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THE LOAM

Though we may forget, there is much the Ancestors do not. They are always watching.
A PROVERB OF THE SCHOLAR TRIBE

The dream was bathed in fire. A hellish inferno with no end. I was enveloped by it, yet there was no fear. The opposite: a serenity of calm. I stretched my hands into the fire, and there was no pain.

All was snuffed in a moment as I craned my neck to bask. The flames vanished, and I was crushed under a starless void of a sky. A rust-red plain stretched out to flat infinity. No mountains nor clouds hung on the horizon. No birds sailed the sky. No creatures roamed the blank wilderness. Only great iron machines of wheels and cogs, and chimneys belching smoke.

Between them I stood a vast horde of demons and as I swivelled to take them in I found I was surrounded. They stared, not at me, but past me, to great circular gates of stone and iron. They shone with the lighting that crackled above, glistening with the black demon blood that had been painted across its surface. Fire sparked at its centre. Demon after demon walked into it, screaming as they did so. The light of their sacrifice burned my eyes until the horde vanished into a plume of smoke.

A town of ash and broken stone emerged piece by piece before me. Once-proud towers lay smashed across its plaza, and I stood in their rubble. All along the walls, snarling creatures carried away the destruction, brick by brick, body by body.

A lone demon perched on a knuckle of stone foundation that still stood in defiance. Fire streamed from his crest of twisted horns that had more branches than a sapling. Half of one was missing, as if broken. Spines ran in a ridge down his spine. Black smoke wafted as though he had wings, hunched and humongous. His red eyes scorched the distance where a forest burned. His jaw hung open, fire trailing over his many fangs with every exhale.

As I stared, his blazing interest turning to find me amongst the rubble.

'Where are you, child?' His voice was like that of endseason storms. I felt the ground shake beneath me at its tone.

The demon stood, his cloak of black smoke unfurling, and a bonfire rising from his shoulders. 'Where are you, daughter?' he asked again, and in that moment, let his stare wander on. He snarled, and settled down into a hunch once more.

The black smoke rolled across the plaza, swallowing every detail. I shielded myself as it did the same to me. The rubble dissolved from beneath my feet, and I felt myself fall into a choking, acrid darkness. And there, between the thick smoke, a single eye glowed brighter than any sun.

I fell towards them screaming.



As it turned out, I was indeed falling, both in real life and the dream.

I came awake in mid-air, greeted by a patch of dark undergrowth racing to meet me. I promptly howled my lungs sore. ‘Aaagh!’

Foliage struck me in the face. Something hit my left hand hard and I grasped it with all my might. To my surprise, relief, and to the profuse thanks of my bladder, I had caught a branch. Almost torn my arm off in the process, but I was fine. It was a wispy thing, an offshoot of a larger branch, and was already starting to crack under my weight. I looked down, and spied a huge fern beneath me. Its leaves were wider than I was tall, streaked white and yellow with faint phosphorescence.

I had little time for my choice, but at least the branch agreed with my decision.

With a snap, I was dropped to the fern and crashed through its door-sized leaves until I collapsed into a patch of huge glowing green mushrooms. Winded, I lay there and wheezed while I checked I hadn’t broken anything. The mushrooms broke and scattered as I tried to get up one-armed to avoid soiling my wounded hand. I knew what mushrooms like to grow in. Once I was on my knees. I sniffed cautiously at my left hand and breastplate, and didn’t like what I found. There was a thick splinter in my palm, and it felt numb having taken all the strain of my fall. When I tried to put weight on my ankle, I gasped in pain. I heard Serisi do the same.

You cretin.

Stubborn as always, I pushed myself to my feet nonetheless, hoping she could feel it. What made this whole morning far more bewildering was that I didn’t even remember falling asleep. I had been waiting to climb down when exhaustion must have struck. It filled me with an unease I didn’t like. How long had I been asleep? It was dark still, and yet now all was silent save for an owl hooting somewhere nearby.

I rapped my knuckles ‘Did you do that? Push me, I mean?’

Push you? How could I? All I can do is speak in this prison you’ve made for me.

I found some of the muck on my chin and groaned. It was far too soon after waking for this. ‘You let me fall without trying to warn me.’

How dare you assume I did not try.

‘Well, did you?’

The demon didn’t answer.

Some coarse moss growing nearby was perfect for brushing myself down. Keeping the armour seemed like a good idea having witnessed what the Swathe seemingly hid around every tree trunk. Luckily, I hadn’t stabbed myself with the knife in my fall, but the hatchet was somewhere deep in the bushes. Lost like I was.

What will you do now? We have a deal that you promised to uphold your end of, remember. You promised to free me.

'It's quite hard to forget, to be honest.'

I cannot wait to be rid of you.

'The feeling's mutual.'

The leafroad was a dark band against the patchwork canopy. A sky was a crack of rare and smoke-marred stars and a glow in the east. Deep within the trees it was a constant night. I looked for any sign of flaming torches, but saw none, much to my dismay. I seized some of the larger glowing mushrooms. I stabbed one onto my knife, and the other I clutched in my hand. They cast a meagre pool of green light, and yet it was better than nothing.

'What I'm doing is I'm following the others and catch up with them. 'Making the decision out loud definitely held me start moving, but it did nothing to slow my anxious heart. Here I was, alone in the darkness of the deep loam, running headlong into nothingness with breathless hope and a knife to my name.

Every moment that passed I thought would be my last. I ran faster than I can remember ever moving before. Twice, I was knocked to the ground by low hanging branches. I was scraped by bushes, tripped by stones, and once I almost ran into the spiked end of a fallen tree, and all to Serisi's mocking laughter. Yet not for longer than one of my sharp breaths did I stop running.

Where no plant shone, the loam was dark as sin. Candlevine barely grew this deep, and I had just crushed mine beneath my armour. The smoke from the wildfires made heaving for breath painful, but I slogged on. All I heard was my own thrashing through the undergrowth. I hoped nothing else had.

A warbling screech stopped me dead. It was incredibly close. I hugged the nearest tree trunk and tried miserably to calm my breathing, just as a hand clamped over my mouth. A good thing too: the sudden presence beside me almost made me ruin my armour, never mind grunting frantically behind the clammy hand. In the almost-dead light of the glowing mushrooms, Atalawe stared wide-eyed at me. A finger was pressed to her lips. She pointed it upwards, where one of the navik crouched in a branch. It was staring out into the forest, chattering at something. One by one, as cautious as could be, she plucked the mushrooms from my hand and placed them down in the mossy loam. Holding up her staff, she beckoned me forwards.

Who is this? She stinks of wild beast.

I bit my tongue to keep from replying.

Atalawe could barely be seen in the darkness. Only by her movement did I see her. She stepped expertly between the shrubs and tangled undergrowth and barely made a sound. I followed every footstep, learning where to tread and not to tread. It was a fine art, and one I think I mastered quickly, if I didn't say so my—

The branch snapped beneath my foot. Atalawe thrust me behind her as the navik screamed. Its shape came flying down the trunk at a speed that made my skin crawl.

I readied my knife as Atalawe raised her staff. The navik sprinted at us, blades raised and jaws wide.

'Light them up!' Atalawe snarled.

Sparkstones clashed in the darkness. Flames whooshed into life, filling the forest with bright light. A dozen other figures stood about with weapons raised. The navik skidded in the moss with a howl, shielding its eyes. Atalawe smacked it straight in the face with her staff, breaking its skull and sending it twitching to the earth.

Now this woman is a much better warrior.

‘Shut up.’

No sooner had Atalawe dispatched her navik than did another drop from the branches above. It snapped at her neck as it grappled with her.

I didn’t need Serisi to help me now. I stormed forwards, beating the others to Atalawe, and stabbed the creature deep in the side, under the ribs. The foul navik fell wriggling and screeching, ripping the knife from my grasp. Another man put a boot to its face and silenced the thing with a cold efficiency. He even spat on it for good measure.

