

# 33

## INTERTWINED

*There is a voice in my head. It promises me death and torture for my trickery and foul magic. Am I falling to madness? Has the battle in Besqular and my narrow escape from that demon cursed me with insanity? Or is it the nectra in my wound? My ribs have not healed as they should have. I am a Sixth-Born, not a sorcer. Why by the Hells did I agree to carrying it for that bastard Lelep? I think I am doomed. Even now this harsh voice speaks to me, demanding its freedom. What is this curse?*

*FROM THE ONLY SURVIVING COPY OF "KĪ RAXA'S MUSINGS"*

*Why are you hesitating?*

"Because it's bloody unnatural, that's why!" I snapped. "We humans learn not to put our hands in fires from a young age, I'll have you know."

*I thought you would be used to being unnatural by now. Especially as everyone has been so eager to remind us of it. Besides, the battle proved you have more demon blood in you than you think.*

Weeks ago I would have been wrinkling my nose at the suggestion, but now I felt the attraction of the power. If Serisi was right about this, and I was becoming impervious to fire, who was I to deny it? The demons and Fireborn would curse my name for it. That was worth a few more dark veins across my neck and chest, surely. I was sure it had nothing to do with my enduring rage at Haidak's audacious and almost deadly attack and a certain sorcer's betrayal.

"Fine."

I forced my right hand closer to the flames of the brazier. I felt the heat in my palms, prickling my flesh. The pain bit me after ten heartbeats.

I hissed, flapping my hand as we humans always did, as if it could shake out the pain.

*Closer, you quivering coward.*

"Let me do it, curse you, demon."

I blew out a sigh and found a calm. I inched forwards until a spear of flame touched my thumb. Again, it seared my skin quicker than anything I could claim as a power.

*Longer, damn you!*

"Yes, yes."

I forgot the demon within me and let our consciousnesses meld. Still in control, I thrust my hand into the flame. Still the pain ensued, and I strode around the hall with my calm immediately forgotten. "Bleeding trees!"

*Give into the flame, Tarko. Embrace it. Trust it.*

“Demon rubbish,” I muttered.

Stubborn as always, I put my hand back in the flame. When the pain came, I was poised to recoil from instinct alone, but I kept still. I fought it with my mind instead, and though I fully expected to see my flesh blistering and smell myself cooking, the fire’s touch became like the brushing of a feather. An intense heat, but no pain. Something that lingered and perpetually leaned on the edge of pain.

Pulling my hand back when it at last became unbearable, I saw no burn on my darkened fingers and felt nothing but a lasting warmth. I exhaled, relieved and more than a little exhilarated.

“What in the Hells...”

*Not from your Hells, Tarko, but from the Void. That was where the fire first started and where the demons first learned to endure it, as you just might, I heard Serisi sigh. All fires are descended from the first spark. And it has been far too long since I have felt its true heat. This is fortuitous.*

The curiosity of trying my left hand proved I was only slightly impervious. My left lasted long enough to taunt me before a flame singed my fingertips. Somewhat disappointed, I tried my right instead, holding it for longer and longer until the heat finally scorched me, reminding me I was still human. By the time my stubbornness and fascination were beginning to wear off, I could count to twenty heartbeats before I had to pull my fingers from the depths of the flames. Embers could sit in the palm of my hand, and all they caused was Serisi’s fiery glow to run through my veins where necra normally burned.

*Our power grows yet again. Another edge is added to the weapon we are becoming, just as I promised you, Tarko of the Swathe.*

A hoarse voice broke my pride.

“What are you doing?”

I swivelled to see Eztaral standing in the doorway. Ralish was a shadow behind her.

“Training,” I replied.

“That’s enough for the time being,” Eztaral said flatly, beckoning for me. “After we’ve waited most of the night, the sage that ravenborn promised is finally here, and they would very much like to have an audience with the great Tarkosi Terelta. Let’s hope this tree is not completely rotten, and they’ve come to their senses on who to hold accountable.”

I lingered long enough for Ralish to thumb my jaw, where new shadow reached across my skin. She pulled the scarf up above my polished Scion armour. Eztaral had warned us that if we dared to take our armour off, even to sleep, then she would do the Fireborn a favour and murder us herself.

Although the attempt on our lives had been an ordeal, I couldn’t ignore the fact it had resulted in new chambers that were far larger and grander. The feasting table was almost double the length of our last, the furniture could have accommodated the Scions and half our ancestors, and I could have built a formidable fort from the number of cushions that infested the room. Instead of the two measly warders that had watched us before, the warders now stood four lines deep at our door. And, most thankfully, the servants came in one at a time and were watched by unblinking eyes.

In the main hall, our visitor waited amongst a ring of highwarders in gleaming golden armour. Plated curtains of it draped the warders from horned helmet to stout boots. Owl-faced masks hid their faces, putting me on edge.

A narrow man stood like a green-clad spoke to their wheel, wearing a headdress of silver lancewing feathers so tall it made the highwarders’ spears look short. A night’s sky of white gems

hung around his neck, suspended from intricate spirals of spiderthread. A sage's silver feather dangled from the jewels. The ornate tattoo of a dagger crossed his left eye and cheek.

*A sorcer sage.*

"Quite right," I breathed as Ralish, Eztaral, and I stood beside a raw-eyed Atalawe.

A plump temach standing amidst the highwarders cleared his throat to introduce the sage. His voice was obnoxiously loud even for a hall as large as ours.

"Sage Alpa the Tenth of the sorcer tribe bids you greetings!" he hollered.

Eztaral played formal with a shallow bow. "And greetings to you, Sage Alpa. I am Eagleborn Eztaral Kraid. We were beginning to think you weren't coming, even though the ravenborn said it would be swift."

I spied the familiar face of the ravenborn in the gang of warders and narrowed my eyes at him.

Sage Alpa parted the highwarders to get a better look at us. His angular nose could have been used for carving wood, and he looked down it at each and every one of us. Me especially.

"The Allmother's bidding takes as long as it takes, Eagleborn Kraid. The Obsidian Forge hasn't seen this kind of violence in many, many seasons. The audacity of it! The shame!" the sage replied most haughtily. "Our Allmother is deeply, deeply concerned. And as overseer of the Forging, so am I."

"As we explained to the others most of the night, we were the ones who were attacked, and by assassins posing as Forge servants, no less," said Atalawe, in a voice that strained to stay polite.

"We defended ourselves the only way we know how," I added.

"With extreme prejudice," said Eztaral. "This was a planned and plotted attack by seasoned warriors and sorcers trying to kill us, Sage. We gave them what they gave us."

"So you say." Sage Alpa held the eagleborn's stare as if it were a challenge. "But none of the captured will speak a word of any such plots and plans to refute this. In the name of fair – and swift – justice, the Allmother is considering banishing everybody that was involved in the violence."

"There's nothin' fair about that!" Ralish blurted. "One of us was almost killed."

"And how many of theirs lie dead? How many Dorla Sel warders?"

I thought there would be no harm in asking, but I was soon proved wrong. "If we could have an audience with the Allmother, we could explain—"

"Impossible! Do not be so ridiculous, Tarkosi Terelta. Nobody sees her until the final round of the Forging. Even if this were a normal day, you would wait weeks to see the Allmother," the sage snapped. "I believe the Allmother is wise as ever. I believe that you are indeed what the other sages and matriarchs say you are: dangerous, underhanded, law-breakers. Even liars and cheats. Perhaps banishing you would be the best for all!"

"You can't do that," I said, fists clenching.

Alpa strode closer to shove his face in mine. "Oh, can't I? Give me one reason why I cannot."

He should have heard the growl of the demon in my head.

"For the good and the survival of the Swathe," was all I said. I'd promised I would do anything to win, and if that meant not tearing this man apart, either verbally or physically, I wouldn't hesitate.

The sage slowly withdrew. I was trying to calm my rising magic when Alpa's indignant scowl broke into a smile. At first I thought he was delighting in the cruelty of his decision, but when he began to laugh and slapped a knee, I found myself lost.

"Hah! Your faces!" Alpa chuckled, drumming a beat on his chest. "All of you look fit to jump on me. Three Gods and their cheeky spirits, can you imagine if I banished you? Hells. The citizens and half the bloodwoods would likely riot if an enigma and inspiration like you were cast into the loam, Tarkosi Terelta. And that goes for the rest of you, Scions of the Sixth-Born. Contenders who gambled their way into the Forging. Contenders that aren't from a bloodwood or a tree city, but a town that nobody has heard of – which is the point, I imagine, when there are people fixing to kill you." Alpa paused to point his fingers at Caraq. "The citizens are fascinated, I tell you. Enraptured."

While Ralish and I caught each other's confused looks, Alpa slapped his hand on a highwarder's shoulder. "Can you imagine if I told the Allmother to cast them out, Loko?"

The warder shook his head and spoke with a tone so unenthusiastic it told me it wasn't the first time the sage had played such games. "I can't, Sage."

"See?" Flourishing his hands, Alpa shooed his warders to the doorway. "Go guard the door."

All of the warders hesitated until Loko spoke up. "Sage, I don't think that's wise—"

"Leave us, I said!"

"As you wish."

The formation tramped into the corridor, wary and suspicious.

Sage Alpa the Tenth slammed the door shut in their faces and sagged onto a nearby couch with a dramatic sigh. Unfortunately, it was the couch that Inwar had chosen for his bed. As the sage sat down, Inwar's head came up with a snarl, fangs bared wide.

"Gods! Until this moment, I thought he was stuffed," Alpa laughed, utterly unfazed by the jāgu's savage grin mere feet from him. The sage slid the crest of feathers from his head and revealed a scalp as bald as Pel's, tattooed with hummingbird feathers instead of battle-scars. A single braid ran down the back of his neck. Though his face looked as if it had been creased more by smiling than by time, I would have guessed his seasons to be around forty.

"That's enough of that shit." Alpa chuckled. "I've given up trying to understand why Tzatca insists on her sages wearing these enormous things. The third-born sage has got neck problems, I tell you."

Confusion still held us all silent. "You're not like most sages we've met," I said.

