

# 28

## AN OFFERING

*Allmother Tzatca of Dorla Sel is the longest-reigning matriarch in the Swathe. For over a hundred and ten seasons, she has guided the bloodwoods and the Swathe. There are some that whisper her long seasons are thanks to forbidden seedwitch magic. Others speak of pacts made with spirits and ancestors. Such talk has turned her into somewhat of a recluse. The sages often convene without her, and her appearances at events such as the Grand Harvest or the anointing of a new matriarch are brief.*

*“OF BROKEN VOWS,” BY THE SORCER SAGE BESEEQ*

I was already standing in the queue when Pel’s shout chased me.

“Tarko!”

I refused to look back. I knew what waited for me: a livid Pel and Eztaral and a smirking Redeye, no doubt. I would not be wavered.

Only one entourage stood in front of me, and they appeared to be finished with a balding temach sitting behind the ornate desk. As sooner as they ambled aside, I marched straight for him. He sat straighter and looked somewhat disconcerted when he saw me charging.

“I’m here to make an offering,” I announced to him, standing tall as I could.

The temach’s smile was oily as he looked me up and down. I saw his nose twitch in a sniff. “I see. And are you not the citizen making the ruckus and violently assaulting people over there a moment ago?”

“A mistake, was all it was. Old friends, old arguments.”

The temach smiled so fraudulently his eyes almost closed. “I see.” With a tired sigh, the man started to sheaf through his documents. “And who are you, exactly?”

“Tarko!” The others had caught up to me, barging up to the table.

“Oh, good. There’s more of you,” muttered the temach.

Pel huffed at me. “What are you doing, Tarko?”

“We have no other choice. We need to stay close to Haidak if we want to foil his plans, and we can’t do it from outside this Forge. You heard him: he has a sorcer in the Forging. Haidak’s going after the Allmother, but if I can beat his offering, then he can’t reach her,” I told the others before they could get a word in edgeways. “I promised I would do whatever victory took, and this is the only way we’ll get an audience with the Allmother and keep Haidak away from her at the same time.”

“Haven’t you considered this is what he wants you to do? That he goaded you, knowing you’d enter? That he hopes to kill you off in the Forge without even lifting a finger?” warned Pel.

“You could die before you even get close to Tzatca,” said Atalawe.

Redeye stood at her side, arms crossed high on his chest and silent for once.

Eztaral nodded. "I have to agree with Pelikai this time, Tarko. This is no path to vengeance. This is too dangerous."

"Who else in this Forging doesn't need nectra?" I hissed, leaning close. "Who else can wield two orders of magic? Who else has a demon warrior in their heads? Don't you see? Everything I've learned and become has been for this moment. This very Forging! It must be, or nothing makes sense. Not Texoc. Not Shal Gara," I growled. "I am a weapon. You said so yourself, Eagleborn. It's time to use it."

"Tarko can do it." Ralish spoke up. "He could win this Forging through stubbornness alone. Don't doubt that."

"The only thing I doubt is his control. It is strategy. We can't endanger our best chance at winning this war on a bloodthirsty game of nobles' whims—"

"This *is* our best chance, Pel," admitted Atalawe. "Tarko always has been, just like you said in the beginning of all this."

"It's time to believe in me, old man," I urged Pel.

"I believe," echoed Atalawe.

Redeye was true to form. "I get the feeling I don't have a choice. It's your choice. On your head be it."

Eztaral had made her decision. "I believe."

Pel screwed his eyes shut, but in the end, he took a breath and nodded.

"And are we quite done with squabbling?" The temach sighed dramatically. "Are you going to give me a name, or shall I guess?"

I wrenched my stare from Pel, but before I could answer, Eztaral beat me to it.

"Paragon Tarkosi Terelta," she said.

"How nice for you," the temach said after a pause. "And where are you from?"

"I'm Tarko of the Swathe."

The temach looked confused. "You mean to say you are homeless?"

"I'm a Scion of the Sixth-Born. We fight for the Swathe," I said. "Even when it won't fight for itself."

The man blinked. "I'll be honest, I have little to no clue what that means." Another sigh followed. "Who is your matriarch or sage? Or your upholder, at very least?"

I cleared my throat. "I have none."

"You must have somebody to vouch and pay for you. And I'm afraid warrior ranks don't count. Only first-born."

"He has one," Caraq interjected as she strode forwards.

"Name?" tutted the temach.

"Caraq Gaakaran, daughter of Noluk, Wingmaster of the Cloudriders of Lostriver."

"Never heard of it."

"Good."

"And you're a matriarch?"

"If that's what you want to call me."

The temach stared squinting at us for some time. "Right. Well, I can see you're a mudm—*earth reaver* of the paragon rank. And the worker rank, too. How curious. You don't see that every day. No wonder why."

*Let me out. I will make him bite his desk so hard when he scratches the back of his head he will get splinters.*

“How long does this take?” I asked the irritating little man.

“Much quicker when you have the answers.”

“Then ask the questions, scholar.”

“Will you be needing room and board here in the Forge? We do have baths, you’ll be glad to hear.”

“Yes.”

“For how many?”

“Eight, including the jāgu.”

The temach scowled. “And how much nectra will you need per day of Forging? Dorla Sel can supply all you need.”

“None,” I replied.

“So you have brought your own then? It will need to be counted.”

I shook my head, allowing myself a smile. “No.”

The temach spluttered with a wheezing laughter. “I get it. This is a prank. Is this Betesh’s doing?”

I leaned both hands on the desk. “No prank. No nectra.”

The temach’s eyes travelled slowly from the desk to mine. “Then you can’t be serious?”

I turned over my fists to show him the glow at my wrists. I cast a sly look to Eztaral. “Deadly.”

The temach scribbled furiously at his papers. “I... Well, this is most unusual.”

Serisi growled impatiently while the man worked at sliding carved and coloured tiles around while he calculated. “Five thousand and twenty gems.”

“Excuse me?” asked Eztaral.

“Five thousand and twenty gems. Rooms, meals, fine for the banned animal, and toll for offering. Would you like me to write it down?”

I had never imagined that amount of gems, never mind heard it spoken – nay, demanded – of me. While I thought of an answer, the temach did so anyway with a flourish of stamps, streaks with painted brushes, and a rip of parchment that was shoved in my face.

Behind me, I glimpsed Pel work his blue lips. Eztaral clutched at the diminutive pouch of gems at her side.

“How long do we have to pay this quite honestly ridiculous amount?” I asked.

The smile that came over the temach’s face was positively unctuous. “Until lastlight. However, if you can’t afford the Forging’s toll, there are always lesser bouts between warriors that you can enter. Some are happening right now if you want to take a l—”

“We have the gems.”

“Do we?” asked Pel.

*In the pockets of other worms, you mean.*

“Elsewhere,” I said.

“Of course they are. Then I will be right here at this table. Waiting with bated breath,” said the temach. “And if you could be quick about it, that would be just wonderful. Some of us have more important things to do.”

Snatching the parchment from his hands, I strode down the steps and onto the Forging floor. The carven heroes above me stared down, watchful. I could imagine the temach's smile on each of those past champions, as if I was not worthy.

"Well, that puts an end to that madness," Pel sighed. "I'm sorry you are disappointed, Tarko. We will find another way."

Caraq scratched her head. "I could send for gems to be sent from Lostriver, but it would take days. Days we do not have."

*I have an idea, Tarko.*

"I think I might know what it is. Just like Mulchport?"

*Just like Mulchport.*

"Serisi," Ralish muttered to me.

I nodded. "Serisi."

Pel looked exasperated. "Three Gods. What's in your mind now, Terelta?"

"Warriors," I said.

Pel's head snapped upright. "What? You going to fight instead?"

"Hardly. If everyone else here can gamble, then we can, too," I told them. "Like I told you in Mulchport: Serisi has a way with gambling."

Atalawe chuckled. "This I have to see. Sorry Pel, Eztaral, but it's the truth."

The eagleborn sighed. "I've decided I don't like this bloodwood."

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With almost every gem Eztaral had in her pouch, we bought our way into the other half of the Obsidian Forge. My neck was already sore at gazing up at the lofty heights of the great hall, but the Forge tested my spine with new wonders to take in.

Taller, grander, the tiered walls stretched up a hundred feet and more, with each level facing outwards. Broad shields of bloodwood protected the bottom layers from wayward spells and errant weapons, or so I assumed. The danger did nothing to dissuade the lowborn citizens and spectators from leaning far out from the railings to be mere feet closer to the warriors clashing below.

The obsidian ribs towered over the heights of the Forge, where angled sections covered in green mosscloth awnings protected onlookers from the afternoon's drizzle. Nobles clamoured in the high reaches, busy yelling at their chosen ones or throwing shreds of coloured wormsilk down into the arena. Lancewings perched on the tallest points, half-lost in the mist, their riders aimed outwards and watchful.

Past the Dorla Sel warders lining every walkway, I saw them. Three duels raged across the sickle-shape of the Forge's grounds. Sand stretched from edge to edge, already torn by quick feet and missed strikes. Where the Obsidian Forge met the sheer wood of Dorla Sel's trunk, grand arches had been carved into the dark. Warriors of all different ranks and garb waited beneath them, some staring blankly, others hopping from one foot to the other. A few grinned madly at their opponents waiting in neighbouring archways.

In the nearest circle, amidst a flurry of sand, two warriors duelled. A ravenborn with armour of amethyst bore a hammer-shaped sword of obsidian that he swung in incredible arcs. His pelt-clad lancer opponent moved like lantern shadow, dodging back and forth or vaulting over the blade. He

scored cut after cut on the ravenborn's armour and bare arms with a wild whooping that seemed to drive the modest crowd wild.

"Let me guess. The lancer will win," I asked Serisi.

"That would be my bet," said Ralish. Atalawe and Eztaral nodded. Pel was too busy scowling.

*Incorrect. The lancer is tired, wearing thin like an ancient blade. He cannot keep it up for long, I promise you. The fear is taking hold of him. I can almost smell it. Likely he thought the larger worm would tire before him, but he's wrong. The raven one is holding back.*

"Serisi disagrees."

Eztaral thumbed her nose. "The lancer has the speed," she mused. "Agility. The stone-armoured one is sweating profus—"

The lancer lunged for a deep stab to the throat. The ravenborn shifted his footing, letting the warrior fly past him, and chased him with the obsidian blade.

The blade won the race. One of its spikes thudded into the back of the lancer's feathered helmet. He was driven into the ground with a crunch, much to the delighted cries of the audience. Eyes wide and teeth bared, the ravenborn wrenched his sword free and showed it to the granite sky with a roar. Their entourages came rushing. One group was equally as large and bulky as their warrior. They came to congratulate and attempt to lift him up.

"Hmph," was all Eztaral said.

I smirked. "She is good, isn't she?" Serisi's words moved my lips. "After a thousand of our seasons spent with a sword in her hand, she says she bloody hopes so."

The screams of a woman from the other entourage superseded the roaring of crowd and champion. She threw herself flat on the ground, tugging at the corpse's kilt of pelts, and had to be dragged away alongside the body. A scarlet streak stained the wood all the way to the arches, where the gathered warriors stared on, a little stiller than before.

"Still want to enter this brutal madness, Tarko?" Pel asked me.

I had never been surer. "This is what Serisi and I were made for."

"Then let us be hasty, Scions. We haven't much time," Caraq urged as she pounded up the carved steps towards the middle levels, where the wood sloped and cascaded in stairs so all could see.

Atalawe rubbed her hands together. "Let's find ourselves a soul willing to take a wager."

"Control yourself, wrangler," said Eztaral. "We're at war, not enjoying an evening in The Raven's Thievery with a barrel of berry wine."

Atalawe wielded a sharp finger. "You should know better than most the importance of remembering what we're trying to save, Eagleborn. If we can't enjoy a smile on a day like today, what's the point in trying?"

The eagleborn didn't argue.

It seemed to me that the more noble the blood or closer to being first-born, the more the need to sit down. On the lowest tiers, chairs were a thing of mythical song and fancy. They began to sprout by the fourth, and fifth, and by the seventh, corpses of chairs offered the watchers places to park their backsides.

On the cusp of where the noblest and richest clustered, we found the more reputable-looking bet-takers hovering beneath their varied, painted signs. Racks of counting tiles sat around them. Heavysset individuals stood behind their masters. Some had their warrior tattoos crossed through, as my sorcer mark was.

"Got good chances on the next battle in the south circle!" one yelled to us.

I stood there, staring at the sole remaining gems in my palm, a smattering of greens and reds.

*Twelve.*

“Well, Tarko?” Eztaral nudged me. “Are we simply going to spectate or have you and your demon come to your senses and changed your mind?”

I snorted as I clenched my fist.

*Allow me.*

Forcing concentration, I let my eyes roll back into my skull, and let the demon within me emerge.

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“Ah, yes.” Serisi breathed in the air, thick with greed and fear, blood and bone dust. “At last.”

Ralish was looked at her with narrowed eyes. “Serisi,” she murmured.

“I did not mean to hurt you, Ralish,” the demon whispered in reply.

The woman crossed her arms and looked anywhere but Serisi’s eyes. “It’s fine.”

*I told you not to say anything, curse it.*

Serisi slapped her hands together and barged to the railing so she could cast her eye over the fighters. While the circles were cleared by workers, the next warriors stepped into the drizzle and prepared themselves. The crowd scattered across the tier began to thump their feet and wooden cups against the floor and railings in anticipation.

The demon kept her eyes on the nearest two worms, where one in intricate blue armour waved to the crowd with her shield made of stone-studded bloodwood. The other – a fat sort with two varnished clubs spiked with antlers – stood frozen, seemingly muttering to himself like a navik knocked in the head. He had little armour besides cloaks and wraps of tan leather. And if Serisi was correct, he was shivering in the rain.

A wizened godseer worm wobbled out of a sconce in the obsidian walls with a wooden tablet clutched in his hands. The man was half beard, and its white waterfall spilled over his shimmering gold robes. His voice was hoarse and shrill, barely audible even to Serisi’s sharpened ears, but she heard the names all the same.

“Lancer Shokela of Rasqax tests her strength against Bako Bako of Orso Ora, warder rank,” shouted the godseer.

“Where in the Six Hells is Orso Ora?” Serisi heard Ralish ask. “Never heard of it.”

“An old bloodwood almost as far west as you can go,” answered Atalawe. “Further than the mountains, to where the loam turns to dust and sand before it meets the ocean. Further than even I have travelled.”

Eztaral was scoffing. “A warder against a lancer? This will be enormously swift.”

Pel was quietly nibbling those blue seeds of his. Serisi could feel the faint magic swirling about him.

Serisi had made her decision. She muscled back to the bet-taker working feverishly at his tiles, forcing the Scions to chase.

“Come forwards, lad, Don’t be shy. As long as you’ve got gems or goods to trade, Cozalah is your man!” Several other bet-takers looked on with glowers.

“Bako Bako of Orso Ora to win.”

*Surely not. That louse of a warder?*

Serisi grinned.

Cozalah winced. “Sure about that? You look new to the Forge, yes? Then I will give you a free tip: you want to choose someone with better chances. Not Bako. He’s a sure loser at his rank. Twenty-to-one chances.”

“I said, twelve gems on Bako.”

“All right! I won’t tell a fellow what to do with his gems twice! Twelve on Bako.” Cozalah held out his hand.

“She’s betting all our gems on that one?” Redeye was full of scorn.

“Tarko, if you’re in there, now would be a fine time to stop her.”

Serisi wasted no more time and slammed the tiny stones into the man’s hand. A piece of parchment came back to her, and she returned eagerly to the railing to grip the wood with Tarko’s poor excuses for claws.

Serisi watched as the warrior of Orso Ora knelt and cast the bark chips in a ring around him. Some kind of worm prayer to the worm gods or their worm ancestors, she assumed. No sooner had he climbed back to his feet and spun his club than the deafening pounding of three drums began the duel.

*Tell me what you see, then.*

“And give up my secrets?” the demon snickered.

*Serisi.*

“The lancer limps. Her left ankle is wrapped tighter than the other. You can see it in the paleness of her flesh. The other has the zeal of a god in him. He has purpose and belief.”

Shield and club clashed in a way that made Serisi grip the rails tighter.