‘Disgusting parasites!’

Well well, Tarko. I am less disappointed in you than I was before. You do have some fight in you after all, Serisi told me in a strange, singsong voice. I guessed it was a demon’s attempt at sarcasm.

Before I could do or anything, a wide-eyed Atalawe grabbed me by the shoulders and examined me closely, patting me all and over poking at every scratch to see how whole I was.

‘Tarko! You’re alive. By the Three Gods and all their spirits, you’re bloody alive! How is this possible? Are you hurt, lad?’

I clenched my fist so she wouldn’t see the nectra wound. Not yet. There were too many folk around I didn’t recognise. A demon in their midst was likely to go down as well as defecating right there and then in that ring of torchlight.

‘Only a little,’ I said.

‘Got a bloody hole in your arm for one thing,’ Atalawe said, uncorking a vial from her belt and pouring it across my shoulder. I seethed with the sting of it. ‘Sheertown was a storm of fire and rubble by the time we escaped the gates. We thought you had been lost. We tried looking, but...’

I had not seen Atalawe this cheerless before.

They left you behind.

‘It’s fine, is what it is, ’telling both of them as one. ‘I’m alive and that’s all that matters. I can’t believe you survived. Where’s Pel? Redeye? Inwar?’

‘Pel’s wounded. Redeye’s... vanished for now. He’s likely finding his own way back. ’Atalawe’s smile seemed forced, and I made sure to nod encouragingly. ‘Inwar’s an animal of his own devices, but he’ll come back eventually.’

The burly warrior who took the killing blow grabbed my knife from the navik’s corpse. By the sword tattoos on his forearms, his jāgu pelt armour, and the three telltale marks across his cheek, the man was a wilder. ‘Fine metal knife you’ve got here, ’he said while looking me and my stolen armour up and down. The others around us were mostly warriors. A handful of porters maybe. I noticed the orokan nearby amidst a patch of skinny saplings. It was old Nod. Asleep, as per usual.

‘And you. You sure know how to handle yourself, don’t you, scholar?’ said the man.

I held out my hand out for the knife, and he slapped it blade-down on my palm.

‘We keep moving. Shal Gara’s not far, ’he ordered. The others did his bidding without question. ‘And get that orokan up. I’m not having it slow us down any more.’

Atalawe and I roused Nod as swiftly as we could. The stretcher on his back held a very wounded and pale Blind Pel. With the shadow of his past bruises, he looked halfway dead.

‘He’s alive, but barely. An arrow hit him in the back and punctured him good. I fixed him as good as I know how. Given him all the tinctures I could, but he needs a proper healer.’

Seeing as the beggar had thrown me into a trap of fire and demons, I should have shrugged and called it fair, but Tarkosi Terelta wasn't that kind of cruel or spiteful. I put my good hand to Pel's arm and listened to his ragged breathing.

Atalawe drew Nod upwards and onwards with a morsel of something hidden in her hand. 'Nothing's managed to kill him yet, and he's faced more than I dare worry about on a night like tonight. It would be a shame if an arrow took down the Scourge of the Scorchroad.'

'What do you mean, Scourge?'

'A story for another night, perhaps.'

'And here was I thinking Pel was a simple and blind old beggar with a chequered history and an addiction to urka. Nothing grand or heroic.'

'You should be glad he's asleep and didn't hear you,' Atalawe whispered as she beckoned me along. 'Pel is much more than nothing. He was a paragon, and if it weren't for the scars on his cheeks, you'd see his rank. And before you start judging him for his addiction to urka seeds, any seedwitch worth their dirt knows they contain faint traces of nectra. Just enough magic in them for an experienced sorcerer to channel into a little cantrip. Not a full spell, just something simple like helping a blind old beggar see better for a short while.'

It sounded like I was being told off, but Atalawe wasn't even looking at me. She watched every shiver and sway of the forest, listened to every whisper.

To Nod's grumpy snorting, we followed the torches into the forest. One man hung back to light our way. It might have been the shadow of his hood, but half of his face looked burned. He kept a respectful distance as we brought up the rear. I wasn't sure if it was the best place to be or the worst.

Atalawe put her hand on my shoulder. 'You're limping on that ankle, Tarko. You sure you're not hurt? You've got plenty of blood on you.'

'I may have fallen out a tree,' I admitted. 'Is this everyone? All that's left?'

'Unless others escaped north and south, then it looks so. There were more until two were snatched into the shadows by the demon's spawn in the night. Another ran straight into a woefang's web.'

How dare she? Navik are no spawn of my kind.

The wrangler bunched her jaw 'We're sorry, Tarko. *I'm* sorry. You were right behind us, and when we tried to come back I saw a demon charging you,' said Atalawe. 'Before we could intervene, the buildings exploded in some kind of demon spell. All white fire. Never seen or read about anything like it.'

She lies.

'She does not,' I muttered under my breath. Now Atalawe was looking at me, and with a narrow stare, too. Not suspicion, or so my intuition told me, but curiosity.

'What?'

'Nothing.'

Atalawe breathed. 'Forty thousand slaughtered. I can barely believe it.'

Serisi's dark chuckle kept my lips sealed.

‘What happened to you, Tarko? How *did* you survive such a thing? Not two days ago you were ready to fight over the fact demons weren’t real, turning tail and heading home. And here you are in the loam.’

Is that so, Tarko? And now you have trapped one in your mind? How delightful. Do you still doubt us now, worm?

‘Luck, I suspect,’ I replied hesitantly. ‘Sheer blind luck. I...’ The confession of what had really happened hovered on the tip of my tongue. To tell Atalawe about Serisi now – here – with nothing to be done about it, felt like a mistake. As everybody kept reminding me, there was a lot I didn’t know. If these Scions of the Sixth-Born were so avowed against demons, what was to say they wouldn’t have me locked up, or worse? I trusted the sting in my gut and held my tongue on the subject until I could find out more. ‘Maybe one or all of the Three smiled on me, but all I remember was the demon, a flash of white light. Next thing I knew, I woke up under a pile of rubble with a headache and a good deal of trouble getting out.’

‘You’ve barely got a scratch on you. And to think somebody like you...’ Atalawe trailed off.

I see I am not the only one who sees how useless you are, Serisi crowed. I had half a mind to stab myself in the leg with the knife and teach the demon a lesson. But that would have been more than suspicious.

I snorted, equally surprised. ‘Go on, you can say it. To think somebody like me survived alone.’

‘For a city lad who’s never swung a blade and visibly shuddered at the sight of the loam on the Causeway, it’s reasonably impressive.’

Hearing Serisi grumble was more like it.

‘I saw a tharantos in the branches,’ I said; a little boast. ‘Snuck away while it pounced on an orokan. I killed one of the navik, too.’

‘The what?’

‘The creatures that attacked us. The ugly bastards with metal blades. They chased me from the leafroad, and when I saw you run beneath me I knew I had to catch you up.’

Atalawe put her hand on my shoulder and drew me close. ‘How do you know what they’re called?’

I realised my mistake too late.

Oh dear, Tarko of the Swathe. Oh dear, indeed. Not a warrior, not a wizard, and not smart either. Are all workers as pathetic you?

‘I heard one of the demons talking,’ I replied, speaking over Serisi.

‘Talking?’

‘Yes,’ I lied. ‘Navik is what they called them.’

Atalawe faced forwards and nodded in a slow measure. ‘I see. Didn’t think they spoke.’

Tell this fool there is much you do not know of us.

‘Did you see the porters?’ I asked as a distraction.

‘We ran straight into the forest and curved south to reach them, but Nod, being the stupid chap he is, had wandered east after us. Why?’