Alpa clasped his hands together. "Thank you. I take that as a compliment, Tarkosi! And you can all relax. All that blustering was a little test. I wanted to see how you would treat with me in the face of threats and blame. I can always spot lies and an ill nature, you see. A gift from Alpa the First, in fact."

"And have we passed?" asked Ralish. "Do you believe we're innocent?"

"Oh, you're far from innocent in this, I'm sure, but I need to know more if I'm going to tell the Allmother to keep you. Such as who in the Hells would be brave enough to attack you, let alone in the Forge. If this was plotted, like you say, then I wish to know who plotted it. As I said, the prisoners act like their tongues have been cut out, and the warders couldn't find a clue if it stabbed them in the arse."

None of us spoke, each weighing whether to trust this sage. If Redeye had proven anything, it was that trust was a scarcer treasure than we had thought, that even family could turn to the Void.

"I get it," Alpa said with a grin. "You're cautious. If the assassins were in Dorla Sel cloth, then they could be in Dorla Sel armour. Hence why I removed my warders. But I'm guessing you're also wary of Dorla Sel robes, even those of a sage."

"Their influence stretches from root to canopy, bloodwood to bloodwood," said Eztaral.

"The ones that attacked us have a gift for lies and appealing to the weaker-minded," muttered Atalawe.

"My my. I would be insulted, if I thought you were talking about me. But I get the feeling you're talking about the individual that sticks out amongst the prisoners like a blue leaf on a bloodwood. The man in the same armour as you. The man even quieter than the others, if that's possible."

Eztaral answered for Atalawe. "We were betrayed by more than just the servants."

Alpa bobbed his head dramatically as he watched my fists clench. "Dark and gloomy underlying meaning understood," said the sage. "Next question. Explain to me how a lad half my age can cast spells as you do without nectra. Better yet, prove it. Dorla Sel is afire with rumours – pardon the ill-timed choice of words – but I want to see the truth."

"If you insist," I replied. I'd already started focusing my mind on the nearest pile of earth. A large pot with a fern sprouting from it was enough. I showed Alpa the glow of my hand while I summoned an orb of packed soil and let it revolve in front of me.

"Nectra in the veins," was all I said.

Alpa looked intrigued. "How did that happen?"

"Freak accident involving a vial."

*Twice*, said Serisi.

"Twice."

"Nothing to do with the tragic fall of Shal Gara?" asked Alpa.

"It happened before that," I muttered. "In the Sheertown Massacre when Firstwatch was lost."

"And now Azcalan also falls to wildfire. The loss of three bloodwoods in a single season is a disaster that has rocked the Swathe, I tell you," Alpa said, smile vanishing. "Since the sun turned black, travellers from the west have been saying it's the fault of demons, can you believe that? As if dusty old fairytales are coming to life? Before Shal Gara fell, their Sage Saronash sent a message warning of demons. We thought it madness."

"Madness indeed," said Eztaral, keeping silent.

Alpa snorted with laughter. "You Scions have tough bark, I'll give you that. But let's drop the act. This city might have its vices and downfalls, top to bottom, but it's my city. I didn't fight to become sage so I could sit on my arse and look pretty in feathers and gems. If there's something starting wildfires and felling bloodwoods, then I wish to know what it is."

Eztaral cleared her throat, drawing my eye and keeping me silent. I didn't wait for her to give me a nod of agreement. An ally who had the ear of the Allmother could not hurt our cause. I took the chance, but I did not tell him all. Matters of demons were for the Allmother's ears. Haidak, however, deserved all the blame.

"The ones who attacked us last night were called Fireborn. Fanatics who believe in the purifying nature of chaos and worship a fourth god, the Iron Icon. Their leader, Haidak Baran, was once an eagleborn of Shal Gara before he helped bring about its fall."

Alpa clicked his fingers. "I know that name. He is the last sage of Azcalan."

"Or is he?" Eztaral snorted.

"How exactly did he cause Shal Gara's fall?"

"Lies and deception," I said, holding back the true answer. Serisi spoke it anyway.

*Demons.*

"Baran and his Fireborn cult have been travelling across the Swathe, coercing or bullying other bloodwoods to turn to their cause of chaos. Azcalan burned because of him. And he is here now, doing the same thing under the guise of a hero," said Eztaral.

Alpa asked the most important question of all. "Why?"

"Nothing mighty or virtuous, only his own gains and his twisted mind," I grunted. "He believes the Swathe is rotten. Dying. That it should fall to cleansing fire so he can rule over the embers. He needs an enormous amount of nectra to do that, and if he manages to turn the mind of the Allmother, he might just get what he wants: the end of the Swathe. That is why he can't be allowed in her presence."

"Baran might not be entirely wrong about the rotten part," Alpa mused. "But doom and fire and the fall of more bloodwoods? That does not sit well with me. Not at all!"

"Will you warn the Allmother on our behalf, Sage Alpa?" asked Eztaral.

Alpa played morose. "Sadly, I will not. I cannot. Even if we sages were allowed to see her during the Forging, Tzatca hasn't reigned as the Allmother for a hundred and ten seasons by acting on hearsay and rash choices. I have no proof but your word."

"Is the attack not enough? Are three fallen bloodwoods not enough?" Atalawe grunted.

"We have proof," I said. "Proof of the true danger the Swathe is in."

The sage looked around as if it hid somewhere in the room. "And where is it?"

"Safe outside of Dorla Sel," Caraq answered.

"It matters not," Alpa said, demolishing our hope. "I cannot ask the Allmother to break the laws of the Forging. Make sure you win, Tarkosi, then you will have your chance. Have your proof ready."

"I'm planning on it," I muttered. "Let's hope it's not too late."

Alpa smiled at each of us in turn. "I will, however, make sure the Allmother sees fit to keep you. Meanwhile, I will keep a close eye on this Haidak and see if he is what you say. He will not reach the Allmother any sooner than you will. You have my word."

That was better than nothing and certainly finer than banishment and utter failure. Alpa swaggered to the door, clicking his fingers before he reached for the enormous handles.

"Oh, and what would you have me do with the Scion in the cells? Shall I have him banished? Hanged for his treachery?"

"Spare him," said Atalawe, the wrangler's voice a rasp. "Until the Forging is done."

"As you wish," Alpa said. "Now watch this."

Clearing his throat, he banged quickly on the door before yelling at the top of a tremulous voice. "Warders! Warders!"

To a crashing of armour, the highwarders came bursting into the room to find Alpa grinning at them and clapping frenetically. Their rolling eyes told me they were bored of this trick.

"Every time!" Alpa crowed before the door slammed behind him.

"What an odd sage," Eztaral muttered as she moved to lock it.

A scuff of feet came from the other side of the hall. Pel stood in a doorway, leaning heavy on a crutch. There was no nectra in his eyes today. Bandages encircled his torso. A rusty stain had already bled through. "I quite enjoyed him," Pel said in a quiet voice. "But he's useless if he won't speak for us. Or dangerous, if he is another Fireborn ploy. Now they will know we have proof." Pel let that threat hang.

"I'm hoping we have had our fill of traitors," I muttered. Atalawe was glaring at me. I didn't feel guilt, only hatred for Redeye for taking away the wrangler's defiant smile.

"Well, Pelikai," said Eztaral, armour clanking as she found a feathered couch to dent. "You've awoken just in time for the real discussion."

"What else did I miss?" the old man croaked.

"You'll have no doubt noticed our new halls. Redeye remains a liar and a traitor. The Allmother came very close to banishing us for the Fireborn attack." Eztaral wagged her finger in the air as if she'd forgotten something. "Oh yes, and judging by the last battle, Tarko now seems to be immune to fire."

The Scions swivelled to look at me.

"What?" Ralish had an eyebrow raised. "You didn't tell me that."

"With Redeye's betrayal, I didn't have time to, but it's Serisi's newest gift," I admitted, failing to hide the pride. "Fire won't bother me anymore."

"Truly?" Pel asked. "Is that what Redeye was alluding to before?"

"Stop saying his name," Atalawe hissed.

A lantern of tree resin burned nearby. I put my right hand in its flame to prove it, and even though I had to battle more pain than before, I endured it to prove the point. Eztaral clenched a fist as if she'd won a bet.

"Three Gods and the river spirits," Caraq whispered.

"A gift indeed," Pel said while he shuffled closer. He felt across the table until he had found a beaker of water and took a shaky sip as he hobbled to me.

"It's good to see you alive, old man," I said.

"It'll take more than a cowardly blade to stop me, you know," he said, reaching for my arm.

Before I could reply, Pel tossed the beaker over me, dousing me shoulder-to-hand. I sprang backwards to snatch my arm away, almost bringing it back around in an instinctive punch. I restrained myself and clawed at my skin to get rid of the pain.

*The blind worm is lucky I like him*, Serisi murmured through clenched fangs in the darkness of my mind.

"Why did you have to do that?" I asked.

“To prove what I’ve always said,” said Pel. “You may have a new power but you also have a new weakness. Serisi’s powers don’t come for free. They always have a cost.”

“Prices I have paid and will gladly continue to pay. That’s what you don’t understand. Now is not the time for more worry.”

*Thank you, Tarko.*

“You’re welcome,” I whispered to my demon.

“Then we had best all hope and cross our fingers in a prayer to the gods and the ancestors that you don’t come up against a water weaver like Sage Dūnekar before you meet the Allmother, hadn’t we?” Eztaral said, wearing that squinting look. “This is a weakness we can’t reveal. Haidak will see it and use it.”

“Fear not, Eztaral. Okarin said I wouldn’t have to face Dūnekar, remember?”

“Then that fawning, scarlet-eyed shrewbat better deliver on her promises,” Ralish muttered.

Atalawe got up without a word and marched for the door.

“Nobody goes anywhere alone, Atalawe,” Eztaral ordered.

A sharp whistle from the wrangler brought Inwar trotting after her. The echo of the slammed door lingered in the rafters.

“What are we going to do about Redeye?” I asked.

“Leave him to Atalawe, is what. She’ll make him talk, and we’ll find out just how deep his burrow of treachery goes. For now... what’s that word, Pel?”

Pel blinked his clouded eyes. “What word?”

