silence lasted just long enough for me to wonder if I had somehow silenced her, perhaps even rid myself of her...

Good morning, Tarko.

‘What game have you been playing, staying so silent?’

I have been busy thinking, Serisi replied. She sounded subdued.

‘Really? About what?’

About this tree of yours, the demon sighed. *About you, Tarko of the Swathe. You have surprised me. I...* Here she growled for some time. *Perhaps your world is not so puny after all. Not so worthy of crushing to dust as I had expected it would be.*

She must have seen me blinking like an owl studying a puzzle. ‘Is that so? What changed your mind?’

I have been asking myself the same question. She took a moment. *It is your spirit. It is somewhat... admirable. A different kind of fire exists not just in you but most of these creatures around us. Even in the imbeciles that dared challenge you this past night. You fight not to take or survive but to protect what you believe in, stupid as that may be. My father’s mind is set on chaos, and yours on order. Perhaps neither can win, and we will destroy ourselves trying to.*

Suffice it to say, I was shocked. Either my words or Shal Gara’s wonders had changed her mind, precisely as I had hoped. I tried not to push my luck and picked my words as if finding the good fruit amongst the rotten. ‘Does this mean you intend to help us at last?’

I will help you survive, that is all. Together we can bring an early end to this war.

‘These nightmares of mine, is that you trying to help? I see the wildfires and your father almost every night. But this time was different. It felt real, as if I had seen it happen.’

You did. Call it a vision, if you must. The magic that binds us has let you glimpse my mind when you dream. It is how you have seen the Starless Plains and the Last Clan. My father’s will is powerful and far-reaching. It controls the navik an it keeps the horde as one. With you and I growing stronger each day, you must have glimpsed his intentions through me. I saw what he planned and so did you. It is not betrayal.

I ignored the demon’s excuses. ‘Do you think Faraganthar... sees me? Sees us?’

Impossible. Dreams are human, not of demonkind.

I clenched my teeth, trying to trust her. ‘And what of me walking in my sleep, then? Was that your doing?’

Serisi snorted. *I have no such power over you, Tarko. Nor do I want to move your puny body about. I am your prisoner, remember?*

‘Fine,’ I replied, ‘Maybe it was the ticabo wine.’ Last night was certainly hazy enough. All except Ralish’s lips.

I feel its poison pounding in my head like it does yours. Why do you humans do such things? And what exactly were you doing with that other worm? With your lips? I felt an unusual stirring within you as if you were hungry—

‘That’s none of your business,’ I told the demon firmly and swiftly. I decided to test the nightmare and walk south instead of down towards Pel.

‘It’s that sorcer Terelta!’ came a yell from a wilder standing at a barracks built into the bark. I had supposed the smog and distraction of war would stop people from recognising me, but this wilder had keen eyes. It didn’t take long for a few others to point at me and cheer. Another passerby

to clapped me heartily on the back, jolting the breakfast in my stomach. A grey-haired and crooked woman approached me with a smile and a wreath of flowered vines. I bowed my head, not quite sure what to do but clutch them and keep moving

You are enjoying this, aren't you?

The demon knew me well. 'Wouldn't you?' I muttered through my teeth.

Wind gusted through the crowded streets momentarily, and in the flurry of ash around me I saw the faintest grin. Wide of eye in case Serisi be seen, I hurried on, still heading downwards but to a southern platform.

As in the dream, I found a railing and pressed myself to it. My heart was beating unnaturally. I stared into the smoke and ash and sure enough saw nothing at all. No glint like lantern-glow. No fire in the blizzard of ash. 'I don't see anything.'

What use is a warning when it comes too late? He will lash out at you with all his ferocity. Here, where your fortifications and warriors are lesser, and where you have little time to build more.

'You have been paying attention, I see,' I said.

You forget I am a creature of war, Tarko. All demonkind are. Our horde has fought more battles than you have eaten meals.