'They're all dead. Murdered with poisoned knives. A man in a cloak and a jade lizard mask tried to do the same to me. It was more like an accident than defending myself, but I stabbed him in the heart during the scuffle. That's where I got this knife.'

Keeping an eye on the others ahead, Atalawe took the copper blade and examined it. It was well-made but lacking any maker's mark or stamp. Just a few scratches and the sign of clumsy sharpening. To my credit, though I had worked for the armourers and metalsmiths for an unsurprisingly short time, but learned a lot from working the bellows and watching. Metal was rare and usually owned by nobles. Iron came from the Scorch. Copper and gold from the west. Silver was reserved for the highest born, and star-iron was so rare it was almost mythical.

'The spirits of luck do seem to favour you, Tarko,' was all she said.

'For once.'

'So, do you believe us Scions now?'

More than she knows.

'It would be hard not to believe after what we saw,' I sighed.

Atalawe shivered. 'The big question is, will the matriarch of Shal Gara and her sages? It will not be easy, with so much death and blame to lay. Even with the wildfires on the horizon and the word of us survivors.'

'Maybe this will help.' I felt my pocket, where I had stashed the demon's claw. I heard Serisi grind her fangs as I brought it into the glow. It was blacker than the night.

'What is that? Is that...?'

'The claw of a demon. Found it in my shoulder when I woke up.'

'Six Hells, lad.' Atalawe was entranced. She reached for it, and with some hesitation I handed it over.

Atalawe hissed with pain as if the claw was roasting hot. It was warm, yes, but not scorching. It seemed so painful she was forced to drop it. A slight sputter of flame came from the claw once it hit the loam, and I swiftly grabbed it up to hide it away.

'Why doesn't it burn you?' Atalawe asked, rubbing at her singed palm and scholar's tattoo.

'I don't know,' I replied honestly. 'But it might be the proof we need, other than the word of these warriors.' I thought of any subject other than the claw. 'Speaking of warriors, where's Haidak Baran? Was he killed?' I felt a little grimy asking with hope instead of concern. It would be a thorn out of my side, to be cold about it. Maybe Serisi was already rubbing off on me.

Atalawe gave me a look that understood completely. 'Despite how peaceful that would make your life, no. The last we saw of him, he and two other lancewings were tearing through the undergrowth at speeds that I've never seen the like of.' Atalawe puffed her cheeks. 'Nothing could catch them.'

'So he's a coward, as well as a bully.'

'That's why most bullies are the way they are, Tarko.'

Whether it was the relief of finding others and a relative semblance of safety, or the fact I wanted to push this newfound luck of mine, but I made a decision: I wanted answers.

'I think it's time you tell me everything I don't know. About my father. You Scions. About the Barans. Everything.'

The woman stared at me down her nose. She held a branch back with her staff and let it whip back in my face. ‘Do you now?’

‘Seeing as we’re all supposed to be dead...’

You all will perish be when my father gets here.

‘...and could be any moment, judging by how deep the undergrowth is getting, why not?’

Atalawe glanced back to the comatose Pel as if seeking permission. ‘I am not the one to tell you,’ she grumbled. ‘But I shall if that’s what you wish, so be it. The demons first came to the Swathe more than a thousand seasons ago. At that time, the Scorch was another broad stretch of the Swathe, stretching all the way to the eastern mountains. A week was how long the first demon attack lasted. Only a week, yet in that time, they decimated two hundred miles of forest with fire and brimstone and brought three bloodwoods crashing down.

‘It’s said the demons were not defeated, but left of their own accord through the same fiery doorway they had appeared from, once they’d had their fill of devouring beasts and humans and turning the proud, ancient forest to cinders, of course. Suffice it to say, the scattered peoples of the Swathe were left reeling and distraught. All their petty wars they’d fought for centuries across loam and canopy were proved pointless. Foolish. They came together to rebuild, to restock and rearm, and prepare for the day they feared would come again. And they were not wrong.

‘From then on, like a plague of gobflies, the demons came again and again every nine seasons. Predictable, yet devastating every time. Our defences were crushed over and over, and the Swathe died piece by piece until the Scorch was all that was left of the east. Remember what I told you about the bloodwoods migrating? Fleeing west saved some but not all. Bloodwood after bloodwood were torn down by their claws. Towns and cities were reduced to ash. Entire tribes and bloodlines massacred. For centuries, we humans trained ourselves, learned to fight harder and smarter. We learned the arts of nectra and built the magic orders. That’s why the Sorcer’s Edict and practice of testing young ones for magic is older than the tribes of the Bloodlaws. It was written in the time of war. With earth, then air, then water, we evolved to meet the demons in battle. Then came Kī Raxa. She changed everything. No sorcer but her has ever managed to harness the fourth order of magic. Fire.’

‘That’s impossible,’ I replied.

‘Not for her. She was a sixth-born, a wanderer and mapmaker. That season, the demons came in numbers greater than ever before. When all seemed lost, she was left standing to face the demon horde and its king head-on. In single combat, she defeated him by wielding his own fire against him. The lost songs speak of how she cleaved a horn from the king’s head before forcing him and his dark kin into a fiery door and burying it beneath a spire of rock and molten metal they now call the Iron Scar.’

I could hear Serisi’s hissing in my head. Having my enemy eavesdrop wasn’t ideal, but I had little choice.

‘Kī Raxa died not long after the demons were forced back,’ Atalawe continued. ‘A sickness took her, and as the sixth-born’s customs demanded, she wandered out into the forest never to be seen again. It was only nine seasons later, when the demons did not return, that Kī Raxa was truly considered the hero she always deserved to be. Before she died, she entrusted her knowledge to members of her sixth-born tribe. They were the Scions, lad. They were the embodiment of Kī Raxa and they shone brighter than any lancer does today. They sat beside the matriarchs in their courts. The finest of the finest families, the excellence of each tribe. Some of our histories say they were the first sages.’

‘Then what happened to them?’

‘Like Pel said. Shal Gara and the rest of the bloodwoods grew comfortable in peace. Self-assured on our mastery of the demons. The Bloodlaws were written to restore order. They failed to recall the terror of past centuries, forgot the songs, lost the carvings and scrolls. And with the Scions having little purpose, they fell from favour. We drifted apart, or were branded as lunatics and splintered off and died. All thanks to those that set their mind to ruining the Scions.’

‘Why?’

‘Jealousy, mostly. Other nobles and those who wanted sages seats for themselves. Others saw no place for us in peacetime and in the age of the Bloodlaws.’ Atalawe bared her teeth. ‘And as Pel told you, there were once some who, unbelievably, wished the demons to return. Religious morons who believe in the demon god and in the demons’ absolute power of chaos. They wanted them to return.’

Finally, mortals with some sense.

‘Shut up.’

Atalawe looked at me strangely. ‘You can tell me to shut up all you want, Tarko, but it’s true. You wanted to know.’

‘Not you,’ I said, thinking quickly. ‘These halfwits, I mean. These demon-worshipping loamers. How can anyone in their right mind believe these demons are a good thing?’

‘Fair enough. Good to know where you stand. In any case, Pel believes that some still exist, scattered and hiding like us Scions. These Fireborn, or so they call themselves. Perhaps if your knife and this lizard-faced attacker are anything to go by, Pel is right once more.’

I like these Fireborn already, Serisi commented.

‘And how does my father play into all of this? You said he was the head of the Scions.’

‘For a time, yes. Teyak was a fine sorcer and a Scorchwars hero. He was to air carving what Redeye is to earth reaving.’

‘I cannot believe that.’