“Begins with a ‘T.’ Curse it, what is it? My mind really isn’t what it used to be.” Eztaral clicked her fingers over and over.

“Training,” I sighed.

Eztaral shoved a finger in my face. “And the winner is Tarkosi Terelta! Your prize? Spending the rest of the day in the training hall. I want you sharper than star-iron for tomorrow’s duel. Ralish, make sure he doesn’t disappear off a balcony again. Caraq, you can keep an eye on both of them.”

“Aye,” grunted the wingmaster, standing tall.

I shook the last traces of pain from my arm as I aimed for the training hall.

“How would you beat Dūnekar, Serisi?” I breathed.

*With a sharp blade while his back was turned.*

Somehow, and for a fleeting moment, that didn’t sound like an entirely terrible idea. I shook the thought from my head and let my magic fill my hands.



# 34

## ZEROCTA

*Kill the mind, and the body will die. Kill hope, and the soul will follow.*

### AN OLD PROVERB OF RASQAX

*I knew a nightmare had me in its jaws when the falling did not jolt me awake as normal. I fell until my arms grew tired of windmilling, and my throat went hoarse from silent screaming.*

*I fell through smoke. Leaves hidden by shadow slapped my hands and legs. Branches and rooftops brushed by my head. The sound of my heart was the beat of war-drums lost in the faded city I plummeted through.*

*The branch came all too quickly, and no amount of struggling would slow me. I braced for the impact that never came. Opening my eyes, I found myself standing tall on a lone rope and plank walkway. Both of its ends were lost in the fog of the dream. Untold heights lay beneath me. Above, the jagged branches were black against a grey and sunless firstglow. A fine ash was falling, yet its flakes were cold and a pure white. It did not smear across my fingers but melted into water.*

*When I looked up, a figure in blood red broke the faceless chasm. I felt the walkway jolt and found a matching figure standing behind me. Red stone masks hid both their faces. Gradually, in stuttered movements, their hands reached to remove the stone. The drumming of my heartbeat became two, jumbled and disjointed. One showed me a visage melted by fire: the face of Juraxi. I whirled to see Haidak reveal his grin, reaching from temple to temple.*

*I found a third figure blocking my path. This Fireborn did not move. They stood level with me, still as mountains.*

*It was I who reached for the mask, and even when I clasped the cold stone of his eyeless, mouthless mask, the figure remained motionless. To the ripping of cloth, the mask came free.*

*Scarlet eyes stared back at me. Each burned with a brooding demonfire. Redeye's face was pale and wan, bloodless as if he was a corpse propped up before me.*

*The mask slipped from my hand. The stone split in two as it met the wood, and with it, the walkway's ropes snapped. To my unheard cries, I tumbled into the mists of the nightmare, leaving Redeye to remain standing in mid-air, watching me fall with his lifeless face.*

\*

My eyelids snapped open to show Ralish lying a good arm's reach from me, head angled on a pillow like my own.

"Are you... you?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Thought so. Serisi puts a wilder look in your eyes. You glow differently. But you were making sounds as if you were her," Ralish said.

“Bad dreams.”

“You dreamwalkin’ again at last?”

I shook my head. I hadn’t dreamed like that since being near Azcalan and the Fireborn window to the Void. “It felt different than it used to. There was no demon king in my mind this time. Something or somebody else.”

“Is it Serisi?”

*That was none of my doing. Nor another demon’s. There is no other royal blood nearby but Bathnarok, and his mind is weak. Perhaps the window. Perhaps the God of Chaos himself reaching through that window.*

I didn’t like the idea of the Iron Icon anywhere near my mind. I shook my head.

“Dream anything useful?”

“If I did dreamwalk, then I saw nothing except what we already know. Redeye is a traitor and one of the Fireborn lords I saw bowing before Faraganthar. I saw him with Haidak and Juraxi, standing together on a bridge. I don’t know if that was real, but I’m ready to believe it.”

“Atalawe’s broken over that bastard and rightly so. To think her own brother has been lyin’ through his teeth since Shal Gara. Must be the noble in his blood,” said Ralish.

I shook my head free of the cloying dreams and sat up. The proof of Redeye’s treachery was undeniable, and yet the sense was utterly lacking. Haidak’s lies were potent, but Redeye had witnessed the chaos of the demons firsthand and still chosen them over us. It was a betrayal of sense, never mind the betrayal to his sworn friends. His Scions. His sister. Strange, who a person will betray to save their own skin.

“We make this vow.” I echoed the Scion’s promise, beginning to simmer with anger again. Anger at Redeye. Anger at the Fireborn. Angry at every doubt and struggle I’d been put through when I had been right all along. “All a lie to him. He stood masked and motionless while I was left for dead in Faraganthar’s demonfire. It feels unbelievable.”

The thunder of drums trembled the leaves of the plants spread about our opulent chamber.

“Forget him just like you would any other Fireborn and concentrate. You’ve a duel to think about, remember? Another rung on the ladder to that Allmother,” Ralish said. She reached for my left hand, reaching past my right. “The sooner this is over and the Fireborn are destroyed, the better for us. I’m looking forward to peace and freedom.”

I watched her get up, her naked skin a reddish gold with the firstglow light behind the shutters.

“Focus, Tarko,” she reminded me.

And focus I did, rising from the bed and flexing my arms. I had a lesson to teach a certain sorcer, and I was not the only one who was eager to begin.

\*

Armour clanking, fist tight around Serisi’s sword, and the Scions making imposing shadows at my back, I stood at the edge of the riser. A silence greeted us amongst the bustling arches. The deafening pounding of the waiting crowds filled the still air.

*Look how they stare at us, Tarko. They either fear us or wish to be us.*

“I’ll take either.”

I gave the onlookers and entourages a smirk before I descended the stairs.

"They say he killed a score of those traitors," came a whisper from a nearby eagleborn.

A highwarder nodded. "I heard he's a treeless savage. A barbarian of the loam. Started a fight with servants over spilled wine, a warder told me."

A warrior in Rasqax armour pushed the warder. "You're wrong. He's a miracle, I tell you. Better than all the rest of you."

"Keep your hands off, river-scum!"

Warders closed in to remind the sorcers of the laws. They seemed twitchy in my presence.

In a deep alcove where wooden and lopsided targets slouched, Envoy Okarin was waiting for us with a smile. She was dressed in a gown of Shal Gara silver today and encircled in red pelts that hung from her shoulders. Though Sage Dūnekar was nowhere to be seen, the Jade Wolf was at Okarin's side. The old sage was carving chunks from one of the targets with sweeping blows of her jade sword. Serisi grumbled appreciatively in my head.

"Scions. I'm glad to see you alive after what they say happened," Okarin said, moving to grasp our hands. Her sable hair hung straight down, making a window of her face. "Another Night of the Copper Knives, I hear. That Haidak would be bold enough to strike you from within the Forge is something I didn't think possible."

"They might have been bold, but they were even less successful than the last time they tried, Envoy Okarin," Eztaral growled. Atalawe stayed on the fringes, a hood over her head and hand on her jāgu's mane.

"I hope they didn't wound you too gravely, Pelikai Maladaq?" asked Okarin.

Pel balanced on a crutch and Eztaral's arm. "Unfortunately for many, I'll live."

The Jade Wolf showered us in splinters before sheathing her sword. "I'm beginning to think neither the Heavens nor the Hells want to see you, Pelikai," she said with a smile.

"Fine with me," said the old sorcer.

"The Forging has not been paused since the Black Storm over a hundred seasons ago, do you know that?" Okarin told us.

"Who am I fighting, Envoy?" I asked. "Do you know?"

Okarin looked around us. "Zerocta Kash got her way. You'll face her today."

Serisi chuckled.

Eztaral was offering Marrowthirst to the Jade Wolf for her to appreciate. "And unless somebody does us a favour and kills Datlak, then Haidak will be one duel closer to the Allmother," said the eagleborn.

"And so will we, by the end of the day," I replied.

"Could I speak to you a moment, Tarko?" Okarin asked, already moving me away from the others.

I looked back to see Ralish sweep an arrow from her quiver and drive it into the face of a faraway target.

Okarin followed my gaze and hummed quietly. "The warriors who fought in the Scorchwars often speak of the bonds formed in war and how unbreakable they become. I see it between you and

the Scions. You always wanted to matter, Tarko, and it looks like you matter very much to the Scions. Especially to her, judging by the way she scowls at me.”

I smiled. “Ralish is no friend of those with noble blood.”

“Like Maven Redeye?”

My head snapped around.

“You forget I have eyes and ears beyond my own. I heard the news of the sorcer’s betrayal. To think Redeye has been lying to your faces since Shal Gara wounds my soul,” Okarin said, making me wonder how she had known that. “Thank the gods you found out now before he could betray you further.”

“Atalawe isn’t so thankful,” I said.

“The man killed demons and Fireborn right alongside you. I would never have suspected him to be Fireborn in a hundred seasons. You Scions are not to blame.”

“He gave me a vial of nectra once,” I said, as the memory forced its way into my head. “It makes no sense now.”

*I do not remember this.*

“But you do not need nectra. Not thanks to your demon.” The envoy tapped the side of my head. The string of beads wrapping her hand brushed my cheek, feeling cold.

“This was different. This was the first nectra I ever dared to drink and the nectra that ended up in my veins. Almost as if Redeye somehow started all of this.”

“But now you know the truth. He is undoubtedly one of the Fireborn and as such, he is our sworn enemy. Speaking of enemies...”

Okarin put a hand on my arm, pointing towards a familiar air carver staring through the crowd at me.

“Zerocta’s saying that you are a coward, and that you caused this whole debacle to get banished on purpose and to avoid fighting her.”

Although it prickled me that Zerocta looked more confident than ever, I held her stare until she broke away. “She’s not that lucky,” I replied.

“She seems to hate you so much. If I didn’t know better, I would have blamed her for the assassins instead of the Fireborn. However, my calculations suggest she’s not that powerful, or that bold, for that matter. She’s the kind that needs a crowd,” said Okarin.

“Do you know for certain she is not Fireborn?”

“I doubt it. My eyes and ears have not seen her and Haidak together. They keep to different circles.”

