

# 6

## STORMBEATEN

*No map in the Swathe is accurate for more than a season.  
A SAYING OF THE SIXTH-BORN*

Eztaral's hand around my scruff woke me from a dream emptier than a void. Only an hour had been spent asleep. The rest of my precious time of rest had been spent fuming over Serisi's new trick or pinching myself to remind myself I wasn't in the demon's clutches.

"It's almost firstglow. Time to leave."

We did so in silence with our feet light and our hoods up. Eztaral left a bag of gems on Maldahak's counter and opened the door with all the deftness of a thief.

It was an iron-grey morning of a fine rain and veils of mist. The canopy was lost to the clouds. Even the peak of Mulchport was hazy. I stared up for but a moment before the rain started to sting my dark-veined skin. Another product of the bond between Serisi and me. I tugged my hood lower.

Much to my silent relief, the only sign of Serisi's scuffle with the air carvers was a vague smear of blood outside Maldahak's doorway. Nobody looked my way. Neither blame nor suspicion reared their serpentine heads.

Mulchport was nursing a headache, or so it seemed to me. Only the dregs and the grumpy early arrivals trod the walkways. Our escape was swift and unnoticed.

Atalawe was waiting for us on the zigzag path that led to the southern leafroad. Arrow-straight, it reached into the lower branches of the forest at a forgivingly slight angle.

"Aren't we all a pleasant and talkative bunch this morning?" Atalawe chided us once we were a sizeable distance from Mulchport. She walked at our rear with Redeye and the wagon. Which, much to the joy of my slight hangover, had developed an irritating squeak in the rain.

Eztaral, always leading, shook her head as she hollered back. "Purposeful, Atalawe, that's all we are. Energy's wasted on the flapping of mouths."

"I'd say it was because some of us stayed up with a skin of berry wine," Ralish suggested, giving me a nudge.

“Oh, did you now?” said Atalawe with a tut. “And here’s my good brother and I getting a good eve’s rest.”

Redeye shrugged. “Not with your snoring, I didn’t.”

“Ah, is that why you’re always so insufferably moody?” the wrangler chuckled.

“Partly.”

Ralish leaned closer to me. “Where did you go last night? You were barely in bed for ten breaths before you disappeared. Yet again.”

“Serisi,” I began.

“Serisi what?”

“She was bothering me, wanting to see Mulchport.”

*Back at the lying again. And you still have not improved,* whispered Serisi.

I winced, feeling the keen edge of guilt slicing my gut. I hadn’t planned to lie, and I loathed it was my natural reflex. Keeping Serisi a secret before had almost put the noose around my neck. I refused to repeat history, but I needed to know more before I told Ralish and the others. To speak up now would only demand the question I didn’t want to hear the answer to: the question of whether I was losing control of my body.

“I’m starting to worry who’s pulling the strings in that head of yours.”

“It’s starting to worry me too,” I muttered.

Ralish poked me in the shoulder, and when I didn’t turn, she clutched my chin and dragged my gaze to her. “I hadn’t planned on sharin’ you, and I’m tryin’ to learn and understand, but when you’re with me, I want you, not you *and* her. Yes, Serisi, I know you can hear me. I realise you must feel like a prisoner, but this ain’t your body.”

The demon grumbled incoherently.

“She’s already changed you enough as it is, what with those black veins and the fact your skin always feels like fire,” Ralish added.

“Changed me for the better, remember,” I replied. “Without her—”

“I know, I know,” Ralish admitted. “We’d likely all be dead now.”

“Hurry it up, you two,” Atalawe called out, shortly before the wet snout of an orokan snuffled in my ear. I quickened my stride.

Ralish wasn’t done. This time her voice was a whisper. “And what’s with all the gems I found in the bed? And the rest in the pack? There must be hundreds there.”

That accursed demon. Careful apparently didn’t exist in the Voidborn’s vocabulary.

“What were you doing in my pack?”

“They were in *my* pack, idiot.”

I kneaded my forehead.

*In my defence, they all look very similar. And you—*

“Serisi apparently has a thing for gambling,” I hissed.

*And a knack for it, too.*

“In that case, maybe she should gamble for us some more. It would have taken me five seasons in the louse-mines to earn that much.”

I furrowed my brow. “Didn’t take you for the type who cared about gems.”

“Well, I chose you for all the power and the fame, but seein’ as we’re not finding any of that in the loam, I think riches would be a nice substitute. Don’t you think?”

“I...”

Ralish’s grin stamped on the worry smouldering inside me.

“You’re too easy to toy with, Tarkosi Terelta,” she sighed. “You know, strangely, I sometimes find myself missing catching those lice. It was important work.”

“Now we’re catching demons and traitors instead.”

“Same job. Just bigger lice. I’m looking forward to prising them from the Swathe.”

I blew rainwater from my lips. “Here’s hoping Stormbeaten will bring us more luck.”

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While Stormbeaten’s promise remained undecided, the morning brought us nothing but a storm. Muted thunder rolled amongst the unseen treetops. Lightning danced through the roof of rippled clouds. The rain grew from drizzle to drops that pummelled us. They fell with such strength it felt like a personal attack by the rain god. It grew so heavy I wielded the scant mud I could summon and shaped it into an umbrella for Ralish and me. The touch of water still felt strange, even painful, on my skin.

*Such foul weather. Feels like a bad omen.*

“It just means we’re going south, or so Atalawe says. And I’m not talking to you,” I muttered in reply.

*Yes, you are.*

“You lied to me.”

*I did not. I simply waited until the right moment to tell you. Just as you are doing with the others.*

“You won’t do it again.”

*I told you, Tarko, I have no choice. It happens whether I like it or not.*

“Oh, I saw how much you liked it.”

“What are you two arguin’ about now?” Ralish asked.

“Nothing.”

“Thirty-mile marker! We should be at Stormbeaten for lastlight,” called Atalawe, pointing at a carved column of ironpith wood poking above the leafroad. “Shame you can’t see her through the clouds, Tarko. Stormbeaten’s even bigger than Shal Gara, and half its scholar tribe argues she’s bigger than Dorla Sel. Course, the Allmother of Dorla Sel wouldn’t admit that even if it was true. Stormbeaten’s one of the oldest, at least seven hundred seasons older than Shal Gara. She first took root inland, when she was known as Perikor, and it’s become lost knowledge that she was

driven to the cliffs by the demon invasions. Now the bloodwood's been weathered stronger than ironpith by the constant winds and storms of the Untold Waters. Feel how cold the air's gotten? That's the salt-breath of the ocean. If this weren't the longsun, you might be seeing snow instead of rain, you know. That's quite the sight."

*Snow? Frozen rain? That sounds hideous. The rain is bad enough.*

"Least it keeps the demons at bay."

A different kind of thunder ran through the clouds. It lacked the percussive punch of a thunderclap, but it still filled the air and thumped in my chest as it came and went. The sound was one I could never forget, even after my short stint in Shal Gara's nests.

"Lancewings. Big ones," I muttered. "Wonder which bloodwood they belonged to."

"Enough slacking and yapping!" Eztaral yelled back at us. "Pick up your feet."

Atalawe, as usual, chose which orders she followed. To the drumming of rain, she rambled on about Stormbeaten, telling us of its fish markets and the long-boats the catchers plied the mountainous waves in. Or its blue and white lancewings that hunted the flying eels. Or the branches that hung directly over the cliffs, ever-crashing with thunderous white water teeming with blackfish so large you could stand upright between their jaws. Or of the bloodwood's new matriarch, Naxāko.

By the law of order, every bloodwood needed a matriarch, and Stormbeaten's was apparently a child. A flux had taken her mother barely a season after she was made envoy, or so Atalawe said, and for two seasons now, Naxāko had ruled Stormbeaten. Even with the mantle of hero on my back, and the threat of the demons' war still looming, I still couldn't imagine the troubles of such a calling at an age half of mine.

*Do you think a child will listen to us?*

"We don't have a choice but to try. And I told you: I'm not talking to you, curse it."

Leaving Serisi to growl, I peered through the dripping canopy. Despite the sting of rain on my face, I kept up my stubborn staring while the leafroad beneath my boots increased its slope. While the others became short of breath, I charged on, almost overtaking Eztaral. I hadn't realised I was so eager to see a bloodwood again, but the clouds defied me. They kept their secrets while my eyes started to burn from the staring.

"How many more miles?" I asked Atalawe as we emerged from the canopy of the forest. The leafroad ran high amongst the treetops, and still Stormbeaten eluded us.

"Twenty, maybe," I heard her yell.

"I can see it," Ralish interrupted, pointing at what I'd mistaken for a swirl of angry cloud. I saw now it was a branch that only a bloodwood could boast. The storm-rain robbed the bloodwood of her copper colour, but I spied the lights of distant buildings a mile above us, no more than specks of dust. The rest of the colossal tree was lost to the clouds.

The miles inched past. It felt as though the road knew how much I wanted it to end and made the going slower. The storm followed us through the treetops, battering us with rain that flew sideways and from ever-changing directions. Serisi and I felt every raindrop, no matter which

spells I tried to hold against the maelstrom. Twice, my mud shields were ripped away. The second time, Eztaral was battered with clods of earth, and she flashed me a look darker than the storm clouds.

Step by step, branch by branch, the bloodwood was revealed to us. By the time our leafroad widened into three separate roads, each leading to different parts of the city, we were craning our necks to take in the highest branches.

Stormbeaten certainly felt more imposing than Shal Gara. Perhaps it was the deeper shade of her wood and leaves. Perhaps it was the angular and spiked architecture that ran along the branches. Or perhaps it was the way Stormbeaten leaned away from the cliffs, carved by the wind so that it cast a dark shadow across the forest canopy even before we reached its gates.

Warders in teal and black fish-leather armour stood in a gapped line across the leafroad. Their obsidian spears spread into an umbrella before their blades, and they endured the soaking gusts of wind as if they'd been born in them.

"State your business," one of the warders greeted us. He shone a fireworm lantern in our faces, making notes of our tattooed marks and brands.

"Travellers seeking shelter and trade," Eztaral said for us.

"Trading what?"

"Whatever we can."

Another warder poked his spear at Inwar. "That thing should be on a leash."

Atalawe laughed. "No, he shouldn't."

Eztaral stepped closer to the man. "Is there trouble, warder?"

"No, Eagleborn," he said, keeping his stare even with the rain running down his face. "Just a lot of strangers coming and going recently, is all. Lot of talk of trouble to the north. They say a bloodwood has fallen. Talk of wildfires and trees shifting. Talk of heretics and law-breakers. Got to be vigilant."

"Stormbeaten weathers all winds," Atalawe piped up. "Isn't that what you say here?"

That turned the warder's head. He nodded solemnly. "That she does and that we do," he said, turning aside to let us pass. "Obey the Bloodlaws and be welcome."

We moved ahead, bowing our thanks before finding our way up a grand ramp, watched over by a humongous quartz statue of the god of rain. His barkwolf head was perched atop a human body, and in his clawed fingers, he brandished a staff topped with lightning. The pedestal beneath him was hewn in the shape of a dead tharantos.

*What is this god's name?*

"We don't say our gods' names aloud, remember? Bad fortune," I muttered, but I did read the glyphs at the pedestal's base.

*Alokaris? He looks fiercer than your other gods.*

By the storm's wavering of the huge branches above us, that was evident enough.

"I forgot about the way Stormbeaten sways," grumbled Redeye as we stopped to stare.

"Enough to make you feel sick," Ralish said.

“Wait until you see the cliffs,” Atalawe chuckled. “Bloodwood-born think they can handle heights. Stormbeaten tests you like no other.”

“We won’t dawdle,” disagreed Eztaral. “We came here to find Pel and the others and to seek the matriarch, and that is precisely what we will do. The danger here is only greater, not less.”

Atalawe tutted as she hauled Grumpus up from the heap he had sunk into. “Lately I feel like Redeye’s got some competition when it comes to pessimism,” she muttered so only I heard.

“Where do we find the others?” asked Ralish.

“Mother said my brother Texoc has a cottage somewhere in Stormbeaten’s version of the Neathering,” I answered. “The others should be there.”

Atalawe pointed below us. “The Rainwalk.”

“Yes, there,” I said. “Pel told us he’d wait from afternoon to evening at the skeleton of a giant fish on the southern side. Apparently even a blind man couldn’t miss it.”

“Near the cliffs. I remember it.” Atalawe nodded while the orokan bleated in her ear. “Oh, hush your whining, Grumpus, you’re drier an’ warmer than the rest of us in all that fur.”

Eztaral blew rainwater from her face. “Then let’s not waste our time. You lead us, Atalawe. I don’t remember this place as I thought I did.”

After stowing our orokan and wagon in a dry beast-house, we began a busy procession, following the road around the giant trunk of the bloodwood to the far side of the tree. Salt filled my nose and stung my eyes. My skin and fingertips felt waxy from it. Serisi grumbled in the back of my mind at every touch of the sea-air.

The citizens that walked past us were bowed-headed and busy. There was no curiosity invested in us newcomers, which meant either Stormbeaten was used to travellers, the city didn’t care, or it was bothered by greater worries. It suited the Scions fine to go unnoticed.

The thickness of the trunk faded, and I was shown a world the like of which I’d never seen before, not even in dreams. The land did not continue as I’d known all my life, but ended like the ragged edge of a torn scroll. Where roots and grey clifftop came to an abrupt end, the world fell away to a stretching, rumpled horizon of water without an end. The Untold Waters were iron grey and nectra blue, and they never stayed still, undulating instead in waves like a vast carpet shaken in slow motion. When the waves reached the cliffs below, fountains of pearl spray were cast high, almost reaching to the gnarled roots that dangled over the precipice. I dared to look. The cliffs were almost the height of the bloodwood from edge to water, and being already halfway up the tree, I felt my nerves tested. Me, a branch-dweller from birth, clutched a railing so tightly it squeaked. I blamed Serisi for the feeling of terror that seeped into my gut. I saw Ralish lean away from the drop breathe an uneasy sigh. Almost all of us stood wordless in awe. Only Atalawe snickered at the sight.

“Told you,” she relished.

*That is simply far too much water*, seethed the demon within me. I could sense her deep fear.

“And yet you demons thirst over this world,” I muttered, unable to look away from the ocean. I wondered what the horizon held behind the storm clouds and whether other lands gazed on us.

*The Starless Plains also once had seas. I never saw them. It was the Iron Icon's thirst that drained them, and he would do the same to these waters.*

"How far does the water stretch?" asked Ralish.

Atalawe shrugged. "Nobody knows. As far as we scholars can tell, it doesn't end."

I spluttered. "Surely it's got an end. It has to."

"Then let me tell you this, Tarko. They say if you walk around the entire Swathe and the Scorch, all you'll find is water. This isn't a lake with a shore you can stroll around. We're the lake, just one of land in the middle of the seas."

*I do not like that.*

Redeye was his usual self. "Hmph. Maybe we should have just told Faraganthar that. Bet he would have changed his mind and taken his demon horde home."

*Doubtful.*

"Look," Eztaral shouted through our chatter. She pointed over our heads, where a pale skeleton of an overwhelmingly giant sea-fish was splayed against the trunk and branch above. Two pairs of fins protruded from its sides. Huge, unhinged jaws hung open, now home to a cluster of cottages. The teeth that remained in its bones were almost as tall as I was. A stairwell ran between its ribs and spined backbone.

"And what in the Six Hells is that?" I asked.

"An ogopor. Godfish. Something the Stormbeaten citizens used to hunt," Atalawe muttered with a wink.

"How in the Six Hells do you hunt somethin' like that?" asked Ralish.