‘Teyak Terelta inherited the Scions when the order was lost and broken. He, Eztaral, Pel, and my mother, long-dead now, built us back to strength. Your father had an unwavering conviction that the demons would come back to burn the Swathe one day, and within our lifetimes. And how right he was. Teyak saved the Scions from obscurity, but in turn it drove him to lengths that ostracised him from the other nobles. It brought us out into the light to be mocked and challenged. Nobody wants to hear of apocalypse when life is as safe and idyllic and comfortable as ours is. Least of all Kol Baran. He was a first-born heir to a fine name and thirsty for the matriarch’s approval. Your father was a paragon of the sorcers’ tribe. When Teyak began trying to warn the sages and the matriarch, Kol Baran took great offence and waged his own personal war against your father. He had him embarrassed, then disgraced, then ruined.’

‘You know what the problem is with your story?’ I interjected.

‘Enlighten me.’

‘It makes my mother a liar.’

Atalawe shook her head and snorted as if that was utterly wrong. ‘Axera Terelta is no liar. Teyak loved her so much he couldn’t involve her. Wouldn’t. Baran sure drove your father to drinking through the failure he caused him, and the ruin it brought to your family, but Teyak was no drunk. No gambler like Baran had everyone – your mother included – believe through tricks and false rumours. Kol Baran is a venomous snake, and a swift and agile one at that. His lies worked their

wicked charm. When he pushed your father too far, Teyak finally snapped and confronted Baran. As you know, that resulted in Teyak almost throwing him from a leafroad.'

Atalawe swallowed some emotion I couldn't believe came from the same mention of my father. 'Because of Teyak's actions, Eztaral turned her back on her vows and left the Scions. That didn't sit well with your father. After he was publicly disgraced, he became even more desperate. Pelikai and I tried to calm him down and watch him all hours of the day, but he disappeared into Neathering and the Midern. Not a week later we found Teyak dead on Daqa Branch, with a dagger-wound through his heart. Some whispered it was self-inflicted, seeing as a blade was found in his hand and urka seed husks in the other. Most blamed gemplenders taking their payment in blood. Baran made sure that rumour reached far and wide.'

I realised I had been clenching my fists. 'I remember that day well. That was the same day I had my sorcer's mark removed.'

'That was no coincidence.'

I paused mid-stride. 'Excuse me?'

Atalawe whacked the back of my legs with her staff to keep me moving. 'Naturally, we blamed Baran for Teyak's murder, just like you might be thinking right now, but the bastard wasn't in Shal Gara at the time. Instead he was flying lancewings with a dozen other nobles to swear for him. It wasn't beneath Baran to arrange it, of course, but there's never been a shred of proof. Kol Baran instead got his revenge by having the sorcers change your mark and bar you from the tribe. Pel always thought it was something to do with the fact his son Haidak had no reaction to the nectra and yet Teyak's son did. Kol Baran became a sage, and you went on living the life of a third-born, knowing no different. So, Tarko, it wasn't your father that ruined you. You weren't a mistake.'

The rage sparked faster than an oily torch. 'You mean to tell me... all this time I've been a sorcer? Because of Kol Baran?'

Look who's a wizard after all, Tarko.

'Quiet!' I couldn't help but snap.

'What?' Atalawe guarded me with her staff. 'You hear something, lad?'

'I... no. Thought I did.'

'You've got nervous ears, you have. Too much fear in you.'

'I'm not scared, I'm furious. I bloody knew I wasn't supposed to be... *this!*' I thumbed at the three tattooed nails on the back of my hands in frustration and inwardly swore all sorts of vengeance on the Baran family. 'By the Three Gods and all their spirits! All this time, I blamed my father instead of Kol Baran.'

'But you aren't a sorcer, Tarko. You've never trained to be a sorcer. You're not even an initiate, and they start at five seasons old.'

'But I still could be, right?' I muttered to myself. 'This changes everything.'

'No, lad. It changes nothing of what is behind us. Nothing of what is coming for Shal Gara, and it certainly doesn't help us out of this loam. Calm yourself. That is not important now.'

'Not to you, maybe,' I hissed, refusing to keep the anger inside, bubbling away. I was quickly realising this was the problem with answers: they always led to more questions.

There was one question that lingered above all: what to do about the demon in my head. The thought of telling Atalawe about Serisi crossed my mind again. I moved as carefully as I dared.

‘These demons,’ I said. ‘What magic do they have?’

‘None besides their immunity to fire and supposedly their silver tongues.’

‘No mind magic, or spells to control a person? Steal their soul, maybe?’

Atalawe spluttered with laughter. ‘Where are you getting these ideas from, Tarko? Are they not dangerous enough for your liking? I’ve never heard of such things.’

In my mind, Serisi laughed. *I knew it was your doing*, she said. *Liar*.

I couldn’t take it any more. ‘Well, this is going to sound—’

A shout cut me off. And thankfully, too. I swallowed my words, already knowing they would be a blunder.

‘Hurry up there!’ The fellow that hung behind with the torch had stopped walking and was waving us past him. ‘Hatlu’s called a camp for the night.’

‘Who’s Hatlu?’ I asked.

‘Hatlu Ko. The charming specimen of a wilder from earlier,’ Atalawe said before nodding to the man with the torch. ‘Thank you for staying behind to give us some light...?’

The man sketched a bow and smiled warmly. I was right, half of his face had been severely burned. One of his eyelids looked to have been melted half shut. His mouth was a frozen smile. A mosscloth bandage covered his neck and ear.

‘Juraxi is my name,’ he said. ‘And pleased to help any way I can for you warriors.’

Part Two

12

NO SURRENDER

Workers rejoice! Where other tribes are limited, workers have the entire breadth of our civilisation to explore! From the comfort of their own bloodwood, they can be farmers, hunters, carpenters, smiths, louseminers, weavers, armourers, nesthands, and much more. Look not to the canopy and long for nobility, but to the wealth of opportunity in your own hands.

FROM A SPEECH MADE BY MATRIARCH OXAN THE NINTH, 1940

The mood around the wildfire was an absolute hoot, full of conversation, laughter, and not one mention of the wildfires, murder and chaos we had escaped from.

I lie, of course.

It was a silent affair. Several of the surviving porters whimpered to themselves as they cradled one another. The younger or lower-ranking warriors nibbled morsels like garbles and stared around into the forest. They flinched at every noise and screech and cry, of which there were many. The forest was louder at night that it was in the daylight. Something was currently crunching on bones or carapace very near to us. In the light of the torches the warriors had staked on poles and the campfire at our centre, the little huddle of survivors constantly caught peeks of glinting or glowing eyes. Twice, the warriors had to drive back a curious and rather hungry beetle with a crown of thorns and a body the length of my leg.

I was presently staring at a cluster of eight eyes that I swore had a red tinge to them. They kept rising and descending into the darkness. When a brief breeze brought us the smell of smoke, the flames moved and the firelight with it. I saw spindly black legs long as my arm wriggling to escape the light. I shivered from head to toe. Four limbs was the maximum both my mind and stomach preferred.

Only Atalawe's relatively calm nature kept me from feeling the same fear. If she was not perturbed, then neither was I. She was poking the fire with a stick, keeping the dead wood we'd piled into a campfire burning.

'It's the fire that keeps them at bay. Even a tharantos, unless it's particularly hungry. We might have forgotten the wildfires, but the forest remembers it,' she whispered. 'Many of the beasts are already moving west. You can hear them if you listen. A lucky time to tread the loam.'

I held my hands out to the fire. The warmth felt good against the chill of night. Serisi's growl echoed around my skull as if she also appreciated it. I wondered if I was somehow feeding her, or making her stronger, and quickly withdrew my hands. My right hand sparked with pain as I did so, and I clutched it.

'Got another injury, Tarko?' Atalawe asked, immediately concerned and reaching for more tinctures and strips of cloth. My right shoulder and ankle had already been daubed with some oily mixture and swaddled in moss.

'I...'