*It makes her no less our enemy.*

As we reached the edge of the arches, I looked up to see white petals filling the sky, almost blotting out the sun that perched atop one of the Forging’s towers. For a moment, I thought I was still asleep and dreaming of snow.

“Reminds me of Stormbeaten,” mused Okarin. “I saw the bloodwood in the endseason once. Have you ever seen snow, Tarko?”

“Atalawe’s told me about it,” I replied. “But strange you should say that. I had a dream last night that was filled with snow.”

“Curious.” Okarin smiled sidelong until it grew uncomfortable.

“Did you have something to tell me, Envoy?” I asked her.

“Do you hear them, Tarko?”

The closer we came to the arches, the more the pounding of the crowd became discernible.

*They are shouting your name*, Okarin and Serisi said as one.

They were right. By the sound of it, more than half the crowd called out my name. The rest called for violence and magic, and they didn’t care who provided it.

“I wanted to say you got what you wanted,” said Okarin. “You matter, Tarko. Not just to your woman or the Scions, but to Shal Gara. To this crowd who, like you did, believe in becoming something more. They see a third-born’s marks in the Forging and imagine themselves rising above their own stations. You have inspired them. You win here, and you won’t just be beating Haidak and the demons, but you will be beating the Bloodlaws. The whole Swathe will see it as they did in Shal Gara. That is why you matter to me.” Okarin paused to watch my face wander through a variety of emotions. “And why you will be welcome to return to Shal Gara once this war is done. I will lift your exile. You will be free to come home and start a new era for the bloodwoods. You and your Scions.”

*I told you they would regret their mistake one day*, Serisi gloated.

Weeks ago, my bitterness would have crowed at such an offer. Today, I was simply shocked. An earsplitting roar saved me from having to answer.

“Think upon it, Tarko. After you and your demon have shown Zerocta what you’re made of,” Okarin said before she melded into the tangle of entourages.

*She can keep her gifts of forgiveness, but I find this worm’s lack of doubt refreshing*, said Serisi. The demon had a point.

“What did Okarin say to you?” asked Ralish from behind me.

I squeezed her hand. “I’ll tell you later.”

To the incensed excitement of the crowd, the godseer came shuffling into the wooden circles of the Forge. Though he spread his hands wide for silence, he was forced to wait for a ridiculous amount of time until he was finally given it. Like the other sorcers, I stood between the arches, eyes roving the crowd. I stared up to the Allmother’s riser suspended over the Obsidian Forge. I wondered if she saw me and whether a scowl contorted her old face.

“On this the second day of the Forging, sixteen offered sorcers remain to be tested. We shall begin without any further ado!”

The subsequent cheer kept the godseer waiting impatiently. He finally gave in and hollered the first names over the noise.

“Our first bout sees Paragon Tarkosi Terelta of the Scions of the Sixth-Born and Paragon Zerocta Kash of Coriqal in battle!”

The Forge shook with the crowd’s reaction. I felt Ralish drag the cloak off my back. Okarin was forced to step back as she whirled it around. Pel and Eztaral stood at my side, whispering all kinds of instruction and encouragement I didn’t need. I seized Ralish and pressed my lips against hers.

“Remember not to lose yourself out there, Tarko,” she whispered.

My eyes found Zerocta once more. With a cackle, she shoved on a winged helmet decorated with shimmering fish scales. I had expected to feel trepidatious again, but I felt nothing but my anger.

I strained to begin. I couldn't fight Redeye, I couldn't fight Haidak or Datlak, but I could fight Zerocta. Serisi's power surged through me.

"Destroy her," Atalawe whispered as she clamped a hand around the back of my neck and pushed me onwards.

With the thunder of the onlookers shaking the sand beneath my feet, I strode into the Forge and the timid daylight. Zerocta matched me step for step a spear's reach away. Her glare burned between the slits of her visor. I could see the eagerness in her quick strides. Her tightly coiled about her neck. Her white-dyed hands were bare, and itching for her chosen weapons: an ironpith club tipped with sharp fish-teeth and a net coiled at her side.

I patted Serisi's silver sword and the sling at my hips. The latter was already loaded and ready to swing, no matter how little weapons of range were appreciated in the Forge.

Zerocta raised her arms for the crowd. The roar stayed constant. I did the same, and the Forging erupted. I saw the blinks of hatred behind Zerocta's visor. As she flourished her club once more, I beckoned to her mockingly. She shook her head as she plucked a nectra vial from her belt.

As we waited for the gong, I let the Obsidian Forge fade. I didn't see Ralish and the other Scions in my periphery. I didn't feel the raucous voices washing over me. All I focused on was Zerocta and proving her terribly, mortally wrong. My demon uttered a low and appreciative growl at the smell of blood in the sand.

*We are unbeatable. Unkillable. The greatest weapon this Forge has ever seen. We cannot lose,* Serisi told me.

I didn't have time to ponder whether that was a warning or a promise before the crash of the gong split the air.

Zerocta had timed her nectra perfectly so that her eyes shone blue at the same moment as the gong's permission. The Coriqal sorcer came streaming towards me with her bone-white hands pulling at the heavens.

My fort spell was rising from the ground when Zerocta's magic collided with me. I was ashamed to find myself knocked to my knees by a vicious gale. My wall of earth had counted for almost nothing. The breath was pounded from my chest.

*By the Void. And here was I expecting her to play weak from the outset.*

I heard the surprised cry of the multitudes before I redoubled my efforts. If Zerocta was bringing rage, so would I.

With a yell, I raised intricate tendrils from the earth and hammered Zerocta from all sides. She deflected each with blade and wall spells that made me feel I was attacking a boulder with nothing but dirt.

*Keep at it, Tarko!*

Despite the demon's encouragement, Zerocta began to fight me on two fronts, harassing me with a surge spell from behind while I fought her in front of me. Yet I still had tricks to call on. While she concentrated, I slid earth beneath her boots and lifted her into the air. Before she could cut the magic from beneath her, I threw her onto her back.

The wind died as I strode back and forth, waiting for her to get up and try again. Arrogantly dangerous as it was, I wasn't fighting time. Only Zerocta.

Even in her heavy armour, the sorcer bounded upright and began to charge. I reached for Serisi's sword, but before I could pull it free, an invisible hand seized me by the leg and dragged me into the air. It was brief but effective. I found myself crashing onto my face.

*This is embarrassing. Give me control, and I will show her the price of testing us.*

“No!” I yelled, feeling sand between my teeth as I battled upright.

Zerocta had closed the distance between us. “You loam-eating bastard!” she yelled as she brought a sharpened blade of air down on my head. I jumped back to let it crash in the dust. The net was freed from her belt and spiralled towards me.

*Move!*

The net brushed my leg as I rolled. Zerocta had not expected that and came too close. Whipping the sling from my belt, I smashed the left wing of her helmet as I bounded away.

Zerocta paused to straighten, click her neck back and forth, and drag her cracked helmet from her head. The noble colour of her eyes was fiery. The twin tails of her hair swished in the breeze spinning around her as they unravelled from her neck.

“You have no place here, Tarkosi. I’ve learned all I need to know about you. You’re a pretender. A fraud. An accident!”

“You haven’t learned everything yet.”

Zerocta’s spear spell came at me viciously, glancing from my armoured side. Another stabbed at my foot as she advanced yet again.

*Unleash me*, Serisi ordered, and I obliged willingly. The demon’s construct exploded around me, jaws and claws wide, much to the frenzy of the crowds. Zerocta dodged the demon’s first swipe, landing a punch of air that doubled me over. To my confusion, she whipped up her own construct, visible only in the stolen dust of my magic swirling around it. The gaping maw of an enormous and vile fish took shape and surged for Serisi’s form. To the roar of dirt, she collapsed behind me.

I caught Zerocta’s gambit too late. She had used the distraction to bring the fight close. Her toothed club hammered into my armour, punching holes before I could twist away.

“That was for Mulchport!” Zerocta laughed. “And I’m only getting started.”

I slammed the back of my glowing hand into her face and spun away to give myself space. I dragged Serisi’s form from the air construct and wrapped her around Zerocta. I felt the demon trying desperately to crush her, but the sorcer’s air magic was as stubborn as I was. She forced Serisi’s arms apart long enough to scatter all my spells with a simple, yet relentless, surge of air.

Once more, I felt the wind seize my limbs and try to pull me apart, I clad myself with dirt to keep Zerocta’s magic prying at something other than me. The rage in me bubbled like boiling sap. I saw the sorcer’s smile through the rushing stream of air and dirt.

“I’m doing this wrong!” I hissed to my demon.

*What?*

“There are orders of magic for a reason. I need to be fighting air with air, not earth. I’m a carver as well as a reaver, gods curse it!” I yelled.

If Serisi had a complaint, I didn’t hear it. I let the calm of my earth magic give way to the more unbridled air magic. It suited the pounding of my heart much more.

As I took a breath, so did the air around me. I saw the twitch in Zerocta’s face as she saw the dirt whisked away from her spells, no longer held by mine. I seized the air instead and brought it crashing down on her.

The pinched air between our efforts caused a thunderclap that sent Zerocta tumbling across sand and knocked half the onlookers on the bottom row of the Forge onto their arses. It dulled their cheers for barely a moment. They surged upright, joining the rest of the crowds in howls of

celebration. I found myself smiling. The sorcer sat up to wipe the blood from her lip and the surprise from her face. She was not alone. I caught sight of Haidak in his usual perch high amongst the nobles, and thought I spied the shock on his face.

“That’s right!” I yelled triumphantly.

The dirt was stripped from Serisi’s construct as she became a creature of air. Her form was barely visible, but she advanced on Zerocta with swinging claws.

Zerocta set shields all around herself, fending off Serisi’s blows until she chose a moment to strike back. She did so with tendrils so fine and deadly I hadn’t considered them possible. One scored a bloody cut across my cheek before I could reel away.

The sorcer’s club hissed past my face as our duel came close again. I countered with a hack of with the silver sword, catching a lucky strike on her ribs. The armour repelled me, but not before I saw the pain in her glare.