"Yes, yes, we're all impressed by the skeleton of the old dead fish," snapped Eztaral. "Do I have to point out that it's evening, and yet for some reason, there is no sign of that ancient, urka-addled nuisance of the man we know as Pel? Is nobody else at all curious why he isn't here?"

"No sign of my mother and sister either," I said. The trepidatious awe of the ocean and its gargantuan inhabitants immediately vanished.

Redeye looked unusually agitated. "Something must be wrong. I knew I should have gone with Pel. I bet the Fireborn are already here."

"Stop your fear-mongering, Redeye. With the ocean right next to it, Pel's powerful enough to protect half this city on his own, never mind fend off a few Fireborn. And don't forget the ferocity of Axera and Tesq," Atalawe chided Redeye, though her gaze was for me. "They'll be fine, I'm sure."

"We'll ask around for Texoc. See if we can find his cottage. Or there must be a barracks or another warder that knows him," I told the Scions, already walking decisively for the trunk even though I had no idea where I was going. It didn't matter. Urgency drove me. I found Eztaral and Ralish marching either side of me. My anxious heartbeat raced our footsteps.

The first few warders we found watching the leafroads and skyrisers hadn't heard of a Texoc, nor of any Tereltas. Stormbeaten was a city larger than Shal Gara; there was no expecting them to know every name in their warrior tribe, and yet I became increasingly irritated with every shaken head and useless grunt.

"Texoc, you say?" said the ninth warder I asked. "Yeah, I know a Texoc. No need to be so brusque about it though, northerner."

"I'm sorry, it's just urgent, is all," I apologised.

The diminutive fellow shrugged. "Well, he ain't going anywhere. I wouldn't worry about it."

I stepped closer to the man. "What do you mean?"

"Fell out with the higher ranks hard, didn't he?"

"What? Why?" I asked.

"Defying orders. Thought he'd defend some fools spouting nonsense about monsters and wildfires. There was a fight with several wilders, and word has it Texoc laid hands on his own tribe. He's lucky he's well liked. They could have thrown him in the swayers like the other troublemakers, but Lancer Huata sent him home instead."

"What other troublemakers?" I asked, fighting not to grab the warder by his collar.

The man shrugged. "Some old blind sorcer and two women."

"Mother and Tesq," I blurted as panic and dread both toyed with me.

"Swayers?" asked Eztaral.

Atalawe pulled a face. "Cages that hang above the waters."

"Where are they? Where is Texoc now?" I snapped.

"I don't know, gods curse it! Barely know the chap. All I know is he lives somewhere a branch or two down. As for the swayers, you can see them from Branch of Aguex."

That was precisely where we went. I asked the beggars that were entrenched in their spots, just as Pel used to be outside our cottage in Shal Gara. Bandaged fingers pointed me onwards along the branches until I came to a wooden cottage squeezed between two burls in the wood. Something had been written in red paint across the window shutters, now streaked by the rain. It was a word I could barely make out but it looked suspiciously like 'Heretic.' Shards of sandglass and broken pottery had been swept beneath the sills. A small skull perched on the doorstep, and for a moment I panicked it belonged to my pet shrewbat Misfit, whom I'd given to Tesq to look after. On closer and fervent inspection, it was only a lizard skull, but still just as ominous. Enduring the rain's touch, I threw back my hood and hammered on the door. Silence answered me, and I tried again, louder and harder.

"Go away!" came a shrill voice that was definitely not my brother's.

"It's Tarkosi! I've come for Texoc!"

"He's not here! Get lost!"

A scuffle came from within. Something smashed loudly. I tried the rope handle, but the door was bolted so tightly it felt nailed shut.



“Texoc!” I yelled. Redeye came to stand next to me, nectra in his hands. Before magic could swirl in our veins, bolts and locks came undone behind the thick wood, and a crack appeared in the doorway.

An amber eye stared back at us, embedded in a woman’s face of flushed red. There was a worker’s mark on the hand that gripped the door. “Go away, I told you!” she hissed, scowling deeply.

I pressed my hand to the door. “Where is my brother?”

“You aren’t welcome here!” she seethed, spittle joining the fall of rain. “Turn around and leave before you bring even more trouble down on our heads than your family already has. Leave, or I’ll scream for the warders!”

The door slammed hard, narrowly avoiding biting the tips of my fingers.

“What by the bloody loam is going on?” I said as I turned around. The Scions of the Sixth-Born looked soaked, tired, and bewildered, and none of them had an answer for me.

# 7

## HEROES UNWELCOME

*Beaten by storms and weathered by waves,  
A watery grave is what this bloodwood craves.  
One blow too many, one bolt to its summit,  
One crumbling rock can make her plummet.  
A watery grave is what this bloodwood craves.*

*At first glance, this appears to be a harmless rhyme for the children. Such rhymes always stem from tragedy, did you know? A limerick born from prophecy by an orakal lost to time, it foretells Stormbeaten's eventual tumble into the Untold Waters.*

*FROM "A SCHOOL OF SONG" BY THE SONGMAKER ELOWNA OF OWLS*

My fist ached by the time the door opened again. There was no livid woman shouting at us this time, but my brother Texoc, second-born of the Tereltas. The light was dim between the branches, and it made his face even gloomier than it already was. A trimmed beard wrapped his chin and a stern mouth, and the eyes above his shapely nose were deep and sunken with bruises. His tattooed arms were folded over a barrel chest.

I counted the crash of three distant waves before he spoke.

"I wish you hadn't come," he said gruffly. I had forgotten how tall and broad he was. Like our father Teyak.

"What a fine hello that is after all these seasons apart," I replied.

"Don't you dare let him in!" hissed a familiar voice. A shape moved behind Texoc. "None of them are welcome! You promised, Texoc!"

"Why in the Six Hells are Mother and Tesq in a cage?" I asked. "And why aren't you doing anything about it?"

Texoc sucked his teeth. In the street behind us, faces had appeared at shutters and sandglass windows, staring out at the commotion. "Get in here. Quickly."

"Drown it, Texoc!" the woman yelled.

"All of you except that beast," Texoc ordered. He jabbed a finger at Inwar.

"He's one of us, and we aren't going anywhere alone, Texoc Terelta," Eztaral growled.

Atalawe flicked Inwar's ear, making the jāgu bare his fangs. "Don't worry, he's house-trained."

"Three Gods," I heard my brother mutter as he dragged us in one by one.

A squeezed circle of wood and firelight greeted us. A suspended bed hung above our heads. Ladders reached into all manner of nooks and rafters. A half-made crib lingered by a broad copper pan holding a crackling fire.

The woman standing guard by Texoc had stopped her pacing, but her fists ground into her hips and her face was redder than the coals in the fire. It was then I noticed her belly was heavy with child.

Texoc put his arm around her, but she shrugged it away. “This is Deskiral. My wife, who, as you can tell, hates every moment of this. And this, Tarko, will be your niece or nephew very soon.”

I stared at the woman. Texoc was only a season older than I was. “I had no idea you were... any of this, Texoc.”

Deskiral huffed. “You wouldn’t, seeing as none of you have spoken in seasons.”

“Mother sends messages, doesn’t she?”

“She does. Fewer and fewer these days,” Texoc replied. “But she had much more to say when she arrived unannounced on our doorstep a week ago. She said Shal Gara fell to war, not wildfires. That you were busy hunting demons in the loam and that we were in danger. I thought she had gone the way of our father and given in to madness.”

“Utter madness,” Deskiral muttered. “I could barely stand to listen to it.”

“Mother also told me you’d changed, Tarko,” continued Texoc. “That much is true, I see. You’re not the boy that used to run about with a cloth sling and pockets filled with squashed berries anymore.”

*Just how much has your mother told him of us, I wonder?* asked Serisi.

I didn’t know if Texoc saw my flinch but he narrowed his grey eyes at me all the same. They were same hue Tesq and I shared, another trait of our father’s. I was glad the dark veins of my neck were hidden by hood and shadow. Gloves covered my hands.

“They have to leave, Texoc,” Deskiral hissed. “If Huata finds out they’re here and you—”

“Deskiral,” Texoc cut in.

“Please.” I stood tall as I could. “Just tell us what happened, Brother.”

Texoc took a seat. “Despite her words, I couldn’t turn Mother away, even if I’d tried. She insisted on staying to protect us, or so she put it. She, Tesq, and old Blind Pel were here three days when some drunk wilders in an alehouse goaded them into an argument. Tesq and Pel spouted all kinds of tales about demons and wildfire. The wilders kept challenging them. A fight broke out between two of them and Tesq. I wouldn’t let them touch Mother, of course. I’m not that unforgiving.”

“What do you mean, unforgiving?” I asked.

Deskiral spoke for him, voice rising into a shout. “Texoc has spent all this time surviving alone while you had each other. He’s built a life here, a family, then you appear as if you fell from the sky and try to rip it apart? By telling us we’re in danger and demanding we leave? Saying there’s people hiding in the shadows who want to kill us? Speaking of demons?! How dare you! Stormbeaten has ridiculed us ever since! What was Texoc supposed to do?”

Texoc stamped his foot. "Enough, Deskiral!"

Making whispers of her complaints, she calmed herself with long strides about the room.

Atalawe spoke up. "What happened to them, Texoc?"

"They were taken away to the swayers for causing a disturbance. Lancer Huata said it would only be for a night, but it's been four."

"Left all their stuff here, too," said Deskiral quietly. "Including that infernal shrewbat Texoc promised to keep."

"Misfit?" I asked. "Where is he?"

No sooner had I spoken than did a shape glide out of the rafters as if he chased his own name. The shrewbat collided with my chest and promptly scurried onto my left shoulder. By the sound of his frantic chirping, he had apparently missed me. Either that or Deskiral wasn't feeding him.

*Ah yes, the rodent that does not like me,* Serisi sighed.

Eztaral was brooding in a chair that she'd claimed. "Why haven't you done anything about this? Why haven't you tried to have them freed?"

"He has, drown it," Deskiral piped up.

"I spoke to Lancer Huata," Texoc argued. "He told me I was lucky I wasn't in the swayers with them and warned me to leave it be. Stormbeaten doesn't just pride itself on the Bloodlaws, but peace and quiet. We aren't warmongers like Shal Gara."

I was torn between blame and understanding. The former was much easier than the latter, but my brother looked broken, as if he had his own demon within him.

"Take us to this lancer," said Eztaral.

I saw the same bristle in Texoc that I experienced whenever orders rained down on me. The rising of hackles, the tightening of the jaw. "Your rank affords you respect but not command here, Eagleborn."

"You might not recall me, Texoc, but I was there when you were born, just you remember that. We are trying to help."

"Oh, I remember you, Eztaral Kraid, just like I remember the rest of you. Father's so-called friends, right? I might have been young at the time, but I remember you failing him well enough. You were the reason I was banished to Stormbeaten by Kol Baran before my eighth season. I was a child, with nothing but my tribe."

"I think you'll find that Kol Baran was the reason you were banished, Texoc. He feared a second-born who would grow up and avenge his father." Eztaral ground her teeth. "But we haven't fought through fire and loam to be guilted by you, so please, feel free to snub the word of your own mother and our reasons of demons and war if you want to. If you're too bitter and mired in the past to accept the truth and our protection, then no matter. We have much better things to do, like saving the Swathe from destruction," she said, moving toward the door as she spoke. Atalawe and Redeye moved to follow.

"Texoc," I urged my brother. "If we have to do this ourselves then we will do just that, but it will be much easier with your help."

The door was halfway open when Texoc sighed.

“All right.”

“Texoc!”

“I’ve made my decision, Deskiral.” Texoc reached for a warrior’s cloak and umbrella made of fish-skin and bones. “You can leave your packs and things here. We should leave before the light fails.”

“And before I give birth a month earlier than I should!” spat Deskiral.

Now that my brother had come to his senses, and with Misfit left in the warm and dry, we were driven back into the rain. The wind had died but the raindrops still came fat and heavy to sting my skin. Deskiral watched from the shutters long after she had bolted the door. The feeling of her eyes on the back of my neck kept me on edge.

Texoc walked swiftly, as though he was eager to be rid of us. His conversation was hushed and rapid. “So Mother tells me you’re a sorcer now, even though they marked you as a mistake. How in the Hells does that happen now you’re so grown and long in the tooth? Last time I saw you, you were still learning how to climb.”

I showed him the red dye beneath the glove on my left hand. “It was an accident. And a lucky one at that.”

“If you’re a sorcer, then why don’t you carry nectra like old Redeye over there?”

Mother hadn’t told him everything after all. “I don’t need nectra, Texoc. That’s the miracle of it all.”

Texoc laughed coldly. “Of course not.”

“Oh, it’s true,” Ralish said behind us. “A freak of nature, aren’t you, Tarko?”

“So they say,” I replied.

Texoc looked me up and down, focusing on the brands of the maven rank on my cheek. “I don’t believe it.”

With a flick of my hands, I lifted some mud from the road and pressed it into a ball.

“Lucky for you,” Texoc whispered.

“Lucky for Shal Gara and the Swathe.”

Texoc curled his lip.

“If we hadn’t stopped the demons, you and I wouldn’t be having this conversation. You wouldn’t be doubting me.”

“Don’t say that word. ‘Demon.’ I could barely stand it coming out of Mother and Pel’s mouths.”

My brother made sure to keep his gaze from clashing with mine. He maintained a watch over the darker corners as we wound our way up several branches to a conical watchtower overlooking the Untold Waters and the western cliffs.

Showing the tattoos on his forearms, Texoc guided us inside the watchtower and straight to a hall occupied by one lonely slab of a table. A man sat hunched behind it, using a parrot-feather quill to scratch at a tablet of wood.

“Lancer Huata,” announced Texoc, making the warrior straighten like an unfurling finger. Huata would have given Sage Dūnekar a run for his height. Even sitting down, he didn’t have to raise his eyes to meet ours. They appeared huge and owlsh behind the sandglass spectacles wedged in his frown.

“Wilder Terelta. You better have a good reason for being here.”

“The rest of my family have arrived, Lancer. They’ve come for my mother and sister.”

Huata stared at the Scions with scrutiny. “My my. And what a large and varied family you have, Texoc. An eagleborn, a temach, a worker, and two mavens. What kind of family is this?”

Texoc put a hand on my shoulder. “This here is my brother. The others are…”

“Family friends,” Eztaral grunted. “Nothing more.”

“If you’re here to cause more trouble—”

“Trust us, we are only here to get our people back and be on our way again,” I said, cutting the lancer off. “Please. We’ve come a long way and risked a lot. We’ll be no trouble at all.”

“Risked what? *Demons*, is it?” asked Huata, a long, ivory smile splitting his face. “Monsters that come through a door of fire? Isn’t that what the old fool of a sorcer was shouting?”

Texoc said nothing.

Eztaral stepped closer to my side. “If all they’re guilty of is a brawl and saying something you don’t believe, then you should probably throw half the people populating your average alehouse in prison alongside them. Why them in particular? Why treat them like criminals?”

Huata stood, knuckles turning white against his stone desk. “Aside from almost starting a panic, Texoc’s sister broke my cousin’s nose.”

“Ah,” said Atalawe.

“We keep ourselves to ourselves in Stormbeaten,” Huata continued. “We don’t take kindly to outsiders coming to disturb the peace with bad tidings and lunacy.”

I sighed. “If you release them, we’ll make sure they keep the peace. Better than that, we’ll be on our way. You’ll never see our faces again.”

Huata cleared his throat. I didn’t know if he was thinking or waiting.

Eztaral exhaled through her nose. She stepped up to the desk with her arms crossed. “All we can offer is our apologies for the actions of our friends, and if that will do to mend what they did, then we would be greatly appreciative and ask for them to be released immediately. Or we would be happy to discuss this with Matriarch Naxāko if you want to take us to her.”