“You’re enjoying this,” Pel accused her.

“I care not for those that willingly choose to fight. I am doing nothing but what is best for Tarko and the Scions. Nothing more than these worms are doing. I am enjoying the simple pleasure of being right. And winning.” And by the Starless Plains, did she enjoy this game of gambling.

The lancer Shokela soon proved Serisi right, faltering on her left foot just enough for Bako to knock her shield from her arm. He clubbed her across the face with a resounding blow. The lancer tried to rise, but a kick sent her sprawling. She held up her hands and called for surrender before Bako could finish her off, much to the derision of the crowd.

Holding the parchment like a sword of flame, Serisi returned to Cozalah.

“Pay me,” she ordered.

The bet-taker did so with one of those fake smiles she had seen humans practise often. Politeness, they called it.

“Twenty to one,” he muttered, counting out four netted bags of gems, two a small fraction of the size. “Means you get two hundred fifty. Beginner’s luck.”

“Is it?”

Once more, Serisi examined the fighters preparing to fight, choosing her winners without leaving the booth. Neither Tarko nor the others complained. They barely said a word as Serisi laid down her wagers.

“Hundred twenty on the worm with sand for hair. Another hundred twenty for the one covered in pelts.”

“You’re mad, boy! That’s ten to one on each. One of those fighters only has one arm.”

“So did the demon king Zashanator, and he reigned for four hundred of your seasons.”

*Who?*

The bet-taker flapped his mouth. "King? Who? Psh. Never mind. I'll take those chances." Cozalah snickered as he wrote out the parchment. "Ah, the confidence of the young."

"Serisi..." Eztaral began.

"Watch, Eagleborn."

And so they did, as the one-armed fighter drove a sharp sword of jade into the other warrior's stomach.

*That was quick.*

"Too eager with his attacks and weak in his parries. Favoured his backhand swing far too much," Serisi whispered.

"And what would you have done about it, demon? Do tell us. We're all very eager to know."

Eztaral might have had hidden her curiosity in mockery, but Serisi saw right through her.

"I would have ended him faster, is what I would have done. You humans always fight as if for an audience. As if you are a hero of song."

While she listened to Tarko's muttering, drumbeats drew their attention to the next duel.

The worm with hair yellow as sand almost cost Serisi the second bet as he caught an axe blade across his shoulder in the first swing. The other warrior pressed him, slicing across his wooden armour until he was forced to the edge of the circle. A deft swing of the leg from Serisi's chosen put them both in the tree-dirt, where they scrapped with their blades in feral savagery. When their blades were lost, it came down to the weapons they were born with. One bit. The other gouged. The yellow-haired worm managed to pin his opponent with his legs and thrust a thumb in the man's eye. To a bloodcurdling scream, the worm dug deeper, driving deep into the skull. The victorious worm, now drenched in blood, got to his feet. There was no celebration from him, just a slow walk back to the arches. He left the man alive, writhing and blinded. By their mutters and slow claps, the crowd saw no glory in the win, but in a demon's mind, any victory was glorious.

"And how did you know that one was going to win?" Eztaral asked.

"That one?" Serisi asked, flashing Tarko's teeth. "I didn't."

*You loamer.*

"It is called gambling, is it not?"

"Three Gods!" the bet-taker yelled behind them. "You're a swindler."

Serisi stood before him. "You took the wagers. You gave me the chances. Pay me my stones, or you and I will fight to the death."

The lump of a man guarding the bet-taker stepped up to loom over Tarko's body. Serisi was not used to looking up at worms, but she did so with a smile so disconcerting, the man backed away.

With an exasperated tut, the bet-taker gave in. Large pouches of gems were thumped on the table. "There! Two thousand six hundred forty. Take it. I'm having no more wagers from you!"

Clapping came from several of the onlookers as Serisi hoisted her winnings aloft like the severed head of an enemy. She drank in their awe. Their jealousy.

Pel looked somewhat impressed. "Halfway there."

Serisi grinned at the next bet-taker in the row, but he quickly shook his head. "No more wagers!" he shouted. As did the next, and so on. Word had spread of her so-called luck.

"Cowards," Serisi branded them.

Eztaral was staring at the clouds. "Our light is fading, Serisi. We have one more chance at most."



“Then why don’t we take some gems from the noble-blooded above our heads?” Ralish suggested. “Seeing as Serisi is so good at it.”

“A fine idea,” announced Atalawe, leading the charge with Inwar swishing his tail in impatience.

In the upper levels, stares came swiftly and stuck like arrows in hide. Scarlet eyes surveyed the Scions’ weary road-dusted armour and the loam on their boots. Serisi met every one.

Sorcers in their dozens stood in clumps with their entourages. White, red, and blue hands held sandglass cups aloft. There was no rabid applause and stamping of feet like the levels below but polite tapping of hands and shoes. The air felt stale.

Serisi strode through them, flexing her hands and forcing others out of her way as she worked her way to the edge of the tier. Much to the distaste of several ruby-clad sages, or so it seemed. Serisi enjoyed their disdain, especially when a growl from Inwar made them recoil. The demon was starting to like the beast.

Surveying the arches and the waiting fighters one more time, she saw familiar colours on one of the fighters: a man of obsidian hair with a matching short-sword and a patch across one eye.

“That one is from Shal Gara,” Atalawe said.

Eztaral leaned forwards. “You’re right.”

Caraq muscled to Serisi’s side. “That’s my nephew!”

“Eagleborn Ren Gaakaran of Shal Gara fights Eagleborn Swish of Coriqal!” The old scholar yelled out the fighters’ names.

Whispers came from around them. Serisi’s sharp ears caught mutters spreading through the crowd.

“Surprised to see them here, after the talk of its falling.”

“Mysterious circumstances, I hear.”

“Wildfires is what it was. I don’t care for this talk of marauders from the Scorch. Or black suns.”

“Surprised they’ve got any warriors left to enter.”

“I hear their matriarch has not come. Plague, they say.”

“I saw their envoy yesterday. Two sages with her. She looks just like her mother did.”

*I had forgotten Okarin would be here, Tarko whispered. That could be wonderfully awkward.*

Gaakaran’s opponent was a beast of a man brandishing a double-ended spear. He was currently beating himself in the chest and around the face as he readied himself to enter the circle.

*Who will you choose to win?* asked Tarko.

“Your eagleborn looks unready.”

“I have taught him well,” muttered Eztaral.

Serisi stared at the eagleborn, gazes level.

“You can trust me, Serisi.”

The demon nodded. “What is gambling without the risk?”

A bet-taker in silver wormsilk looked overwhelmingly pleased to see the sacks of gems thumped on his table.

“What are the chances on Gaakaran of Shal Gara?” asked Serisi.

The bet-taker worked his tiles and checked his parchments. “Two to one.”

Atalawe sucked her teeth. “That’ll do.”

“No, it will not. Ten to one.”

The bet-taker laughed. “No wager.”

“I will take that wager,” interrupted a voice.

The Scions turned to find a familiar sorcer standing beside them. A woman wearing fishbone armour coloured demonfire orange and shit brown, with two long tails of braided hair hanging to her hips. She still wore the marks of Serisi’s last lesson. Bruises hid beneath her eye. A split lip was healing. Several other sorcers in masks stood behind her. Serisi could see their scowls through the slits. Nobles had overheard the challenge and begun to form a crowd.

*They’re the air carvers from Mulchport. The ones we – you – beat senseless.*

Serisi smiled. “That they are.”

“What a surprise to see you again, sorcer!” the woman said, looking Tarko’s body up and down. “You do get around, for poor, treeless loamers. Though it looks like your existence squabbling in the muck hasn’t treated you well. I can’t tell if that’s mud or plague on your neck.”

Tarko would have hidden the marks on his skin, but Serisi straightened proudly. “You wanted to make a wager, worm?”

“You and I have unfinished business that needs putting to rest,” the sorcer announced.

Serisi felt the Scions’ stares upon her.

“I would rather it be in the Forging, but I doubt the likes of you have the stones to offer yourself, whelp. I will happily take your gems to teach you a lesson instead,” she said. “Loamers like you don’t belong here, and it’s time you learned that lesson.”

The demon showed off her teeth. “Ten to one on Shal Gara’s warrior.”

“Ha! Coriqal’s champion will prove you wrong before you’ve taken a breath. I will take the armour off your backs in payment, and have you dirty, festering lowborn thrown from the nearest branch.”

“I have only just met this bitch,” Caraq goaded while looking to us, “but I can tell she’s an idiot straight away.”

Serisi threw one last look at Eztaral. Trust was a strange concept to a demon, but she felt it all the same.

“You have a deal, sorcer,” the demon growled. “And this time when I beat you senseless, we will have plenty of witnesses.”

The sorcer reached for her bone sword almost immediately. Another sorcer held her back with a hiss of warning.

Drums filled the air as the circles were joined in battle once more. With a stunted cheer, the crowd pushed forwards to watch Shal Gara fight Coriqal.

Within ten heartbeats, Eagleborn Gaakaran had been battered about the circle until his shield broke in two.

Eztaral stood firm. “Don’t you worry. I trained him well, I said.”

“That you did,” Caraq yelled over the noise.

*What?*

“Caraq is right. He toys with him. The other is too proud,” Serisi explained.

The eagleborn feigned an early defeat, falling to one knee. As though he had already lopped off Gaakaran’s head, the Coriqal warrior walked around the circle with his spear held high. The sorcers standing beside the Scions whooped along with him.

Serisi smirked as the eagleborn chose his moment. He spun across the dirt, slicing across the backs of his opponent’s legs. With a roar, the warrior reeled backwards. His spear grazed Gaakaran’s

breastplate, but he had already lost. Gaakaran split his spear in two and cut a bloody line from throat to chin. The warrior clutched at his throat, weapons forgotten. Gaakaran put him out his misery, not with blood, but with the pommel of his sword. Coriqal's finest slumped to the dirt.

Cheers rang for the Scions as Serisi raised her fists into the air. Tarko cheered in her head.

The Coriqal sorcer looked as if she would fade into the crowd, but a few disapproving hisses from red-eyed nobles caught them in a trap of public scrutiny.

"Where is your honour, sorcer?" Serisi held out her hands. Eztaral and Atalawe stood at her side, arms crossed.

The sorcer visibly seethed as she clicked her fingers. There were many mutterings and threats of exile from their matriarch, but eventually one of the other sorcers shuffled forwards with a wooden box heavy with gems.

"A fine lesson. We look forward to the next," Serisi growled as Tarko fed her words. "See you in the Forging."

The sorcer spat at their feet before she stormed into the noble crowd.

"That felt almost as good as it would if I had ripped her spine out," hissed Serisi.

"That's enough from you, Serisi. Our time is almost up," Eztaral warned.

Ralish nudged the demon. "Time you brought Tarko back."

*Ralish is right. It's my turn now, Serisi, and I've got my own lesson to teach,* said Tarko as he climbed his way out of the darkness in their mind. Serisi took one last look at her gems and faded with a smile.

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The temach was busy clearing up his parchments when I thumped the box of gems on his table.

"How dare you—what is this?"

"Gems," I told him. "A ridiculous amount of them, just as you requested. Hopefully you weren't waiting too long with bated breath."

After eyeing the Scions behind me, the temach pawed at the box in doubt, but its shimmering contents soon proved him wrong. The red arose in his cheeks.

"I... Well..."

I rapped my knuckles on his table. "And if you could be quick about it, that would be just wonderful. Some of us have important things to do."

The laugh of the demon in my head gave me a wolfish smile.

*Tarko of the Swathe is going to the Forging to spill rivers of traitors' blood, and Serisianathiel will spill it alongside him.*

# Part Three

# 29

## FORGING'S EVE

*The currency of the Swathe's gems has allowed the first-born and noble bloodlines to rise above the tribes of the Bloodlaws in ways unthought in centuries past. Instead of power of wisdom, ancestry, magic, or might, they seek power of riches, and the Swathe has become poorer for their wealth.*

*FROM "HONESTY OF HIERARCHY," BY ANONYMOUS HERETIC KOJI*

The demon whispered in my head, jarring me from my own wonder.

*And I thought the last tree was big.*

It was a powerful understatement, but the demon was not wrong. Dorla Sel burned with the light of a million lanterns and candelvines. Drums thrummed and horns blew in discordant frequency through the branches. Acrobats dove from twisted ropes, spinning madly before coming to a backbreaking halt. Others whirled together in knots as they sang. Roars of beasts joined the frenzy of celebration. The Forging had started. There was no going back now.

"I don't think I'll be smashing any flowerpots here, my demon friend," I said, twirling my empty sling around my fingers. My head darted to the right as an arrowhead of golden lancewings roared between the branches, close enough to see the stares of the riders wondering what a sorcer was doing sitting cross-legged on a Forge rooftop, mere feet from the edge of a more-than-inconvenient plummet. If they had stopped to ask, I would have told them peace and quiet and a moment to question whether the others were right in thinking I had gone mad.

Even after an hour of doubting myself, the answer was still no. My choice to enter the Forging was not a mistake. A dangerous choice, yes. But for somebody who had spent months in the loam, charging after demons, dangerous had become another day.

*I trust I will be allowed to fight, and this will not be a moment in the sunlight for Tarkosi Terelta only,* hissed Serisi.

It struck me then that I had no idea of the rules of this Forging.

"We'll have to see, won't we?"

A pair of hands and a familiar face appeared at the window to my right. Ralish looked me up and down. "There you are."

"I wouldn't be anywhere else, that's for certain."

Ralish took in the city as I did, eyes full of its fire. The rain had cleared with lastlight, and though the clouds remained, the god of rain had given Dorla Sel a blessing.

Ignoring the height like any tree-born citizen, Ralish jumped from the window and landed close to me.

"Gettin' nervous?" she asked.

"I feel like I should be, but somehow I'm just eager to get started. Can't deal with all the waiting."

“I don’t mind admitting I’m nervous. Not that I doubt you or want to stop you, but the not knowin’ what’ll happen or who you’re up against is poison to me. Like goin’ into a fight with a blindfold.”

“I’m stronger than ever. I’m ready. And I know you two aren’t the best of friends right now, but Serisi can protect me if it all goes to shit.” I gave her a wry smile.

Ralish seized my hand of dark veins. “Can’t wait to see the look on their faces when you show them you don’t need nectra. The temach’s reaction was so enjoyable, it’s given me a taste for more. The looks on the nobles’ faces tomorrow will be delicious.”

I chuckled. “They’re going to call me a freak of nature and order all over again, I’ll wager,” I said.

“Maybe they’re right,” said Ralish.

“I forgot to say thank you for believing in me in the offering, after what hap—”

“I believed in you from the moment we met in the mines,” she replied. “Never thought it would lead me all the way to Dorla Sel and this Forging, but I’d still rather be here taking this risk than sittin’ in a bloodwood waitin’ for the fires to reach me.”

“You don’t have to worry, you know. Serisi and I are stronger than ever. We won’t lose.”

Ralish didn’t reply, staring up at the bloodwood’s highest branches instead.

Peace and privacy were put to an end when Atalawe appeared at the window. “Better get yourselves in your armour and ready to leave, you two. Eztaral wants to make a show of force. Show we aren’t afraid of those Fireborn bastards or those that have decided to side with them. I think it’s a fine idea. With any luck, the Fireborn will get greedy and pounce first,” she said with a chuckle. “We’ll have Haidak booted from the tree.”

Neither of us wanted to argue with that. Ducking through the window, I strode across the rooms the temach had seen fit to give us. No doubt they were in some way lesser than other rooms, but the sweeping beams and pillars of pale narin and obsidian were still grander than any chamber I’d slept in. Strange beds that Atalawe called couches lined the walls. Waif birds squawked from fine cages, and incense burned in braziers of iron. Wormsilk veils split the veritable mansion we’d been given into its many rooms.

The room came with a contingent of a dozen workers that seemed constantly on hand. They insisted on us referring to them as servants. Several of them had stares for the faint marks of my third-born heritage on the backs of my hands, just the same as theirs. I don’t know if they thought me an imposter or a traitor, but I made sure to bow to them whenever they insisted on bringing clay platters of fruits and fried bats.