*This is how we must win. She is weak without magic. Let me have control.*

“This a forge for sorcers, not brute strength. Let Haidak and the other traitors see how powerful I’ve become and the mistake they’ve made.”

Zerocta thought I spoke to her. “If you seek to taunt me, you make a poor go of it. Coward!” she hollered as her spells regrouped. “It’s time you went back to the loam where you belong! You don’t belong amongst us real sorcers.”

The crowd seemed to enjoy the banter. Hands pounded the railings.

Instead of lashing my opponent with words, I let my magic speak. I caught a lucky break in Zerocta’s maelstrom of tendrils and landed a hefty blow that smashed the scales from her armoured shoulder. Zerocta reeled.

“And yet you’re still not good enough to beat me,” I yelled.

*Satisfying.*

“Nectra-less freak!”

Zerocta gurned with the strain of her rageful efforts. Back and forth across the Forge’s sand, we tested each other. For every blade spell I thrust, a surge spell hammered me back. For every spear of air I deflected, another came seeking to pierce my armour. Every movement I made was matched. Every attack returned. Zerocta and I, despite the fury the realisation filled me with, were matched.

The hurricane from our fight drove the sand from beneath our feet and bared the bones of the Forging’s floor. A sandstorm harassed the crowds and those squeezed into the arches.

With one hand, I bent the air to my will. In my other, streams of sand to add crushing weight to the blades of wind. Still Zerocta resisted me.

Serisi’s worlds rumbled within me. *It is time to let me fight, too, Tarko. Together, remember?*

The demon was right. The truth was simple: to deny half of me was to fight with one hand tied behind my back. Never mind the fact I was beginning to accept anything that would show Zerocta what a nectra-less freak could do. I shouted wordless nonsense to the roar of the magic as I gave up my pride.

*I will need a diversion to get us closer.*

I sought to give it to her. I focused on deflecting Zerocta’s onslaught, forcing her sideways as she desperately tried to crush me. I took a gamble, letting up my shields momentarily to make her over-reach. I bounded aside as the floor of the Forge fractured. While I had her reeling from the



rebound of the magic, I used wind and sand to trap Zerocta's feet. She was already fighting free, but it gave me just enough time to close the gap.

With gritted teeth, I gave into the demon pressing eagerly against the backs of my eyes. The nectra glowing in the veins of my hand faded from bright blue to hot magma. Darkness rushed past me as though I fell into a chasm.

\*

Tarko had given her space but precious little of it. Serisi pushed his scrawny legs to painful lengths to close the distance and reach the recovering maggot of a sorcer. She hated this specimen even more than Tarko did. This was her enemy, not his, and it was time for Zerocta to suffer the consequences of her choices.

The sword was already raised in Serisi's hand. A cry streamed from her throat. She felt the Forge inhale. Felt every eye watching her strike. Her wild grin stretched Tarko's cheeks.

Zerocta was fast for a worm. Her club aimed at knocking away the sword, but Serisi had been waiting for such a move. The tip of the sword scraped the inside of Zerocta's armoured forearm where the armour was thinner. The baying of the crowd soared as blood coloured the earth between them.

Before Serisi could strike, an invisible hand knocked aside her foot. Another thumped her in the face as she fell to one knee. Wind gusted around her, squeezing.

"Foul worm tricks!" Serisi bellowed as Zerocta swung her club. Serisi ducked to seize the handle of the sorcer's club and wrenched her sideways. Serisi used the momentum to spring upright. Silver clattered against ironpith as they duelled, shards of teeth and splinters spraying in all directions.

Serisi weaved a silver thread with the sword, pressing Zerocta so hard she had no time to cast her bothersome spells.

"Ready, Tarko?" Serisi snarled.

The expression on Zerocta's face as she looked deep into Serisi's eyes was one of confusion, swiftly chased by dreaded realisation.

*Ready for wh—*

Serisi lunged with her foot, delivering a rib-crushing kick to Zerocta. The sorcer fell to her arse with a winded gasp.

\*

Serisi threw me back into my body so quickly I almost tumbled with Zerocta. My right hand flared with the power of nectra as I dragged air and earth to crush her into the ground. She fought bravely enough, managing to get to her knees and build a shield spell that began to force me back. I managed to batter her with half a dozen hammer-shaped tendril spells before I felt Serisi pawing at my mind.

"Yield!" I yelled at Zerocta.

"Never! Not to an aberration like you!"

It was the answer I had hoped for. With a gloating laugh, I let the demon in once more.

\*

The demon waded in, carving at Zerocta's shields as if they were made of iron and not air. The sorcer was denying the weakness setting in. Serisi could smell the nectra leaking from her wounds and pores. She could see her reaching for another vial and sought to stop her. Swinging the sword beneath her and rolling with the force, she twisted through the air to bring the blade down on her spells.

The shock broke the magic in half. Zerocta caught Serisi a glancing blow on her arm with her club, but the demon drank in the pain. Zerocta fought madly to keep her at bay, but many across the centuries had already tried, and all had failed.

Serisi sliced scale after scale from Zerocta's armour until she cleaved the club in two. Even then, Zerocta was so intent on revenge, she tried to stab Serisi with the remnants. Stepping back on one foot, Serisi let the splinters waft past her nose and stopped the sorcer dead with a fist to the nose. The sword followed her knuckles and – to a shocked cry from the crowds – severed Zerocta's arm at the wrist. Blood spewed as the ownerless hand fell to the earth.

The shock was evident in the drained colour of Zerocta's face. It took her a moment to realise the bloody stump was hers. The pain came soon after, contorting her lips into a wordless screech.

Serisi receded into Tarko's mind, but not all the way. She perched on the edge, waiting for Zerocta to act. Screams came from the arches and the crowd for her to yield. To give in.

In the space of a heartbeat, with nothing but a hateful glance at Tarko's grin, the sorcer made her decision.

\*

As Zerocta reached for a remaining for a vial of nectra, I found myself not in the chasm watching from behind my eyes, but perfectly entwined with Serisi. A demon's rage filled my body. Both of us surged towards her with sword outstretched and felt the impact as we drove Zerocta into the earth. Cries of, "Finish her!" and, "Kill!" filled our ears. Both of us pressed the silver point to her cheek, slicing skin. Both of us seized her throat and squeezed until cartilage crunched. Zerocta's eyes bulged, turning at last from defiance to mortal horror. All I wanted to do was keep pressing. Keep squeezing. A demon's fire turned my vision crimson red.

"TARKO!" came a solitary cry, barely heard above the maelstrom of noise. I glanced to the arches through my bloodlust and saw Ralish standing on the windswept sand. Her eyes were wide and not meeting mine.

I looked down. At the end of my fingers, dirt clung to my hands in the shape of demon claws. Each of them drew blood from Zerocta's neck.

*Let us kill her, Tarko. Put an end to this presumptuous weakling and give your people what they want. Give in to the fire.*

"What are you?" Zerocta gasped at me.

I shoved her to the sand one last time before withdrawing my blade. The dirt fell from my hands as I stood. Serisi bubbled beneath my skin, as did our urge to finish her for good and punish her for all the rage in my heart. I struggled for control.

The crowd assumed my victory, and their noise put a ringing in my ears. Even those who had cheered for my death now chanted my name.

"Tarko! Tarko! Tarko!"

A hush dented the crowds as Zerocta, blood-smirched and pale, found her feet. She pointed a lone finger at me. The old godseer and highwarders marching towards us stopped dead.

“You’re more than a freak. You’re an abomination, Tarkosi Terelta! I see it in your eyes. Let it be known! Let them all look at you! We can see it in your skin! You aren’t even human, you are possessed by a spirit or an ev—”

The silver sword silently whipped through the air. Skin and bone parted before the blade. When it emerged from the other side of Zerocta’s neck with a fountain of scarlet, the sorcer’s head remained perched atop her severed neck just long enough for me to see the hatred in her eyes. A single one of her braids tumbled to the sand.

With a thud, Zerocta’s head met the earth. Her body followed it seconds later.

The hush continued for a moment until I slammed the sword into the bloodied sand, feeling it bite wood beneath. I put my back to the roaring adulation of the crowds and marched away.

The Scions welcomed me like an unexpected ghost. None of them spoke except Eztaral.

“Cold-blooded, Tarko. Or should I say Serisi?”

I felt no remorse. My battle-rage refused to die, and I spoke my mind. “I did what was necessary to win, just as I said I would.” I glanced briefly to Ralish as I let loose my words. “Zerocta stood between us and the Allmother, and she got what she deserved. So will anyone else who gets in our way from now on.”

“Our way? Or yours and that demon’s?” Ralish asked of me.

I refused to answer. I left them wondering as I walked away, taking in every shocked look and whisper, every clap to the back and cheer. I had won, and that was all that mattered. Before I disappeared deeper into the Forge, I caught the narrowed eyes of Okarin and the subtlest of nods she gave me.

*A fine fight*, said Serisi.

# 35

## SCOURGE

*Nectra is deemed rare. Precious. In truth, it is not rare, but flows by the torrent through most bloodwoods of age. The matriarchs and sages would not tell you, but barrels upon barrels of nectra can be harvested from a healthy core in a day. Enough to drown most sorcers, never mind fuel their magic.*

“THE CONFESSIONS OF A SHAMED GODSEER,” AUTHOR ANONYMOUS

The sand took on a glitter at night. Amidst the furrows of the workers’ rakes, the white of forgotten bone and shards of teeth peppered the sand. The blood remained like ownerless shadows. Not all Zerocta’s, mind. The Forge had seen plenty of blood that day. I wondered if the crowds that had stood in the now empty levels were at all sated.

*It is much simpler here, do you not think, Tarko?*

“In Dorla Sel?” I snorted. I had thought our life complicated before. This bloodwood had shown me different.

*On a field of battle, fool. There is no treachery shoved upon us by others here. No scheming and plotting and treachery. No doubting and fretting. No gloom-born creatures poised in the shadows. A place to know your true self. All is simpler for us here. To kill or be killed. We were made for it.*

My mind’s eye showed me the head of Zerocta lying in the sand and Ralish’s eyes narrowed in doubt. “My true self seems to worry the others,” I whispered. “I can tell.”