“You northerners. Always in a hurry,” Huata sighed. “Fine. I’ll take you to your troublemakers.”

Warriors I hadn’t yet seen peeled out from behind the pillars that lined the room. They clanged their spears, causing the Scions to tense, but they left us unharmed. Following a smirking Huata, we were escorted down dark stairwells separate from the main thoroughfares.

One of Stormbeaten’s lowest branches was a stunted and twisted thing that extended over the edge of the cliff and waters below. A thin, wandering deck had been built on its back, and

another hung from its belly. It was here that Stormbeaten hanged its prisoners. And thankfully not the kind of hanging one might expect.

I spied the rows of dangling baskets through the haze of rain. Each was a pinched sphere of wicker weave, just big enough for one person, and was suspended from a single braided rope tied to its top. The swayers were aptly named for all the swinging back and forth they did. Nothing lay below them but the mist-wrapped brink of a cliff, several dead roots, and the ominous crash of huge waves. The passing minutes were gut-churning as we worked our way down the lower walkway beneath the branch.

“All this for a simple brawl?” I muttered to Texoc.

My brother said nothing. I don’t know if it was the lanterns of shining cerulean fish that Stormbeaten used in place of fireworms, but he looked pale to me.

“They say the creaking of the ropes turns people to blubbering heaps in a week,” Atalawe informed us, as if that little tidbit was supposed to help in the slightest. She withered under Eztaral’s glare. “Sorry.”

When we came to where the baskets clung on for dear life, we crowded the railing and looked down, much too far down for the dizziness Serisi felt. In the faint light, I could see three bedraggled figures in the only occupied baskets. Beneath them, the angry ocean seethed and thundered. Between the white foam of the waves, I saw dark shapes moving. Spined, black fins thrashed as creatures thick as a bloodwood branches fought between themselves. Fearsome maws gawped, showing rows of white teeth.

“Mother! Tesq!” I yelled. “Pel!”

It was my mother who showed her face to the light first. Pale and soaked to the bone, she was, eyes full of fear. I whirled on Lancer Huata.

“Pull them up right now,” I began to say, too late to hear my mother’s shout.

“It’s a trap, Tarko!”

I watched Huata put one hand around Texoc’s neck. Before I could move a muscle, he had drawn a dagger with his other hand; one of red Fireborn copper. A fist clutched my insides.

“Texoc!” I yelled.

My brother noticed the blade far too late. It tucked under his chin and held fast, causing a dribble of blood. Huata held Texoc on his tiptoes.

“But we had a deal, Huata!” my brother blurted.

Huata chuckled, a thin little noise. “Fools.”

“A *deal*, Texoc?” Eztaral snarled behind me.

*Your brother is a traitor, Tarko!*

“What’s happening, Tarko?” I heard Ralish whisper. Her snowy eyes were wide. An arrow was half out of her quiver. The claws in my gut dug deeper.

“Texoc kindly agreed to deliver you to me,” Huata told us. “You shouldn’t blame him: he had little choice in the matter. A soul rarely does when love and family are concerned, and that

weakness is what's brought you here. That is where we Fireborn differ and where you Scions fail. I am almost disappointed. I expected more, after all I've heard of you."

To Inwar's roar, leaf-shaped spears with vicious hooks rested on our shoulders. I turned to find the warriors now wore masks of jade over their faces, carved in the shape of snarling lizards. A score now stood around us, others in scarlet robes still creeping from the shadows. Redeye had a vial of nectra close to his mouth, but an obsidian spear sliced him along the cheek in warning. The magic vibrated in my limbs, sputtering as it clashed with my building rage. Rash ideas filled my head, but it was undeniable: the trap had closed with us firmly in it.

"Curse you, Texoc!" I seethed.

"I think you'll want to put that down, old friend," said a familiar voice.

None other than Juraxi emerged from the mob of blasted heretics. The bastard's fire-tortured face was uglier than I remembered it. Beneath a red hood, a lopsided and ruptured smile was bared in greeting. I had the overwhelming desire to smash it off his face with a slingstone.

"Still unfortunately alive, I see, Juraxi?" I hissed.

"Who's this prick?" Ralish asked.

"A traitor to Shal Gara and the Swathe. The feckless man who surrendered me to the demon king."

Juraxi swung a fist for me. I barely had room to move, and his blow collided with my jaw. I didn't know if it was Serisi's strength in me or Juraxi's feebleness, but it hardly turned my head. I felt only fury, not pain. I watched the worm withdraw his hand and struggle to maintain his smile.

"It's a great pity Haidak didn't kill you the moment he clapped eyes on you, before you and your traitor demon ruined everything," he said.

"Excuse me, but I feel I was also crucial to the ruining of everything. I won't be left out," Eztaral goaded him.

Atalawe raised a hand before having a blade raked down her arm. "Neither will I," she snapped. "I ruined quite a lot of the everything."

Ralish wasn't going to be left out either. "I watched from a safe distance."

"You can mock all you want, Scions. Pretend there isn't a thread of fear in your hearts if you want, but you and I know the truth. You've failed miserably."

Atalawe whistled. "What's it to be then? Quick death? Slow death? Somewhere in between?"

"Oh, that's not for me to decide," Juraxi replied. "That'll be up to Haidak Baran when he arrives shortly."

That was a shock. "Haidak Baran is coming here?" I seethed.

Juraxi looked immensely pleased with himself. "That he is. When he heard your mother and sister had been captured, he left for Stormbeaten immediately. Haidak has several bones to pick with you and your family, Tarko. I wouldn't deny him that, would I?"

"Hah! He wouldn't let you, you mean," chortled Atalawe. "You're still his dutiful barkwolf pup, clinging to his heels."



Juraxi waved a hand as if he wielded a spell, and a Fireborn fist struck Atalawe across the face. She came upright spitting blood.

“Pitiful,” she grunted. Inwar came to her aid, swiping at the spears that menaced her.

“Gods. Throw that infernal beast into the ocean. I’m bored of it,” Juraxi ordered.

Those words hit me harder than any punch.

“No!” Atalawe screeched. “You can’t do that!”

“Oh, but I can.”

More than a dozen spears were already driving the jāgu to brink of the walkway where the railings ended. Inwar fought them for every inch. His wild eyes and sabre-fangs shone in the lanternlight. He had nowhere to jump, and his claws dug splinters from the wood as he tried to cling on. Blood stained his fur. Atalawe and I joined the fray, managing to fell three Fireborn before they restrained us. I felt copper at my throat and hot blood on my skin.

“Juraxi! Stop this!” I howled, but the Fireborn did not listen.

“Do it,” he ordered.

With a roar that rended my heart, Inwar went scrabbling over the edge of the branch, limbs flailing.

Not even in Shal Gara’s last battle had I ever seen Atalawe so feral. She bled from a score of cuts, had five men restraining her, and yet her ferocity still shone like nectra in her eyes. Spittle flew with her poisonous words.

“You will suffer a thousand deaths for this, Juraxi! I swear to the gods and all their spirits, I will hunt you even in death and carve your bones out of you while you’re still alive to watch!”

Juraxi merely wiped his face. “Huata, put them in the swayers.”

“As you wish,” said Huata, at last taking his blade from Texoc’s throat.

To the creaking of cables and the protestations of winches, while the others were shoved in baskets that looked far too weathered for my liking, I stared at my brother with slitted eyes. He mouthed what I imagined was an apology, but I shook my head in distraught denial. There was a glaze in his eyes I couldn’t forgive.

“This is all your fault. Your own family, Texoc?” I snarled. “What have you done?”

“I did this *for* my family, Tarko.”

“Argue all you want, Tereltas,” Huata snorted as he seized my brother by the scruff. As a cage reached the deck’s level, Texoc was thrown inside it. “You’re in the same boat now, as we say in Stormbeaten!”

“This wasn’t what was agreed, Huata! You said you had no intention on harming us!”

Huata laughed. “And *I* don’t. Haidak Baran has every intention!”

Texoc howled as the basket swung outwards. The arc almost pitched him into the ocean there and then, but the collision with the walkway knocked him senseless.

Juraxi’s slippery voice came from behind me. “Your turn, Tarko.”

I found a basket waiting for me, its wooden door yawning wide. Copper knives menaced me from every direction.

“You afraid of me, Juraxi?” I asked the traitor.

The swift blink of his good eye told me all that I wanted to hear. I sneered, reaching my hands to the ground and flexing my magic again. Half a dozen blades pressed themselves to my Scion’s leafleather, but I didn’t care.

*Do not, Tarko. I feel your rage as if it were my own, but take it from a warrior who has wielded more blades than you have known seasons. You will kill us both.*

Still, I strained, ready to fight.

“If you think I won’t end you right here just because of loyalty, you’re wrong. I’ll simply tell Haidak you resisted. It’d give me all kinds of pleasure to kill you and that traitor inside you, Tarko. Test me, I dare you.”

*Tarko...*

“Curse you to all the Hells!” I yelled as I forced the magic from my veins. Juraxi looked almost disappointed.

Under the tearful and resentful gazes of my family, I was forced into the basket.

“Don’t worry now,” Juraxi sneered at me as the winches were unwound and I juddered down into the darkness. The Fireborn were already slipping away along the branch one by one. “Haidak shouldn’t be too long. You can expect him at firstglow.”

“Can’t wait,” I growled.

# 8

## SWAYING

*Nobody knows where the blackfish came from. They appeared in Stormbeaten's bay one season and decided to stay. Aside from the occasional attack on fishing boats and putting an end to the pastimes of diving and swimming, they have done a fine job of making swayers far more terrifying. The fish are quite obsessed with our hanging prisons, and because of this, the rumour has arisen that the blackfish feed on fear.*

*FROM THE STUDIES OF ORAKAL ALAMSA*

"Well, this is new," I growled, once the baskets had fallen somewhat still. Only the wind bothered us now. The swaying kept my heart beating swiftly. Every creak of the rope or splash of grotesque sea creatures below caused my body to tense. It was exhausting.

"And I thought you'd be coming to rescue us," my mother sighed at me.

"That was the plan," I replied. "Until Texoc betrayed us and led us into a Fireborn trap." *I think we should kill him for this insult.*

"You would think that," I growled as I stared at my unconscious brother in the basket next to me.

"Texoc did what he had to do, nothing more," Mother replied sternly. "We'll hear his excuses when he wakes, I'm sure."

Tesq looked as if she had spent the entire four days puking. "They better be good."

"Won't be good enough," Atalawe snarled. Her eyes were red-raw. She was pressed to the floor of her basket, still trying to peer through the mist and gloom. I had no interest in looking down. No desire to see the waves nor the monsters that loitered beneath them, never mind poor Inwar's fate.

"We are imprisoned without nectra or weapons, dangling from a branch over an ocean that would sooner drown us or eat us than let us float. No amount of arguing is going to fix that, but if you disagree then please, by all means, continue wasting your breath," Eztaral barked. We all fell quiet. "No? Good. Now perhaps somebody could fill us in on what in the Six Hells is going on? Pel?"

Old Pel was captured at the end of our dangling basket row. He looked equally exhausted, blind eyes closed and face slumped up against the wicker. "We were careful. Kept to ourselves. We made sure Texoc was protected and kept an eye on the workings of Shal Gara as we planned. A few days in, we dared to visit an alehouse. Three men noticed we were from the north and

harassed us for hours about Shal Gara's fall. All they wanted was an excuse for a fight. Blades were drawn and magic bared. Warders descended on us in droves before we could explain ourselves. I wasn't about to take on a whole bloodwood over a brawl, and ruin our chances of an ally. It wasn't until after that we found out the men were Fireborn. Their mockery was bait for a trap, and like fools, we fell into it. We thought we could at least trust the warders and lancer that put us in here, and we expected to be free within a day. Maybe two. That's when Juraxi came to show us his melted face."

"Oh, how I wish to smash it with a rock," I hissed.

*As do I.*

"You'll have to beat me to it," Atalawe promised me, before a sob took her.

In the last of the evening light, I stared along the branch, marking a few of the warders who had been left behind. These didn't hide behind jade masks, but stared down at us like crows waiting for crumbs to drop. I bared my teeth at them, hoping they could see how unafraid I was. My rage still gripped me too hard to feel the dread they likely expected.

Blame, however, took its turn to pester me. Coming to Stormbeaten had been my suggestion. I had promised Eztaral the risks would be my burden to bear. I caught her eye between the sway of the baskets. She wore the same glare as she normally did, no deeper or sourer than usual, and yet it was directed solely at me.

Pel cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, Eztaral. Atalawe. I should have been wiser. Calmer."

"I'm sorry also," Tesq said with a sigh. "I didn't need to break that warder's nose, let's be honest. But to be called a liar after all we went through? I couldn't stand it."

Mother snorted. "And where do you think you get that from?"

Before I could add mine, Eztaral cut me off. "We can all make apologies until firstglow but it doesn't change anything of now. The blame lies with the Fireborn, and I would much rather discuss how we're going to get out of these astoundingly uncomfortable baskets."

Tesq rattled the walls of her basket. "Bars are ironpith and woven wicker. Can't budge them."

"Tarko? What of your magic?"

"I tried a moment ago. There's not a scrap of dirt or dust to be found. No farm or field I can reach. I've got nothing."

"Redeye?" Eztaral asked.

"It's useless," decided Redeye. He was already curled into a ball as though he had settled on defeat. The loss of Inwar had cut him as deeply as his sister.

"Very helpful."

My mother pointed upwards. "Even if we managed to figure out a way to get free, we're being watched."

"Three warders at any given time," said Pel. "They change every four hours, never leaving before their replacements get there."

I kept watch on the warders, observing them unhood blue lanterns. “And we’re sure they’re all Fireborn?”

“Judgin’ from their stares and smirks, I’m assumin’ so,” answered Ralish. “How have the Fireborn infested another bloodwood so quickly?”

“Maybe it was already infested,” Pel told me. “We don’t know how long Haidak spent spreading his lies and rebuilding the Fireborn before the day the sun turned black. For all we know, they already reach across the Swathe just as we feared, but were too hopeful to believe.”

Though nobody moved their lips, the word ‘hopeless’ spread through my strange family. I saw it in all their eyes.

*I will not die in a basket, Tarko, Serisi muttered to me. Nor will I die the hands of the red worm Haidak.*

“Neither will I,” I said aloud in defiance. “We survived Shal Gara, we can survive this. Even if it’s just to take the Fireborn down with us.”

Eztaral began testing her bars one by one. “Tarko’s right. Think, Scions. We have a whole night to figure this out before Haidak comes for us. Think, curse you!”

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Despite the gift of a whole night, mere hours told us all we needed to know: our choices were painfully few. Singular, to be precise. There was nothing to do but spend the remainder of our time waiting for Haidak, and hope to fight our way out when he arrived.

The only balm we were given was a lessening of the storm. The rain became a fine yet irritating drizzle. The thunder grew distant and the lightning sparse, and the wind died to a breeze. The waves far beneath us, however, never ceased their pounding. Even within an hour, I found their rhythm to be torturous. It seemed like the constant creaking of the ropes and the waves were in competition for how quickly they could drive us mad. The monsters that Atalawe had called blackfish still waited as if the ropes were prone to wearing through and sending a morsel to the depths. Every now and again, one would rear out of the Untold Waters so we could all gaze at its spiny black snout and snapping jaws.

I spent the imprisonment cowered beneath my hood, trying to keep the stinging rain off me and the persistent shiver out of my bones. Serisi was brooding, having given up on her frequent and useless suggestions, most of which involved different ways to kill Juraxi. I busied myself with glaring at my senseless brother or keeping the tears from my cheeks at every thought of Inwar.