The so-called servants had done an almost suspiciously fine job of polishing our loam-worn armour. I wasn’t quite certain it was the same armour by the way it shined. The char marks of demonfire and scratches of blades had been polished out. The sheen of the grey ironpith and copper plates was on the cusp of hurting my eyes.

Ralish handed me my helmet after every buckle and tie was strapped and knotted.

Once we were armoured and armed to the fangs, the Scions and Wingmaster Caraq stood together in a circle in the main hall of our chambers. Eztaral roamed its circumference, staring deep into every soul.

“We stick together, and we don’t throw the first punch or swing the first blade, and we certainly don’t seek out trouble. They might insist on calling it a celebration, but I call the ruckus out there a crowded battlefield where we don’t know who’s an enemy or not. Keep your wits about you, protect

our offered sorcer here, and don't you dare disappoint our new matriarch," Eztaral said with a flash of a grin at Caraq.

"Take wing and give no mercy, as we Cloudriders say." The wingmaster stamped her feet in agreement.

"I can live by that," Atalawe replied before she whooped to the beams above us.

"And let's keep our offered sorcer safe, shall we?" said Pel, to a final and united stamp of the feet.

In formation, we left our rooms to the servants already cleaning up after us and strode into the corridors of the Forge. Workers and warders bowed out of the way. Other sorcers still lingering in their own mansions watched us as we passed and muttered to their entourages, sometimes spurring rounds of laughter. I stared at each of them in turn while Serisi promised them all kinds of injury and inventive deaths.

The noise of the streets met us like the gust of a gale as we left the Obsidian Forge behind us. Mobs crowded around the arena, baying for the sorcers within. Warders had to guide us through the crowds to keep the prying hands at bay. All manner of beads and woven trinkets were shoved in our path.

"They think if they touch you, they'll live a long and blessed life," yelled one of the warders, likely after seeing my blank face.

"I don't know about that," I muttered. What I did know was that I felt that old impulse to wave and play the part they expected of me. I kept to smiling instead.

We were guided onto a skyriser that whisked us up past Dorla Sel's core and into her crown. A broad and sweeping plaza of polished wood waited for us between two close branches. Smaller trees had been planted across its vastness and draped with candlevines. And between them, an enormous crowd filled the night air with its noise.

Warders bowed to us humble Scions as we stepped from the skyriser. We were quickly welcomed by a godseer in an inconveniently long robe that made her look like an overgrown caterpillar.

"Your parchments."

Atalawe did the work of a scholar and showed them the official documents the temach had reluctantly given to us.

"Welcome, Scions of the Sixth-Born of Lostriver, Matriarch Caraq Gaakaran, Wingmaster, and your offered sorcer, Paragon Tarkosi Terelta, to the Feast of the Offered!" the godseer crowed loudly. Two rotund fellows standing either side of the skyriser's dock pounded wide skin drums to announce our arrival.

Caraq and Eztaral sauntered without fear into the crowds of bloodwood entourages. Nobles, sorcers, warriors, and all manner of important people swarmed the miniature forest. There were more gems and glittering jewels in that crowd than lights in Dorla Sel. They wore every colour and cut of cloth and armour imaginable. The dizzying variety of the whole Swathe was spread before us. On cloaks and breastplates and small flags, I saw the glyphs and patterns of bloodwoods and cities I had never even heard of.

Servants ran about between the glittering crowds like nesthands rushing to fill sapwater troughs for demanding lancewings. Half of them rolled barrels of sloshing wine back and forth at mad speeds. Songmakers battled with the clamour of conversation and laughter with songs of past heroes long

dead. Scores of Dorla Sel warders stood stoically between the trees, faces masked and hands firmly gripping their spears.

“Into the tharantos nest,” muttered Ralish, making Caraq chuckle.

“Pretend you’re a noble and nobody will look twice at you,” I said. “I like to think of Shal Gara and imagine what they’d say if they could see us now.”

“I can think of several headmen I’d invite to this party. That bloody Matriarch Danaxt, too.”

The gathering was definitely more delicious-looking than a tharantos nest. It wouldn’t have been the Feast of the Offered without food. Tables had been suspended on ironpith chains between the branches. They were laden with all kinds of fare, half of which I had never laid eyes on in all my nineteen seasons. I felt assaulted by the smells wafting over me. Though I wasn’t sure if it wasn’t the sea of perfumes we waded through.

*The stares here are different,* said Serisi.

The demon was right. The looks we were given in that plaza were not ones of adoration and wonder like the citizens below had given us. These were scrutinising, curious to the point of invasive, and on occasion, mocking. I could hear Serisi clacking her jaws together in repulsion. I saw what she saw: the opulence, the sheer wealth. Upon this plaza stood everything that was wrong with the order of the Bloodlaws, and the bloated noose it had become for the rest of the Swathe.

It wasn’t long before I caught sight of the sorcers of Coriqal, slumped upon wormsilk couches and holding court amongst a gathering of shining warriors. In one hand she held a crystal cup of wine. In the other, she swished about a tail of her hair, now bound silver wire and gemstones. Although the Serisi had very recently swindled the air carver out of her gems, she looked wholly enthused to see me. The sorcer pointed a braid at me.

“Speaking of the loam... Look at these treeless pretenders. How in the Hells did you scrape your way into the Forging?” she yelled at us.

“With your gems, actually,” I called to the sorcer once the laughter had died away. “Told you I would see you in the Forging.”

Her face became stone. “I see they’re accepting any kind of scum this season. Just look at that armour! It is more dust than ironpith. I think I remember my great-grandfather wearing something similar!” she crowed.

“Strange,” I said. “I was just wondering something similar.”

“And what is that, I wonder?”

“Why a bloodwood would choose the colour of shit for their armour.”

The sorcer worked her lips. “What is your name, loamer?”

“Paragon Tarkosi Terelta. And yours?”

“Paragon Zerocta Kash. They call me the Tempest of Coriqal, and I count on facing you in the Forging.”

I bared my teeth. “Same.”

*I should like to skin her for a fine coat, Tarko. Merely a suggestion.*

“Of course you would,” I chuckled as I stood straighter and left the woman to her pathetic circle. Rejoining the Scions, we wandered deeper into the glowing nest of enemies and unknowns.

Naxāko passed us by on our tour of the plaza. She pretended not to notice us until the last minute, and even then said nothing. We returned the favour, and silently eyed up the sorcer walking by her side. The paler, middle-seasoned woman had the look of a person who had never appreciated a joke in their life. She had the most elaborate sorcer tribe tattoo I had ever seen, reaching from hair



to jawline. A sword of sharp shells and blackfish teeth clung to her back, half-hidden by the teal hair that flowed over formal black armour. White scars crisscrossed her neck and bare cheek.

“Haidak is here also,” came a growl from Eztaral as she took a sandglass cup of clear spirit from a servant’s tray.

I followed her gaze immediately, hand instinctively reaching for my sling. I stared daggers through the trees at the detestable traitor with his Fireborn and other nobles spread around him. He mocked us with his boldness. Juraxi was by his side, clutching at his missing arm. I saw them laugh at Haidak’s words while he beamed around his pathetic circle. My mind sought the dirt surrounding the tree roots. Blue light simmered in my veins. I wanted to crush them all, and not stop there.

“Tarko,” Ralish warned me, standing at my shoulder. “I know that look. Even though it would teach all these pompous nobles and fat first-borns a lesson, don’t do it. That’s not who you are.”

*I do not like these rules. This is unbearable.*

“You sure we can’t do anything, Eztaral?” I complained.

“As much as I desire to introduce him to Marrowthirst, I am certain, Terelta.”

I watched Haidak Baran continue to grin and flatter those gathered about him. Sages and two matriarchs, by the look of their fine robes and trappings. They seemed more than content to nod along to whichever lies the monster fed them, slurping them down faster than the morsels pinched in their ringed fingers. I hated them by extension for daring to entertain the worm, and for breathing the same air as him. I hated them for their jewels and silks and for their blind eyes. I almost charged for Haidak right then and there. Even if I could have escaped the Scions, the warders stood ready to enforce the Allmother’s laws with ruthless efficacy. My revenge would have been swift but pointless.

“Well, that’s interestin’,” said Ralish, putting a hand against my chest as if she already guessed my impulse.

“What?”

“I spy Envoy Okarin. And she does not look happy.”

“Where?”

My head swivelled to see none other than a crimson-clad Envoy Okarin marching across the plaza with sable braids streaming and face a picture of thunder. She moved so swiftly and with such purpose I half-expected to see a blade in her hands. Instead, a string of white beads strangled her fingers.

Okarin did not slow until she reached Haidak Baran, who turned with a grin that withered as soon as she spat at his silken shoes.

“Traitor to the Swathe!” came her cry, momentarily stilling the din of the plaza. Nobles liked decorum and manners. This was bold. I hadn’t seen her so ablaze since the last hours of Shal Gara. A far cry from the muted woman that had exiled us at her mother’s whims. It intrigued me.

“This, I have to see,” I said, moving between the herds of people to get a better view and within earshot.

“I curse you to all the gods for what you did to Shal Gara,” Okarin was yelling, waving her finger inches from Haidak’s face. The scarlet lancewing feathers arrange in her hair wobbled. Although I harboured a bitterness over my exile, Okarin was momentarily forgiven for the furious display she put on.

Haidak showed enormous control in keeping calm and acting his role of sage. A pathetic lie, but it worked. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you are talking about, Envoy. I am a sage loyal to Azcalan. You must have me mistaken for somebody else.”

“And did Azcalan not succumb to flames several days ago? Yet another bloodwood fallen because of you, Haidak Baran. If this was not the Forging, I would have my warders strike you dead where you stand.”

Haidak rolled his eyes at the other matriarchs. “The fall of any bloodwood is a tragedy, I agree, Envoy, but I assure you it was not my doing.” He paused to shake his head dolefully. “The blame lies with wildfire. It seems that is our common enemy, not each other. I’m sure the loss of Shal Gara has wounded you deeply, but you’re mistaken in your blame. And you are on the edge of breaking the Allmother’s rules with this needlessly aggressive diatribe.”

“How dare you—”

“It was a pleasure to meet you, whoever you are. I bid you a fine evening and a fortunate Forging for your bloodwood,” Haidak said with a smile as he edged away with the matriarchs and sages. He caught my glare before he departed and had the hateful audacity to wink.

“Envoy Okarin,” shouted Eztaral, before Okarin could seize the scabbarded blade hanging from her neck. “We meet again.”

Okarin glared at us accusingly at first, but the realisation came swiftly. “Eagleborn Kraid! What are you doing here? And you as well, Tarkosi? I didn’t expect that.” The envoy swept forwards to greet us, counting beads as she counted us. “I worried you had perished in the loam.”

“No thanks to you, Envoy,” Ralish interjected.

Okarin bowed her head. “My mother’s decision was final. I had already tried to sway her several times but with no luck. She has since banned me or any sage in her court from mentioning you. I had no wish for you to be exiled, and if I am to tell the truth, Shal Gara’s poorer for your loss.”

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“The Forging, Tarko, of course,” she said, working the beads in her hand. “I am here to do what is right and tell Allmother Tzatca that the rumour of wildfires is a lie. A Fireborn lie at that. I aim to warn her of the true threat behind the fall of three bloodwoods in one season.”

Serisi rumbled in my head. *What a coincidence.*

“Sage Dūnekar has been offered to the Forging in the hope of gaining an audience. My mother took some convincing that this was the right choice, but I wore her down. She has not been... *herself* recently.”

Okarin gestured behind her where two familiar figures were approaching. None other than Sage Saronash the Jade Wolf and Aben Dūnekar, sage of the Shal Gara sorcers, walked amongst the trees. Beside them marched Eagleborn Gaakaran.

“Dūnekar is fighting?” I asked.

“That is *Sage* Dūnekar to you, exile,” the old sorcer rasped at me. I hated that I had to bend my neck to look up at him. The sage looked as hoglike as ever, maybe with a few more wrinkles in his snout. The silver feather glistened on his chest. His braided locks, what few of them remained on his balding head, were trussed up like a bird’s nest. Scars of the demon war and Shal Gara’s fall crisscrossed his face as they did the Jade Wolf’s. She and Gaakaran at least had the decency to bow.

“Glad to see you alive, Scions of the Sixth-Born,” Gaakaran said.

“I cannot say I’m glad whatsoever, Eagleborn,” Dūnekar huffed as he pointed at me. “If you seek the culprit behind the fall of Shal Gara, Envoy Okarin, you should blame this one. This abomination and the thing that dwells inside him.”

*Greetings.*

Okarin clenched her fists around her beads. “So you have said at length and repeatedly, Dūnekar. Fourteen times, in fact.”

“Wonderful to see you again, Sage,” I said, matching the old sorcer’s stare.

Dūnekar was too busy staring down at Pel. “Pelikai.”

“Dūnekar.”

“What brings you to Dorla Sel?” Okarin asked us, cutting the sage off from any more complaints.

“The Forging and the Fireborn,” Eztaral said honestly. “You’re not the only one who wants an audience with the Allmother. Tarko’s going to get us one, isn’t he?”

I nodded solemnly.

“You’ve been offered to the Forging?” Okarin asked, looking surprised again. “With which bloodwood?”

“Matriarch Caraq Gaakaran of Lostriver. Pleased to meet you,” said Caraq with a smirk. “Tarko fights for me now.”

“Gaakaran?” Dūnekar spluttered.

“My aunt,” Eagleborn Gaakaran said with a suspiciously similar smirk.

Caraq chuckled. “Nephew.”

Dūnekar lost his patience with us. “Outrageous. The Forging is not the place for the likes of *you*, Terelta. You do not belong here, Tarko. You are a blight. A curse. You should go back to the loam before you regret your decision and find out what a real sorcer looks like. We will handle the Allmother and the protection of the Swathe ourselves. Trouble, should be your name.”

*I see he has not changed.*

“Scared we might have to duel, Dūnekar?” I asked.

Wiping his hands in the air with an exasperated sigh, Dūnekar turned his back on his envoy and fellow sage and melded into the crowds. Saronash and Gaakaran did no such thing, staying with their envoy.

Okarin ushered us to the edge of the plaza where the nobles and their stares were thinner. “For what it is worth now, I am truly sorry for my mother’s decision.”

“Where is Danaxt?” I asked.

Okarin sighed. “An illness ravages her. The fifth-born say she will live but only to see another season, perhaps two. The fall of Shal Gara broke her heart and her spirit.”

An apology of my own lingered on my tongue, but I held it back, keeping my guilt and bitterness to myself.

“And so, I came here to speak on her behalf, and yet I find the loathsome Haidak Baran walking brazenly about these crowds as if he were born in Dorla Sel. The whole of Dorla Sel is abuzz with concern over fall of the bloodwoods burning, and yet the culprit roams freely right here in their midst.” Okarin seethed. “It is unbearable having to endure the sight and stench of him while he turns the rest of the Swathe against us in front of our eyes. And now he pretends he was not to blame? It is hateful. It makes no sense.”

I knew that feeling all too well.

“Welcome to our world,” Ralish told her. “The world that’s conveniently ignored everything we did and how hard we fought. Just like Shal Gara did.”

The envoy met her narrowed gaze, nodding slowly. “You should know that Shal Gara still stands with you. Gaakaran will tell you the same: that there are those that carve your likenesses in

bark and in the wood we rebuild with. Songs have been written of you, Tarko. Of all of you and what you did for Shal Gara. Those like Dūnekar are fewer, but louder.”

“It is true,” said Gaakaran.

“We have not forgotten as the others have,” Saronash added.

*Songs, she says? I wonder if my glorious acts are remembered?*

As I tried to understand that, Okarin stepped closer to me. “Is she still in there, Tarko? Your demon?”

I let Serisi come forth to flash her fire in my eyes. I saw Okarin’s face stiffen.

“More than ever,” I replied.

“I can see her,” she said, gaze slipping to the marks of Serisi and the nectra on my neck. The armour was failing to hide it. “If you stand against Haidak, then you have my support. We are stronger together. Know that I stand with you, even if I cannot back you openly. If you need anything, then you can find me in the Forge. Shal Gara still has weight in the Swathe, and there are... *agreements* that can be struck to influence the order of the duels. And I will do my best to convince Dūnekar to cease his whining. He might not believe in you, but I do.”