'That's enough bragging out of you, Serisi.' The sheer effort of counting such a number unsettled me. 'Now all I have to do is get Eztaral to believe us.'

Good luck with that.

I scowled into the ash. 'Thank you.'

The Rootfort called to me with a distant clatter deep below. I stared down at the skirt of the Neathering, its wood painted patchwork between the green glow of huge mushrooms that normally only glowed at night. It was a disquieting omen. My mind wandered to the same cold light that had lit the Burrows. I would have shivered at the thought of the cells had it not been the realisation of who now occupied their pitch-dark hollows.

The Rootfort could wait for a few moments more. There was something I had to do first.



The shrill cry almost shook the magic from me. An obsidian-studded club waggled in my face. At the other end of it was a boy. A boy who appeared to be half my age and a good foot shorter than me, and he alone barred the Burrows tunnel.

'Stay right there!' he yelled again for good measure.

Strike the wretch down like you did those sorcers, Tarko. Serisi growled within. *How dare this worm stand in our way.*

'Calm down,' I told both the demon and the boy.

‘Leave ’im alone, Inis, don’t you know who this is?’ barked a portly warder shuffling down the Burrows tunnel towards us. ‘Never mind that he’s passed two warders already, curse it!’

Inis looked as though he hadn’t a clue, but was eager to go along with it.

‘Course, sorry,’ said the boy as he lowered his obsidian studded club, and promptly got shooed away.

‘Bloody children, they send me now. And all of them think they’re here to fight demons.’ The older warder bowed as low as his ale-ripened belly would allow. It was the same chap who had seen to the Scions during our short stay in the Burrows, and either he had a terrible memory for faces, or he pretended not to remember he had once locked me behind bars.

‘Warder Casqal is the name, and what can we be helping you with, Elevate Terelta?’

I was still so unused to the title coming from strangers’ mouths, I almost looked behind me. Managing to dodge that embarrassment with a swift bow of my own, and prayed my voice didn’t squeak or break on the way out. Fortunately, I escaped that, too. The Three Gods and their spirits must have been smiling broadly somewhere behind the rain and smear of ash.

‘I’d like to speak to the sorcers Envoy Okarin had locked up.’

Casqal winked at me at the same time as wiping his sweaty bald brow. ‘The ones that were beaten senseless last night by your very hands. Would those be the same sorcers?’

‘They may just be,’ I smirked only to copy the warder’s enthusiasm.

‘Should have sent more of them to the Hells, the traitorous loamers,’ Casqal opined.

I agree.

Casqal leaned to look down the mushroom-lit corridor and then tapped his bulbous nose with a chuckle. ‘Eagleborn Kraid swore me to no visitors, but I guess you don’t count as a visitor, being one of them Sylons as well, right? Tarko? Can I call you Tarko?’

‘If you please, and it’s Scions.’ I corrected him, making sure to smile.

Casqal matched my smile and doubled it. ‘Them’s the ones. Come with me.’

As the warder led me deeper into the Burrows, he cupped his hands around his greasy mouth and yelled, ‘Batshit!’

‘What?’ screeched a haggish voice. I saw a familiar crone-like shape emerge into the mushroom glow halfway down the tunnel: the snaggletoothed woman whacking a club repeatedly into her palm. Her lank hair stretched halfway to the floor.

‘Keep an eye on our new idiot boy Inis.’

‘Bah!’ was the summation of her reply.

We moved on, and I had to ask. ‘Batshit? Is that her name?’

‘Aye, tis. We call her that because, well... she is quite mental,’ Casqal sighed.

A short walk took us to a familiar tunnel. More than familiar. It was burned into my memories. Before me the dark eyes of the cells spread into the gloom, some half-closed, others wide open, and some squeezed shut. Casqal yammered in my ear.

‘Here they are, the pathetic bastards. Attacking you weren’t just stupid, it was downright treacherous, if you ask me. You’re the best hope we’ve got. They’ll rot for putting us all in danger.