“It’s good to see you, my boy,” said a voice, so weak I thought it was a breath of the wind. It was my mother, staring at me from one swayer away. Her amber eyes seemed to swirl.

“You too, Mother. It’s good to see you all alive, despite my worries.”

“And here was I worrying about you in the loam.”

“I shouldn’t have let you come here. We should have stuck together.”

“Could have, should have. Wishing for what you can’t change only leads to madness. It would have made no difference. The Fireborn would still have been here, waiting to trap us. It might have ended worse. Besides, you might be the hero of Shal Gara, but I’m still your mother, and this was my decision,” she said. “How’s that demon of yours?”

“Angry, same as I am,” I said. “Did you ever think Texoc would do such a thing?”

Before Mother could answer, my treacherous brother let out a groan, followed by a sharp intake of breath as he opened his eyes and saw nothing beneath him.

Serisi growled at him. *The traitor wakes.*

“Gods,” Texoc gasped when realisation struck. He looked up to meet my narrowed eyes on one side, our mother on the other. “No, no, no! This wasn’t supposed to happen!” he garbled in a panic. He seized the bars and shook his basket so hard he knocked into mine.

“Warders!” he yelled, much to the hissing of the Scions. “I want to speak to Huata! Fetch him, drown you!”

Their laughter was faint but still audible. A fruit pit came out of the gloom to bounce off my basket.

“You better start talking, Texoc. You’ve got blood on your hands, Brother!” I snapped.

“This wasn’t the deal!” he said between his grunts of anguish. “Gods, what of Deskiral?”

“Talk!” I yelled.

Texoc pulled on his hair as he yelled at me. “What do you want to hear, Tarko? Some grand and noble reason? Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you! Call me a traitor or a coward all you want, but I had no choice! I did what I had to to keep my family safe.”

“Texoc,” Mother said in a voice that stilled each of us. “Explain.”

Texoc took a breath. “The morning after you, Tesq, and Pel were thrown in the swayers, two wilders came to my cottage and threatened me. Said they’d cut the baby out of Deskiral themselves if I didn’t promise to introduce my brother and his friends to Lancer Huata when you arrived. I refused. The next day, somebody slopped fish-blood all over our cottage and branded me a heretic. Others started to believe them. I couldn’t step out the door without them staring and whispering. They came again and again until Huata himself stood on my doorstep. He said if you came quietly to see him, answered some questions, and apologised, he would let us all leave Stormbeaten peacefully. If you refused or caused a fuss, he’d slaughter us all, starting with Deskiral. I was so desperate, I had no choice but to agree. I worked all my life to leave the Terelta curse behind, and here it was, following me to Stormbeaten after all these seasons. I was angry, confused, afraid for my wife and unborn. I hoped and prayed to the Three you wouldn’t come, but when you appeared on my doorstep and refused to leave, I did what I had to do.”

Tesq shook her head. “And to think we warned you all about the Fireborn and their lies—”

“And I thought you mad, Sister! After so many seasons apart, you appear out of the blank sky one day, blabbering on about cults and wildfires and how Shal Gara’s fallen to demons? What was I to think?”

“Did you not see the black sun?”

“A bad omen for the endseason storms, our scholars said.”

“Gods,” I hissed. “Fireborn lies, I bet.”

“How was I supposed to know?”

Tesq scoffed. “You were supposed to trust your family, Texoc. We could have protected you.”

“Like you protected Shal Gara?” Texoc shouted. The waves crashed and the ropes creaked, but none of us said a word. “Deskiral is my family now, drown it. How was I to choose between my child and my mother? Tell me what you would have done differently.”

Tesq had no answer for that. Mother did. She looked at none of us, facing out to the unknown blackness of the ocean.

“As I said before, what’s done is done,” she muttered. “None of it can be changed now, least of all our blood. We are family and we will stay family. At least now you know we are telling the truth, Texoc.”

Texoc strained at his bars again. “We have to get out of here. If they’ve hurt Deskiral and my unborn—”

“We’re not going anywhere soon, Texoc,” I told him. “Your only hope is that Haidak Baran sees fit to spare you when he comes here to murder us Scions.”

“Haidak...? As in Kol Baran’s son?”

“As in the leader of the Fireborn cult. Orchestrator of the demon invasion. The very same.”

Texoc grew evidently paler, even in the scant light. “I can’t believe it.”

“Three Gods, Texoc,” Mother sighed. “The quicker you can, the better.”

The silence returned. I watched my brother try to swallow a rancid meal of the truth and his choices. I knew how it felt. I had already made plenty of terrible decisions in my short seasons.

“Then you’re really a sorcer, Tarko?” Texoc asked.

“That I am.”

He rubbed his injured head with a wince. “Fancy that. I can still remember you playing sorcer outside the cottage on Kī Raxa Branch, Tarko. Casting spells by throwing mud and water at me.”

*How adorable,* groaned Serisi. *It sounds as if you were a chaotic spawn.*

I nodded sombrely. Lost memories came flooding back. “And you playing warrior with a shield made of a basket lid and a stick for a spear. I remember that, too. With Tesq pretending to be a lancer on the roof.”

Texoc pulled a wry face. “And all the while, Pel watched us with that look of utter confusion on his face. Out of his mind on urka, carving those mushrooms. Gods, it’s been far too many—”

“Wait. Shut up,” I snapped.

Texoc looked confused. “What?”

“Urka!” I said again, louder this time. “Atalawe, do you have any seeds on you?”

Atalawe had worn a blank look for the last hour.

“Temach!” Eztaral barked her rank. That seemed to do the trick.

“What?”

“You still have any urka seeds?” I hissed at her.

Atalawe patted herself, still dazed with grief. “A pouch, maybe. I brought some with me for Pel. Those moronic Fireborn didn’t seem too interested in confiscating anything that didn’t look like a blade.”

Pel had shuffled upright. “What’s in your mind, Tarko?”

*Indeed, Tarko. What are you planning?*

“There’s a trace of nectra in urka seeds, correct? Atalawe told me that’s how you manage to see. What if you ate enough to summon a spell?” I asked.

“That still wouldn’t be enough to cast spells, Tarko.”

“Have you ever tried?”

“Once, maybe—”

The eagleborn slammed a hand against her cage. “We have to try, old man. No time like tonight.”

“Eztaral, I wouldn’t be able to control it. For all the nectra in the seeds, the rest of the urka—”

“It could put him to sleep for days. Maybe a week.”

“Could it kill him?”

Atalawe frowned. “In extreme doses—”

“Then we’ll have to keep an eye on him, won’t we? Get Pel the seeds, and don’t any of you dare drop that pouch,” Eztaral ordered in her quietest warrior’s voice. It was still just shy of a shout.

What followed was a group effort that was unrehearsed, urgent, and yet executed perfectly, if I had to say so myself. Slow and careful, right under the noses of the warders, Atalawe swung to Tesq, bouncing her basket off Tesq’s several times until she forced the pouch through the bars. Tesq passed it to me. I gave it to my mother, who swung it to Eztaral, and finally Pel. Redeye even gave us some muted and half-hearted applause for our efforts.

Blind Pel felt the pouch. “There might not be enough.”

“Try, Pel. All we have is one shot. Firstglow is only hours away and we’re counting on you.”

And hours we waited, watching Pel crunch the seeds beneath his blue-stained teeth one handful at a time, and waiting for them to take effect.

“When you’re ready, bring the water up to break one of our baskets.”

“What, Eztaral?” I asked, with Serisi echoing me. “That’s not quite what I had in mind...”

Eztaral gave me a deathly look. “Trust me, Tarko. I’ve seen him do it a hundred times before.”

“You ask a lot, old friend,” said Pel.

“Less talking. More eating.”

By half the pouch, Pel’s head began to droop. But the blue sorcer glow gathering in his eyes forced us to push him onwards. It was working.

“He’s feeling the effects all too quickly,” whispered Atalawe.



“He’s fine,” Eztaral told us. “Keep going, Pel.”

Pel did as he was told until his head sagged. Once, twice, and then down for far too long.

“Pelikai!” we shouted.

He came upright with his eyes shining. Admittedly, there was an idiotic grin on his face and a severe slope to his head, but he was awake. Barely.

*The blind wizard is drunk on his seeds. This will not work.*

“Have some faith, curse you, demon. Would you rather we sit here and wait for Haidak?” I hissed.

*I would rather die in battle than drown in that infested ocean below us.*

“Pel, we need you to concentrate,” Eztaral was urging the old man.

“Listenin’,” he mumbled.

“Bring the water up to Tarko’s basket like I know you can.”

Waterfalls of rainwater cascaded around the gnarled roots below us, as if feeding the Untold Waters. They were closer and calmer than the waves, and Pel set his blue gaze on them.

It took us a moment to realise he was doing nothing but drooling against his bars.

“Pel! Cut the shit!”

The old coot came awake once more and slapped a hand on his bars. “I cagan.”

“What?”

“Can’t.”

Eztaral’s voice was like two slingstones grinding together. “I don’t care if you can’t, sorcer, you’re going to have to.”

“Minwarshmar,” Pel answered, uttering nonsense.

We all froze as a shout tumbled from the branches above. Our efforts had been noticed at last.

“What’s all this bloody commotion I keep hearing?” a Fireborn warder demanded as she moved closer to check on us. Aside from the swinging of our baskets, we stayed still and silent as trees.

I locked my eyes on the warder that peered over the railing. She scowled and attempted to cower me with the bright lanternlight. I refused to blink.

“Bastard Scion,” she threatened. “Just you wait till firstglow. Can’t wait to see what Baran does with you. Now shut up, before I give you a taste!”

We waited until the warder had sauntered back to the others.

“Pel...”

“Ingwuw,” Pel jabbered at me.

“We need you, curse it. Hurry up and save us!” I urged him.

Pel pointed again at the bloodwood. Oddly, I saw one of the blue lanterns in the giant roots wink out at the same time. I narrowed my eyes, curious.

“Pel!” barked Eztaral. She clicked her fingers. “Listen here and listen good. Remember that journey to Rasqax? The kanalat nest? Remember how I saved you, and you made me promise never to tell anyone the Scourge of the Scorchroad had squealed so loudly?”

“Can’t wait to hear the rest of that story,” Mother muttered.

“I’m calling in that favour, Pelikai! Right now.”

“Bashtid,” Pel mumbled as he closed his eyes.

I thought he was asleep until water splashed my face. A spray so fine I thought it was rain, but it came from the wrong direction and with too much personality. I gasped at the fiery touch of the water.

Squinting through the gloom, I watched a pale thread of a waterfall below us begin to sputter. Spray lifted into the air under Pel’s touch, shining faint blue in the lanterns staked below. I swore another one of the lights had disappeared since I last blinked.

“That’s it, Pel,” I hissed. “Keep it up!”

Pel looked crushed by the concentration. The spell was weak. Ill formed. Cold water splattered us all as he tried to summon it together. With a growl rumbling in his chest, the old sorcerer went rigid with effort. Even the errant raindrops now obeyed him. They pelted me in their obedience to Pel’s addled whims, and when he finally managed to drag a tangled mess of a tendril spell together, he threw it against my basket.

*Gah!* yelled Serisi at the water sloshed into my face again. The force rocked my cage and sent me staggering, almost twisting an ankle. I cursed to the night.

Pel’s magic clutched my ironpith bars and wicker mesh, finding cracks only water could find. Splinters popped as the spell gripped harder. Beyond my cage, I saw Pel beginning to sag against his own bars.

“A little more!” I hissed.

A savage crunch of wood answered me. Pel collapsed as the broken pieces of cage fell into the ether. The spell faded to nothing but rain.

“He’s bloody done it,” whispered Tesq.

Redeye could always be relied on to hound me. “There’s your bloody finesse, Tarko,” I heard him call to me.

Ignoring Redeye, I kicked at the hole Pel had fashioned, breaking off jagged edges and making it large enough to shimmy out of. It was loud. Far too loud, but I had no choice.

“Curse you! I thought I told you to stay quiet?” came the warder’s shout.

With broken wicker scraping at my cloth, I removed my gloves, put my hands to the outside of the basket, and pulled. I knew it was an awful idea, but I was powerless to avoid glancing down, where a dark ocean reached for me with its waves and clawing spray. My skin grew hot, defying the frigid night air.

With a crash of water, one of the blackfish threw itself out of the waves and snapped its jaws loudly. Even though there were several hundred feet between the fish and I, the promise of a

gruesome death was enough to make me tremble with strain. I felt the fear of the demon creep up my spine.

“Calm yourself, Serisi. I’m the one who has to climb, not you,” I said as I steeled myself.

*Precisely.*

“Trust me,” I replied, feeling the basket shift beneath me in a gust of breeze. I felt every muscle in me seize up. “Three Gods!”

The blue wash of the warder’s light started to approach along the walkway. Fortunately for me, I was on the dark side of the basket, hidden from the lantern’s glow.

“Careful, Tarko,” Ralish told me sternly.

“I intend to be. Don’t you worry,” I said, taking my feet one at a time from the inside. At least the wicker gave me more than enough to cling to, and within several gut-wrenching moments, I was perched atop my basket. It was the woven rope that made my heart stutter. It was only a short distance to climb to the walkway and winches, but it took me several moments to breathe out the terror and seize the weave.

Eztaral’s voice was strained. “Quickly, Terelta!”

I took my chances and climbed. Hand over hand, half a demon’s strength powering me, I ascended as fast as I could manage. My shadow shrank with every heave as the warder came to the railing again.

“Oi!” snarled Redeye at the end of the row. The furthest basket from mine. The distraction came just in time. “We getting fed or what? I’m starving.”

“Good! And you best shut your mouth before I decide to cut your rope and feed the fish!” the warder yelled back. She couldn’t resist the bait. “Lord Haidak only wants a few of you.”

I heard Redeye continuing to moan and argue like the expert he was, buying me time to creep into the light. I was a head above the walkway, vulnerable as lame prey, and I had a new problem: I had to jump to grab the walkway. It was not – much to Serisi’s and my dismay – a short distance. The blackfish were gathering beneath me, writhing around each other.

*Do not dare, Tarko.*

The rope juddered as Mother swung her basket into mine, closing the distance between me and the haven of the walkway. I appreciated it once my heart had stopped choking me. My mouth was dry as old leafleather.

Once, twice more, she struck me before the warder noticed the commotion.

“What’s going on? Who’s that there? OI! He’s escaping! Tarkosi’s escaping!”

I leaned into the last swing as hard as I could before I leaped into the air. Blue light washed over me, painting the precious walkway I stretched for. A hooked spear was silhouetted against the glow, levelled and rushing to pierce me, but I was a slave to hope and momentum in that moment.

*By the Void!* Serisi’s howl filled my ears.

In the blink of a crushing moment in which I thought I had failed, my fingertips collided with the walkway. I had never seized anything harder. The demon poured every piece of herself into my hands and arms, but it was already too late.

The warder was almost upon me. I was trapped between her blade and the last fall of my life. The mask of hatred she wore grew taut as she raised her hooked blade to strike at me.

“Tarko!” was the only sound I heard. Not the pounding of paws. Not the screech of joy from Atalawe. Not even the vengeful roar that raced past me.

Inwar bounded from the darkness in a streak of white, green, and fresh scarlet blood. Jaws wide and claws outstretched, he collided with the Fireborn warder so hard that I heard the snap of her spine. Screams filled the night as Inwar claimed his revenge with extreme prejudice. They lasted moments only before her body fell in two pieces from the walkway.