I tilted my head. “You should warn him instead. I’m here to win.”

“I see your confidence hasn’t faded, Tarko.”

Okarin stepped closer still to me. I could see Ralish bristle in my peripheries.

“Do you still dreamwalk, Tarko?” the envoy asked. The beads in her hands fell still.

I looked to the Scions over Okarin’s shoulder. “I haven’t since Shal Gara fell and Faraganthar was killed. There have been a few nightmares, but that is all.”

“What a shame. Perhaps we will share a dream one day,” she whispered before withdrawing.

Gaakaran came to touch foreheads with his aunt and to clasp Eztaral’s hand. When he turned to me, he gripped me tightly. “We believe in you, hero. When Swathe’s days grow dire, we will stand against the fire, isn’t that what you Scions say?”

I nodded proudly, my ego swelling.

“I’ve never seen such dire days,” Gaakaran remarked, before he guided the Jade Wolf and Okarin away.

“You’re right about that,” Redeye could be heard mumbling.

Ralish muttered in my ear. “I do not like that envoy.”

“Songs, Eztaral,” Atalawe grinned. “Would you have thought? At least somebody believes in us besides old Two Moon and Caraq here.”

Eztaral stamped her foot. “I don’t care for songs, but I would care for Haidak’s head on the tip of a spear.”

A blast of a horn and the frenetic pounding of drums interrupted us. In the sky above us, where wisps of cloud were painted orange by the yellow vinelight, a mighty skyriser was descending. Highwarders covered every scrap of its platform, each with their teardrop shields raised like the petals of a flower.

Whispers ran around us. “The Allmother speaks!”

I crossed my arms as I watched the riser descend above the forest of the plaza. It did not sully itself by coming down to our level, but hovered a hundred feet above. I stared as the shields shifted to reveal the distorted figure of an aged woman standing behind a sphere of sandglass. She was wrapped in complex braids of moon-white hair. With a slowness that tested my patience, she approached a cone of emerald and gold poking from her sphere. Her voice was not as shrill as

Danaxt's, but it pierced the noise of Dorla Sel just the same. I found myself drifting away from the Scions to get a better glimpse of the all-powerful matriarch.

"In this season of bad omens, rumours of wildfires, and lost bloodwoods, it would be simple to forget the Forging. And yet in the face of difficult times, it comes to matter more than it has in decades. From first-born to sixth, you have come from bloodwood far and wide, flat town and tree city innumerable, to stand united as one. Here in Dorla Sel, mightiest and oldest of all bloodwoods, capital of the Swathe, you have shown the Swathe has no fear."

The earthquake of stamping feet and voices united could be felt in my lungs.

Allmother Tzatca held her hand for quiet, and gradually, it was given. "One truth remains above all others, and that is we are here at the gods' behest, and here to exercise their gifts of magic to see who stands above all as the finest. The best. The absolute. Amongst you stand our sorcers, those blessed with the gods' gifts of might and magic. Some of those standing before us have come for glory. Others to humbly test themselves. Others have come to make a name for themselves that will outlive their mortal bones. Yet only one standing amongst you is that absolute, yet to be revealed. All of you have such a chance. Do not squander it. Do not bring shame to your bloodwoods. Seize this opportunity with both fists and tighter than ever before. Stand tall against doubt and darkened rumours. May the Three Gods and all their spirits smile on you, and may their gifts of nectra and magic flow strong and pure!"

The crowd's roaring was so intense it looked as though it lifted the Allmother's skyriser aloft. As she receded back to her spider-like palace in the shadows of the crown, the drums and music began anew. Chanting could be heard across the branches.

"And there you have it," I heard Eztaral snort. "If we want to see the Allmother again, a certain somebody amongst us will have to survive the Forging."

"Fine words, don't you think, Terelta?" asked a figure not far from my side. Juraxi stood nearby, his lopsided face bearing its usual smile of pretend cheer.

Serisi snarled within me. *This detestable roach will not escape death again. Give me control. I can be discreet.*

I held us both back, painfully aware of the warders peppering the crowds.

"Juraxi," I breathed. "How did you survive Stormbeaten? We left you there to die."

The loamer stared around our circle. "The will of the God of Chaos saved me."

"And here was I assuming it was a decent healer," I said. "Surprised to see me here at the Feast of the Offered?"

"Not so much. Haidak said you would be stupid enough to try to win," Juraxi laughed. "You can try your best, but you can't defeat the Iron Icon's power."

"And what could a God of Chaos want with a runt like you? He already scarred you once with his fire and took everything you loved away. The sad truth is you still worship him for it. I don't hate you, Juraxi. Hah, I pity you. You're no better than the half-dead souls caged up in the roots of Azcalan, following your master Haidak's every word and whim," I told him.

Juraxi's smile turned us upside down as Inwar trotted through the crowds and stood at my hip, fangs bared. "Haidak leads us to glory. You will see."

"He leads you into a fiery death. You'll burn just like those in Shal Gara did," I snapped. "Take it from somebody who knows demons better than you ever could: you Fireborn are pawns to the Last Clan. No better than navik and twice as useless. Slaves to a god you are too afraid to fear in the right way. You will see, Juraxi, and I'll be there to witness the realisation on your face."

*I cannot wait.*

The putrid Fireborn returned to the crowds with a puckered face and without another word. I scanned the nobles around us, and wherever I looked, I found them: the concentrated stares of strangers. They did not shy from my gaze, and it disturbed me to wonder whether it was noble blood or Fireborn belief that kept them staring. They lingered between trees and tables, or loitered amongst chattering crowds.

*This ban of fighting and violence wears on me, Tarko.*

Eztaral put a hand on my shoulder. “You heard the Allmother. Let’s not waste our chance. Back to the Obsidian Forge with us, where we don’t have to watch our step for the cloaks of nobles nor suffer this awful music any longer.”

“Where’s Redeye?” Atalawe asked. We looked around, seeing no sign of the scarlet-eyed bastard.

*How predictable.*

“Once again, he’s disappeared when the Fireborn are around, Eztaral,” I muttered.

The eagleborn gave me a sharp nudge and cupped her hands to her mouth. “Redeye!”

“I’m here,” grumbled the sorcer as he appeared from between two shrubs carved into leaping barkwolves.

“What in the Six Hells did I say about sticking together, Redeye?”

Redeye lifted up a plate of lizard tails and shrugged. “Isn’t a man allowed to eat?”

Eztaral caught my suspicious glance at Redeye. For the first time, I saw my doubt in her mismatched eyes.

*I tell you, that man will betray us before this is done.*

As much as that unsettled me, I had to agree with my demon.

# 30

## FIRST BLOOD

*History is not written by the victors, for there is no victory in falsehood.*  
*FOUND CARVED INTO THE DOORS OF DORLA SEL'S SCROLLCAVES*

I felt the drumbeats in my feet, throbbing through my bones and into my head to jostle the demon within.

“Are you ready, Serisi?”

The demon chuckled. *More than you know. I was born to spill blood.*

Eztaral clapped a hand on my back. Ralish clutched my hand. Atalawe said a scholar's prayer while Inwar growled impatiently. Only Redeye stood apart, curiously unreadable.

Pel stood beside me in silence, hands clasped behind his back.

“How far did you get in the Forging?” I asked him.

“Lost my third duel. I was young and impetuous. I was so concerned with pleasing the crowd I forgot my magic. I almost lost my head because of it. Don't you do the same, Tarko. Applause means nothing when you're dead.”

“And you, Redeye?” I looked to the sorcer. The man had dark bags under his crimson stare.

“Second duel,” he grunted.

The skyriser jolted as it began to descend through the levels of the Obsidian Forge. Floor after floor had been dedicated to mansions and chambers similar to ours. All except one level: a broad gap washed in a glimmering shade of blue. Carts of clinking nectra vials were being shepherded back and forth along narrow corridors in the bark-wood. For a fleeting moment, I glimpsed a hall pulsating with a core of light, deep within the tree. The silhouettes of a hundred warders were stark against the shine.

The chains slackened as the riser hit the floor of the Forge. We stood at the edge of a hall filled with bustling sorcers and their entourages. Sunlight beamed through grand archways at the far end, and beyond them, the Forge thundered with anticipation. Its half-moon battleground of fresh sand and varnished wood shone in the sun.

With the Scions at my back, I made a path through the crowd of waiting sorcers. Some were busy practising their spells in hollows in the walls, making the air vibrate with magic. Others whirled through dances of the sword and spear. Dozens more bowed in prayer before the alcoves where shrines to gods and ancestors glittered with vinelight and smouldering herbs. Godseers stood with them, making sacrifices of frogs and beetles.

“Weapons are allowed but are frowned upon. A last resort only,” Pel lectured.

Serisi grumbled.

“Only one duel at a time.” Eztaral tightened the clasps on my shoulders and back. “And the fights go on as long as they have to, until one sorcer gives in, can't fight back, or is too dead to do anything about it. Keep in mind, Tarko: we are not here to kill our kin. Not unless they prove themselves to be Fireborn.”

“And I can use whichever magic I want?” I said in hope.

Pel cleared his throat. “You’ll use what you’re good at, Paragon, and won’t trust in spells you’re not used to. Better to keep that a hidden weapon Haidak doesn’t expect.”

*And I say we show them what kind of weapon we are,* said Serisi.

At the edge of the arches, where the sunlight almost touched the tips of my boots, I stared up at the towering levels of the audience. Not a place at the railings or a single seat remained empty. A kaleidoscopic sea of people waited to see sorcer blood spilled. The perches above the spires of obsidian were crammed with lancewings, crows, and parrots. The branches above were heavy with crowds, all of them stamping their feet to the beat of the drums. Ribbons and petals fell as snow upon the waiting battleground.

I could see the points and waving hands of citizens and bet-takers as they sized me up against the other sorcers standing beside me. Some raised their dyed hands, others waved, and a sad few flaunted themselves in ridiculous poses. Zerocta, our good friend from Coriqal, happened to be one of the latter.

*I hope we get the opportunity to grind her face into the wood.*

I sized up my competition, memorising the cornucopia of armour, from obsidian and stone to wood, pelt, and metal. Most of the dyed hands I saw were white and red. A rare number wore blue. Streaks of colour and long knots of hair showed the painted and braided sorcers amongst us. Of all the offered, I was most definitely one of the youngest. The only other sorcer I could see who had barely seen their twentieth season was a skinny maven in black feathers. There was a shiver in his red hands he tried desperately to hide.

*I would not bet on that one, that is for certain,* said Serisi.

“And what about him?” I said.

“Who?” Eztaral asked.

“Haidak’s sorcer.”

I pointed at a brute of a sorcer, currently washing his face with a barrel of water. The earth reaver was encased in scarlet and copper armour, and a half-mask of jade covered the lower half of his face, carved like a lizard poking out its tongue. Four brands were etched black on his cheek. Thin strands of copper hair grew in patches across his skull as if fire had touched him. Juraxi hobbled around the man, mouth wagging with words I couldn’t hear. Haidak was nowhere to be seen, but likely rubbing shoulders in the higher tiers of the crowd.

Atalawe snorted. “That’s Haidak’s champion? Looks like the kind of man who would open a nut with a warhammer.”

“How are the sorcers matched with each other?” I asked, thinking of what Okarin had told me about agreements that influenced the duels.

“Any order of magic can fight any other order. So can any rank, from initiate to sage. Sometimes it is fair, sometimes it is not,” Atalawe answered. “And my fellow scholars would tell you the duels are organised by order of offering and name.”

“Orokan shit,” said Redeye. “There’s all kinds of bargaining amongst the matriarchs and backers for who fights whom.”

“And why aren’t we doing any of that, Eztaral?” asked Ralish.

“The Scions do not resort to bribing citizens who already have their heads so far up their own arses they would choke on their tiny hearts,” she replied. “Not only that, but we have spent all our



gems again. And lastly, because after the debacle in the offering, everybody thinks we are mad or foolish.”

“You’re cheery today, Eztaral,” I said.

Pel stepped forwards, putting a hand to his ears. “It begins.”

A shadow grew across the petal-strewn arena. We sorcers poked our heads from the arches to see a tiered and armoured skyriser descending from a lofty branch. Highwarders lined every inch of its layers, and their teardrop shields of emerald and gold gave the platform the look of an ornate pinecone. A wide eye of sandglass dominated its underside. No doubt the hermit Allmother Tzatca was hidden within.

When at last the riser had come to a halt above the highest tier of the Obsidian Forge, the drums came to a sudden and eerie halt. Every highwarder stamped a foot and raised their shield. The crowds fell still. The hush was accompanied by a cloud falling across the sun and casting a veil of shadow across Dorla Sel. It stood the hairs of my arms on end.

A familiar and ancient godseer shuffled into the centre of the Forge, directly beneath the Allmother’s riser. He gave no words, simply lifting a vial of nectra from his gold robes for all to see. Undoing the stopper, he poured the nectra in a glowing blue circle. A knife slid from a scabbard and drew crimson from his wrinkled palm. With a clenched fist, he dripped the blood into the centre of the circle, as if painting an enormous eye.

“By nectra and the gods of sun, soil, and rain, you have been blessed, and it is and shall be your right to wear their blessing upon your mortal skin,” he intoned, giving the sorcer’s rites in a shrill voice that would have rivalled a lancewing’s chirrups. “By the spirits, you have been blessed to wear the mantle of magic. And by all mortal laws, you have been blessed a sorcer. By these three blessings, I name you sorcers of earth, wind, and water. Bring honour to the bloodwoods, the Allmother, your family, and your tribe! Through might and magic!”

“Through might and magic!” roared the sorcers and the crowds in one terrifying voice.

“Let the Forging begin!” the godseer proclaimed. The drums thrummed once more as the old scholar raised a tablet in his uninjured hand and called out the first names.

“On this, the first fight of the first day of Forging, Sage Aben Dūnekar of Shal Gara, water weaver, tests himself against Painted One Saika Leafcutter of Rōkama Dar, air carver!”

The Obsidian Forge pounded with feet and clapping hands. The whole of Dorla Sel must have trembled under its noise.

The crowd of sorcers parted behind us, making way for the chosen two. Dūnekar came forwards in a slow and measured strut and was welcomed by a mighty cheer. He wore no armour, merely a robe of red and silver silks. At the far end of the Forge, his opponent matched him pace for pace, shrugging his arms and punching the air with white hands. The paint lining his face and bald head was black and pale silver. Vials and daggers fought for space on his crossed belts and spiked carapace armour. It was only when the light struck that its black turned to purple.

Sorcers and entourages lined the open wall of the Forge’s innards, clamouring to see the first blood spilled. For the first time, I noticed stone urns of water and black earth placed around the edges of the Forge. I could already feel the dirt calling to me.

Saika raised something small and wooden to the canopy. I watched his mouth move in a prayer to the ancestors and the Three. And if he was particularly nervous, all their spirits, too.

Dūnekar took up his position upon the battleground. A single vial was clenched in one hand. The sun shone upon the silver in his braids.

*Starless Plains, that man is one ugly sorcer.*

“Powerful, though.”

“And the crowd likes him. The fall of Shal Gara has gained him a sympathetic following. He’s the favourite to win, I heard some workers say.” Atalawe said. “It wouldn’t be the first time. Didn’t Dūnekar win the season you lost, Pel?”

“That he did,” the old sorcer sighed. “We better hope his old age has slowed him down.”

“Hasn’t slowed you down,” Redeye muttered, getting a dour look from me. I had run out of patience for the sorcer. He was lucky I had larger problems.

A crash of a gong above the arches began the duel. Saika of Rōkama Dar had a vial in each fist and he threw them to his lips so fast it was a wonder he didn’t smash his teeth. Nectra dribbled down his cheek and neck in his haste.

Dūnekar had no such hurry. He didn’t spill a drop, and even took the time to put the vial back into his pocket while Saika hurled his into the screeching crowd.

I counted my hurried heartbeats while the nectra took hold of the two sorcers. Their eyes shone pale blue when the magic filled them. Sand billowed as Saika cast the first magic: a simple yet powerful surge spell that ripped across the Forge’s grounds.