*I am tired of their worry and doubt. We are one at last. We are winning.*

“And yet they don’t look at me as a hero anymore. Maybe that Rasqax sorcer had a point: I am less a miracle and more a monster.”

*What is this talk? Monsters can win wars just as well as heroes. Trust in me. My kin have been winning them for eons. You merely did what we promised to do: whatever is necessary to win. We are the weapon they wanted, and so the Scions should rejoice as we do. As this crowd did today.*

“Rejoice” was a strong word. Killing Zerocta was a victory that brought us much closer to the Allmother and finishing this, but it had not sated my anger. She was nothing but a leafroad bandit standing in my way compared to Haidak and the Last Clan. They had yet to face their justice, and I was becoming more impatient by the hour to serve it to them. I flexed my right hand, staring at how the coarse ridges of the scars had spread down my fingers. It had not felt the same since the duel. My nails felt rougher.

A worker raked the sand nearby. Another preceded him, tamping the sand flat. I saw them trying their hardest not to look at me, but their furtive and repeated glances were highly obvious.

*Fans, as you call them.*

I suspected something else and watched them closely while they began to bicker between each other. The bickering flared into a hushed argument and finally a shove that culminated in the other throwing down the rake, ruining the perfect furrows in the sand.

“Then I’ll do it. Skittish toad,” he hissed to the older worker before sheepishly coming forwards. I clenched, wary, as he approached.

“That’s close enough,” I warned.

“Sorry to intrude, Paragon Terelta.” The man looked a strange mixture of elated and terrified.

*The man holds himself like a navik before a king.*

“Forgive my friend. He’s far too shy,” he said. “I was ’oping you might bless me and my family.”

“Bless you?” I had been cheered and clapped for in Shal Gara, but never asked to bless anything. “I—”

“You’ve been blessed by the gods. An ’umble worker just like me turned greatest sorcer in the Swathe. You’ve given us ’ope, Paragon, and even just a wish of blessing from somebody so smiled upon by the Three, then per’aps they will smile on me too. They’re always watching.” The man poked a finger from the fists he tightly clutched to his chest and pointed at the canopy shining above us. A rare star or two showed its face between the bloodwood’s leaves.

I wasn’t sure if he meant the red-eyed nobles above or the gods beyond, but I nodded nonetheless and wondered how in the Hells I was supposed to bless somebody.

*This is more like it than the laughter we have suffered.*

Before I could decide on an answer, the worker took a step towards me, hands outstretched.

With demon instinct, I seized his wrists and gripped. The shock was visible in the worker’s face. His eyes were fixed on the char-coloured skin of my hand and the sharp nails digging into his skin. The other looked fit to flee at my stare of daggers. I watched every shadow in the Forge.

“Who are you? Whom do you serve?” I demanded.

“I—Overseer Begesh!”

“Who?”

*I do not think these are Fireborn, Tarko.*

“Forgive me! I only meant to clasp your ’and, Paragon,” the worker gasped.

With one arm, I dragged the man upright and forced a smile. I extended my left hand, and he hung on to it as if he were falling.

“Blessings to you and your family,” I muttered.

“Oh, thank you, thank you!” he said, acting as if I’d just placed a thousand gems in his palm.

I looked to the older worker, who put one hand in a satchel that hung at his side. Again, I stood ready, but all he pulled forth was one of the dolls carved in my likeness.

“They say you’re a miracle. They say you’re here to save us from the Bloodlaws,” he whispered in a voice shakier than a leaf in a storm. The other worker hauled him away.

“Enough of that now. We don’t want to bother the good sorcer any further, do we? We stand with you, Tarko. Don’t let them take what’s rightfully yours away from you. You can do it. You can be champion, I knows it.”

To the shouts of their overseers, the two workers got back to their raking and left me in the silent stare of the furtive stars.

*Champion, they call us. They love us, Tarko,* Serisi told me with what sounded like an enormous grin. I felt the pride. *Even if the Allmother does not believe us, perhaps her people will.*

“It’s about time,” I said as I watched lancewings spiral through Dorla Sel’s branches.

Movement caught my eye of another figure roving the sand at the far end of the Forge. They were masked and hooded, but I had no clue who it was. I imagined Datlak, Dūnekar, or any other sorcer brave enough to face me.

I turned my head to the arches and wandered past their darkness. A handful of sorcers were practising their craft against beleaguered mannequins. A few turned their head in my direction; the rest pretended to ignore me. I climbed the stairs to the hall's upper reaches and found a familiar face staring out over the battlefield.

"More admirers?" Pel asked as I came closer. There was little shine in his eyes that night. I could see him turning his head to catch the sounds of the tree. In his gnarled hands, a carving knife was slowly giving a chunk of wood a face. At the sorcer's side, Inwar sat on his haunches, his bushy tail swishing back and forth.

*The blind sorcer does not trust us.*

"You following me, Pel? Did Eztaral send you to watch me?"

"No, I needed some healing air. Atalawe's salves can only work so much magic."

I stared at the bandage across his chest. "Lies. Like I told the eagleborn, I don't need to be watched, despite what you all may think of me."

"Truth," insisted Pel. "It's not about watching you, but keeping you safe. Eztaral asked Ralish to follow you, but she declined."

I drummed my fingers on the cold obsidian of the wall. I hadn't forgotten the look on her face. The same one she had given me twice before.

"I can take care of myself," I said, making Inwar yowl at me. I flicked his ear, and the brute thumped his big head against my ribs.

Pel waited for an angry cloud of squawking parrots to pass overhead. "Infectious, isn't it? The Forging. Not for those watching, of course. I mean the admiration. The chanting of your name. The way they look at you with a mix of awe and fear. I almost miss it. I never executed an unarmed opponent mid-sentence, however."

I sighed. "If you're going to give me another lecture about control or Serisi's gifts—"

"It would fall on deaf ears. I am merely reminiscing, Tarko. As we used to do in Shal Gara."

I watched workers poking at each other with rakes in a whispered argument. "Who beat you?" I asked.

"Limino the Wavetamer of Stormbeaten, and he was one terrifying water weaver, let me tell you. Dead now, sadly. He met his end in the Scorchwars, the day Firstwatch almost fell to the marauder warlords."

"You never did tell me the story of why they call you the Scourge of the Scorchroad," I said, wanting distraction.

"Is that a question, lad?"

"If you can't remember or the memories have faded, old man..."

"That day is carved into my mind, Tarko, make no mistake." Pel bit his blue lips. "A mist came before firstglow, obscuring the approach of the warlords. We expected it to come, but Eztaral and the Jade Wolf's lancewing squadrons that were promised were waylaid by a storm, leaving only a thousand of us to protect Firstwatch, gods rest her. We were battered and worn from weeks of a failed thrust into the Scorch and all that had survived the Scorchfolk's savagery. Reinforcements weren't coming. By the time our air carvers and weavers could shove the fog away, we had already been pincered. Marauders spread north and south up the Scorchroad."

“The matriarch had been poisoned days before the battle. She lay in a long sleep, and as the only paragon left in the whole tree, it was up to me to lead the bloodwood. My idea? Traps, and plenty of them. Leafleather and thin bark stretched over trenches floored with obsidian shards and ironpith spikes. Deadfalls hanging from the forest’s branches. Burning walls. Deep ditches right beneath the slingers and archers. Funnels to lead them into killing fields at Firstwatch’s roots for our sorcers. Drowning pools, mud-patches, all manner of tools of murder.”

*Most excellent*, said Serisi, rumbling with approval.

“Thirty thousand came to kill us, a combined horde of Scorchfolk brought together by three unified warlords. They brought contraptions of wood and stone and great machines made to hurl stone blocks. The mightiest warlord, Gergex, brought monsters from the Scorch to the fight. Beasts on four legs with horned faces. Onix, troll-like creatures of raw, sunbaked flesh that were halfway as tall as a demon and just as fierce.”

*Unlikely.*

“We knew we had to bide our time until the lancewings could come. It was madness. Boulders and slingshots filled the air. Scorchfolk screamed for hours as wave after wave fell to our trickery. Arrows and nectra began to run thin. Here and there some intrepid bastard would make it through and weaken our positions. Two of Firstwatch’s watchtowers were knocked from their branches. Wildfires sparked where the Scorchfolk sought to burn their way through. And then Gergex ordered in his onix.” Pel paused. “Now, Scorchfolk can’t climb, but onix can. I’ll never forget Limino’s howling as they ripped him limb from limb and cast his pieces from the bloodwood. Atalawe and Redeye would have both fallen to one had your father, Teyak, not ripped the air from the monster’s lungs and choked it.”

*You can do that?* Serisi asked.

I made a silent promise to find out. It felt odd to be walking in my father’s footsteps when I had spent so long avoiding them.

“With their charging beasts and a rally from the marauders, it became a massacre. Half of us were slaughtered. Gergex and the warlords managed to drive those that survived up into Firstwatch’s branches. Their boulders pummelled us while ladders and ropes began to reach upwards. We looked to be doomed, and so I snapped shut one last trap. While the others desperately held the Scorchfolk off with tooth and nail, I took the remaining thirty sorcers along Firstwatch’s westernmost branch and fought our way behind the marauders that had amassed beneath the bloodwood. We made our way right to where their warlords stood: far from the carnage and grinned with preemptive victory. We broke their machines into kindling and I drowned the warlords in a flood spell before the marauders noticed. We squeezed their thousands into a crowd so thick none could move, let alone fight. Just in time for the lancewings to finally arrive.

“A bloodbath ensued. Those that fled were the only ones that survived. Even those who surrendered, we cut down. The Swathe never forgave the Scorch for that day, and nor did the Scorch forgive us. I’m not sure if they’re wrong to, considering the way we punished them, but Shal Gara saw fit to call me the Scourge of the Scorchroad for what I did that day and in days after.” Pel ran his hand along his bald, scarred head, feeling the ridges of old wounds. “There have been far too many scars between then and now.”

“Sounds as if you did what was necessary. Whatever it took.”

Pel frowned. “That was not the point of my story, Tarko.”

I shook my head. “I can’t believe I spent all those seasons thinking you were nothing but an addled beggar.”