*Do not just dangle here like a rotten fruit, move, Tarko! Others are coming.*

“Inwar!” I yelled, as soon as I had two elbows and a toe on the walkway. The jāgu was already way ahead of me, charging the remaining warders on the stairs. They might not have had a chance to reach a warning bell, but their howls of terror at the vindictive beast worked just as well. I saw a swarm of lanterns working their way down from above.

Hauling myself onto the walkway, I immediately scrambled to the winches. I had nine to work, and my tired arms were already aflame. Eztaral’s basket was almost at the platform when I heard boots running up behind me.

I whirled to find a Fireborn in a mask and red robe hurtling at me with a knife raised. I was defenceless save for what the gods gave me. I charged him low, ducking under my foe’s stab to slam into his ribs. I heard the breath wheeze from him as he met the wood. A swift kick knocked him senseless.

*You have been paying attention, Tarko.*

Almost slipping in the pool of blood and pieces of warder I didn’t want to identify, I seized the spear to hook the basket closer and tied it with a latch. All that remained was the intricate ironpith lock that held Eztaral prisoner. I began to hack at it frantically.

“Behind you, Tarko!”

I spun, fortunately stabbing a Fireborn through the throat with the hook of the spear. It might have sent a fountain of blood into the night, but it didn’t stop the swing of the man’s club. It smacked me around the ear, blinding me with white pain. I fought the numbness with every fibre, but there was no stopping my body from toppling to the walkway. I felt myself sliding from reality.

Serisi’s voice drifted to me as my eyes closed.

*My turn.*

# 9

## RIGHTEOUS CHAOS

*Did you know there is a differing quality to nectra? It is true! Only slight, of course, but those sorcers who've travelled between bloodwoods speak of changes in taste, speed of magic, and how long the nectra lasts. Rasqax, it's said, gives nectra that can last twice as long as other bloodwoods. Lucky northern bastards.*

*OVERHEARD IN A CORIQAL ALEHOUSE*

Serisi's eyes snapped open to find a knife racing for her. Her stolen body was tired and weak, but fast enough to roll aside and let the blade eat wood instead.

Unleashing a cry of war, the demon seized the Fireborn's cloth-wrapped wrist and twisted. By the sounds of the bones breaking, her strength and control was greater with Tarko utterly senseless. A cackle burst from her. She would teach these Fireborn the true meaning of a demon's fire.

Another came to test her. A swift kick sent him screeching over the precipice and to the blackfish jaws below. Screams came from where Inwar drew a line of blood and bodies on the stairs. More sought to pounce on her from behind. Serisi swept up a spear in one hand and a Fireborn knife in the other. The metal felt good in her small hands, much more reliable than the spear of measly wood and stone.

With her smile beaming, Serisi swung the spear in a pattern that sliced the arm from the first Fireborn and sent the others skidding in the fountain of blood. Another tried to stick her with a blade. She dodged easily, rising up to headbutt him into a stupor. The knife plunged into his heart. He flapped his mouth, face scrunched in confusion and agony until Serisi twisted the blade and put an end to him. The next tried harder, landing a few pathetic blows with a stave before Serisi hooked his legs and stamped on his throat so viciously she practically decapitated him.

Unseasoned as raw meat, they were, and that was what Serisi made of them.

"Tarko!"

Serisi whirled to look for the lad for a moment before realising Eztaral was staring at her.

"Free me, curse you! You won't win this on your own!"

Defiance held her back for a moment, but this worm was a warrior she had come to respect. Eztaral would have made a fine demon.

Serisi set Tarko's hands firm around the spear and swung for the basket with all the might she could muster. To her – and Eztaral's – pleasant surprise, the ironpith bars snapped, and the eagleborn bounded free.

“Save the others!” she ordered.

Together they tackled the winches. Serisi attacked the handles so hard she nearly snapped them in half, but she raised two baskets for every one of Eztaral's.

One by one, they hacked at the locks. Atalawe and the red-eyed wizard were first, and they wasted no time in seizing lost blades and diving into the fray. The sister and the mother came next, then Ralish, and together they hauled an addled Pel from his basket. The traitorous brother gave Serisi pause.

“Let him out, Tarko,” said the mother. “You won't leave your brother behind, not while I still draw breath!”

“As you wish,” Serisi growled in Tarko's voice as she reluctantly broke him free. Texoc seized her arm and shoulder in a brief and awkward embrace, and Serisi couldn't help the scowl on her face. The worms' insistence on touching each other turned her stomach. Especially when it came to despicable backstabbers.

With their collection of borrowed spears and copper knives, the Scions pressed a path up the stairs. The Fireborn had momentarily thinned. The creature Inwar was perched on a mound of corpses with his fangs bared. Atalawe seized him around his neck, hands gently touching at the wounds across his body. The beast was soaking wet, and not just from blood.

“How in the Six Hells...?”

“He must have grabbed a root. Or swum to the shore,” Ralish gasped between fierce breaths.

“I don't care how he did it,” replied Atalawe, head pressed to the jāgu's. “The gods have smiled on us and that's all that matters.”

“We do not have time for this,” Serisi uttered.

“Tarko's right. There will be more of these fetid traitors on their way, I'm sure,” said Eztaral. Tossing a dagger aside, she seized a sword from a fallen corpse and stormed up the stairs onto the overhanging branch. Serisi did the same, finding a long sword of serrated obsidian and toughened wood. It was not Voidborn metal, but it would have to do.

This walkway was barely bigger than the last. Serisi snarled every time she glimpsed the drop below them and the hideous ocean waiting to swallow her whole.

Her ears were dimmer within Tarko's body, but she still caught the sound before the others. It was a low drone, too prolonged to be thunder, and it grew every step they took.

“Lancewing!” hissed Serisi.

Eztaral raised her stolen sword high, pointing above to the colossal branches that hung over them. A dark shape could be seen descending through the mists. “It must be Haidak Baran! He's early!”

“Couldn't keep away, I guess!” said Atalawe. “He must really care about us.”

Ralish had found an axe and spun it around in her hand. “Too much, I fear.”

Eztaral pointed to Serisi. “Tarko? Anything?”

The demon was confused. “Any what?”

“Dirt. Earth. Anything you can fight with, curse it!”

Serisi shook her head, knowing she had no knowledge of the worm-magic.

“Then let’s pray our luck continues and the gods keep on smiling, Scions. Hold fast!” Eztaral broke into a run, aiming to get as close to the bloodwood as she could.

Serisi pounded out a dozen steps before a wall of flaming torches burst into life. A formation of Fireborn stood before them, knives out and glowing vials of nectra in hand. Juraxi and Lancer Huata stood at their centre.

“I think you might have jinxed it, Eztaral,” Atalawe muttered as she rested the oblivious Pel against the railing and held her spear flat.

“Scions of the Sixth-Born!” a voice hailed them. A voice Serisi hated as much as Tarko did.

Above, spinning rain and mist in vortices with its blurred wings, a giant and familiar golden lancewing appeared. The downdraught buffeted the branch. Its metallic feathers caught the shine of every torch and lantern. A lone figure sat on its saddled back, dressed in a matching suit of scarlet armour. In his hand was a long glaive of obsidian and fiery bronze, and on his face was a sickening smile. Serisi endured the sting of drizzle against her face to grimace up at him.

“I knew you would deliver yourselves to me eventually, if I was patient. My my, how long has it been? Only weeks, but it feels like an age already, doesn’t it?” crowed Haidak Baran, moving his damnable bird closer to the branch. The Scions had to brace themselves. Half the torches were blown to smoke.

With a clank of armour, the bastard dropped to the walkway while the bird retreated to hover a short distance away. Haidak ran a hand through his red locks and stood tall. “Ah, will you just look? All of the Terelta family, gathered in one place for the first time in seasons. We should have brought a scholar to carve this charming scene. I had almost forgotten you in your exile, Texoc. What luck that Juraxi reminded me. Now every last one of you is stuck in a trap of my making.” Haidak tutted. “You know? I really thought you would make it harder than this.”

“We can make it far more difficult if you would like, my once-friend. Just face me without any of your Fireborn ready to spring, and I’ll be happy to oblige you,” growled Eztaral.

“Eztaral Kraid. You look aged by all this. Still like an old barkwolf with a bone, aren’t you? Don’t know when to give up and die. You think this new student of yours won’t disappoint you as I did, I can tell, but it’ll be another in a long list of your mistakes. You’re wrong. Fortunately you won’t live long enough to witness your failure.”

Serisi could see Eztaral was torched by those words. The eagleborn almost charged Haidak there and then.

“It feels good to be myself in front of you all at last, I will tell you that,” the worm said. “The ruse was fun at first, of course, but day after day of lying and pretending to go along with your altruistic whining grated on me deeply.”

Haidak hefted his blade to point solely at Serisi. “Which brings me to you, Tarkosi Terelta, the supposed saviour of Shal Gara yet somehow also its most recent exile. Hah! How pathetic, to think you had won. And you, Serisianathiel, daughter of Faraganthar, lurking somewhere in there. Traitor to your own kind and fool father. The demons are looking forward to the day they get to pull you apart, let me tell you. It’s all they talk about.”

Serisi raised her head, flexing those small, bony fingers like claws. “We have pondered many times how we will kill you for the plague you helped bring to this world. You have no understanding of what you have unleashed,” she said in Tarko’s voice.

“So you told me last time, Terelta.” Haidak snorted. “*We*. My my. Taken quite the shine to each other, haven’t you and your demon? There’s such a glint in your eye I don’t know who I’m even speaking to anymore.”

“Enough of the gloating-villain shit, Haidak. Are we fighting this out or going to talk till lastlight?” Atalawe yelled over my shoulder.

“Atalawe,” hissed Redeye.

“The unwashed wrangler is right. Let’s finish this at last, shall we?” Haidak said with a chuckle and a spin of his glaive. “Give them what they want, Fireborn. Send them to the Hells!”

Before any of the Scions could move, Serisi bounded for the foul worm without question. “He is mine!” she growled.

“Tarko, no! Not without your magic!” Ralish snatched her shoulder, but Serisi’s mind was set and her steps already quickening into a sprint. The thirst for blood and battle pounded through her borrowed body. Eztaral’s roar was a faint echo.

“Scions! For Kī Raxa!”

The clash of glaive and sword was earsplitting. Another followed in quick succession. The glaive sought to slash and pierce, but Serisi foiled it with her obsidian every time. Haidak was faster than last they had fought – the demon had to give him that – but not nearly fast enough.

Serisi dodged between the thrusts of the long blade and raked Haidak’s arm with her sword. As he snatched back the glaive, she jumped with it, halving the weapon’s reach and driving a foot into his leg.

“Insolent worker scum!” Haidak seethed, spittle on his chin. Lashing out with agility she hadn’t expected, he landed a glancing blow across Serisi’s face with the back of his hand. The glaive raked Serisi’s belly while she spun away.

“Tarko!” came a voice.

Eztaral came flying past her, sliding under Haidak’s blade on the wet walkway and landing a strike on his chest. The ornate armour dented under the blow, driving the bastard backwards.

“He is mine, I said!”

“Get in line,” was all Eztaral told Serisi as she parried a flurry of attacks. Haidak fought as a servant of chaos: vicious and unpredictable. But Serisi knew all too well how to fight chaos.



“Together,” she snarled, using Eztaral’s lunge to pounce for Haidak’s turned back. The worm was sneaky, turning her sword aside with the butt of his glaive before skipping backwards. He spun the weapon in a blurred circle.

“Enough!” yelled a hoarse voice behind them. Serisi had barely managed to turn her head to see Pel propped on one side, fists clenched and eyes shining blue, before a wave of seawater exploded around the branch. Where the others held fast against the Fireborn, it washed the feet from under the jade-masked bastards. Torches sputtering and hissing, they screeched as they were washed into mid-air and down towards the waiting blackfish. The screams from the thrashing ocean were quite delicious.

Haidak was thrown against the railing, spitting and cursing. The crunch of wood was telltale. Serisi grinned. She knew the wonders of armour. She had melted her own into her bones centuries before, but it was not without its drawbacks.

“A pretty suit of armour might stop a blade and save your life,” she yelled over the tumult. “But you pay a price, worm! Weight.”

Before the Fireborn could wrestle upright, Serisi hurled her sword. It was a savage throw with all her strength put behind it. She did not care if the blade found flesh. That was not the point.

As the blade clanged against Haidak’s crossed vambraces, the railing reached its breaking point and gave way behind him. The face he pulled was the kind Serisi would savour for centuries more, she was sure. Sadly, it swiftly gave way to one of mirth as the rumble of the lancewing grew loud once again. Haidak even held his arms out wide as he somersaulted down onto his bird’s saddle. The creature screeched mockingly as it tore through the mists.

“Nice try, Tarko,” Eztaral hissed, already retreating, “but now it’s time to run!”

“I am not finished.”

Eztaral gave her little choice, dragging her by the scruff of the neck, but Serisi pulled free. She could see the enraged surprise in Eztaral’s expression.

“I won’t have you taking on a giant lancewing on your own, curse it! The others need you alive, not speared on the end of a beak!” she yelled in Serisi’s face.

Serisi bared her teeth. She had fought the bird before and lived. Barely, however, and that had been in her true form. Relenting, she allowed Eztaral to drag her away, and they sprinted with one eye over their shoulders as the lancewing looped back towards them.

Haidak’s voice was obstinate yet weak against the thunder of wings. “Meet your end, Terelta!”

A spear forged of mud came surging overhead. Redeye had clearly found some nectra and earth to wield. Haidak’s lancewing veered almost supernaturally around the spell, but a second blast of magic forced it away from the branch.

Serisi and Eztaral quite literally jumped into the fray of Fireborn and Scion. Ribs and weak armour cracked underfoot before their blades went to work.

The rake of a man they called Huata was being hounded by Atalawe and Texoc. Ralish and Inwar were driving strays over the railings while Redeye kept the monstrous golden bird at bay.

Axera had Pel slumped in one arm and a hooked spear in the other, swinging it madly in wide arcs. Eztaral was her usual whirlwind of death. This was the righteous chaos Serisi was born for, and she drank it in.

*Juraxi.* The cowardly creature guarded the doorway to the stairs and Serisi's freedom. The worm pushed other Fireborn in front of him, all the while yelling something about revenge and glory.

Serisi waded towards him, hacking her way through body after body with a heavy jade machete. She could see the worry grow in Juraxi's eye, and her smile grew with it.

The worm lunged with his copper blade. Serisi smacked his hand aside and swung a foot into his hip. Juraxi crashed against the wooden buttress of the doorway.

"You are no warrior. You are nothing but a petty murderer, full of lies," Serisi scoffed. She mimicked what she had seen the humans do and spat at his feet. "A weakling Faraganthar and Haidak swindled into betraying your kin in the name of chaos. You deserve death."

Surprisingly, Juraxi gave her his skewed smile instead of the blubbing she had hoped for. "And you're not Tarko, are you? You're Faraganthar's daughter, aren't you? How interesting."

An eerie squeal of death momentarily stalled the battle. Serisi glanced to see the traitor Huata pinned against the wall with Texoc's spear driven deep under his sternum.

Serisi turned to treat Juraxi the same, but the slimy worm was already pouncing. Copper pierced her Scion leather and punctured her shoulder. The pain was fire she drew strength from, just as she had been taught. Juraxi dodged away to evade her swing, but he couldn't dodge the spear Atalawe hurled into their duel like a lightning bolt. It pierced Juraxi's back, and as he staggered in pain, arm raised to paw at the wound, Serisi twisted her stance and brought her machete back around.

At first Juraxi didn't notice the absence of his arm. Only the spatter of blood alerted him to the stump left below his shoulder. The jade was sharp.