Dūnekar was ready. With a clap of his hands, water fled from the urns to form a shield before him. The surge spell battered the thin circle of water, spraying a good amount of the crowd on the lower levels. Saika threw spear and blade spells around the shield with his spare hand in an effort to catch Dūnekar out. Enraptured, I watched the old sage’s shield warp to meet every attack. Saika seized the air at his back instead, buffeting him from both directions to spoil his footing. But Dūnekar was rooted like a lanky bloodwood. In the cloud of dust, I spied water spinning around his legs, keeping him still.

“Dūnekar can’t endure that for long, surely?” Ralish asked.

Pel’s clouded and glowing eyes were fixated on his old sage.

“Watch,” Atalawe told her.

Dūnekar had been working a distraction. While Saika focused on crushing the sage between his spells, he had failed to notice the water pouring from the urns at the far edge of the Forge. Three rivers of it tumbled across the wood, and as they rushed for Saika, they took on the shape of galloping barkwolves with fangs bared. I won’t deny my jaw slackened.

*All that water*, Serisi muttered, and for a brief moment, the question of whether I had made a mistake had a different answer.

Saika noticed the roars of the crowds far too late. He was swift, I granted him that, but despite halving two of the constructs with blades of air, the third bowled him over with the force of a hammer. Dūnekar worked his magic, swirling the water around his opponent so that Saika was pinned on his knees. Even through the spell, I could see the bubbles escaping from the sorcer’s mouth as he fought to breathe. With a clench of his fist, Dūnekar ripped the spell away only to batter Saika with a dozen watery fists. Once again, he drowned Saika.

The crowds began to chant in anticipation of Saika’s eventual death or capitulation. Their chants grew faster and faster as the sorcer clung to life. Fortunately for Rōkama Dar, it was the latter. Saika’s hand escaped the maelstrom to slap on the sodden ground.

Dūnekar was reluctantly merciful. The spell relented, washing almost as far as the arches. Saika was left to cough up bloody water while Dūnekar bowed to the Allmother’s riser and made his way

back to the arches without a single glance for the crowd. They didn't seem to care. Dūnekar had given them what they wanted.

The old sage walked close to me as he strode into the shade. He had no words for me, but his haughty scowl spoke enough.

"Now you have seen the true nature of the Forge, Tarko," Pel said.

Redeye was picking at something in his teeth. "Still think you can win?"

I nodded firmly. "Undoubtedly. Never been more ready in my life."

"Funny. I remember the same words spoken by a sorcer in the Battle of the Scorchroad. We found him in four pieces when the dust had settled," said Redeye. "Remember, Pel?"

"Enough, curse it!" I snapped. "I don't know why the others tolerate it, Redeye, but I've had enough of your constant scepticism and complaining. If you're not going to say something useful then keep your depressing words to yourself for once in your life. If you're so full of doubt and doom, then why don't you just leave? Or is there something you've yet to do? Something you're biding your time for. What are you hiding, Redeye?"

"Tarko!" Atalawe hissed, looking shocked. "What's going on?"

"You sound deranged, Tarko. And I've been keeping quiet plenty. You think I'm hiding something? How about you tell the others about the last water spell that hit you in the face and how that felt?" Redeye goaded, before Eztaral whacked him on the arm to a clang of copper and ironpith.

"Enough, Redeye! I want silence out of both of you. This is not the place."

I turned away from the others, looking instead to the next souls to step into the ring. The nervous maven had been chosen and was currently being gripped tightly by his small entourage. A matriarch put a hand to his face as if blessing him. And for good reason, too.

The opponent that had been chosen for him was none other than Haidak's sorcer. I saw no sign of Baran, only Juraxi and a dozen Fireborn in robes and masks. Their offering thumped his chest and thighs as he pointed at the maven and began to chant in a deep grunt.

"What is he doing?" Ralish asked.

"Never underestimate the power of the mind over muscle," answered Eztaral. "A weak mind can lose to weaker muscle and magic just as easily. There are Scorchfolk warriors who dance before a battle, and though it may sound utterly pointless to you, few enemies have ever put a knot in my gut like they did."

It was working marvellously on the maven. I saw the sheen of sweat on his forehead as he marched to the arches to meet his fate.

Haidak's sorcer had a name, and it was brayed to the heavens.

"Paragon Datlak Baran of Azcalan, earth reaver—"

"A cousin, no doubt," Eztaral answered my confused glare.

"—faces Maven Ipara the Viper of Gora Kara, earth reaver!"

"Viper? Does he look like a viper to you?" asked Ralish.

"Maybe it's all an act," suggested Atalawe.

Pel nodded. "I hope for his sake it is."

Ipara and Datlak made their way out to the centre of the Forge, twenty paces from each other.

As the gong was hammered, Datlak was already downing his nectra. Ipara struggled to catch up, spilling half down his shoulder. He might have been nervous, but he was quick with his spells. A huge thud filled the air as two rush spells collided. Datlak was running to close the gap when Ipara tripped him with a miniature wall spell and made him eat dust.

Down came Ipara's tendril spells, shaped like hammers, but Datlak wielded half a dozen shields around him, catching each blow in turn. They fought closer and closer until Datlak ducked under Ipara's guard to seize him by his collar. That was the moment all of us expected the Viper to come alive, but, much to our disappointment, it was no act.

Datlak slammed his forehead into Ipara's nose over and over until the maven fell limp. His face was a mask of blood, his nose caved in. Datlak raised him in one hand, letting a tendril spell flow over his arm to lift him higher.

The crunch of his skull and ribs echoed as Ipara met the Forging's floor. If I hadn't already known Datlak had Baran blood, I would have guessed it then as he strode in a circle around his opponent. He grinned at the crowd, cupping his ears to hear their roars.

*Disrespectful, but effective. These Fireborn have learned from demonkind.*

"Submit!" the crowd began to yell.

"Stay down," Eztaral murmured.

Ipara died a fool. His last act was not to tap his defeat, but to swing a dagger at Datlak's leg.

"As you wish!" yelled the sorcer before he willingly stomped on the Viper's head. Three kicks were all the brute needed to end Ipara's life, and leave the maven a bloody mess upon the sand. A gasp ran through half the crowd, a cheer ran through the other. Gems swapped hands as the death of a sorcer made fortunes and paupers. It felt cheap. Too quick. I would have struggled to tie my boots in the time it had taken Ipara to die.

"Bloody loam," breathed Ralish.

Behind me, I could hear Atalawe muttering another prayer to the gods and their spirits, just in case.

"Datlak's a brute, that's clear enough. A cheap death with nothing to do with magic, if you ask me," Eztaral surmised.

I shrugged my armour. "Haidak must be so proud."

Pel sniffed. "But he's dangerous all the same. Nobody gives their all in their first fight if they can help it."

"Either you or Dūnekar will have to beat him, if we're to stop Haidak reaching the Allmother," Eztaral reminded us.

The brute was heading towards us. I couldn't see the smile behind his half-mask, but I knew it was there.

"Tarkosi Terelta, they call you," Datlak Baran said in a voice deep as the drums.

"And you are Azcalan's finest, or so they tell me," I answered. "I wonder, how big was the barrel they scraped you out of?"

*Very good, Tarko.*

The sorcer looked dumbfounded yet he understood enough to realise it was an insult. His response was to wipe Ipara's blood from his forehead and drip it at my feet. Whispers abounded in the arches, in between the cries and wailing of Ipara's entourage.

"I look forward to fighting you," Datlak said with a shine in his eyes that was nothing to do with nectra and irkingly familiar. "Both of you."

I watched him thump into the crowd, imagining all the different ways I would beat him.

Serisi had simpler ideas. *And I look forward to peeling his face off. We could wear it as a hat.*

The time for mourning the dead sorcer was swift. Another beat of the drums summoned the next duel.

Four more duels were fought before I was called. There was little ceremony besides a scholar sidling up to us with a very elaborate and oversized clay tablet. “Paragon Tarkosi Terelta?” he squawked.

“That is me.”

“You’re next.”

“Who am I fighting?”

The scholar huffed as if it was highly inconvenient. “Molox of Rasqax. Hm, almost rhymes. He’s a painted one and an earth reaver.”

*Delicious. One rank above you.*

“Very good, Serisi,” I whispered.

I couldn’t deny the clenching of my gut. Or how the wind turned cold on my forehead. I told myself it was anticipation, the promise of battle, even the demon’s lust for blood. Anything but fear.

A small armoured cart dragged by a half-dozen workers and twice that many warders stopped at my side.

“Nectra,” uttered a worker.

“I don’t need it,” I replied.

“Hmph. You and half the others here who brought their own,” he sighed as if failing in his calling somehow.

“Don’t see any on you,” said another worker, before the first whacked him around the ear.

I smirked. “Like I said, I don’t need it,” I repeated.

Amidst their confusion and scoffs of disbelief, I turned to each Scion, clutching their hands in turn. All but Redeye.

“This is your moment, Tarko,” said Pel. “Don’t you forget what I said about control.”

Eztaral adjusted my armour one last time. “And while you’re having some kind of epiphanic moment out there, make sure you show them the power of the Scions. Show Haidak what he missed in the last battle of Shal Gara.”

I touched my forehead to Ralish’s without a word.

“To the loam with all that. Show them who Tarko Terelta is,” she whispered.

Atalawe looked me up and down before thumping her fist against mine. “Do what you do best.”

I couldn’t deny the snort of laughter that came from me.

Taking a breath, I turned on my heel and marched for the sunlight beating down upon the Forge. The stares came thick and fast as I was visually weighed and measured. Zerocta and the Coriqal sorcers all grinned like jāgus.

“Think you might have forgotten your nectra, sorcer!” she said in a mocking voice. Several onlookers spluttered with laughter.

“There’s one every Forging, I swear,” complained another.

“Where’s he going? He can hear us, no?”

“Mad fool.”

I smiled at each of them while Serisi snickered. *Show them indeed.*

With every pound of my quickening heart and every thump of boots, I focused on my calm and let the magic find me. My hand quivered as the power surged up my arm and spread across my chest into every vein. Its heat scorched me from within. It yearned to be freed.

My opponent broke into the light with me, thirty paces away and hands already raised to the crowd. I refrained from doing the same, but I still kept my head up and eyes fixed on the maelstrom

of the crowd. Its roar shook the air around me. Heat waves trembled the far edges of the Forge either side of me. My boots scuffed through streaks of blood wet and dry as they read my name.

“Painted One Molox of the bloodwood Rasqax, earth reaver, faces Paragon Tarkosi Terelta, of the... the Scions of the Sixth-Born! Also earth reaver!” announced the old godseer.

Molox was as wide as he was tall, it was just a shame he stood a head shorter than me. Not even his spiked, mud-brown hair could make up for it. Blue tattoos of water’s waves washed along his chin and jawline. They matched his cobalt armour of iridescent snail shell perfectly. An axe of bone jangled at his hip amidst a clutch of nectra vials. Molox might have cut an impressive figure, but for some reason, all I could think was that he seemed the sort of blustering fellow that insisted on wrestling every time wine passed his lips.

Molox snapped a nectra vial from his belt and stood ready to drink. I, of course, did nothing but stand there. I even crossed my arms to show it was no trick, even though my fists were clenched tightly around shivering magic.

Predictably, the crowd thought me either suicidal or a waste of their time. Or even worse, a deep offence to the Swathe. One intrepid citizen decided to boo me at the top of his lungs. Others followed eagerly. Within moments, the whole Forge had turned on me. Scraps of fried lizard tails and fruit rinds started to fall instead of petals. An entire turtle shell clunked on the ground near my foot. I ignored it while I silently removed my gloves and let the crowd see one red hand, one blackened fist, and a pair of worker’s marks. I enjoyed every stare and yell. I was done hiding.

Molox was looking at the godseer with his hands in the air, exchanging shrug after shrug.

“What are you doing, sorcer?” Molox hissed at me, but before I could answer, the gong cut the air.

With an exasperated snarl, the sorcer of Rasqax drank his nectra and threw aside the vial with a smash of sandglass. I didn’t move a muscle, even while he began to close the distance between us. His eyes were glowing blue by the fifth step. The sorcer was fast with his nectra.

A cry boomed from the crowds. “Teach this fool a lesson, Molox!”

*Hah.*

I waited until he was ten paces from me and dragging spears from the dirt before I unleashed my spells. Snapping my hands to the ground and heaving with every scrap of might, I brought dirt cascading inwards in two tumbling waves, twice as fast as Molox could react. They smashed into him from left and right, leaving a cloud of dust where he had stood moments ago.

The silence of the crowd did not last long. I glared across the tiers, showing them I had no shine in my eyes.

Molox did, however. Two glowing orbs pierced the haze of dust.

“Shield, Tarko!” yelled Pel. “Control!”

I raised the spell just in time for the ferocious dart spell to explode against my shield. The force almost knocked me off my feet. Three more came before I could build a fort spell to keep them at bay.

Molox anticipated my escape. Two tendrils shaped like pickaxes splintered the wood of the battleground. I broke them with tendrils of my own and drove the fort into a rush spell.

*You are better than this, you know.*

Serisi was right.

While Molox spun intricate blades of earth around his outstretched arms, I forced my imagination into a construct I had never tried before. With a sweep of the dirt beneath our feet, I

summoned one of the blackfish of Stormbeaten in earth form and made it lunge at Molox. The spell dented his armour deeply, and while he staggered, I lashed thin rope-like tendrils of dirt around his arms and legs.

Molox's will battled mine like two bloodwoods leaning against each other. I was vexed to find his was winning. While he held half my tendrils at bay, a construct began to build behind him. Crude as my blackfish, but shaped as a spider with Molox at the centre of its legs.

I was forced to drop my spells and dive for cover as the thick legs came crashing down. Any one of them could have pulverised my skull. Ducking and rolling, I kept my dart spells flying to buy me time and space.

"Serisi, I think it's time you made your entrance," I hissed at my demon.

*With pleasure!* she roared.

Throwing my arms wide, I dragged the last scraps of dirt to me. Serisi's form exploded upwards, claws curled, jaw agape, and broad wings spreading from her back.

Even Molox had to pause for a second to stare at the intricate construct, no doubt as foreign to him as when I first set eyes on demonkind. The breath of the crowd was a wind.

I ripped the sword from my belt, throwing it into Serisi's claws. She went to work with frightening passion, slicing the legs of Molox's spider construct while I kept the sorcer busy fending off my barrage of dart spells. In my other hand, I kept my sling loose, loaded, and tucked out of sight at my side.

Serisi fought like the demon she was. Her twirling attacks were dizzying to watch, so much so that Molox was too distracted to notice me getting closer. I could see spears of earth forming at his back. The enormous spider's legs reared, ready to stab at Serisi.

Sprinting under the shadow of the duelling constructs, I cut Serisi's spell short and dragged her downwards just as Molox pounced. The spells missed the demon and instead pierced the wood at my sprinting heels. While the sorcer reeled from the miss, I swung my sling like a club and caught him a glancing blow across the temple.

*My sword, Tarkosi!*

I was summoning a vicious rush spell when Serisi, as if she was half in control of me, threw up my empty hand to claw at the shining sky.

"What the—"

The impact of the sword landing in my palm jolted my bones. With a yell made of half surprise, half victory, I swung my sword at Molox's neck.

Molox blinked at me, face and neck twitching at the sight of the silver blade hovering an inch from him.

"Submit!" came the cries, almost immediately drowned out by demands of, "Kill! No mercy!" mixed with pleas to spare him. Some of those came from the Rasqax entourage beneath the arches. The Scions watched me with folded arms.

*You know mercy is not my way, Tarko,* said Serisi. I felt her presence at the very surface of my being. My hand twitched, making Molox flinch.

"But it should be mine," I breathed, torn.

*What if he is Fireborn? An enemy of the Scions?*

The bastard was refusing to submit, but so would I, if it were my arse in the dust.

*End him.*

It felt too cold-blooded. Eztaral was right. I was not here to play kin-killer. This man was no Fireborn assassin standing over my brother's corpse. "Control" was the word that echoed in my head.

"Submit," I said above the incessant chanting roar of the crowd.

"It is not the Rasqax way," he growled between bloody teeth. "We fight until we cannot."

"Trust me," I replied. "The Swathe needs you alive."