“I was that, too,” chuckled Pel, before wincing at his wound. “But I know how you feel when they call you hero. How easy it becomes to dismiss the dirt and blood that earned the title when the crowds roar your name, as I did in the seasons after I was named Scourge, doing whatever I could to stay a hero. If I have anything to say, it would be there is killing for good, and then there is being a hero. A true hero does what is right, not whatever it takes. That way lies madness.”

“Reminiscing, are we? Gods! This is a lecture after all.” I tutted. “Is that why the others avoid me? Because I did wrong and lost myself? Then tell my why plenty of people cheered for Zeroceta’s death, Pel. Monstrous or not, they believe in me. I don’t care about being a hero. I care about winning and doing what we came here to do. Maybe instead of you worrying about me, I should be worried that you’ve all forgotten this is a battlefield. Kill or be killed. Simple.”

Pel didn’t get a chance to respond. I began to walk away, hands in my cloak pockets. “I have better conversations to have,” I muttered as I headed for the risers. Inwar trotted after me as if he also had orders from Eztaral.

“Tarko. You know Eztaral’s forbidden anyone but Atalawe from seeing him, remember?”

“I know,” was all I said.

To the clank of the skyriser, I proceeded up the trunk, stopping only once on a level that glowed bright blue with nectra. The riser stopped with a jolt, and its vine-crafted doors opened for a ravenborn with a shield and sword. I don’t know why I left the riser, but with Inwar at my side, I brushed by the ravenborn with a mumbled apology and headed towards the shining glow emanating from the deep core of the bloodwood.

I got nowhere near it. I made it one corner and two-score steps before I met the wall of warders, close-knit with their spears poking from their shields towards me. A dozen more ranks waited at their backs, equally as wary. Far behind them, filling a vast hall lit solely by an intense sapphire glow, were walls of shelves holding great vats and barrels of nectra, where godseers filled vials from sacred taps. Thousands of vials hung from ropes or filled crates. The true core lay hundreds of feet beyond, and yet the shine was so bright, I had to shield my eyes. The hundreds of warders arranged around the hall at various entrances did nothing to dampen the glow.

“Off limits to all but Dorla Sel warders picked personally by Sage Alpa!” yapped another ravenborn who barely reached my shoulders. While keeping one eye on the intimidating jāgu at my side, she leaned closer and lowered her voice. “Even for you, Paragon Terelta. All the best for tomorrow, might I add.”

I stared at her with the same suspicion in my heart, but she winked.

“You better do well; I have six hundred gems on you.”

“You needn’t worry,” I murmured.

“Who are you up against?”

“If I get what I want, then Datlak Baran of Azcalan.”

The ravenborn pulled a concerned face. “Then I hope the gods smile on you.”

Politely yet firmly, I was driven back to a riser. The next platform that rattled past was headed down to the bowels of the Forge. I spared a moment, my foot hovering half-in, half-out of the riser’s rails.

The grizzled warder manning the ropes tried his best to hide his sigh. He looked tired of sorcers. I made my decision. Eztaral’s orders needed to be broken.



Stepping aboard the riser, Inwar and I made our way to the depths of the Forge, where wood-carved walkways spiralled across its underside. The ravenborn watched me go with a furrowed and confused look. I was gifted views of Dorla Sel's trunk reaching half a mile down into the gloom and loam. The leafroads that speared the bloodwood from every side glittered. Their lights reached far into the forest, obscuring the humongous roots that kept Dorla Sel upright. Lancewings raced by beneath us in shining formations.

*Glorious*, said my demon.

It was, and I had to drag myself away to more important things. More warders stood at every intersection, and with their grunts and nods, I found the prison that hung at the centre and very bottom of the Forge. Unlike its nectra, its prisoners were not so off limits, as if Sage Alpa wanted the law-breakers and traitors seen by all. Some of the cages further below me and closer to a leafroad were decorated with rotten and smashed ūlana fruit.

To the thud of my boots and padding of Inwar's paws, I toured the hollows that were drilled into the wood. They were similar to Shal Gara's Burrows, but with more fresh air, light, and warders standing between every other cell. And just like my fallen bloodwood, the bark and wood regrew to reclaim the hollows and swallow their inhabitants. Most of these had weeks before they were crushed. Some older prisoners with the marks of warriors pawed at their narrow windows made of obsidian bars.

I soon recognised the false servants and Fireborn scum that had almost killed Pel. They had sneers for me, and I stared at each and every one of them with Serisi's fire in my eyes. A precious few quailed, especially when the jāgu tested their bars with his fangs. I ignored the rest in my search for the one prisoner I wanted to see.

Redeye lingered in the shadows of his hollow, arms crossed and legs folded. He barely looked up at my shadow at the stout bars. He still wore his Scion leafleather, and I found my lip curling.

*He is fortunate these bars are in our way.*

"Why?" I spoke up, wary of the ears of the warders nearby. Never mind those of the prisoners. Several pressed themselves to the bars to snicker at me.

"Why, Redeye? Were you a Fireborn since the beginning? Before Firstwatch?"

Redeye chose to keep his silence, spitting some chewed morsel to the side instead. Inwar sat on his haunches to watch the traitor. I expected him to growl, but he simply skewered him with his hunter's eyes.

"Why do it? Was it cowardice and to save your own skin? Or was it greed and for riches?"

"I'd save your breath, Paragon," mumbled one of the warders. "He hasn't spoken a word. Not to us, not to his cronies, nor to anyone who comes down to see him. None of them have."

"How many visitors has he had?" I muttered.

"A scholar, dressed like you, has come twice. Also a sage with red hair and red armour."

I couldn't have known more contempt. "What is Haidak planning? What whispers have you two shared?"

Redeye rose at last and scuffed his way to the bars. He put his red-dyed hands around the obsidian and leaned close. I stared, waiting for him to speak, but he refused me once more. I was forced to restrain my fists by my sides.

"To think you just stood there, waiting for me to die at the demon king's hand. And to think you have been lying with every breath since then. It sickens me."

Redeye blinked.

*Leave this wretch, Serisi told me. Not for mercy's sake, but I grow bored of his silence and his despicable face. We will deal with him once Haidak lies dead, and he will pay for his crime with blood.*

I was inclined to agree, and with a curse, I turned on my heel and aimed for somewhere that didn't have the cloying air of treachery.

Barely six steps from his cage, I heard Redeye whisper, "Force only goes so far before it gets you killed."

I spared a look over my shoulder, but the traitorous sorcer had already receded into the shadows. He had spoken those words before, I was sure of it, yet the faded memory was far from comforting. "Infuriating" was a better word, and all my visit had done was stoke my anger like a poker dragging through coals.

My journey through the Forge was slow, interrupted by many a well-wisher, fawning citizen, or appreciative warder. Along with the usual stares and whispers from the unbelievers, of course.

The bristling warders stacked against the door to our chambers parted to let Inwar and me enter. With the door slammed behind me, I found the halls quiet and empty. The candlevines were dim and the fireworm lanterns hooded. The long table of polished wood before me was piled with more offerings from the adoring citizens. Atalawe camped at a window veiled in silk, sharpening a golden knife with vicious jerks of her arm. The jāgu left my side and sought out his master. His purring sounded like distant thunder.

"Eztaral and Caraq have gone looking for you and Pel. Nobody's supposed to be wandering alone," the wrangler asked without looking up from her blade.

I held my tongue about her own wandering.

Atalawe tested the blade on her thumb, drawing a line of blood. "Did you see him?" she asked.

"I did," I said.

"And did he speak to you?"

Once more, I held back. It was a lie not for me, but for her. "Not a word," I replied. "I still can't understand why—"

Atalawe slammed the knife into the obsidian windowsill. "Shakes the very foundation of everything you believe in, doesn't it? As if trees grow from the sky and the heavens lie in the loam."

"Looks like we have both lost a brother," I said quietly.

Atalawe threw the blade into the corner of the room, where it dug into a wooden column of black pine. "Something's arrived for you from one of our many admirers, in that box there."

"What is it?"

Atalawe didn't answer but she did point at an ornate box of twisted wood, painted in Scion colours.

"Who did it come from?"

"We don't know. Came along with a bunch of Rasqax silks, as if we have any use for them," Atalawe said as she joined me in standing over the box.

*What if it is a trap? Something from Haidak?* asked Serisi. I spoke her words aloud.

Atalawe shrugged. "Wouldn't put it past him."

I took Serisi's sword and jammed it under the box's lid. Both the wrangler and I stood back. Inwar crouched, ready to pounce.

With a twist of the blade, the box popped open. I don't know what I expected. Perhaps a wriggling mass of kanalat snakes. Perhaps an angry woefang stuffed inside. A mist of dire poison, maybe, but the box revealed no such thing. Only a dark interior covered in mosscloth.

The sword poked inwards, finding something solid beneath.

Atalawe and I looked at each other before dragging the cloth aside.

"My my. Quite the admirer indeed," Atalawe muttered as she stared down at the empty face of an ornate helmet carved from grey ironpith and lined with iron. Its visor came to a point at the chin. Copper feathers ran along its jaws, cheek, sweeping back along its skull and comb. Slanted eye slits sat above gaps for the mouth, carved like the fangs of snarling jāgu. In my head, I heard the demon hiss with intrigue.

Beneath the helmet, a matching suit of armour waited for me. Instead of the Scions' armour of tempered leafleather plates, this was forged of overlapping iron and stout wooden scales. More copper feathers sprouted from the suit's shoulders and vambraces. I had never seen armour like it, not in the workshops of Shal Gara armourers nor in the metalsmiths of the Forge. It put the ancient armour I currently wore to shame.

Apparently neither had Atalawe. "Three Gods," she breathed. "Somebody must like you. It's even in our colours."

*This is almost worthy of Voidborn forges, Serisi told me. I very much approve of this gift.*

I reached for the helmet, feeling its weight before slipping it onto my head. I had expected my sight to be limited by the eye slits, but I had full view of Atalawe and the room. I looked around to test it, and it was then I noticed a figure sitting at the table on the far side of the room, wrapping the handle of her mattock in fresh leather.