Juraxi's bawling screech was immensely satisfying. He left an impressive trail of blood as he scabbled across the deck.

Serisi was striding after the pitiful worm when a blast of horns put a halt to the battle. The air was filled with their noise. Serisi glanced upwards. Firstglow had yet to truly rise, and lantern upon lantern was streaming down the trunk and branches from above. Stormbeaten had finally woken up. The Fireborn began to scatter like spiders from a broken nest. With a frustrated roar, Haidak wheeled his lancewing into the low clouds to vanish.

"Tarko!" Ralish seized Serisi's arm. The demon watched her eyes measure the amount of blood decorating Tarko's body.

"We need to leave! Now!" Eztaral bayed, already marching up the stairs.

Serisi looked down on Juraxi a last time, machete twitching in her hand. The worm was already turning a milky pale. Ralish had to pull her away.

"This isn't you, Tarko. Balance, remember? We've had enough chaos this night."

“He’ll bleed out soon enough. The Six Hells will welcome him warmly.” Atalawe also had to drag herself from darkness.

“Beside taking a short walk and a long drop into the ocean, where are we going, Eztaral?” Axera shouted over the horns and the Scions’ pounding feet.

Serisi turned around to find Redeye a short distance behind and catching up. His eyes shone blue beneath his frown.

“We’re bloody trapped once again!” he yelled.

“As encouraging as ever, thank you, Redeye!” Eztaral barked.

Texoc was trying to go another direction but Tesq dragged him back. “I need to get to Deskiral!” he yelled.

“If we can get to another branch, evade the second-born, and sneak away we—ah. Shit.”

The Scions ground to a clamouring halt at Eztaral’s back. Ahead, standing at the wall of Stormbeaten’s trunk, was a crowd of black-and-teal-clad warriors barring the way. A dozen leashed and gnashing barkwolves strained to charge. At the sight of the blood-drenched Scions, the warriors hammered their triangular shields and stamped their feet as one.

“Drop your weapons and get on your knees, or suffer the wrath of Stormbeaten!” cried a shrill voice. “By order of the Matriarch Naxāko!”

At Serisi’s side, Redeye didn’t hesitate in taking a knee. Texoc did the same. Pel slumped from Axera’s grasp and lay like an empty sack on the floor. The rest, Serisi included, found it hard to let go of their blades.

Another crash of feet and shields split the air. The warriors began to advance in formation.

“Surrender or die!”

With a muttered curse, Eztaral threw down her sword. Atalawe followed suit. Serisi was last, and it was with great disgust she settled down onto her knees, something that was interminably uncomfortable, never mind demeaning. Demons did not kneel.

“And once again, we’re at the mercy of a matriarch,” Atalawe mused as the warriors approached with hooked spears level.

“At least we’ll get the audience we wanted,” muttered Eztaral.

Before they began to seize the Scions one by one, Serisi turned to Redeye with suspicious eyes. “What delayed you?”

Redeye raised an eyebrow. “And what stopped you from wielding your magic, hmm? Plenty of mud for spells down here.”

Serisi had no answer for that. She had no power over her mouth. Or her body for that matter. Her strength fled from her. Dizziness swirled her mind. The wood rose up to collide with her head.

“Tarko!”

# 10

## NAXĀKO

*Every bloodwood must have a matriarch. Every matriarch must have a bloodwood.*  
*SUPPOSEDLY THE FIRST WRITTEN LAW OF THE SWATHE*

It was bewildering to say the least, waking up to wolf-masked warriors of teal and black hauling my arms behind my back to be bound with rope. Pain swooped in to hammer against my skull. There was a fire in my chest. Barkwolves yapped in my face, baring fangs. All I could see of the others was Redeye on his knees next to me, his eyes aglow with nectra and a sour look on his face.

“What in the Six Hells?” I muttered before they hauled me up and turned me around. I was relieved to find the rest of the Scions all alive. My mother and sister were staring at me with worry. Texoc was alive, too, being pushed about and questioned by those who recognised him. He kept his gaze low and his mouth shut. Behind me, Eztaral was also mired in sweat and blood. Atalawe held on to Inwar while they looped his neck with rope. All of us were equally bound except Pel, who was unconscious but breathing, thankfully. His lips and chin were a brighter blue than usual.

I looked to Ralish, trying to shuffle close to her before I was slapped around my wounded head.

“Are you all right?” I asked over the yelling and constant barking. “Tell me you are.”

“I’m not injured, if that’s what you mean,” she said to me with a narrow stare. “Are you all right?”

“I’m not sure,” I answered. I was covered in blood. Despite grazed knuckles, the long wound across my stomach, a hole in my shoulder, and a range of developing bruises, I was in no danger of dying. My limbs shook with energy I didn’t recognise. The black veins beneath my skin stood out like cords, and my fingertips were stained dark even despite the red dye of an earth reaver. My entire body felt battered and bruised.

“Where’s this Tarko been?” she said. “I’ve never seen you fight like that.”

I had a strong suspicion it was because I hadn’t been the one fighting. I distinctly remembered a Fireborn club knocking me down. I had the headache and a bloody lump to prove it.

“I have been practising, you know,” I lied.

“Not that much, you haven’t.”

“Heat of battle and all that.”

Ralish adjusted her wrists with a wince. “Mhm.”

“Move!” came the order, and we were pushed and prodded along the branch towards the trunk and a walkway that led to a higher branch. The rain was returning with the light, and I hoisted my hood against it. I shivered beneath my soaked clothing. My breath escaped in faint clouds.

“Serisi,” I muttered beneath my breath, using the rumble of marching feet for cover. “You better start talking, demon. What happened?”

*I saved us, is what,* replied a weak voice, distant at the back of my skull.

“From what? By the looks of it we lost.”

*Everybody is alive, are they not?*

A sharp pain lanced across my skull. A fleeting memory came with it, one of Haidak’s grinning face. Another chased it, of Juraxi lying pale and bleeding from the stump of an arm.

“I—Was that real? What did we do?”

*What did I do, you mean. I did what I did in Mulchport. I fought Haidak and killed Juraxi with your hands.*

“You *what?* I... Gods curse it,” I breathed.

*We would have perished without me.*

A chill ran through me at the demon’s words, and the prospect of how close I – the so-called hero of Shal Gara – had come to death. A strange mixture of failure and relief filled me as I questioned who and what I was becoming.

*I think the phrase you are looking for, Tarko, is ‘thank you.’*

I was far from sure about that, especially given the thump in the ribs a warrior dealt me.

“Silence!”

Our captors led us up a grand spiral of wood that the clouds had hidden until now. Half the city and the bloodwood seemed contained in its coil. It was not just some staircase, but entire rows of buildings, markets, and towers that jutted outwards as if pretending to be branches. Spherical buildings hung from the upper branches like the swayers but far larger and stouter.

The spiral reached from Stormbeaten’s middle almost to its canopy, where the bloodwood split into five north-leaning branches lost to cloud. Lancewings came and went from nests all along the tree’s edges, dodging ropes of streamers and pennants that told the wind’s direction. Rooftops of red bloodwood leaf covered the city, and each was angled like an umbrella facing the south.

Fortunately, my tired legs didn’t have to contend with all those steps. Stormbeaten was as civilised as Shal Gara, and the warriors dragged us to a skyriser on the edge of a branch. The cold wind of the Untold Waters gusted as we huddled as close to the centre as possible.

Other second-born joined us before we climbed. They had captured three surviving Fireborn, although that was generous to say for one of them, who stood crooked and bleeding between the hands clasped over his stomach. They were three I didn’t recognise, but they still stared at the Scions with hatred. One even struggled against his ropes to get to us.

Although the barkwolves had been left behind, we now had the fortune of sharing the skyriser with several crates of dead fish. The smell was enough to bring me fully awake. The

injured Fireborn hurled his guts at the feet of a warrior. An eagleborn, judging by the six chisel marks on his teal barkwolf mask.

*Foul*, said Serisi, and I could almost feel her shiver.

“The fish or the Fireborn?” I whispered.

*Both.*

The Fireborn got a smack around the face for his insult. After the eagleborn was finished looking him up and down, the warrior hauled him to the side of the skyriser and casually hurled the man into thin air.

We all stared at each other as the scream gradually faded. Not soon enough for my liking. I swear the Fireborn had to take a breath in the middle of his fall to carry on screaming.

“Not wasting our healers on a dead man,” the eagleborn said to his warriors, and they thumped their spears in unison. The skyriser’s ropes creaked in protest. I worried for Blind Pel, but he was already beginning to wake.

“How do you feel, old man?” I whispered.

“Awful,” Pel muttered. “But at the same time I am not exactly sure if I’m awake or dreaming.”

Eztaral snorted. “Unfortunately, you’re awake.”

The cloud swallowed us by the time we switched to another platform. This one had fewer dead fish but plenty more warriors and what looked like Stormbeaten’s highwarders. Each of the latter wore a helmet shaped like the head of a fearsome black eagle with opal eyes and teal fish-scale armour beneath flowing scarves. On their shoulders, they carried enormous obsidian blades. Part sword, part stone slab, I wondered – and worried – whether I could even lift one. I had thought Shal Gara’s warriors fierce, but Stormbeaten was changing my mind.

We stood still as rocks, making sure we gave them no reason to lighten the load another time.

The matriarch’s hall looked nothing like the Crimson Crown of Shal Gara. It was a spiny sort of building, aggressive in the way it hung above Stormbeaten. A teal orb sat at the centre of seven thick spikes that pierced nearby branches, like a giant ironpith seed lodged high in the bloodwood’s canopy. Blue, lantern-lit walkways met it from four different directions. Another godfish skeleton hung by its tail beneath the hall, its jaws facing the heart of the tree.

Into a domed hall, we were ushered. The same spines that protruded from the outside also pierced within, each pointed directly at a broad stone chair suspended from the ceiling on a score of ropes. Ensnared in its cushioned clutches was a pale-faced and silver-haired child who could not have been older than twelve seasons. A red birthmark reached across one cheek. She gently swung back and forth, watching us enter in complete silence with her scarlet eyes. This must have been the Matriarch Naxāko.

An ornate staircase of fish ribs cascaded to the floor beneath her, and sitting in a semicircle at its base were the seven sages of Stormbeaten. I had no idea or care what their names were, but I knew each of their tribes immediately. Most of them looked as if they had just been rudely awakened, stuffed into their robes, and thrown into their stone chairs.

“Bow in the presence of Matriarch Naxāko of Stormbeaten, Keeper of the South Wind!” barked the second-born sage while the highwarders spread around the hall. We did as we were told. Even Pel, who was now standing without Axera’s help and blinking owlishly at the unfriendly architecture. He still looked out of his mind on urka.

“Speak,” ordered the matriarch. Her voice was as high and pure as a silver bell.

After a deep bow, the eagleborn removed his helmet to show shaggy grey hair and a heavy, weathered face that only a mother could be proud of. “There’s been a battle, Matriarch, down in the Rainwalk near the swayers. A bloodbath would be more accurate. All of our warders have disappeared, and we found these culprits fighting bitterly instead. There are dozens dead, several of them in Stormbeaten armour, but most in red cloth like these two prisoners. They were wearing these.”

A jade lizard mask was held in the air. A highwarder delivered it to Naxāko while the eagleborn continued.

“Although I do not know these two, we recognised many of the fallen who were wearing red and jade. They were Stormbeaten-born, Matriarch. Men and women I’ve seen on watch or trained alongside. One of the dead was Lancer Huata. By all accounts, he was a good man and fine warrior.”

I heard Ralish mutter at that. She received a clout for doing so, and I strained against my ropes.

“I can’t explain what he was doing down there, fighting these.” The eagleborn jabbed a finger at us Scions. “Except for this Stormbeaten warrior, Wilder Texoc Terelta, nobody has seen them or their beast before.”

For a moment, I thought he was talking of me and my demon, then I heard Inwar yowl.

Naxāko turned the jade mask around in her lap while she massaged her forehead with her other hand. She might have been young, but she had the energy of a woman of many seasons.

“As if I do not have enough problems to deal with in this bloodwood,” she complained. With a toss of her hand, the mask was thrown to the marble floor and dashed into pieces.

“If I may—” began a younger portly man with a constant smirk on his face. I guessed him to be the first-born sage,

Naxāko threw up her arms. “No, you may not, Sage Gatowa. It is too early for your blathering,” she said. “You in the copper and grey. Who are you? Speak.”

I looked to Eztaral and Atalawe. Seeing as I had been dead to the world for most of the battle, I had little desire to do the job of explaining.

Eztaral cleared her throat. “As there is no point in secrecy, I will speak honestly, Matriarch Naxāko. I am Eagleborn Eztaral Kraid, and we are the Scions of the Sixth-Born, an order founded in Shal Gara almost a thousand seasons ago for one purpose and one purpose only: to keep the Swathe safe. These two standing before you believe in quite the opposite. They work for the Swathe’s downfall.”

“That’s a lie!” spat one of the Fireborn.

“Silence him,” Naxāko ordered.

“We call them Fireborn, Matriarch. They believe not in the order of the Swathe but in chaos instead.”

Naxāko swung her leg out of her seat and kicked the air. “So you have a disagreement, is what you’re saying. A feud that you saw fit to bring here to my bloodwood.”

Eztaral visibly tensed. “If you wish to call it that, Matriarch, then fine. I call them the most dangerous enemy the Swathe has faced since the time of Kī Raxa.”

*She is avoiding talking of demons, is she not?* Serisi asked. I nodded. I didn’t blame Eztaral. The subject was a quick path to being laughed at, but time and excuses were running out.

“Them?” Naxāko pointed at the two Fireborn. One was now bleeding on the floor.

“Not them specifically, Your Highness, but those whom they follow. I assume you’ve heard of the fall of Shal Gara and Firstwatch, or the Sheertown Massacre?” asked Eztaral.

“Of course I have. Two bloodwoods fallen to wildfire in one season? It is a historic tragedy that has shaken us all,” said Naxāko.

“The Fireborn caused them both, all through lies, deception, and treachery. If left to their own despicable devices – something I would heartily recommend against – they would see the same fate thrust upon every other bloodwood. Even Stormbeaten.”

“Though the wildfires that have ravaged the north are grave, we have enough to concern ourselves with in Stormbeaten to worry about the rest of the Swathe. We go forgotten here in the south, I’ll have you know,” said Naxāko. “This is not our concern.”

“It is now, Matriarch,” said Atalawe, loud and clear. “The Fireborn are already here turning the minds of your citizens. Dozens of your own warriors have already been poisoned against you. That is how they managed to capture us when we first arrived and put us in the swayers without Stormbeaten even noticing. All we are guilty of is fighting our way free before they saw fit to kill us.”

Naxāko pondered Atalawe’s words for a long time, rubbing her hands all the while. “Why aren’t you with your fallen bloodwood, Eagleborn Kraid?”

“We were exiled, Matriarch,” I answered instead. “For failing to protect our bloodwood.”

The Fireborn had not learned the lesson of silence. He struggled against the warders once more. “For allying yourself with a traitor demon!”

“Silence!” yelled the Stormbeaten eagleborn.

“I am sorry,” Naxāko said, leaning forwards. “Did you say demon?”

“I did, and you’ll see them for yourself when they come to burn this tree to ashes, just like all the rest!” seethed the man, doing a fine job of broaching the Scions’ difficult subject for us.

“Gag him,” Naxāko sighed. “I will not hear any more talk of this nonsense!”

Eztaral tilted her head. “If I may ask, Your Highness, who else has mentioned demons?”