"Then make it look good, curse it."

"Serisi? Oblige him," I breathed, already feeling her surge into my skull and her power flitting down my arm. My right hand hurtled into his jaw and knocked him out cold. My fingers flexed for his throat before I pulled the demon back and pushed her within.

The crowd was strangely stilled, as if expecting me to go further. I put them out of their misery of waiting by sheathing the silver sword.

A shrill shout rose above the clamour of unease. "Tarkosi the merciful!"

It took a moment, but the cheers came like a storm-wind through the forest, until the whole Forge erupted in praise. I turned to find the crowd on its feet, from noble to humble citizen. Coloured parchment and petals and even gems rained down upon the floor of the Obsidian Forge.

*At least revel in your victory, Tarko. If I cannot bathe in blood, then let us relish in the adoration of the worms that would give anything to be us,* Serisi snarled.

I raised my hands to feel the thunder increase in volume. Even in the dusky sandglass floor of the Allmother's riser, I imagined I could see clapping hands.

As I removed my helmet, Serisi unfurled into her form of dust, mirroring my pose before the crowd. I don't know how I found him, but my eyes locked with the tiny shape of Haidak Baran on the topmost tier. I could imagine his scowl.

Of course, there were those who stood still and with arms crossed: those whom I had cost wagers. Those who had wanted death and innards, perhaps. Or those whom Haidak had already got to. Here and there, I saw their suspicious stares and blank faces. They were barely jostled by the crowd.

I turned for the arches to see the Scions standing amongst a crowd split between cheering and confused looks. Ralish met me halfway, pressing her forehead to mine.

"Hadn't a doubt," she whispered. "Show-off."

For once, Eztaral out-grinned Atalawe. Pel seized my shoulders and whispered something about pride I couldn't hear over the clamour. Though he pretended not to, Redeye shrugged as if proven wrong.

Yells echoed amongst the arches as the Scions folded around me. I let the voices wash over me as I stood tall and chin high, a victorious smile on my face. A demon's grin.

*How is that possible?*

*It's not!*

*He's a freak, I tell you.*

*Never seen a construct like that before.*

*He's a liar. A cheat. A fake.*

"Make way there," yelled a gruff voice. The Rasqax entourage came barging through the gawpers. Two equally stocky warriors held a weakened Molox between them. He soon shrugged them away to square up to me.

"How?" he asked.

"Nectra in the veins," was all I said, letting the crowd argue over that. "A lucky accident."



*And a demon in the mind.*

Molox came closer to look at me. He extended an open hand, and after a moment of consideration, I seized his wrist with a thud of armour. “You had every right to end me, but you showed mercy. That isn’t usually the fashion in the Forge,” he muttered. “For that, if you ever need anything of Rasqax, you can call on Molox.”

“The same goes for the Scions,” growled Eztaral, locking eyes with a man in purple robes who had the silver feather of a sage around his neck.

Molox answered with a laugh. “I don’t know if you’re a miracle or a monster, but curse me, you’re a fine sorcer.”

I matched his grin. “Don’t worry. I keep asking myself the same question.”

# 31

## THE BAIT OF TREACHERY

*None can know the future save the gods. For the Three have already written what shall come to pass, and even they cannot change their fates. What will be shall be. And what they have written today, warriors of the Scorch, is a glorious victory against the atrocious oppression of the treefolk!*

*FROM A SPEECH BY WARLORD GERGEX, SHORTLY BEFORE HE WAS BRUTALLY DEFEATED IN THE BATTLE OF THE SCORCHROAD*

Word travelled fast in an average bloodwood. It travelled like a lancewing in Dorla Sel.

*Again, Tarko,* demanded Serisi.

"Fine," I said, even though there wasn't a complaint in my body.

I shifted in front of the wide archway once more, looking out over the balcony and upon the crowds below spread out on the encircling leafroad. The cheer rose once more as they glimpsed me and my Scion leafleather.

"You're gettin' too into that, if you ask me," Ralish snorted. She was lounging on one of the couches, poking at the strange foods the workers had brought us.

"It's Serisi, not me."

Ralish raised an eyebrow.

"Well, maybe I am, but it's a fine change from being laughed at for believing in demons and a God of Chaos, isn't it?" I asked. "We've been denied so long, it's good to be recognised again. To matter to more than just Two Moon and Caraq."

"You're not wrong," she replied. "But I can see your swollen head from here. You'll have trouble fittin' it through those arches if you're not careful."

I shook my supposedly bloated head. "The more they cheer for me, the less they'll believe Haidak's Fireborn lies. I only wish Mother and Tesq could be here to see how far we've come."

"Far too dangerous with Haidak's lies spread like lice throughout this bloodwood."

The door to the room opened and shut. A scowling Pel entered and promptly slumped down in a chair. He had a knuckle of wood and a short knife in his hand and was halfway through carving a lancewing.

"Incessant," he remarked.

"What?" I asked.

Without looking up, Pel pointed at the doorway with his knife. “Why don’t you see for yourself? All they can talk about is the worker who became a sorcer. Or the sorcer who needs no nectra. Or the sorcer without a bloodwood. Looks like you made an impression.”

Ralish followed me to the door to the main hall of our Forge mansion. The first thing I saw was Eztaral pushing a balding and portly man out of the room. Atalawe opened the door for them and revealed the corridor beyond. Several figures were trying to shove through a line of Forge warders.

“There he is!” a man yelled as he spotted me.

“Paragon Terelta! The bloodwood of Scree would like to offer—”

Eztaral slammed the door in their faces. “Three Gods, Tarko,” she whispered as she pinched the bridge of her nose. “It’s like they think you’re some kind of prophecy comes to life.”

“I ran into a scholar who said you’re the most exciting thing to happen to the Forging in decades,” Atalawe said with a wide smile.

“Kī Raxa reborn, you could say,” I muttered.

With a scowl, Eztaral threw whatever the merchant had given her to Atalawe. Free of its wrapping, it was a fine and slender sword of blue topaz.

“Nice.” Atalawe made the blade hum with a flick of her finger.

“We’re gettin’ gifts now?” Ralish asked.

“All kinds!” Atalawe kicked at the pile of parcels of mosscloth and patterned parchment. “Look at all this loot. Favours and bribes and offerings.”

“Not to mention the food!” chortled Caraq, camped at a table with Redeye. Both were almost lost behind the piles of fruits and an entire roasted and glazed loamtoad. Before each morsel, they held their food for an attentive Inwar sat between them to sniff. “We thought it might be poisoned at first, but Haidak’s missed a trick.”

“Everybody wants to meet Tarko,” muttered Redeye.

Eztaral stood before me. “You, my good sorcer, have created quite the mess. And you know how incredibly fond I am of messes, don’t you?”

“Not my fault I managed to win the hearts of the crowds in one fight,” I replied.

“Mhm,” was all Eztaral said. “I would heartily disagree. As much as you might like people hammering on our door as if it were a proud nail and peering through our windows like perverts all hours of the day, I am not a fan. The Scions have spent centuries in the dark for a reason.”

Ralish had drifted towards a quiver of grey-fletched iron arrows propped against the wall. “At least Haidak knows what he is dealing with now. I wonder how he’s feeling this evening after seeing what Tarko can do and that half the bloodwood stands behind him.”

“Morose, I hope. Suicidal, if we’re really lucky.” Atalawe dug a pair of crystal knives from one package. “Well, hello there.”

“With any luck, the nobles he’s already turned are starting to question his lies about us,” I said.

“And that’s exactly why we believe Haidak might try something despite the Allmother’s decree,” said Pel behind me. His blade scraped over and over at the wood in his hand. “That man is as much prideful as he is devious. Whether he wanted you in the Forging or not, today we spat in his eye. *You spat in his eye.*”

I shrugged as I sought the windows. “Then let him try. And let him watch as I put his sorcer in the dirt. With an air spell, no less. If the Forging thought my lack of nectra was impressive, wait unt—”

“But you won’t. You are not ready to fight with air, Tarko. Not yet. You are still an initiate in that order, not automatically a paragon,” Pel reminded me. “I don’t say that in doubt but as your tutor and friend.”

*Do not listen to the old sorcer, Tarko. We are unbeatable,* said the demon.

Heavy slats crossed the sandglass that burned with the vine and torchlight of Dorla Sel. I stared through them at the branches above us. “Not ready,” I muttered, breath fogging the glass. “My air carving caught us Bathnarok.”

Eztaral crossed her arms. “Perhaps instead of sitting here bathing in the adoration of your newfound fanatics, you should be training every hour that you’re not sleeping, eating, or dodging death in the Forging. You’ve proved you can win one duel, but I’ll make sure you can win this Forging whether you—”

Another hammering came at the door.

“What now?!” Eztaral barked as she sought the door. She wrenched it open to find Envoy Okarin and Gaakaran standing amongst a cluster of visitors, who had only grown in number. The servants who tended to our room scuttled in beside the envoy.

“Are we interrupting you, Eagleborn Kraid?” Okarin asked. “Or may we enter?”

“Why?” grunted Ralish.

I could see Eztaral’s old loyalty puppeteering her as she stepped aside to let Okarin enter. The envoy stood in the centre of the room, where water bubbled in a font sprouting with leaves. She nodded to each of us in turn. “Temach Atalawe. Pelikai Maladaq. Overseer Ralish Lahni.”

“*Scion Ralish Lahni.*” Ralish bit off the envoy’s words.

“And Maven Redeye,” said Okarin, turning to the table. “And Wingmaster Caraq of the Cloudriders. My eagleborn – your nephew – has told me much of you since the feast.”

“Only the good stuff, I hope, Envoy. I wish we could be meeting under better circumstances.”

Okarin nodded. We waited for the quiet clacking of her string of white beads to end before she spoke. “As do I. Ren says you have the fastest lancewings in the Swathe.”

“Some of them.”

“And your home, Lostriver, where is that? Gaakaran didn’t mention it.”

“It’s lost.” Caraq grinned.

“I see. And you, Tarko.” Okarin turned to me. “You’ve made quite the stir in the Forging, haven’t you? The sorcer who needs no nectra is on everybody’s lips. It is as if everybody has forgotten about the fall of three bloodwoods.”

“We’re done with hiding,” I replied.

“Did you come to inflate this boy’s head some more, Envoy, or was there another reason for your visit?” asked Eztaral.

“As I imagine you’ve been cooped up in here by the crowds, I thought I would bring you news of tomorrow’s duels. Of the gossip and bargaining that is happening all across Dorla Sel and the Obsidian Forge at this very moment.”

“Knowledge is power, isn’t what the scholars say, Atalawe?” said Eztaral.

“Tell us what you know,” I said.

Okarin meandered around the hall, staring at the various gifts and picking minuscule morsels from the table to examine. “Thirty-two sorcers compete in this season’s Forging. Out of today’s sixteen bouts, three lie dead. The rest submitted or were too injured to fight on. One sorcer managed to survive his duel despite both his legs being snapped – quite literally – off.”

“Bet that made a mess,” Atalawe said with a dramatic wince.

“Sixteen sorcers remain, and half of them want nothing to do with you.”

“Are they afraid?” I asked.

Okarin shook her head. “Cautious. Smart. Superstitious. A few, possibly afraid, if I judge correctly. The other half are clawing at the loam to face you, thinking you are either a cheat or some great test. Haidak does not seem to be pleased by your performance. Remember I spoke of deals that can be made behind the crowd’s back? I believe Haidak is conspiring to have you face Dūnekar tomorrow and turn us against each other. The bloodwood of Coriqal, however, is pushing harder. What in the Hells did you do to anger Coriqal, Tarko?”

“We’ve never set foot in that bloodwood. Several of their sorcers took offence to us in Mulchport. Seri—I bloodied their noses a little.”

Atalawe chuckled. “So that’s what happened.”

“Then we might have taken most of their gems gambling against their warrior.”

Okarin showed a faint smile as she stared at me. “Well, Paragon Zerocta Kash, the so-called Tempest of Coriqal, is thirsting for blood and calling in every favour she can muster. I calculate there is a high chance she fights you tomorrow.”

*What fine news. Our disagreements can be settled once and for all once I grind her face into the wood.*

“Excellent,” I whispered to the sound of my demon chuckling.

“How do you know that, Envoy?” asked Ralish.

“Rumours. Bribes. Experience.” Okarin tapped her head as her eyes slipped back to me. “Dreams.”

“And Datlak of Azcalan?” I asked. “When can I face him? We have to keep Haidak away from the Allmother.”

“If not tomorrow, then perhaps the third day. Or he will be one of the final four. From what I have discovered, Haidak is working feverishly to make sure that happens. But do not fear, for I will call in every one of the favours owed to my mother and Shal Gara to oppose him.”

I remembered my manners. “Thank you, Envoy.”

Okarin nodded with a smile. “You are welcome.”

“What of Stormbeaten, Envoy?” asked Eztaral.

“Stormbeaten? Silent on the matter of Tarko. Why?”

“Curious,” Pel muttered.

“Naxāko made her choice. She sided with Haidak,” I told them. “I’m more interested in what happens if I am put up against our good Sage Dūnekar.”

Okarin winced. “That man and my mother are the same: they both blame you for Shal Gara. I’m convinced he wants revenge now that he knows you are here. He will not listen to me,” she said. “However, you will not fight him until the final duel, should you both make it that far. I will do what I can to ensure it. Dūnekar may be an old fool, but he is still a sage of Shal Gara. You are not the only one who wishes for an audience with the Allmother, remember, Tarko. Two of our sorcers in the fight are better than Haidak’s one. And if Tzatca listens to us, then you will not have to fight him.”

“Bet you’re secretly happy about that,” I heard Redeye muttering.

“Shut it, Redeye,” I snapped.

Okarin hid her beads in the sleeve of her robe. “And that is all I can say, other than may the Three Gods and their spirits carry on keeping watch over you, Tarko, as they seem to enjoy doing,” she said before making for the door. Gaakaran thumped his fist against his crimson breastplate before he followed his envoy.

Workers scurried in and out as the doors were opened. Gaakaran did a fine job moving them aside with a voice and threats suspiciously similar to a certain Eztaral Kraid.

“If I could have but a moment!” yelled our visitors.

“Tarkosi!”

The door slammed once more in their faces. Eztaral dusted her hands.

“Do we trust this envoy?” asked Caraq, spitting crumbs everywhere in the process.

Ralish was shaking her head. “I definitely don’t.”

“I said we trust nobody,” Eztaral reminded us. “But if I have to trust someone, I will take Okarin’s help, her connections, and her cold, calculating mind. We need you to face Datlak.”

“Zerocta comes first, it seems,” I said, half to myself as I listened to the demon rubbing her claws in the gloom of my mind.

“And you won’t beat her or that snide-faced quillhog of a sage if you don’t *what*, Tarko?”

“Train, Eztaral.”

“A sorcer *and* a genius. Is there no end to your talents?” Eztaral pointed Ralish and me out of the room. I moved slowly to spite her. Redeye also occupied my attention. He was putting on a hooded cloak.

“Well, Okarin’s right about one thing,” said Redeye as he pushed himself up from the table and aimed for the door. “We are cooped up in here. Won’t get a wink of sleep with these crowds yelling all night long.”

“Where are you going now?” I asked him. “Disappearing again?”

“To walk around this accursed Forge to see if there’s any peace and quiet left in this tree, that’s where,” the sorcer answered.

I stopped in my tracks. “Suspicious, considering the dangers, if you ask me.”

Redeye snorted. “I don’t recall anybody asking you anything.”

“What are you getting at now, Tarko?” Atalawe asked. “What is this between you two?”

Eztaral interrupted. “None of us goes anywhere alone, Redeye. Especially outside the Forge. That’s what Haidak wants.”

Redeye had already reached for the handle of the door. “I don’t care. It’s Tarko they want, not me,” he grumbled. “Besides, it’d be good to have somebody put me out of my misery and save me from this madness.”

“I said no, Redeye,” Eztaral ordered, but the sorcer acted as if he hadn’t heard her. “Redeye! Don’t you dare disobey me.”

The sorcer disappeared into the clamour of the corridor before she could stop him.

“What in the Hells is going on?” demanded Atalawe.

“Nobody else seems to see it,” I said, “but that brother of yours is up to something, and I fear it’s not in our best interests.”