She seized my hand before I could object. I clenched my fingers to hide it. Thankfully, in the firelight, you couldn't see the glow of the nectra embedded within me. Smudged ash and dirt covered the dark colour to the veins in my wrist.

'What is this? Sandglass?'

'It's fine, just an injury. I got most of the shards out.'

'And what is this blue stain? If I didn't know better, you'd smashed some nectra into you. Or you clutched a handful of some ticabo berries at some point during your mad dash.'

'Sounds about right,' I chuckled nervously.

Atalawe blew a strand of her hair from her face. 'Better than the nectra. That stuff isn't any good to you if you get it in your blood, and that's an understatement. It's more dangerous than half the poisons I have memorised. Worse than musktooth venom. Almost as bad as a grimspore.'

Poison? What is she blabbering on about? Ask her! I heard the worry in the demon. I shared it too.

'Poison?' I blurted.

'You didn't know? Why do you think sorcers drink it, lad? It's the only way it doesn't kill you. You'd know quickly if it was nectra, trust me. You'd be dead after an hour, so count yourself lucky.'

An uneasy relief took over me. I had more questions, but for the moment, I was focused on keeping my lips from wavering and giving my truth away. Before releasing me, Atalawe produced her sphere of akiga juice and sloshed it on my hand. It stung like needles to my bones. Serisi hissed with me.

'Agh! Leave me be,' I blurted.

'I know more than most of those healers, lad. Trust me.'

'I'm fine.'

A gruff voice interrupted us. 'What are you two loamers so thick as thieves about, eh?'

It was the wilder: the thick slab of a man that the others called Hatlu Ko, sat across the fire from us, all hunched and brooding on a chunk of log. He was busy grumbling at the darkness between a curtain of black, lank hair and grinding a stone against a half-broken obsidian axe. Hatlu

looked the sort of man who, if he couldn't open a bottle or jar, would punch it open just to teach it a lesson. Though his paunch wobbled with his efforts, his heavy arms were thicker than both my thighs.

The others around the fire numbered a dozen survivors at most. Pel lay near to the fire to get some warmth in his bones. Even in the longsun, the nights could grow cold enough to shiver. I had a feeling that would change when the fires got here.

Atalawe stared through the flames at him. 'I was saying how we're not far from Shal Gara now.' 'And then what?' muttered one of the warriors.

One of the porters wrung her hands so hard I wondered how the skin stayed on. Her eyes were wide and red-raw with tears. 'Those fire-beasts will come for us anyway. Them and their loathsome little pests. Shal Gara will burn just like Firstwatch did, I tell you.'

Correct, Serisi told me.

'Call them demons.' I spoke up. The circle looked around at me. The porter's tear-rimmed eyes were so wide it was surprising they stayed in their sockets. 'Because that's what they are.'

Hatlu spoke up again. 'Pah! No such thing.'

'Knowing what you're fighting lessens the fear,' Atalawe said.

'Is that some scholar tribe wisdom, is it?'

Atalawe smirked. 'It's a simple fact no matter your tribe. They were demons. Not saying their name doesn't make them any less of a threat. Now it's up to us to warn Shal Gara that they're coming. That's why we need to survive the next day so the city can be told what's coming.'

'They won't believe us,' came another complaint, this one from a warrior of sun-baked northern skin. 'I hardly believe my eyes.'

'I think the fact that we are all that remains of the war-party proves enough, don't you?' I asked.

Atalawe nudged me. This time, I had spoken too much. Hatlu Ko looked to me like the sort of man that only followed his own authority. That explained why somebody with so much grey in his bushy beard hadn't ever progressed past the wilder's rank. And why he stared at a lad half his age and likely wondered who I was to tell him what to do.

'And what do you know of such things, boy?' Hatlu stood. With a flick of his wrist, he embedded his axehead into the log with a whump of rotten splinters. He ambled around the fire, stretching his thick arms as he did so. I straightened slightly. Atalawe just watched the fire. All I saw was a slight shift of her feet, and her lean from the tree stump we both shared.

'Saying it how I see it, is all,' I replied. I didn't like this kind of man. He was the sort who threw his weight around wherever he saw fit. The kind who had never been challenged enough to think differently. I might have been too confident, but I found myself finding a target for all the jilted anger that lingered within me. I saw the bully in him. I saw Sage Baran, and I sneered.

'They'll have to believe us,' I told him, stuffing a slice of old frog meat into my mouth and chewing. 'The war-party didn't just disappear, did it? You were there. You saw what happened.'

‘Course I was there!’ Hatlu ran a bruised and burn-scabbed hand through his beard. ‘You know what? I’m more concerned what a worker and a scholar are doing in warriors’ armour. Armour that you got no right wearing, ’specially in a war-party like Eagleborn Baran’s. You ain’t warriors like we are.’

It seemed Hatlu wasn’t as much of a dolt as I’d taken the brute for. I chewed and stared while Atalawe answered.

‘We took them off the fallen to keep ourselves safe. You saw those creatures, what would you have done? And, for your information, we were porters.’

‘That’s right,’ said the teary-eyed porter. ‘I saw them the night the war-party left us.’

Hatlu came and stood between us and the fire, making a silhouette of himself. He put his fists to his hips. I noticed the shape of a hatchet on his belt. ‘But not after,’ he accused.

Atalawe tutted. ‘What is this? The demons weren’t enough for you, so you’ve got to pick another fight?’

‘It’s traitors I don’t like. Back-stabbers like the kind that led us straight into that bloody trap. The kind that sold us out to the marauders. What does your big mouth say to that, boy?’ Hatlu barked.

Serisi had spent the evening silence until now. *What does it say, Tarko?*

‘Nothing,’ I hissed at her, but Hatlu stepped forwards nonetheless.

‘Speak up, boy!’

There was nothing like the accusation of being a traitor to turn heads. Nothing like the prospect of a convenient culprit to soothe minds. One by one, the eyes of the circle swivelled to stare at us. Their eyes hollow were hollow and their foreheads furrowed in the wavering light of the fire. I stared flatly at Hatlu. ‘I said you’re wrong. You’re looking for somebody to blame for all the blood that was spilled. Looking for a way to get rid of the fear inside you, I bet.’

Hatlu didn’t give my words a moment of consideration before trying to seize me by the throat. Atalawe was on her feet in the space of a blink. Hatlu Ko was on his arse in the next. It happened so fast I wondered if I’d fallen asleep for the briefest of moments. The wrangler’s ironpith staff rested gently on the man’s bulbous nose. Some of the other warriors got to their feet, but Atalawe shook her head.

‘If we were traitors, you would be dead by now,’ she told Hatlu in a voice utterly devoid of mirth and full of threat. ‘So if I were you, I’d rethink what the lad said, and keep a lid on that temper of yours. You’re looking in the wrong place for a fight. Perhaps if you can get that into your thick skull, you’ll realise this is the time for us humans to work as one, and not fight amongst ourselves. If that’s what you want, then the demons have already won this war, and the Swathe is already lost.’

That it is.

I clenched my jaw and hoped Serisi wasn't right. The others around the circle seemed to do the same. One by one, they sat back down or turned back to their vigil of the forest. There was nothing else to be said, it seemed.

Atalawe at last let Hatlu up. By his huffing breaths, he was fuming at being outdone and embarrassed. He got up, irritably brushed the loam from his jāgu fur, and went to retrieve his axe. He turned, but did not advance, only staring at us from beyond the fire. Our camp teetered on violence for a short while until Hatlu spat in the dirt and went back to his sharpening.

One of the other warriors voiced her thoughts. Three deep gashes crossed her breastplate. What remained of her severed arm was clutched to her chest and wrapped in dirty bandages. 'We should get back on the leafroad at firstglow,' she muttered.