Naxāko tutted fiercely. “My ears hear all kinds of fanciful gossip. Talk of sightings in the forest of strange monsters. People are saying the wildfires are the fault of spirits, or demons, or the



gods walking the earth again. Some say the bloodwoods themselves are moving. It is all the fault of fearful, bored minds. It is distraction from order, and I will not have it in Stormbeaten.”

“But you must have heard of Shal Gara uprooting and moving west?”

“As hard as it was to believe, I did. My scholars have told me wildfires once caused such a thing to happen.”

“And what about the black sun? Or a message from Sage Saronash of Shal Gara weeks ago, asking for help and reinforcements?” growled Eztaral.

“And I ignored it. I thought it was the raving of a fool, and I was far too concerned with quelling the riots and panic over the sun goddess falling into darkness for madness such as that. Half of my citizens listened to my godseers and believed the black sun an omen of bad storms. The other, less sensible half thought it was the end of the world, and panicked. Now we know it was an omen for Shal Gara and Firstwatch. As tragic as their fall is, the sun is healed and Stormbeaten is still here. As I said, it does not concern us. Now, do you want to agree with your enemy and tell me once more that it was the work of demons, or have you some sense between your ears?”

I could see Eztaral’s patience crumbling like a dead branch. She did well to hide it.

“I said I would be honest, Matriarch, and that is what I shall be,” she said between clenched teeth. “Demons are responsible. And before you scoff again, I have fought and killed them with my own hands. They are out there in the forest this very moment, plotting to finish a war we thought we’d ended in Shal Gara. They came to the Swathe a thousand seasons ago and now they have return to finish what Kī Raxa stopped them from accomplishing then: utter destruction. You can choose to believe or not, Matriarch, it doesn’t change anything for us, but these Fireborn believe with all of their filthy hearts, and they believe it so much they’ll do whatever they can to see chaos made a reality. I failed in my duties once before, and if I did not try to change your mind or warn you, I would be failing once again.”

I spoke up. “The Fireborn will whisper in Stormbeaten’s ears and convince you all chaos is the way. They’ll lead all of you to ruin, from first-born to sixth, and the only way to stop them is by joining forces against them. That is why we are here. Not to cause trouble and spill blood, but for an audience with you, Matriarch. We are here to ask for Stormbeaten’s help in this fight.”

Naxāko rubbed at her temples while the fourth-born sage waved his clammy hands dismissively.

“This is nonsense. Kī Raxa fought marauders and Scorch warlords, not demons,” he scoffed. “This is all a ruse. I have read every scroll and song of old, and nothing speaks of such things. The last bloodwood to move was—”

“And you believe this because the Fireborn spent centuries making sure you believe what they want you to,” Atalawe argued. “They have erased the truth slowly and surely. Turned it into legends and fairytales for pompous scholars to argue over.”

“How dare you speak to me so, lowly temach!”

“I say we execute them or put them back in the swayers where they belong.”

“How convenient that would be,” snorted Redeye.

“Happen to know somebody called Haidak Baran, Sage?” I asked him. “Once eagleborn of Shal Gara, now leader of the Fireborn?”

The sage blustered, cheeks and chin wobbling as though he had no jawbone. “I—I’ve never heard of the man.”

“Interesting. I didn’t say it was a he, did I?”

That seemed to intrigue Naxāko. It looked to me like she was beginning to believe. “Even more so, considering a member of a Baran family was here a week ago, visiting with certain nobles and sages,” she said.

“This is outrageous!” yelled the sage. He got to his feet in a rage, clicking his fingers to summon the highwarders. “I will not stand for this accusation!”

*Burrowed deep indeed.*

“Mhm,” I hummed.

“Either sit down, Sage, or remove yourself!” Naxāko yelled. Her high-pitched voice made Inwar yowl.

The sage took some time deciding before he sat his plump arse down and kept his thoughts to himself.

“It seems to me that you Fireborn and Scions are both as mad as each other, but I won’t have you painting Stormbeaten red over your disagreements. What you say is grave, Scion, and I don’t want to believe it,” she said. “But I wonder if not believing you would be a bigger mistake. Though I am already pulled in a hundred directions at once, you can be sure I’ll stay vigilant for those who seek chaos over order. As for your demons and wildfires and moving bloodwoods...”

Naxāko made us wait.

“Proof,” she snapped. “I won’t lift a finger to help you without it.”

“What proof, Matriarch?” asked Eztaral. “What would sway your sceptical mind?”

Naxāko drummed her fingers on her knee in thought. “A demon,” she said at last.

“I’m sorry?” Atalawe spoke up.

“A demon. Bring me a demon. Then I will know they are not myths and lies and the full force of Stormbeaten will be yours.”

While several sages snorted at the prosperous idea, the Scions shared concerned looks. Eztaral caught my eye. I flexed my fingers as I sought dust to show off Serisi’s form, but she shook her head sternly. I understood. It was a dire gamble.

“We have a claw taken from a demon,” I ventured.

*Do not lose me that claw, Tarko. Remember it is all that is left of me.*

Carefully, I fished Serisi’s broken claw out from behind my armour and held it aloft. Before I could speak, the Stormbeaten eagleborn snatched it away. Mere moments after he had taken it, he threw it straight back at me.

“Gah!”

“Problem, Eagleborn?” asked Naxāko, sitting up in her chair.

“It’s hot, Matriarch!”

“Not for me,” I muttered, stowing it safely back where it belonged.

Naxāko pinched her forehead. “I said proof, not trickery.”

“But Matriarch—”

“Enough!” she screeched again. “I’ve heard enough of this! I was robbed of my sleep, I won’t be robbed of my senses.” Naxāko levelled two fingers at the Fireborn. “You two. What say you?”

The one without the gag could have called us liars and thrown us into question. He could have stayed silent. Instead, he chose chaos and tried to spit rather unsuccessfully in the matriarch’s direction. There was a thin line between devotion and madness. “I say you won’t be on that throne much longer, Matriarch! The sun will turn dark again all too soon.”

Naxāko sighed over his continued babbling. “Take them away. Have them clear up the dead before you put them in the swayers. A month will do nicely.”

They fought and bit and cursed as they were dragged away by the Stormbeaten warriors. One spared a moment for me, struggling so he could goad me.

“Better watch your back, Tarkosi. We Fireborn are everywhere and anywhere. We will be there when you least expect it and tear you apart from the inside. Careful who you trust!” he threatened, staring at each Scion in turn with a satisfied grin before he was hauled off.

*He speaks the same warning as Bathnarok, Tarko, Serisi warned me. Betrayal.*

“As for you Scions,” said Naxāko, making us wait just long enough to hear our fate for me to start fearing the worst, “I wish you to leave my bloodwood. Even you, Wilder Texoc Terelta. By associating yourself with these Scions, you’ve forfeited your right to belong to Stormbeaten.”

I watched my brother stare into a void as if he hadn’t heard his matriarch.

“Don’t come back here unless you have something to change my mind, or you will see we have worse punishments than swayers, I promise you. And if you do return, do it quickly, for I depart for the Forging in Dorla Sel within the week. You may count yourselves lucky for my mercy.”

Eztaral bowed. “As you wish, Matriarch Naxāko.”

*That is it?*

Words clamoured to be free of me, but I was seized by the shoulder and forcibly turned. In the bustle and close press of the bound Scions, I tried to manoeuvre closer to Eztaral.

“That’s it?” I asked her in a hiss.

“That’s it. We’re alive. We’re together. We’re free. We got the audience we came for. I consider us lucky this didn’t end worse, and so should you. I’m going to take what we’ve been given and not spit in the hand that offered it. Understand?”

“No.”

“Then start trying, Terelta.”

“We could have shown her Serisi.”

Eztaral flashed me a look. “And she would have called it a construct. Naxāko is smart for a child. Even if she did believe us, she can’t be seen believing in fairytales, let alone acting on them. If she denied us completely and it was a mistake, she’d be rash. That is why proof is what she wants and why proof is exactly what we’re going to give her.”

“What? You’re going to deliver a whole demon to her?”

The eagleborn’s mouth curved into a smile. It had no warmth, no humour, only a mockery.

“You’ll see,” she said, as nonchalantly as if she discussed the weather. “Now, don’t look so scared, Tarko. What with your new lust for fighting, it should be a longsun breeze, isn’t that right?”

“A breeze,” I muttered.

Eztaral’s stare followed me until I faced away. Even then I could still feel it burning into the side of my head.

# 11

## OF TRUTHS

*Bloodwood seeds are rarer than snow on a longsun day in these seasons. A bloodwood flowers once every hundred seasons, and each tree only produces one flower and one seed. They are kept in vaults much like nectra and may only be planted in the presence of the Allmother. As I mentioned in my previous chapter, the last bloodwood to be planted was Scree, and no bloodwood seed has taken root in five hundred seasons despite many attempts. It is a vexing mystery to all fourth-born of the Swathe.*

*“ON THE NATURE OF BLOODWOODS” BY TEMACH LILO, 1807*

Another crash came from behind Texoc’s door. Another wince from those of us gathered outside.

“Think it’s going well in there?” Atalawe asked while something that sounded distinctly porcelain smashed against the wall she leaned against.

“About as well as everything else during this trip,” answered Redeye, kicking at gouges in the wooden planks of the street.

“How long has it been?” Ralish asked.

Atalawe eyed the haze of sun behind the clouds. “Hour, maybe more.”

At the continued sound of shouting, my mother took a deep breath in through her nose. “It’ll take as long as it takes. Deskiral wasn’t planning to have her child while exiled in the loam. I know I’d be livid if somebody came back to me with that news.”

Tesq was having as hard a time with forgiveness as I was. The Tereltas were experts at holding a grudge. “It’s his own fault for—

“For having us as a family,” Mother interrupted. “He’s already paid the price. Unless you’re saying you would rather have him stay here, where the Fireborn could take their toll at any time?”

“Of course not.”

“Then shut up, Tesq. We stick together.”

“Yes, Mother,” my sister mumbled.

“What’s done is done. We are alive, and there are more,” I added while I let Misfit run spirals around my left arm. It was as if the little shrewbat could tell how close he’d come to not seeing me again. “How are you doing, Pel?”

“I am... alive. The urka is beginning to wear off,” said the old sorcer, currently playing with a small leaf and utterly fascinated by it, clearly still as aloft as a kite.

“Sure about that?” Atalawe poked his arm, and Pel looked in the complete opposite direction from her, confused. “You’re lucky to be alive.”

Eztaral was keeping an eye on the band of highwarders that stood at a distance, watching. They had followed us from Naxāko’s hall. “So are we,” she said. “That was far too close for my liking and a miracle of the gods that we walked away with only cuts and bruises.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, before any blame could be thrown my way. “It was my idea to come here.”

“And rightly so,” Mother answered. “What were you going to do, leave us here? I’m glad you finally caught up with us. Though, if you’d left when I said you should, none of this might have happened. Think on that, all you Scions.” She wagged her finger at the others, ever the mother.

Nobody argued with Axera Terelta.

*You humans apologise too much.*

“Thank you for that,” I whispered.

“Serisi talking to you?” Ralish asked. A bruise was blossoming on her cheek, and I reached to put a hand to her skin.

“As always.”

“And what does she say of all this?” Eztaral asked me, shoulders hunched and arms folded, mismatched eyes locked on me.

*It was a glorious battle. Though why we now have to impress a child is beyond me. She is clearly a frightened coward beneath it all. We should find better allies.*

“She said it was a fine fight, but that Naxāko is a coward and doesn’t agree that we should have to impress her. That we should find better.”

“The demon is right,” Eztaral answered.

“You agree with her?”

“At least about the part where we should find better. We’ll find proof all right, but not for Naxāko. Somebody more important.”

“You’ve just decided this?” Atalawe asked.

Eztaral filled her chest with breath. “I have. I have a delightful headache from the flat of some bastard Fireborn’s sword, somebody cut me on the left buttock so I can’t sit or lean – I mean, who in their right mind wounds somebody on the arse? – and my stomach thinks my throat’s been cut, but all that aside, my mind is clearer than it has been in weeks. Whether it was Haidak’s face or Naxāko’s words, I’m not sure, but I know what we have to do now.”

“Good to have you back, Eagleborn,” said Atalawe with a smile.

I winced again as I glimpsed Haidak’s grinning face in my mind.

“Stop it, Serisi,” I breathed.

*I cannot help it. You missed much.*

The fact I had missed Juraxi's end and Haidak's retreat, never mind the Fireborn slaughter, irked me. I had longed to test myself on Baran once more, and the demon had stolen my moment. "You don't have to remind me."

*When are you going to tell them about our new situation?*

"When I figure it all out for myself." The lie was growing. The longer I let it live, the more it would consume me. I had learned that lesson already, yet for some reason I couldn't bring myself to think about it.

*I will not have them thinking you saved them when it was all my doing.*

"Want all the glory, do you?"

*I am a demon, Tarko. Of course I do.*

A screech of hinges interrupted us, making Misfit scurry behind my collar. Texoc stood at the doorway with a mosscloth sack in one hand and a red handprint on each cheek.

Tesq sucked her teeth. "I'm not too fond of this wife of yours, you know, Texoc," she said.

My brother gave her a sour look before thudding out into the street. Deskiral, bound in coat and shawl, came bustling out after him. She slammed the door so hard the frame cracked. Deskiral looked around our group, frowning especially at us Tereltas, and huffed. Her words were said with a drone that drowned out all sincerity. "I understand we are all in danger, and thank you for trying to protect us," she said, before the strain of staying calm became too much. "But we were doing just fine before you came along, and if you think I'll hear any of your excuses, or more talk of demons—"

Eztaral cleared her throat. "Do you know the first trick to keeping safe in the loam, Deskiral?"

"What?" she snapped.

"Keeping quiet, miss. Now, I get this isn't an enjoyable situation, but if you'll follow me, we can make this as swift and as painless as possible for all."

Deskiral looked around at us again: the sulking sorcer, the brash eagleborn, the dishevelled Atalawe, the watchful Axera and Ralish, even the drugged Pel. And me, with my face still washed with blood. What a crowd we made.

At last, Deskiral sighed with a shudder. She pushed Texoc out of the way as she followed Eztaral.

My mother stepped close to her. "Welcome to the family, Deskiral." I heard her say.

\*

Naxāko's highwarders followed us a mile from Stormbeaten before they left us be. I couldn't have cared less for their suspicion; I was too busy focusing on the ache of my sleep-deprived and battle-weary legs. Every step sent pains shooting from foot to rib. By the muttered growls, I knew Serisi felt it too.

We trod the leafroad in thankful silence, letting the rain drum on us and wash away some of the filth from the battle. I dared the painful touch of the rain to drink it as it fell.

Stormbeaten's warders had not let us keep our Fireborn weapons, but Atalawe had argued enough for the return of Grumpus and the wagon. Spare swords, arrows, bows, staffs, and scant nectra lay beneath its panels and piled supplies. They were either fashioned by our own hands – Pel and Atalawe's to be honest – or bought cheap from Mulchport's only two weapon traders. Cheap, but still sharp and lethal. There was even a sling for me.

Tightly knit, we walked with our weapons out and ready from morning to evening.

The leafroad, still several hundred feet above the loam, made the finest place to camp. With the rain spent behind us, a fire did our souls good and gave our bones some much-needed warmth. I sat closer than all the others, hands barely hot even within reach of the flames. I could feel Serisi drinking in their shivering glow. My muscles were so glad to be at rest I swore I melted into the wood. Misfit, perched on my shoulder and curled up in a chattering slumber.

The same silence we practised on the march continued around the fire. Dry biscuits and nuts were nibbled while the Scions stared into the flames.

Deskiral was glancing around the circle. "Don't you lot ever speak?" she asked after some time.