Eztaral stamped her foot. “Training, Terelta!”

I sucked my teeth. The eagleborn might have met my suspicious eyes, but she refused to say more. All she did was point to the training hall.

Ralish was waiting for me. The hall was a regal but bare room lined with thick wooden and obsidian panels, designed for a sorcer to flex their magic how they pleased in the privacy of their own chambers. A balcony ran behind the triangular windows. Enormous stone bowls of earth and water sat around the walls. Wooden targets hung from the far side of the room, already peppered by Ralish’s arrows.

“Although I loathe the noble-born for all kinds of reasons, I do like how they spend their gems. Your very own trainin’ hall. Gods. This beats the loam and wakin’ up to the canvas of a tent. I bet that’s how it starts. Just you watch: I’ll be snappin’ my fingers at my fellow third-born for a glass of wine in no time,” Ralish said as she stretched across a lone couch and dipped her hand in one of the bowls of water.

I was too busy striding up and down to notice the earth drifting around my hand, taking the vague shape of a demon claw.

“What’s botherin’ you? Okarin?” asked Ralish.

“Okarin doesn’t bother me. I thought I’d be angrier at her, but she’s helping us just like she did once before when it mattered. Besides, I think I can see the guilt in her. The kind that comes from wrong choices.”

“She bothers me,” Ralish replied. “She talks like she is actin’ on a stage.”

“The one that’s acting is Redeye,” I said.

“What is it with you two? Was that the cause of all that commotion out there?”

I took a breath, knowing how broken in the head I was about to sound. “When we first encountered Bathnarok in the loam, he had a warning for Serisi and me. He told us we were traitors amongst traitors, and that our own betrayal was coming at the hands of one we trusted. Then a Fireborn made the very same threat in Naxāko’s hall.”

“One we trust? You mean like Texoc? He betrayed us, gods rest him.”

“Eztaral thought the same, but ever since we left for Stormbeaten, Redeye has found little moments to vanish. In the battle with the Fireborn, he lagged behind to apparently steal nectra. He did the same in Azcalan and in the Feast of the Offered. And now, tonight, he’s disappearing again.”

“So you think Redeye is what? Going to betray us? His constant moaning grinds on me too, but you truly think it makes him a Fireborn?”

*That is exactly what we are saying.*

“Yes,” I admitted.

“Is this Serisi talking, or is it you?”

“Both of us, Ralish. Ridiculous as it sounds, that’s the dark thought that’s been camped in my mind since Stormbeaten. I told Eztaral and mother but they were far too quick to tell me I was wrong. I tried to dismiss the idea, and yet it’s gotten to the point that I can’t ignore the signs anymore. I’m sure he’s hiding something dire from everyone.”

“Signs.” Ralish pursed her lips. “But you don’t know for sure?”

“You don’t believe me either, do you?”

“I didn’t say that. It’s odd, of course, but it doesn’t mean he’s a traitor. You need proof, Tarko, not just suspicion,” Ralish said. “Do you have any proof?”



“No, I don’t have proof. Other than what the power of Haidak’s lies and the fear of the demons can do to a soul,” I said, staring at the fierce lights of Dorla Sel. “But I think it’s about time we had some, don’t you? Even if it’s to prove I’m wrong.”

In truth, I hoped I was. Vindication was a shiny prize, but the consequences of me being right – of a Scion turning – were far more important.

“What’s in your mind, Tarko?”

I wasn’t sure, yet I stepped to the balcony door and inched into the open. The windows were jealous with their light. A matching balcony hung above me, casting shadow where no torches or candlevines burned. The watchful crowds couldn’t see me. I felt Ralish close at my back, hand on my ribs as we peered down the railing.

The hordes still stood around the entrance, and I kept watch on the thin, guarded channel filled with comers and goers. Other sorcers swaggered around, basking in the crowd’s delight and etching their names on strips of parchment and pressed bark.

*There he is.*

I felt Serisi dragging my attention to a hooded figure charting a straight course through the channel. The hunched posture was immediately recognisable.

“There he goes,” I said, brimming with suspicion.

Without a second thought, I pulled up the hood of my grey cloak and put my hands to the railing. With a grunt, I jumped over and down. A shadowed ledge waited beneath me, empty but for streaks of vinelight escaping through closed shutters.

“What are you doing?” Ralish hissed.

*I can feel the intent in your mind, Tarko. Is this a hunt?*

I nodded. “Following him and getting my answers, Ralish. Are you coming?”

“Fine,” she huffed, grabbing up her bow from a nearby plinth and strapping it around her shoulders. “But if you’re wrong, you’re doing all the explaining to Eztaral.”

*Allow me, Tarko.*

Drawing back to the fringes of my consciousness, I felt the demon’s strength in my muscles and bones as I lowered myself enough to jump. The impact barely shook me. I continued to climb along the shell of the Forge, sticking to areas of shadow and holds barely wide enough for fingers and toes. My tree-born instincts were heightened by the monster within me.

A yelp came from a servant busy sweeping as I thumped onto the wood next to him. Ralish appeared moments later.

“Don’t mind us,” I hissed as I threw myself over the next railing. Urgency drove me; Redeye was already vanishing into the crowds.

*Quickly now. Our prey is escaping,* Serisi said as she faded back into my mind.

By the time I had reached the wooden plaza surrounding the Forge’s branch, Ralish was several levels away. I heard the demon itching to keep running, but I forced her to wait. Once

Ralish had caught up, we stood at the edges of the oblivious crowds and acted as one of the adoring citizens, keeping our heads down and pushing through the throngs as swiftly as we could in pursuit of Redeye. The irascible sorcer was travelling fast, barging his way along the congested branches in his usual sullen manner. The tattooed mark of the sorcers often cleared a path, and I used mine to the same advantage. Ralish kept beside me, moving people aside with shoves. Wherever Redeye went, I followed, no matter which stall or entourage I had to wade through. Annoyed cries followed in my wake.

When the sorcer stopped to inspect some armour, we lingered at the edge of a market stall and hid behind candlevine lanterns fashioned from frog skin.

*Look there, Tarko.*

The demon dragged my attention to the merchant grinning and waving at me. He waved to his table of crude straw dolls, each depicting a sorcer in the Forging. Several had been smeared with black ink to mark their deaths. The rest of the dolls were pristine, including one that looked suspiciously like me, complete with the crossed-out mark of the worker tribe.

“Who is that?” I asked the man.

“That is Tarkosi Terelta of the Sigons.”

“You mean Scions,” I corrected him.

“Sigons.”

“It’s Scions. Scions of the Sixth-Born.”

“That’s what I said! You want to buy it? Only five gems!” the merchant offered excitedly.

Ralish smirked at me as if waiting for me to cave. I showed her different and walked on.

“Tarkosi Terelta dolls. Got to get me one of those,” she snickered.

“That’s a bit too much adoration, if you ask me,” I said, knowing that to be a complete lie.

I followed Redeye as he moved on, pulling Ralish with me. The sorcer made a habit of weaving through the crowds as if he knew he was being followed, but we pressed on nonetheless and kept him in sight as much as possible. Although we lost him here and there around corners and amongst markets, Serisi’s keen nose and eyes kept us on his trail. Branch by branch, stair by stair, he led us down to where our lancewings were nested.

“All right,” said Ralish, “I’m also starting to get suspicious, but if he gets on a lancewing, we’ll lose him in moments.”

Ralish was right, and we sped to catch up with him. Hugging the bark and darker stretches of branches, we shadowed him from a level above. My suspicion was like clay in a kiln, growing sturdier and more certain with each passing moment. Redeye had already proved himself a liar. This was certainly no idle amble around the Forge. His was a mission with purpose.

As soon as Redeye disappeared into the arched-roof building of the lancewing nests, we dropped like stones down vines and creaking rope ladders, close on his tail. The nests were dark, with only a handful of nesthands busy mopping up sapwater and droppings. I spotted Redeye

climbing onto the saddle of his lancewing Glassclaw. Ralish pressed me against a wall as he swivelled to look behind him. I escaped his stare just in time.

The thrumming of the birds' wings grew loud. A wind gusted about us, and no sooner had Glassclaw burst from the nests than we sprinted to our own lancewings.

Volechaser had somehow caught my scent and was already chirping for me, wings hammering the air. I skidded to a halt so fast I collided with his feathered side.

"Good to see you too," I said as I immediately threw a saddle over his back. I had barely strapped myself in before I urged him to fly.

"Follow that sorcer, Vole!" I snapped, eyes fixed on the shape close to disappearing between the branches.

"Yah!" yelled Ralish as Thundertail took flight. Vole would not be outdone and blasted ahead of Thundertail.

"Easy now! Not too close," I warned.

The bird understood, relaxing the beat of his wings just enough to stay in sight of Redeye without alerting him. At least we blended in well: the bloodwood's branches were full of other lancewings, crow-riders, and oversized, cantankerous parrots. Still, the sorcer was cautious. He must have circled Dorla Sel twice before he headed upwards to where the mansions sprouted between the buildings.

*What business does he have up here?* Serisi asked me.

"Cursed if I know."

A building with a roof like a quillhog's back loomed out of the crimson leaves. A roof of awnings spread between needle spires. Workers hauling carts streamed in and out of its gaping doorways. Several threw up their arms in anger as Redeye's lancewing gusted the grain from their carts. The sorcer cared little, flashing the nectra spread across his chest and marching into the huge granary.

"What is he doing?" Ralish yelled.

The distraction let us hurtle past him and cling to the narrow spires. Dislike was turning to anger as I slid from the lancewing's back onto a taut awning. It stretched beneath my feet and almost toppled me into the ruckus below.

"Bleeding trees," I cursed as I seized something solid. I tried to peer between the gaps in the awning but to no avail.

*Sword.*

I didn't argue with my demon. I took the silver sword from my belt and cut a window in the stitched leaf. The smell of grain and flour hit me. Below me, a flood of workers wielded shovels and rakes and carts, moving mountains of grain between mill and sack. And between them all, Redeye wandered, looking for something or someone. Ralish and I trailed him to the curious chirping of our lancewings, cutting hole after hole to keep him in view. I was sure the workers would be full of hate next time it rained, but at that moment I didn't care.

Redeye proceeded to the end of the granary where it was quieter and stopped in the centre of the thoroughfare with arms folded. Two figures promptly wandered into sight. One was dressed in shining copper armour and had a bronze glaive strapped to his back. He walked with a swagger and his head held high. Empty hands were held outstretched. The other figure look injured and hobbled at about half the pace, struggling to keep up. They were unmistakable.

“Is that—?”

“Haidak Baran and our good friend Juraxi,” I uttered, my tone like a branch breaking. The leaf awning under my grip squeaked as I squeezed. Serisi’s fury almost sent me diving over the edge. I knew Redeye had been hiding something, but this was my worst fear brought to life. Vindication wasn’t as shiny as I had thought. All I felt was nauseating shock.

“I knew I was right about him,” I hissed. “I just never truly believed it.”

“That fetid, two-faced roach!” Ralish snarled. “What in the loam is happenin’ here?”

*I will peel the skin from his face for a snack before I disembowel him.*

I took no comfort from the fact Redeye didn’t greet the Fireborn with open arms. Haidak grinned as Redeye stabbed at the air with a finger in his usual sour way, arguing about something. Even though I leaned and strained to hear them, Serisi’s sharp ears couldn’t catch their words from that far away. All I caught was a splinter of Haidak’s laughter over the workers’ noise.

Haidak took a step closer to Redeye. I could see the bastard’s broad grin even from my perch. I wondered what it was that made him smile so. Was it the gleaming gems of information that Redeye had brought him? Was it the bargains Redeye was making for his own faithless skin?

Whatever business my enemy and so-called ally had was swiftly conducted. Haidak swept from the granary with Juraxi following like the lackey he was. Redeye stayed like a statue amongst the hillocks of grain.

“Redeye, you bastard!” I bellowed, but he did not turn. At last, he walked from the granary, returning the way he had come.

With a snarl, I sprinted back to Volechaser, who extended a wing so I could bound into my saddle. The bird seemingly understood my vengeful mood.

The lancewings tore for the far end of the granary, rolling upside down as she flew so she could somersault down to the branch’s walkway. Workers howled as grain spiralled around us in the storm of the birds’ wings. While I swallowed my stomach, I looked around desperately for any sign of the treacherous sorcer.

“Where is he, Tarko?” Ralish yelled.

“I don’t know, curse it! No sign of him!”

Vole rose up above the branch, swivelling to show us a broad plaza shining with all colours of cloth. Weavers and washers worked at looms and troughs. Merchants hawked their fine wormsilks and bolts of mosscloth. I spied Haidak’s fiery copper armour instead. He was still without warders. There was not another Fireborn in sight.

“Tarko,” Ralish warned me. “Remember the Allmother’s rules. I want to put an arrow in him as much as you do, but we can’t risk it now!”

I did not listen. Volechaser alighted so I could slide from his feathers and give chase.

“Haidak!” I shouted after him, finding the silver sword in my hand.

It took two more yells to turn his head. His smile took a moment to spread.

“Surprised to see me?” I asked.

“A little, I have to say! Honoured, even.” Haidak looked around at the curious faces of the workers and merchants. “And what is it I can do for you, Paragon Terelta?” he asked.

I stepped closer, keeping my sword low but ready. “Busy evening for you, crossing paths with not one but two Scions.”

Haidak blinked.

“What business do you have with Redeye?”

“Oh dear,” Haidak replied with a chuckle and a tilt of his head. “This must be all kinds of confusing for you. Redeye is the one who has business with me.”

“What has he told you? Speak, curse you!” The sword was now aimed at Haidak’s gut.

“Tarko!” yelled Ralish. “Control yourself.”

Serisi was strangely silent. Torn between revenge and the glory of the Forge just as I was. And she was not the only one to hold their tongue. Juraxi was without the usual confident smirk on his face. He looked drawn and weak. Almost harrowed.

I heard the thump of spears on wood as Dorla Sel warders began to gather.

“Yes, indeed, Tarko! Control yourself, won’t you?” Haidak tutted at me. “Seems like not all you Scions are on the same branch, are you? And I mean that literally as well as figuratively. Word of advice. It’s best to stick together in Dorla Sel. It can be a dangerous place. These other sorcers and their entourages can get jealous, you see. Devious. Not all wisely keep to the Allmother’s laws as you and I do, Tarko, even in the Obsidian Forge.”

“You wouldn’t dare, not during the Forging.”

“Tut tut, Tarko. You should know me better by now. This is war, and I will do anything necessary to win it. Unlike you,” Haidak whispered, pressing his armour against my blade. “Imagine what a calamity it would be to have both you and Redeye elsewhere in the city at the exact moment somebody decided to attack your precious Scions. Divide and conquer, as the scholars say.”

Ralish dragged at me. “Tarko, what is he saying?”

“I think you know exactly what I’m saying, mine-scum,” Haidak spat at her. “What an unfortunate night you picked to follow your friend. Your Scions could have used you.”

The dread filled the pit of my stomach.

*The others*, whispered Serisi. Amidst the din of the cloth market and the city around us, I heard it: the solitary pounding of a warning drum.

“Tarko, we can’t stay here,” Ralish snapped.

It took all my effort to pull away from Haidak, especially considering his beaming grin.  
“Before this is over,” I promised him, “you will beg me for mercy.”

Haidak nodded. “I’m counting on it.”

“Curse you!” I snarled.

“Tarko!”

# 32

## FIRE

*Many claim to know the gods' wishes. Opine this event a result of their influence. It is a dangerous practice, to assume the whims of immortals who craft worlds with their own hands. It is infinitely more dangerous when such claims come from those who do not listen to the signs of the gods, but to their own avarice, and who use belief for vile devices.*

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

Clinging to Vole and Thundertail, we raced for the Forge as fast as the lancewings could fly. I felt my cheeks and eyelids peeling back from the pressure of the wind. Vole's wings clipped leaves, and I expected every branch and jut of architecture to dash my skull to pieces. I could barely hear the drums growing over the roar of wings and air.

Smoke was drifting from the wall of the Obsidian Forge. The sight of it chilled my insides, and I urged my lancewing even faster until Dorla Sel became a sickening blur.