Atalawe shook her head and perched on the tree stump once more. 'None of us are in the state to climb, never mind go back. It's too high above us now. That being the point of the leafroads, remember? Other roads are ahead of us. This isn't the first time I've trodden the loam.'

'She's right,' another warrior bobbed his head. 'I know one that shouldn't be far.'

'Firstglow, then,' said the terrified porter in a voice so shaky I knew she had zero faith we would live through the night. I wasn't so sure either, considering how darkly Hatlu was still staring at Atalawe and I.

Atalawe leaned close. 'Hatlu's scared is all. Rattled by surviving something that by all rights he shouldn't have survived. Men like Hatlu would likely rather die than admit weakness, so it comes out in other, more violent, ways.'

'And now you've embarrassed him some more.'

'I'd hoped he would learn his lesson, but men like him also don't forgive easily. Fortunately we don't have to put up with him much longer.'

'So,' I mused. 'What's to stop him doing something while we're asleep?'

The wrangler sucked her teeth. She put herself on the loam with her back against the dead roots of the stump. 'A fair point. We'll sleep in shifts, in that case. I've never one for much sleep, so wake me in an hour or so, and you can sleep the rest of the night.'

My aching bones and heavy eyes protested, but somehow, by the time I thought to speak up, she was already snoring. I was jealous.

I took up the stick Atalawe had used for poking the fire and took up her duties. I didn't know what I was doing, but it was satisfying to hold the glowing end of the stick in the hottest parts between the logs. Serisi seemed to stare as well, quiet and pondering for once. I was glad for it.

I became lost in my thoughts. For how long, I didn't know, but it was until one of the survivors shuffled around the campfire to share the expansive tree stump. It was the man Juraxi. My hand stayed on my knife while he approached with an uneasy smile. It was tough not to stare at the extensive burns across one side of his face.

'Do you mind?' he asked, pointing to the space Atalawe had left. The wrangler still snored soundly.

‘As long as you’re not going to call me a traitor.’

Juraxi scoffed and thrust out his hand. It too was burned to a painful-looking crust. He tutted at himself, switched hands, and tried again. I pressed my palm to his as was customary. Unlike the others – myself included – Juraxi didn’t seem to have a tremble of fear in him. He seemed no wiser nor experienced than any of us. The grey that wasn’t ash or twig in his remaining hair told me he was roughly the same as age as Atalawe.

‘I don’t know enough about you to call you anything.’

This man smells of demon-fire. I knew the demon’s silence couldn’t last long. I felt Serisi’s intrigue as if it were my own.

‘My name’s Tarkosi.’

‘And you’re from Shal Gara, right?’

‘You aren’t?’

Juraxi shook his head. It was tough not to stare at the extensive burns across one side of his face. He had straight cuts across his hands and wrists, the kind a blade makes. I saw the tortured edge of a warrior’s sword tattoo under his sleeve.

‘No, I was born and raised in Firstwatch and lived on the Loamsedge all my life. Until now, of course,’ he said, trying to laugh but sighing instead. I smiled to be polite. He was the sort of person who barely blinked and kept constant eye contact.

‘I was having the worst day of my life the day that the sun turned black. Didn’t think it would get worse, but then Firstwatch began to burn,’ he said.

‘You were there when the demons first came?’

Juraxi’s stare turned glassy and distant. ‘That I was. Far too close. They appeared in the snap of fingers.’

‘What do you mean, appeared?’

The man took some time to answer. The fire danced in his eyes. ‘They *appeared*. That’s all I can say. One moment Firstwatch was sounding its alarms over the black sun and the smoke rising in the Scorch. The next, there they were. Some kind of door, but flat like a pond or a lake, and made of fire. It cut through anything its path. Houses. Buildings. People.’ Juraxi spent a moment swallowing whatever lump blocked his throat. ‘My mother and father never stood a chance. Merciful, is what I’ve been telling myself since then. The days pass and it gets no easier to believe. Dark times, indeed.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I muttered. The pain in his face was plain to see, and it tugged at me.

Juraxi exhaled, breath quivering. ‘To think that the end of our world has come.’

‘It hasn’t,’ I said. ‘Not yet, at least.’

Juraxi gingerly touched the burns across his hands. ‘You keep thinking that, young Tarkosi. You’ll see soon enough.’

Though I could see precisely why he believed that, I refused to believe it. I couldn't. The alternative was unbearable. 'Given up already?' I asked him.

Juraxi waved his hand across the circle of survivors. 'None of you saw what I saw. That changes a man. Changes a mind.'

'You were a warrior before?' I asked, changing the subject. 'Before, that is.'

'I was a humble warder. And you?'

I showed him the crossed nails on my hand. 'Third-born. I've tried most callings in Shal Gara.'

'Never found one that fit, huh?'

I shook my head and let the conversation falter to the crackling of flames and the sleep-bound whimpers of the other survivors. A pained screech turned both our heads for a moment. Deep in the trees, something died a gruesome death. I looked for the glowing spider's eyes again but saw none. There were plenty of other flitting shapes between the faint glow of the plants and the firelight to steal my attention.

Juraxi shivered. 'So what did bring you into the war-party? Not usually a place for workers.'

'Like my friend said, we were porters for the warriors. Carrying supplies is all.'

'Never seen porters or scholars like your friend before. She knows how to handle herself.'

I gave the man a nod and wry smile.

'Where did you get that knife?' Juraxi asked. The man was full of questions. His gaze had shifted to my blade, which was still clutched in my left hand.

'I found it.' The excuse was poor and Juraxi didn't buy it.

'Seems like the kind of knife you don't just find, Tarkosi. Copper's not that common, even in Firstwatch.'

'Well, I did, so I don't what to tell you. There was a dead man who didn't need it any more.'

'Take a life did you? You seem too young for such a thing.'

'Like you said: dark times. But no,' I lied. 'He was already dead.'

The silence hovered between us until Juraxi stood up. 'Sleep well then, Tarkosi. I'd watch out for our friend Hatlu over there if I were you. He seems to have taken a strong disliking to you, and if I know anything, it's that grudges are hard to kill.'

I nodded, not knowing what else to say. Juraxi had an oddness about him that I wasn't sure whether to pity. Perhaps seeing the demons arrive had addled his mind, in the way fear was a poison.

Naturally, Serisi was there to fill the quiet. *He speaks the truth, you know. About the end of your world. My father and our kin have spent too long existing in the Starless Plains to fail now.*

'What does that mean?' I breathed.

It means this is a war to the death, Tarko of the Swathe. There will be no surrender. No quarter. Even if it takes a hundred of your seasons, we will be victorious over your world. There is no alternative for my kin. And there are no heroes to save you now.

Serisi's threat shook me, I had to admit. She had become such a part of me in such a short time, it was easy to forget she was the enemy. One that would have ripped my spine out in the space of a breath if she could escape from me. It was as if Juraxi's words had stoked her fire.

And as for you, the demon continued, the one who stole his daughter away. If my father finds you, you will regret ever being born. You will regret every breath you've ever taken. You will spend a century being torn apart and put back together. My father does not forgive, she seethed in my mind.

Serisi had betrayed herself. I heard it even if she didn't. My voice was barely a whisper. 'You're scared of your father, aren't you? I can hear it in your voice.'

If you had any sense in that mortal worm-brain of yours, you would be too.

I smiled then. Serisi felt it and hissed at me. 'Looks like I'm not the only one who has father issues,' I muttered.

Serisi said no more. I felt like punching the air. I had won that argument. A small victory, but I enjoyed it all the same. I grinned around the circle until I caught the fear-soaked gaze of one of the warriors, and remembered that none of them had their own private demons. Not ones that talked to them at least. I extinguished my smile and went back to staring at the fire.

Beside me, Atalawe snuffled as she came awake.

'That was all the sleep you needed?'' I asked.