"Thought you didn't want to hear us talk?" Redeye mumbled.

"Well..." she said, shuffling around on a sack of supplies. "I suppose I should know where we're going. Texoc doesn't know."

"That's because I haven't told him," replied Eztaral. "You are going to Mulchport. At least for now. You'll be safer with their sage."

"Mulchport," Texoc repeated. "I've been through there several times. Not a bloodwood, but not a bad place."

Deskiral was fidgeting in her seat. "And then what? Are we to live there for the rest of our lives? Hunted by these Fire-people?"

"Not if we get our way," said Tesq.

Eztaral sipped at a measure of wine she had found hidden in the wagon. "We'll have to see who wins this war, won't we?"

"And what becomes of us," muttered Redeye.

Deskiral looked into the darkness of the canopy. "War. I don't see any war."

Texoc spoke up. "I had thought we might see them from the way you described it, Mother."

"What? Who?"

"Demons, Deskiral," Axera answered.

The woman crossed her arms over her belly. "Nonsense."

"Show her, Tarko," ordered Eztaral. "You can't survive what you don't rightly fear."

*Yes, let us show her, Tarko.*



I withdrew my hands from the fire and squeezed them into fists. Where dirt and mud lay on the road, I dragged it to me in streams. From the shadow at my back, the demon emerged out of the earth.

Texoc was staring at me, not Serisi. “I—I’ve never seen a construct spell like that.”

Pel’s eyes had faded back to their chalk white, but he still swayed sluggishly. “It’s not a spell.”

“What are you saying, Pelikai?” asked Texoc.

“That I am no spell, but a demon,” Serisi growled with a voice of grinding earth. She swung closer to them, showing them her smile and its many fangs.

“Three gods, it speaks,” Texoc gasped.

The silence was thick and Texoc and Deskiral’s pause long. All I saw was them leaning slowly away from Serisi’s form.

I did not hold back. “After the sun turned black, Pel kidnapped me into a Shal Gara war-party bound to avenge the burning of Firstwatch. When we barely survived the Sheertown Massacre, I accidentally bonded with a demon warrior after I smashed a vial of nectra in my hand. She has been living in my head since then, melded into my thoughts and body. At first, she was my enemy, but we wouldn’t have killed the demon king without her, and now she fights alongside us as a Scion, lending me her power.”

“Demon... king?” Texoc asked.

Deskiral plugged her ears. “I don’t want to know any more, drown it.”

Texoc pointed to his own hand and neck. “Is that why you have those dark marks, Tarko? And that claw? Why you don’t need nectra?”

“That it is.”

“Why didn’t you show the Matriarch Naxāko that? It? That thing?”

“My name is Serisianathiel of the Voidborn, daughter of Faraganthar and the Last Clan.”

“Because she would have either called it a construct spell and a trick, or thrown Tarko straight in the Untold Waters,” answered Eztaral.

“Some might say Tarko’s an abomination,” murmured Pel.

“And thank you for that,” I said with a tut. I even caught Ralish laughing, and I reached for her hand. Serisi swirled in the gloom behind us. “Almost everybody we have met has either laughed at or been horrified by the truth, even Shal Gara at first. Nobody wants to hear of apocalypse when life is safe and idyllic. Right, Atalawe?”

Atalawe flicked a nutshell into the fire. “It’s a lot to process, isn’t it? Creatures from another world than ours, the kind who’d sooner kill you than spare you a word of reason why? The mind doesn’t like it. And the Fireborn that tricked and blackmailed you, Texoc, they would have the demons ruling the Swathe, and they’d tell you that’s a good thing. Easier to swallow than—”

“What my kind would do with your world. Which is reducing it to cinders in the name of chaos and killing, eating, or enslaving those who survive before they ravage another world,” said Serisi. “I would rather not see that happen.”

“Same,” replied Texoc, a fraction paler than before.

“That’s why you and Deskiral will be staying in Mulchport,” Eztaral interjected.

“Alone?”

“No.” Eztaral looked to Axera.

Mother shook her head. “Tesq and I have decided to stay with you.”

“I’ve had my fill of killing,” Tesq muttered. “I intend to fight in other ways.”

“I’m not having us split up again,” I interjected. “Look what happened last time.”

But Eztaral was adamant. “You’ll have to. Mulchport is of little importance, largely unknown, and big enough to defend if it came to it. Where we’re going, your family will be in even more danger than before.”

I squinted at her. “You make it sound like another tharantos nest.”

Eztaral shoved seeds into her mouth and spoke over the crunching. “Worse.”

Redeye gave his usual cheery response. “Wonderful.”

“What’s in your mind, Eztaral?” Ralish asked.

“We do exactly what Naxāko suggested: we capture a demon,” she answered. “But we don’t take it to Stormbeaten. We take it to Dorla Sel and straight to the Allmother Tzatca. I wager if we convince that solitary old wench to turn against the Fireborn, then Haidak and the Last Clan are doomed.”

Pel began to chuckle to himself as if Eztaral were telling jokes.

“You want to capture a demon?” I asked. Even Misfit seemed to sit upright at that idea.

Eztaral nodded. “That I do.”

Redeye shook his head. “And take it all the way to Dorla Sel. Weeks away?”

“Correct again.”

“And show it to the Allmother?” Atalawe checked. “A notorious recluse?”

“And all the doubt will be squashed. Tzatca will have no choice but to listen to us and recognise the threat the Fireborn and demons pose. She will rally the other bloodwoods on our behalf. Haidak’s mischief will be undone, and the demons never get their claws on the nectra necessary for another doorway.” Eztaral broke a nutshell in her fist. “We have little choice. Whatever we think of the Bloodlaws and nobles, we Scions can’t fight this war alone.”

My mother spoke up. “You never said *that* was your plan, Eztaral.”

“What if the Fireborn get to Tzatca first, like they have Stormbeaten, and poison her mind against us? With the Allmother in Haidak’s claws, he could not only get ahold of Dorla Sel’s vast supply of nectra but also command all the other matriarchs. The Last Clan would spread across the Swathe without challenge.” Even our wrangler wasn’t convinced, and Atalawe was normally intrigued by a mad plan.

“Precisely. And that is why I intend to get there before them.” Eztaral scowled as she punished another shell. “Are you with me, Scions?”

*I agree with this plan*, Serisi told me proudly.

Pel and Atalawe shared a look. Redeye was firmly shaking his head.

“I am,” I growled. “We bring the bloodwoods together as we planned. We do whatever it takes, just as we did in Shal Gara.”

“It sounds like the usual kind of madness you Scions come up with, so I’m coming with you,” said Ralish, making me smile. “I was born to work, and defendin’ the stubborn Swathe is the greatest calling I’ve ever heard of. I insist on bein’ involved.”

Eztaral clapped her hands. “Never had a doubt in my mind. You take the vow, and I’ll make you a Scion, Ralish. Then you can make up your own madness like the rest of us.”

Ralish nodded. “Music to my ears.”

“Good.”

“Wait, why did I have to win a war to get made a Scion?” I asked. I saw Ralish grinning in my peripheries.

“Because you lied to us,” snorted Eztaral.

Atalawe nodded. “Can’t argue there.”

My own mother shrugged. “Solid logic.”

Even Inwar growled at me.

Serisi shrank back into a mere cloud of dust, and I let her fall. *You did lie, Tarko.*

“And here was I thinking this was all in the past.”

“The Scions of the Sixth-Born never forget,” Atalawe reminded me with a chuckle.

I threw up my hands, got to my feet, and after handing Misfit to Tesq, I made for the darkness. The subject of lying stabbed at me, and I wanted to escape. “I’m going to patrol the leafroad and make sure we’re not being followed.”

I saw Deskiral unplug her ears as I left. “Are you done talking?”

With voices and the spitting of flames fading behind me, I stepped far into the gloom. I let the forest’s lights come alive to my eyes. Giant ferns and patterns of moss shone with their own illumination. Moths left trails of glowing dust wherever they lurched through the air. The candescent eyes of small spiders and lizards crept through the void of the deep forest.

*Why do you sulk, Tarko?*

There, painted across the empty black wedge of the leafroad, I saw more of Serisi’s memories. Each came like a bolt, doubling me over. I caught a snatch of carnage spilling down steps. Of Inwar’s bloody fangs. Of Eztaral dragging me back before a spell raged over my head.

“Stop it, I said.”

*It is not me. Our minds perhaps rejoining.*

“Sss,” I breathed between pursed lips. “It looked like Shal Gara all over again.”

*That it was.*

“Tarko?” Ralish had followed me into the shadows. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Headache. Maybe from the battle, I don’t know.” I rubbed my eyes to find her standing with arms crossed.

“There’s somethin’ going on in that little mind of yours, and I don’t mean the demon. I told you: I won’t have any lies. Neither will the others. You broke our hearts once...”

“I haven’t lied to any of you.”

*Hmm, is that true, Tarko?*

The guilt skewered me. I felt the nausea inside me, just as I had felt back in Shal Gara, lying barefaced. Here I was all over again, and I refused to fail another time. “I didn’t know if it was real until recently.”

“How recently?”

“I had my suspicions after Mulchport. The battle with the Fireborn confirmed it.”

“What?”

“That Serisi,” I said, taking a breath. The admission of it aloud was what had driven me to secrecy in the first place. “Can take over my body.”

“*What?*” Ralish recoiled, lip curling.

“Not at will, and only when I’m unconscious. She’s done it twice. Maybe several more, but I only remember two. The first time was when I fell asleep in that alehouse and the second was when I was knocked out during battle. And I have a strong suspicion it won’t be the last time she does it.”

“When were you knocked out?”

“Before I hauled you up.”

Ralish stayed out of reach. I didn’t like the wary look in her eyes. “Keep talkin’.”

“It must be something to do with our bond. She and I switch places. She can move me like it’s her body and I’m the one stuck in it, not the other way around. What’s more, she makes me stronger. Faster. Better with my fists and with a blade.”

“That explains how you fought like that. I had a feeling it wasn’t you.”

*Perhaps you will learn a thing or two, so we do not have to dance with death so often.*

“Shut up, Serisi. Not now,” I snapped.

“This is my time, demon,” Ralish told her sternly. “Can you control it, Tarko?”

“Apparently not.”

“Is this a problem? Is it a danger?”

*Not to you. To the Fireborn, however...*

“I don’t know,” I said.

“You don’t know?”

“That depends on how much you trust Serisi.”

“I do trust her,” Ralish replied after a pause. “I’m just not sure about what the bond with her is doin’ to you. The dark in your veins has grown even further. I can see a difference even since the battle. Now this?”

“It’s superficial, nothing more. No different from the dye on my hands.”

“Let’s hope it is, and not a sign you’re losin’ yourself.”

“I don’t like this one bit, either, but I have to admit that Serisi was the one who won all those gems, which I will be forever grateful we kept at my brother’s house. And that she was the one who brought up the baskets. Who fought Haidak and killed Juraxi.”

“So...” Ralish thought hard while her eyes roved over my face. “She saved us, is what you’re sayin’?”

*That I did.*

“As much as I dislike how much of a failure that makes me sound, yes.”

“Then I suppose I should thank her, shouldn’t I?”

“Don’t ask me. I don’t remember anything.”

“In that case, you don’t remember me rippin’ the Fireborn apart, do you? Is that why you doubt I should be a Scion? Look at me: only three blades touched me. Pel and Eztaral’s work has paid off. I’m better than these Fireborn bastards,” Ralish argued, showing off the bandages on her arms and midriff.

“I don’t doubt you at all, Ralish.”

“Could have fooled me, Tarko.” She tutted. “Don’t you dare think I can’t hold my own.”

“Trust me, it’s not that. I want you here with me, but after what happened to my family, I also want to keep you safe.”

Ralish stepped closer to me, grabbing my collar as if she was going to strangle me. “Good, because you don’t have a choice. You keep forgettin’ the demons took my home, too,” she said. “I have as much right to fight as you, whatever comes of it.”

“Terelta,” said a voice. Eztaral was standing a dozen paces behind us.

“You should tell her,” Ralish whispered. “Before she skins you alive for even thinkin’ about lying. I wonder if that’s why you brought her basket up first.”

“What? She’s the best warrior—”

“It was a joke, Tarko.” Ralish cut me off before she turned away. “I’ll trust you with this. I’ll even keep trustin’ Serisi. But I won’t let her take you from me or turn you into somethin’ I don’t recognise,” she said. “And I won’t sleep next to a demon.”

*Tell her I do not want to share a bed with her either.*

Eztaral patted Ralish on the back as she left as if to taunt me.

“I’ve just received a talking-to, so if you’ve come to give me another, get it over with,” I said.

The eagleborn shrugged. “I’m here to listen, not talk, Tarko. Question is, who’s doing the talking right now?”

“How do you know?” I whispered.

“I’m not sure what I know, except that you called Haidak a worm during the fight, and that’s not something Tarko Terelta usually says. Given this magic that bonds you and the demon, and given I still don’t trust it, I have to ask: are you hiding something from us again, Terelta?”

I sighed, giving her the short version.

Eztaral chewed her lip. “So it wasn’t you who walked into the alehouse at that late hour, was it?”

I shook my head.

“Should I be worried about this?” Eztaral asked.

“I don’t think so. Serisi fought Haidak alongside you. If she hasn’t earned your faith yet, I don’t know what will.”

“Then we shall have to see what else she can do, won’t we?” Eztaral turned her back on me without another word.

“That’s it?” I asked, bewildered.

“You see, Tarko? This is what happens when you don’t lie: magical things can happen, like trust and responsibility. What else do you want me to say? I now have two warriors in one body and one is much more use with a blade than the other,” she said. “But mark my words, the moment this becomes a problem instead of something I should be thanking for saving my neck, we will be having a different conversation. You hear me, Maven Terelta? And you, Serisi?”

*Hard not to.*

“Yes, Eagleborn.”

“Good. We won’t mention this to the others for now, not until we are in the loam again.”

“And are we not going to talk of the Fireborn’s warning, either?” I asked Eztaral before she got out of earshot.

“What warning?” she asked, not meeting my eyes.

“Don’t play games, Eztaral. You must have heard it as well as I did: that there are Fireborn where we least expect. That they’ll tear us apart from the inside. The demon Bathnarok gave us the same warning before we left for Stormbeaten. He told us we would be betrayed by those close to us.”

“Fireborn lies to make us doubt each other. Nothing more.”

I struggled with that. “What if it’s not, Eztaral? There is still the matter of the third Fireborn, the one who stood behind a mask that night Faraganthar almost killed me. What if that’s who Bathnarok is referring to?”

“Did you get hit so hard in the battle that you’ve forgotten you were betrayed by your own brother not so long ago? Surely that was what the demon was warning you about.”

“Texoc wasn’t Fireborn or anywhere near Shal Gara. And why did the Fireborn threaten it again in Naxāko’s hall after my brother’s betrayal?” I shot back. I took a moment to wrestle with my next words. “What if one of the Scions is turning?”

Eztaral whirled on me. “Do you doubt any of us, Tarko? Have you seen any of us acting suspiciously? Do you doubt me?”

Serisi growled inexplicably in my head. *Not her.* Another pain scorched my head. Another memory came back to me: a glimpse of Redeye trailing behind us, his head cowed and his eyes shifting back and forth. I felt Serisi’s doubt flood me.

I winced. “Not you, but—”

“Good, then that is the end of it, correct?”

“Yes, Eagleborn,” I muttered.

“You better be ready to train once we’re clear of Mulchport,” Eztaral said to us. “Both of you.”

While I hung my head, Serisi gnashed her fangs. *If she is speaking the truth, then I want my own sword.*