Vole flared his wings in a neck-wrenching manoeuvre that stopped us inches short of the obsidian wall of the Forge. The windows of our chambers were blackened and smashed. Smoke billowed from one, and I could hear a commotion within.

To the snapping of the saddle straps, I hurled myself onto the balcony with limbs spreadeagled. Magic filled my mind and shook my bones as I kicked the door of the training hall inwards. Smoke rushed me, stinging my eyes. I snatched the earth from one of the giant stone bowls and threw it outwards in a wall that cleared the air. With smoke and earth spinning around my hands, I smashed down the inner door with a heavy dart spell and entered a roomful of utter chaos.

*What in the Starless Plains has happened?!*

A haze of smoke and battle filled the main hall. Fire was creeping up the veils of mosscloth and eating at the furniture. Pel was wielding loops of water, lashing them like whips against an ailing air carver pressed into a corner. Eztaral was duelling across the table with a servant brandishing a hammer. Atalawe was currently pinned to a couch with a dagger closing in on her throat and her staff the only thing keeping her alive. Caraq was lost elsewhere in the smoke, hopefully alive.

Before I could act, two men in servant garb came bounding from the smog wielding a blade and an obsidian hatchet. I seized one with a tendril spell and smashed his skull into the floor. His dagger skittered to my feet while the other veered to put a hatchet in my chest. A grey-fledged

arrow thudded into his throat before I could bring my spells to bear. The man's legs flew out from beneath him as he lurched backwards, gargling blood and eyes looking fit to pop from their sockets.

The brawny man atop Atalawe was knocked aside by my next spell. Before he could struggle upright, the green and white blur of Inwar came bounding from the smoke and ripped the man's throat clean from his neck. There was no gargling from this one. Just a river of blood and a fine view of the man's spine. I heard Serisi's chuckle over the pandemonium.

"Tarko!" Atalawe yelled. "Thank the gods! The bloody servants have turned on us!"

I punched the air, throwing another veil of earth across the room. Furniture skidded and rolled under the force of my spell. Amidst the haze, I spied Caraq with woman in a headlock. Her enemy was struggling with the ferocity of a tharantos, spitting and shrieking. Caraq swiftly put an end to her complaints as she slammed the woman's face on a table and wrenched her head to the side with a sickening crunch.

"There's more coming!" the wingmaster bellowed.

The corridor thundered with the sound of battle. A fresh wave of our attackers came sprinting into the fray. One of Ralish's arrows saw to the first while I crushed another with a fist-like tendril. Pel joined us with his magic, wrapping an orb of water around one servant's head. No matter how the bastard struggled, the water stayed put, forcing its way down his throat until he fell to the floor, wriggling like a caterpillar.

Flaming vials of red sandglass came soaring over our heads. Wherever they smashed against the walls, fire exploded. All the decorations and trinkets and vanities the Forge had insisted on were the room's downfall. The flames spread voraciously between the furniture and raced across rugs, eating into everything within moments.

"Pel! Tarko!" yelled Eztaral as she fought to escape a billowing cloud of flame. A swinging blow from a spear sent the eagleborn sprawling. Marrowthirst escaped her grasp and skittered across the floor. Before the attacker could bring his spear blade down on the eagleborn, water and earth descended on him in a deluge. Pel and I didn't let up until he was encased in mud.

More fire-vials came flying, cutting us off from the balcony doors. The surviving air sorcer on the far side of the hall drove the flames towards us with gusts of wind and unbridled laughter.

"Kill him!" Caraq bellowed as she dove for cover.

Eyes shining a bright and cold blue from the nectra, Pel was aiming to do precisely that when a knife hurtled through the smoke and struck him in the chest. His tendril spell collapsed to a cry of pain and Atalawe bounded to catch him before he toppled.

"Pel!" I yelled, fixing my fury on the air carver. My dart spells were like hail, but each broke against his unflinching wall spell. With a pulse of air, he threw back my magic and bent his wall into a vortex that inhaled the fire. A flaming tornado spun towards me across the hall.

Raising my hands, I let my magic unfurl, unfettered and raw. Earth fell away from me as I grasped the air. My veins glowing with fierce light, I threw my might against the air carver's magic.



*Destroy this worm, Tarko!*

The tornado flattened under the pressure of my spell. I glimpsed the sorcerer take a step back and the confidence fall from his face. I pressed harder, fanning the flames into heights that licked the rafters. The air carver railed against me as hard as he could, but my outrage won the battle. The vortex consumed him with a combined scream of air, fire, and abject pain.

*Glorious!*

“The others, Tarko!” Ralish shouted to me.

Pel was desperately trying to wield his spells, but half the light had vanished from his eyes. Inwar kept servants at bay as Atalawe dragged him from the growing inferno.

“Fight for the corridor!” I bellowed.

“You heard him!” ordered Eztaral.

While the others battled their way to the doorway, I turned my magic on the flames. Under the force of my air spells, the flames gusted against the wall, searing the wood wherever it showed its face and taking the shine from the obsidian. The wind pushed the flames further to the rafters of the hall. It was dangerous to fan the fire, but it gave the others the escape route they needed.

“Leave it, Eztaral!” I could hear Caraq yelling. “It’s lost!”

The eagleborn struggled nearby, trying to recover her sword from the fire, but the flames burned too fiercely even with my air hammering them. As Caraq hauled her away, I let go of my spells so I could make a grab for the sword. The flames swooped back in as I hurled myself to the blade. The fire bloomed with another crash of a red vial, catching me off-guard and sending me sprawling. Marrowthirst almost fell from my grip when flames began to climb the leafleather of my arm. I frantically waved my arms, sending stuttering spells into the inferno that bought me time. A tiered shelf of scrolls and tablets falling towards me was a fine reason to remember my legs and start running. Cinders and ash filled the air as I hurtled for the doorway. Whether I tripped or hurled myself, I wasn’t sure, but I ended up sliding across the floor into a circle of Scions. I felt hands frantically patting at the flames that clung to me while I thumped Marrowthirst on the floor.

“Your sword, Eztaral.”

“Gods, boy. You almost cooked yourself!” Eztaral yelled. “Atalawe! You’re needed here, too.”

“I’m fine! I’m not hurt,” I said, fighting the others away to see a corridor in utter disarray. Dead warders and traitors in servants’ garb littered the floor around us. A pitiful and bloody handful still huddled together, weapons and fists raised and muttering prayers to the Iron Icon. Before any of us could act, the warders rushed them with their spears and skewered the traitors like frog meat.

In the whorls of the smoke, I saw other warders pinning captives to the walls. Several were being trussed up with leafleather bonds, and they struggled and screeched as if they had spiders under their shirts. Workers hauling buckets of soil and water streamed past in panic to deal with

the fire raging behind us. A water sorcer in Dorla Sel armour ran amongst them, eyes already aglow.

Atalawe was nearby, bent over Pel. He had turned gravely pale in the precious few moments since I had seen him last. The hide-wrapped handle of the knife was still protruding from his ribs.

I scrambled to Pel's side, clutching at his hand.

"He'll be fine," Atalawe assured both of us, trying to keep her smile up. "There was no poison on the blade, and it missed everything important. Luckily the Fireborn can't throw for shit. Just the matter of taking it out is all, but the Scourge of the Scorchroad proven he's still a tough old bastard."

"Getting too old, I think—" Pel managed to say before the pain overcame him.

A laugh came from nearby. I set my sights on one of the wounded servants lying close to us. Despite being riddled with spear-wounds, the man still kept up a detestable grin, and it filled me with wrath.

"Haidak sent you, didn't he?" I shouted, inches from his face.

"Glory to chaos," the servant whispered, before I put my hands on Atalawe's staff and hefted it in my hands.

"Fireborn scum," I spat, smacking him around the head and drawing blood.

*End him!*

I placed the staff in one of his spear wounds and pressed hard.

"Tarko!" Ralish yelled. I turned to see a familiar fear in her face. One that I had glimpsed that night in the dark of our tent before Dorla Sel. I withdrew, abruptly conscious of how many eyes were watching me come close to executing the man in cold blood.

"Aren't there more pressin' matters?" she asked, shaking the battle-mist from my eyes.

My stare snapped to Eztaral. "Redeye!"

"The lad's right!" Eztaral barked. "Where is that sorcer?"

A voice cut the commotion before I could answer. "Right here, Eztaral! Came back as soon as I saw the smoke."

And there I saw him, standing with nectra in his eyes and dust in his palms. Several of the traitorous servants lay dead around Redeye's feet. He looked severely out of breath.

"You liar!" I snarled at him, unable to hold myself back.

"What do you mean, boy?" Redeye hissed.

"I saw you meeting with Haidak," I said, marching up to him.

Eztaral stamped her foot. "What is the meaning of this, Tarko?"

The sorcer crossed his arms once more. "You're speaking out your arse, yet again. What is with you recently?" he asked, fixing me with his scarlet eyes. I could see the coward behind his blank stare.

*Let me at him!*

“Traitor!” The demon in me jolted forwards to seize him by the collar. Redeye pushed me away.

“Tarko! What in the Six Hells has gotten into you?” Atalawe yelled, dragging me backwards and relieving me of her staff.

“I saw him with Haidak and Juraxi in a granary, is what, Atalawe! Discussing something important, I’d wager, right?” I accused, jabbing a finger at him. “I told you he was hiding something, and he’s either selling us out to save his own skin or he’s one of the Fireborn! To think you’d stand with those who murdered my brother and felled Sh—”

“Enough!” Eztaral slammed Marrowthirst into the wooden floor. “What in the loam is going on? If you’re lying, Tarko, I swear—”

“I saw him as well. With my own eyes.” Ralish interrupted. “We followed him from the Forge to a granary high in the city, where he met with Haidak and that lackey.”

Redeye looked between me and Eztaral while his face turned sourer and sourer. “This is a ludicrous lie. The boy’s had it in for me since Stormbeaten, imagining all kinds of things about me. Don’t take your fear out on me, Tarko. Easy to see your emotions are already getting the better of you. That demon’s pulling your strings, I say.”

“Where were you tonight, Redeye?” Eztaral asked. We all stared silently, waiting for the answer.

Redeye shrugged. “I took a walk around the trunk.”

Eztaral stamped her foot again. “Look me in the eye when you answer me, curse you.”

“I told you, I took a walk!”

“Orokan shit,” I argued. “You took a lancewing.”

“Redeye, what is he talking about?” wheezed Pel as he tried to push himself up.

“Is this true, Brother?” asked Atalawe, voice hoarse.

Redeye shook his head emphatically, but no words came from his mouth.

“Speak,” Eztaral demanded. “Are Tarko and Ralish telling the truth?”

“This is ridiculous, Eztaral!” spluttered Redeye.

“SPEAK!” the eagleborn shouted so loud it caused the whole corridor to flinch.

Redeye flexed his fingers.

“Bathnarok told me betrayal would come at the hands of one we trusted,” I told the Scions. “In Stormbeaten, Redeye stayed behind with Juraxi, who miraculously survived. In Azcalan, he was mysteriously waylaid. He disappeared in the Feast of the Offered, and now he’s meeting with Haidak as if he’s not the mass murderer he is. Not to mention he was conveniently absent for this attempt on our lives, just so he could save his own skin. We’ve always wondered who the third

Fireborn lord I saw standing before Faraganthar could be, and if you ask me, Redeye here is looking incredibly guilty.”

“Where were you? Why won’t you say?” Atalawe was clapping at Redeye’s face, but the sorcer still refused to answer.

“This is true, isn’t it?” Atalawe yelled as she slapped her half-brother across the face. “Redeye!”

The sorcer broke at last. “None of you would understand,” Redeye whispered at first, but his voice soon rose to a shout so that all the corridor could hear his poor excuses. “I’m the only one with sense around here. You’ve all got tunnel vision and you’re focused on this faded image of Kī Raxa. This impetuous, overreaching boy! You are fools if you think we will survive this war! Better to prepare for the future!”

“Get him out of my sight before I do something I regret,” Atalawe said, cold as star-iron. She stepped away from her brother with shaking fists and tears brimming in her eyes.

“You can take this one as well, warders!” ordered Eztaral, gesturing for them to bind Redeye like the other captives they were hauling away. “Have him locked up like the traitor he’s turned out to be.”

Redeye was dragged between the swarm of warders and the astonished crowd that had gathered. He did not look to his sister or the eagleborn he had followed for decades, but at me: the one who had uncovered his filthy lies.

Atalawe stared through us all as she slumped to the floor, propped up by Inwar. Eztaral wrenched Marrowthirst from the wood and grabbed its blades with her hand. The fury on her face was frightening.

“Decades, I’ve known that sorcer,” she was muttering. “He betrayed us, right under my nose.”

“If he’s the third Fireborn lord, he’s been a traitor since Shal Gara,” I said, much to the glaring of the others.

Before any of us could speak another word, a loud commotion swarmed down the corridor towards us. A feather-crowned ravenborn was barging his way through the crowds.

“What in the stinking loam is going on here?” he asked, face growing even more horrified with each corpse he counted. The ravenborn had barely looked us up and down before he snapped his fingers. “Bind these! Take them way!”

“This was a flagrant assassination attempt, is what it was!” Caraq yelled. Blood streamed from a cut across her jaw. “We were defending ourselves.”

The ravenborn refused to listen. “You’ve almost set the Forge alight, and I have dead servants and fallen warders scattered across the corridor!”

Several in the crowd began to boo when a half-dozen warders shuffled forwards cautiously, shields clanking together. The others shook their heads, arguing on our behalf.

“We did nothing wrong!” Ralish shouted as she pushed a warder’s hands away from her. I let the light shine in my veins in warning.

“Anyone who puts a hand on us will lose it within the next heartbeat, Forging or not!” Eztaral yelled.

“How dare you threaten us!” the ravenborn spluttered.

Atalawe rose to her feet. She gripped her staff so tightly I thought she was going to snap the ironpith with her bare hands. Eztaral held her back.

“I wonder what the Allmother will think when she hears one of the Forging’s future champions was attacked by lawbreakers and murderers dressed as Dorla Sel servants? Murderers whom you no doubt allowed into the Forge, weapons and all, and let attack us in a lodging you provided to us in the name of safety? Don’t you, Ravenborn?” she asked.

The man flapped his mouth before he chose the wrong path. Instead of sense, he saw Atalawe’s rant as an affront to his authority. A threat. The ravenborn cleared his throat, trying to ignore the applause and jeering from the onlookers. “I don’t care!” he blurted.

“You don’t care?” the wrangler seethed.

“No!” The ravenborn stuck to his decision like tree sap. “You will be the sage’s problem, not mine. And just you wait until he gets to the bottom of this. He’ll give you what treeless troublemakers deserve. Swift justice. Mark my words!”

*I wonder how much this man lost betting against you, Serisi said, making me smirk.*

The ravenborn chewed his lips before turning on his heel. “Mark my words!”

Warders closed in around us, shields locked into a wall. While the ravenborn found others to exercise his embarrassment on and warders hauled the last of the Fireborn assassins away, we were warily pressed along the corridor. A gaggle of healers bearing a stretcher and a silent Atalawe saw to Pel.

“Eztaral...,” I spoke up.

“Don’t you dare,” she snapped at me with a voice like a jāgu’s growl. “Don’t you dare say you were right about Redeye. There’s been enough death today, Tarko. I don’t want yours on my hands.”

In truth, I hadn’t even considered it. An apology had lingered on my lips instead.

“I never wanted to be.”

Eztaral looked at Marrowthirst, thumbing the parts that had been blackened by the fire, before running her narrowed stare to my hands and arms. I looked down for the first time. Where patches of leafleather had been burned away and exposed my poisoned skin, there wasn’t a single burn nor wound of any kind. The fire had left me untouched.

Blood dripped from Eztaral’s palm as she touched my unburned skin. “You and that demon grow close indeed,” was all she said before following the warders.

Ralish had heard the eagleborn. She too was staring at the bare patches in my Scion leather, her face scrunched up. The angry pound of my heart filled the silence as she brushed past me and followed Eztaral.

“Why does the truth never feel as good as you think it will?” I asked Caraq, feeling the wingmaster close at hand.

“I wish it did, young Tarko. I wish it did.”