Atalawe rubbed her eyes, thumped a cough from her chest, and stood up. 'I'll sleep when I'm dead, whenever the Three Gods see fit to take me.'

I shook my head as I slumped down in the loam next to slumbering Pel. These Scions were all mad, I was sure of it.

To muddled thoughts of my father and a past I would never have a hope of knowing, I fell swiftly into a deep sleep, full of muttering voices.

□

Fire. It surrounded me once again, so real that it took me a moment to realise I wasn't burning.

The world was split in two: red earth cracked and dead below me, and above, a black sky empty of stars above. Thunder rolled from clouds unseen. Mountains arose from the endless flat of the plain that had no end. Machines of crunching iron spread across the featureless desert cracked and broke. Flaming pyres rose from the ground to carve craters from the wasteland. Entire plateaus of earth were blasted forth and drifted into the void like cotton motes.

Once more, the demon horde surrounded me. Their fires burned hotter, paler. In silence, they raised their fists to a figure unseen behind me. A king of darkness stood before the circle of iron and blood-washed stone, and as he raised his flaming sword in promise, the air between the gates started to shiver. A curtain of fire filled their limits.

The horizon shuddered with the weight of black shadow: a storm almost indistinguishable from the void. A single and burning eye sat at its centre, slitted as a serpent's.

I felt as a prisoner standing before the demon king, powerless to escape his attention. He sniffed at the searing air. I felt his gaze find me and pin me to the dust like an insect. A darkness of dirt enveloped me, until all that faced me were the demon's two fiery and inescapable eyes. They transfixed me, and in them I saw no plain, but a forest burning. A voice split my ears. The voice of thunder. The voice of a king.

'I see you.'



The rays of firstglow were offensive.

A spear of it found a precious gap in the canopy and blinded me in one eye. I groaned as I remembered where and who I was. I was currently slumped in the loam and damp with morning dew. Around me, the other survivors were awake and stamping the ashes of the campfire to death. I rubbed my aching eyes. My only solace was that I hadn't been hacked to death in the night. Atalawe was nearby, pouring dew-water into Pel's mouth.

I frowned. My dreams had been full of fire and ash and dust once more. Nightmares, more like, confusing and bizarre even for my own riotous imagination. Nonsense, I hoped, for I was too exhausted to make head or tail of it. I blamed the demon. I clenched my wounded right hand to see if she would speak, but there was silence in my head. I wondered if demons slept. I wagered she was ignoring me. Sulking, even.

I pushed myself up. My ankle had become like stone in the night. Whatever adrenaline had kept me running had vanished. It clicked as I took a step to test it. I hissed between my teeth.

'Can you walk alright?' Atalawe asked without looking up.

'As much as I need to. We aren't far,' I replied. 'Are we?'

Atalawe smiled at me then. A little of her normal exuberance had returned. 'You remind me so much of your father. I know you hate to hear that, but only because you only know him from his mistakes. But you are Teyak's son sure enough as I am my mother's daughter. There's the same flame in you that refuses to be snuffed.'

Atalawe would never know how right she was in that moment. However, it was too early for me to think up any reply besides a shrug.

'How's the hand?' she asked.

‘Still sore, but better.’ I looked up between the lofty trees for any sign of Shal Gara. The bloodwood was utterly lost between the press of foliage and undergrowth. Firstglow shone at an angle through the canopy. I craned my neck to see the sky. Only a patch of it was visible, and it was choked with smoke from the east. There wasn’t a scrap of blue, as I’d hoped for near Shal Gara. Far down in the loam, a faint mist clung to the tree trunks. It spiralled behind the survivors as we moved through it. One less, by my count. Atalawe saw me counting and patted my shoulder.

‘One went walking in the night. All we found of his trail was that it ended in blood. Taken by a fisher vine.’

‘And what in the Six Hells is that?’

‘Hangs a frond like a fisher’s hook or a noose. If you’re unwary enough to walk into it and get caught, it pulls you high into the canopy where it... well you can imagine the rest.’

I didn’t want to.

Hatlu Ko seemed groggy, as if he had been swigging spirits from a flask all night. He muttered something foul as he swaggered to the front of the group. ‘This way,’ he barked, setting a path that went under the leafroad.

‘No. It’s that way,’ Atalawe corrected him with a point of her staff. ‘East.’

‘By the Six Hells,’ Hatlu snapped. ‘You lead the way then, scholar!’

Atalawe led Nod and Pel’s stretcher past him without meeting his glowering eyes. ‘With pleasure.’

‘Three gems says we get an axe in our backs before we reach Shal Gara,’ I whispered to her.

‘Six gems and you’re on.’

Atalawe and I chuckled as we stepped east.

The faint light shifted above us with the sun’s wandering through the darkened sky. A rain came within the first hour of starting to walk. We heard its drumming on the canopy high above us first, then slowly its drip came down the levels of the forest. Some drops fell hundreds of feet to reach us and make our torches hiss and sputter. I was glad for it, and raised my hands high until my right hand stung at the rain’s touch. Holding my palm close, I saw the faintest glow between my fingers. The wound had healed slightly after the akiga juice. And yet dark veins had spread down my palm and deeper into my wrist. They looked thicker than before, and I hid them away from sight and thought.

‘Serisi,’ I whispered, once Atalawe had wandered ahead to poke at some suspicious-looking leaves, and the survivors had moved on. Not in my life had I experienced such peculiar dreams, and I had a feeling I knew who to blame.

What do you want, wor—Tarko?’

I raised an eyebrow at that. ‘Tell me, does your demon kind sleep?’

We have no need of such a thing. No such weakness. Our fire and the pure will of the Iron Icon sustains us.

‘Then I guess if you don’t sleep, you don’t dream, either?’

Serisi took a moment to answer. I thought I heard the grinding of her fangs. *No.*

‘You wouldn’t happen to be lying to me now, would you, Serisi?’ I muttered.

I have not known dreams until being trapped in your mind. They are... strange.

‘The places I keep dreaming of I’ve never seen before. A rusted plain. Machines of great iron wheels. A storm of darkness.’

Then you dream of our dying world, Tarko of the Swathe. The Starless Plains we demons call our home.

‘What do you mean you world is dying?’

That is why we are here. Crushing your world will save ours.

A gruff shout slapped my mouth shut. ‘Talking to yourself, traitor?’

Hatlu had wandered back down the file. He had trouble in his eyes. He spoke to me yet stared knives at Atalawe. His axe was lashed loosely across his back and a cloth in his hands, wrapped around something.

‘None of your business,’ I shot back at him. He came close enough to smell the stink of sweat on him.

Now Hatlu’s gaze switched to me. He looked as though he’d take a swing at my face, but the fact Atalawe was close stayed his hand.

‘You need to learn some respect, worker. You should know your place.’

I felt myself twitch at those accursed words. ‘Is that right?’

You’ve got some fire in you today, mortal, Serisi told me. I almost like it.

‘You’ve got some cheek, boy, and just because of that,’ Hatlu barked, making the rest of the survivors halt and turn. Atalawe stood at my shoulder, sensing a fight just as I did. Hatlu surprised us all, and instead rummaged inside his handful of cloth and produced three oval fruits of a bright red colour and a waxy hide. ‘Neither of you can have some of this ūlana fruit I just found,’ he said with spite practically dripping from his blubbery lips.

‘Ūlana fruit doesn’t grow down on the loam, you dimwit,’ said Atalawe.

‘Well I found it hanging from a tree just up there, so clearly you’re not a very good scholar if you don’t know where ūlana grows, are you?’ The wilder held one of the fruits up and waggled it. Ūlana fruit had a thick rind guarding its flesh, one that peeled off in three sections. The trick was to pick at the stalk first, and Hatlu was already doing that with his grubby sausage of a finger.