I'll be dead before I see these loose, I tell you. Two are awake and only just stopped hollering. Don't have much hopes for the third. You bashed his skull in all the wrong places. And if you want them out of the cells for a moment or two, I won't say no to you teaching them another lesson.'

It was tempting, I will admit that. I might have been Shal Gara's best hope, but I never said I wasn't human.

'I'll just take some privacy, if that's fine with you, warder,' I cut across him.

Casqal looked a fraction disappointed, yet I was sure he would keep listening from somewhere nearby. 'As you wish.'

I could already see fingers clutching at bars. Noses and faces poking into the faint light at the sound of voices. These were the sorcers, not yet hoarse from shouting or driven mad by the creeping of the cell.

Are you going to kill them? Finish the job you started? You and I become more alike each day.

'No,' I muttered.

'Please, we've learned our lesson!' one of the three remaining sorcers yelled. The two air carvers were awake. The man I thought I had killed with my sling was currently unconscious and twitching sporadically.

'So quickly?' I asked the others.

They fell quiet as they recognised me. The other inhabitants of these Burrows were equally unhappy to see me. They were the survivors of Sheertown. The very same souls that decided to sacrifice me and lie for their own freedom. The Burrows had not treated them well. I could see how drawn their faces had become. One of them crooked a finger at me.

'You.'

'Me.' And I said no more than that. I simply let them look at me standing beyond their bars, in my armour and my freedom. I saw their eyes crawl to my crimson hands and the two new lines across my cheek.

One of the sorcers couldn't help himself. Ralish hadn't hit him hard enough, apparently. 'You're still a freak.'

Even though I heard Serisi snarl in my head, I managed to stay calm.

'Maybe I am, and yet you're the one who's too stupid to realise this freak might be the only person keeping you alive. When I leave here, I go to fight to keep you from burning in demonfire. Think about that when you stew in your jealousy and grand ideas of what is natural and not.'

Is that it? Not a single drop of blood spilled in revenge?

I shook my head, not caring how mad I sounded. 'I get the best revenge of all. They're the bloodwood's now, and before it claims them, they'll have plenty of time to torture themselves with regret.'

It was all that was needed to send the sorcers into panic and rage in equal measure. The other prisoners either whimpered or stared at me vacantly, all sense gone from their eyes.

It was a strangled whisper that stopped me from leaving so soon. I looked down on a cell whose bars were caked with filth. No hands gripped them and no face was pressed into the light. I peered into the gloom within the cell and saw a single eye staring back at me. A gurgle turned into a retching sound. A face mottled black with bruises and sores appeared. I barely recognised the man.

‘Hatlu Ko,’ I muttered. The man was still... alive, if you could call him that. The grimspore had changed him drastically. What looked like a yellow mould spread across the man’s forehead and neck. Scabs and sores covered his lips. Swellings in his neck and arms protruded thick as thumbs.

His head cracked to the side as I spoke his name, but that was all the sense I could make of him. With bloody spit dripping from his mouth, he receded back into the gloom.

‘Warder! What is this man still doing here?’

Casqal appeared much too quickly. At first I thought he must have been eavesdropping, but he acted as if I hadn’t called him at all. He looked sweatier than usual. ‘Elevate, I—’

‘What is it?’

‘There’s something happening in the Neathering.’ Casqal pointed. ‘The warriors look like they’re getting ready to fight again.’

My father approaches, as I warned you.

An urgent shiver ran through me. I imagined being late for a battle could be somewhat advantageous if you were more of a cowardly nature, but I had no luxury. Not now.

I put the warder and the Burrows behind me without a second thought. ‘Have that man put out of his misery, curse it,’ I shouted over my shoulder to Casqal, shortly before accidentally barging Inis into a wall.

‘Get out of his way, you useless boy!’ Casqal yelled, and then in a higher, more desperate pitch to the beat of my swaggering footsteps: ‘We believe in you, Tarko!’