‘Hatlu,’ Atalawe explained in an exasperated tone, ‘the only things that look like ūlana fruits and grow down in the loam are gemspider eggs, or—Six Hells! STOP!’

Atalawe swung her staff at Hatlu, but he dodged away. At the same time, his finger cracked the fruit’s skin.

I had eaten my fair share of ūlana fruit in my time. In truth, it was my second favourite after ticabo berry, if I had to put them in order. Yet out of the possibly hundreds of the fruits I’d eaten in my seasons, none of them had spat an oily tentacle at me and pierced my neck like a wriggling and grotesque arrow.

‘Agh!’ Hatlu cried as he recoiled. Even though he let go of the fruit, the thing clung on to him. The red husk was pulsating and withering with each beat.

‘Nobody go near him!’ Atalawe warned in a savage yell as survivors sprang to help him. ‘I’ll break the arms of anyone that tries.’

‘You bitch!’ Hatlu seethed. ‘Get this thing off me!’

‘Get back, I say! If anybody touches him the spore will explode and infect us all.’

The word “infect” had a strong, sharp edge to it, and, like an obsidian blade held to their throats, it held every one of the survivors in place. Myself included.

‘What is happening?’ I hissed.

‘It’s a grimspore, curse it!’ explained Atalawe. A carnivorous seed that waits to be picked or eaten by a beast or an idiot warrior.’

‘A what?!’ Hatlu seized the fruit and wrenched, but the more he pulled, the deeper the hideous tongue burrowed. The pain of his attempts turned his voice a shrill scream. ‘Get it off me!’

Keeping Hatlu back with the ironpith staff, Atalawe whispered to me. ‘Give me your knife.’

‘W—why?’ I stammered

‘What’s happening to him?’ cried one of the warriors.

‘The grimspore infects the mind,’ shouted Atalawe, ‘slowly taking it over and turning it ravenous.’

‘Ravenous for what?’ I yelled, watching Hatlu was pawing madly at his neck. His complaints were becoming hoarse.

Atalawe didn’t hold back. ‘Ravenous for other prey. Other hosts. And by that I mean *us*. The grimspore is unstoppable. There is no cure for it, no tincture known by any scholar or seedwitch, except fire. Nothing more we can do but put him out of his misery before the spore takes hold and he becomes a danger to us all.’

‘You can’t be serious,’ I spluttered. That seemed more like murder than practicality to me.

‘Deadly serious, Tarko. Nobody can survive it, and if you don’t want to end up just like Hatlu, we need to act quickly!’

'She right! 'Juraxi yelled by my side. I hadn't noticed him get close. 'I've heard of these parasites before. One almost destroyed my cousin's village.'

Hatlu's cheek turned grey as he started to convulse through shock. 'Curse you to the Six Hells, all of you!'

'I'm sorry, 'Atalawe said. I had no idea she had taken the knife from my belt until I saw her wielding it at Hatlu. 'I truly am.'

A wail from a survivor pierced my ears. 'Somebody stop the scholar! There must be something we can do!'

Hatlu backed away from our frightened and closing circle. His bulging eyes were turning black at their edges. Blood dribbled from his swollen lips. It was then the grimspore's withered seed fell loose from his neck and fell dead to the wet loam. All its venom was spent, and by the panic in his face, Hatlu knew it.

The wilder lost his gall, sweeping the axe from his back and swinging it over his head with a howling cry. Atalawe spun her staff, but it cracked against his forearms without halting him.

I swung a punch at him far too early. Mostly through panic, I'll be honest. What I didn't expect was for the ground to mimic me.

A shower of rain-soaked moss and dirt burst from the loam and collided with Hatlu. The axe flew spinning into the undergrowth while the man tripped and landed heavy on his discoloured face, winded, choking, and with his last stand knocked out of him.

Atalawe stood frozen in abject shock. As did I. Utter confusion reined. All was awkward birdsong and rain-patter between us and the survivors.

'Did you just...?'

Before Atalawe could finish her thought, Juraxi sprinted past us, yelling about Hatlu getting away. He was right. Atalawe managed to drag her eyes from mine and saw the doomed wilder escaping in a stumbling run. She sprinted after him into the bushes, and to escape my confusion, I followed. Branches sticky with sap snagged at me. Caterpillars the size of sausages stuck to my armour. I was so preoccupied with brushing them off I didn't realise I had caught up with Atalawe. She had stopped dead, and I thumped into her back.

In the minuscule clearing we had stumbled into, a wooden leafroad sprouted from the earth. Ahead, a score of warders had their spears flat and pointed at us. In the light of their fireworm lanterns, the red and silver crest of Shal Gara was plain on their leafleather armour. I could have cheered to see them, had it not been for the grim-faced woman twice my width that stood at their centre, a club in her hands. A wriggling, gasping Hatlu was already on his knees with rope around his wounded neck and a gag across his mouth. Mud smeared his cheeks.

'Drop your weapons this instant, 'demanded the huge warder.

Atalawe did as she was told, but slowly and speaking as she did so. 'Warder, we're from Eagleborn Baran's war-party, the few survivors that are left. We've come with dire news for Matriarch Danaxt. We must speak with her and the sages immediately.'

The warder snorted long and hard before finally spitting phlegm in the loam. 'Run ahead,' she said to one of her men. 'Tell 'em we've caught some more of the deserters. To prepare a Burrow for them each.'

'You can't do that!' I cried, confused. The Burrows were Shal Gara's infamous prisons, and feared intensely even by those who had never dared to break a law. We had come all this way, survived all this breathless struggle, only to be received as deserters and traitors to the city I'd done nothing but try to matter to. It was enraging. 'We're not deserters, curse you! We—'

'Shut your mouth! Bind them! And go get the others trying to hide back in the bushes.'

Atalawe tried to pick up her staff again, but not before two spears jabbed at her. She stood back, hands clasped and head roving back and forth. 'Believe us, we're no deserters! We are survivors. Firstwatch has been lost. Demons are amassing on the Loamsedge and time is short to do something about it.'

The warders laughed heartily at that.

'Demons? Hah!' guffawed one with a questionable moustache and pox across his face. 'At least you and Eagleborn Baran are keeping your stories straight.'

Imprisonment is not what you promised, Tarko! Serisi boomed within me, calling me all kinds of viper and liar and cheat.

Atalawe had become livid. She struggled and snarled like Inwar as they bound her. 'You idiots! We haven't done anything wrong!'

'Haven't done anything right either!' crowed the pox-scarred man. He came at me with similar bindings, and I backed away from him.

'You do what they say, Tarko,' Atalawe hissed at me before they gagged her. 'There'll be time enough later for them to realise what fools they are!'

'Come here, boy! Don't you test me.'

'No,' I snapped. 'This isn't fair after what we've been through!'

I was a whirlwind of indignation. It felt as though I stood before yet another headman lording my inconsequence over me. Every time I had been banished to another calling, every time I had been told to back down, shut up, and know my place, all those moments coalesced into one burning point in my mind. *One of rage*. Serisi's roaring became blocked by the sound of blood in my ears.

'Tarko!'

Atalawe's muffled shout did nothing to calm me. The scarred man seized me by the wrist a moment later. I pushed at him, and in the same moment, the moss and soil beneath our feet exploded upwards with a rumble. This was no flurry of dust, but a thick column of dirt that struck the man square in the face. He windmilled backwards with a choked cry. I stared down at my wounded hand and found it shaking. Through the drifting dust, I saw Atalawe with that wide, white look in her eyes once again.

'Deal with that mudmage, curse it!' I heard the leader's yell.

The blow came seconds later. Somebody behind me swung a club to the back of my neck. Darkness pounced on me while the world turned sideways. My eyes rolled around, but before I passed out, I saw a warder sneering down at me.

Serisi's voice was the last thing I heard.

You're a liar, Tarko. A despicable liar.