"I'll leave you two alone," muttered Atalawe, taking Inwar and disappearing into a nearby chamber. I removed the helmet and placed it on the table across from Ralish.

"Quite the gift," Ralish said, focusing on her mattock.

I nodded, watching her closely. All I wanted was to see her smile, but I was refused it.

"What did that talking mannequin Okarin say to you in the Forging today?" asked Ralish.

"She said she would overturn our exile and that we would be welcome to return home to Shal Gara once this is over. To start a new era of the bloodwoods free from the Bloodlaws."

"And would you?"

I had considered it, but it had taken mere moments to know the answer. "The Swathe is my home now. There is little left in Shal Gara for me."

Ralish nodded. "Hmm. She can take her forgiveness and throw it to the loam."

"This isn't about Okarin, though, is it? I can tell you're disappointed in me," I said to her, voice low.

The mattock thumped onto the table, immediately forgotten.

"I'm unsettled, is all. Do you blame me, after how you're actin', or after how the duel ended between you and Zerocta? Even now I can see the rage in you. That demon shines through your eyes." Ralish skewered me with her pale gaze. Her hands moved to the arrow pendant that hung around her neck. "My fears are comin' true. The promise you made me in the loam has all but been forgotten. I barely recognise you anymore because that demon and you are too deeply entwined. All you seem to care about is Haidak and the crowds that chant your name."

“Out of everyone, I never expected this kind of doubt and worry from you,” I said. “I care about winning because I promised to keep you safe and to do what was necessary to stop you and everyone else dying in demonfire. All of this – everything I’ve done – is to keep that from happening!”

“And at what cost?”

“Whatever the cost!” I snapped.

Ralish raised an eyebrow. “See? You don’t even realise the price you’re payin’ when it’s right in front of you. What’s to win if this war takes everythin’ from you?”

*Why does she insist on holding us back?*

“You knew what I was when you followed me into the loam,” I said.

Ralish banged a fist on the table. “Precisely. And this person sitting in front of me is not the man I put my faith and hope in. I didn’t fall in love with a hero or Kī Raxa reborn, I fell in love with Tarko Terelta. Not whatever it is you’ve become these past weeks, some halfbreed of revenge and anger and pride who is on the brink of forgettin’ what he fights for. Say what you want, but you’re not changin’ for the better. I should have known this demon would take you from me.”

“You... love me?” I asked, feeling like that useless worker in Shal Gara’s mines once more. She had never said that before.

“Do you not, after all we’ve been through?”

The answer was simple. The words had lingered on my lips several times in the loam. “Of course I do. I wouldn’t go to such lengths if I didn’t,” I replied. “And do you still love me?”

Ralish stood. “Do what you feel you must, Tarko.”

“I don’t have a choice.”

“Yes, you do.”

After the click of the door closing behind her, I slammed the helmet into the table, scoring a deep dent in the wood. I had no words, only competing emotions of outrage and guilt.

*Whatever it takes, Tarko. Keep that in our mind, my demon consoled me. The price we pay is great, but unavoidable.*

I hoped my demon was right.

# 36

## THE THIRD DAY

*In the ill-fated Forging of the two thousand and sixty-seventh season, a sorcer known as Qualesh cheated the rules of Dorla Sel, poisoning a young and much-beloved sorcer's nectra before their final duel. The sorcer, Tuth, was severely weakened and stabbed in the eye by Qualesh in an ignominious defeat. The crowd, upon discovering the deception, promptly rioted. They swarmed from the stands and ripped Qualesh limb from limb. His head was hung from the gates of Dorla Sel until the next Forging, and since that event, all nectra brought by competing bloodwoods is presented to Dorla Sel and guarded with warders' lives.*

*FROM THE STUDIES OF ORAKAL ALAMSA*

*What is taking so damnably long? We grow impatient!* Serisi asked over the thunder of the raring crowds. They had begun to stamp their feet in unison. The reverberation ran through my bones. Acrobats and jugglers had been thrown into the Forge to entertain the multitudes while they waited for the second fight of the day. Almost an hour of delay now, and patience had evaporated. Fruit, both rotten and ripe, was starting to rain down to pelt the acrobats.

The Scions stood at my back as I roamed back and forth, new armour clunking, eager to continue. I could barely stand the anticipation.

"Eztaral?" I snapped. "What is taking so long?"

"As evidenced by the fact I haven't already given you an explanation, Tarko, you could probably assume I have no more clue than you do," the eagleborn shot back.

Envoy Okarin at last came pushing through the Scions' crowd, braids flailing.

"Your next opponent is refusing to fight," she said. A red line had been painted beneath her eye today, like a crimson tear. Instead of a gown or robe, she wore light ceremonial armour of red bloodwood leafleather and silver. A thick scarf of silver thread and amber amulets ringed her neck. Her trusty beads ran quickly through her silk-gloved hands. I sensed her frustration.

"Who is it? Did you manage to arrange for me to fight Datlak?" I asked, silently praying. I could see the red-clad sorcer parading the fringe of the arches, looking as eager as I was to fight. Haidak stood beside him, arms crossed and looking infuriatingly pleased with himself.

The godseers had been tight-lipped that tense and hazy day. Only eight sorcers remained to fight for the coveted audience with the Allmother. One fight had already been won that morning: a champion from none other than Stormbeaten. It had been a close and bloody duel. The sorcer of Stormbeaten had come away the victor. She stood now upon a balcony above our heads, guarded by highwarders according to tradition, or so Atalawe had gruffly told us. Matriarch Naxāko looked immensely pleased with herself. She had only just finished strutting about.

"Who is it?" Eztaral urged.

"Narikis. A sorcer of Scree," said Okarin with pursed lips. "I have pulled every string to have Datlak fight either you or Dūnekar, but Haidak has somehow kept his brute of a sorcer beyond our reach."

“Curse it!” I stamped my foot, shouting in unison with my demon. “That means Haidak could have a chance at the Allmother if Datlak’s not beaten today.”

“That is sadly out of our hands. We can only hope Dūnekar is called to fight him.”

Eztaral stared across the sorcer’s hall at the argumentative commotion happening at the end of the hall. The white-clad entourage of Scree had their voices raised and their warms waving. “Why is the feckless loam-gobbler wasting everyone’s time?” she asked.

Okarin stared at me, a shine in her red eyes. “He is calling Tarko a marvel of magic and refusing to fight somebody so clearly blessed by the gods. Scree is famed for its devoutness in worship of the Three, and he’s not the only one whose superstition runs deep. Or he’s afraid of you. The bigger the coward, the louder their voice, I find. In any case, you continue to make quite the impression, hero—”

“If he concedes, perhaps Tarko will win by default,” Ralish cut the envoy off.

Serisi grumbled within me. *I do not wish to win by another’s surrender. There is no glory without earning it.*

In truth, neither did I. Although his capitulation would take me closer to the Allmother, it frustrated me. Serisi was right, there was no glory in that. No victory. I wanted to earn my prize.

Okarin shook her head. “Unlikely. It is far from honourable. Few sorcers, if any, surrender before their duel. It brings shame.”

Pel held up a questioning finger. “What order is the sorcer?”

“Water weaver,” replied Okarin. “A maven. Earth shall face water.”

The Scions turned to look at me as one. I could see the concern in their frowns, and I hated it.

“That is not ideal,” Eztaral muttered. Even Inwar growled at that, as if he somehow understood the danger.

Serisi tensed within me momentarily. *No, it is not, but we will be victorious nonetheless.*

“We don’t have a choice if we want to speak to the Allmother,” I snapped, if only to ignore the splinter of doubt that stuck in me. “I will just have to make short work of him, won’t I?”

“Let’s hope he surrenders,” muttered Pel.

I tried to get a better look at the coward who was making me wait. The onlookers could see my impatience, and their stamping grew louder and swifter. The rotten fruits and vegetables were exchanged for larger and more solid objects. One of the jugglers was knocked senseless by a thrown chair and had to be dragged from the sand by the warders.

Pel gave me advice in a torrent of words while I continued my confined march. “Water sorcers are lethal up close where they have the most control. Don’t let him pincer you. He’s only a maven, so the deadlier spells are going to be lacking, but he’ll have plenty of brute force. Your armour should protect you from errant splashes and distraction.”

My pacing brought me closer to Ralish, and I caught her gaze.

“After all that was said last night, do you still at least believe in me?” I asked her.

Serisi tutted. *We do not need her belief.*

The wait for an answer stabbed me. “I do,” Ralish replied.

“Then trust me. This is how we must win.”

Ralish took a moment to look at my hand and the growing sharpness of my nails. I reached to touch her cheek, but I couldn’t ignore how she flinched away, subtle as it was. I could see the vying storms of emotions behind those opal eyes. The anger in my gut swirled.

“Just don’t die on us,” she said. “Not after all you’ve sacrificed to get here.”

“I, for one, believe wholeheartedly,” Envoy Okarin announced by our side, far too close for Ralish’s comfort. She became stone, crossing her arms.

“This doesn’t concern you, *Envoy*,” Ralish hissed.

“On the contrary, Overseer Lahni. Any learned mind would know Tarko holds the fate of the Swathe in his hands, now more than ever. It concerns us all.” Okarin squeezed my left arm and smiled broadly while Ralish seethed. “May the gods be with you as always, Tarko.”

Serisi growled in my head. *We do not need your gods. We need only to fight.*

With an exasperated snarl, I grew interminably bored of this game of waiting. I pressed the helmet onto my head, and with my blackened hand, I drew the demon’s silver sword. Putting the arches behind me, I strode boldly out into the Forge with furious purpose in my soul.

I marched into the centre of the crescent of the Forge and slammed the sword into the sand with a resounding thud. I raised my hands to the crowd and felt their roar wash over me like a wave. I drank it in. My name reverberated between the sheer walls of obsidian.

“I’m waiting!” I bellowed, staring upon the Scree entourage as the crowd reached fever pitch. I saw the sorcer Narikis standing between his matriarch and envoy. Bright armour of white stone veined with gold covered him head to toe. He must have been only five seasons my senior. Two curved knives perched sheathed on his chest. The godseer and orakals were gathered around him, arguing with the matriarch.

Once more, I paced as if I aimed to wear a furrow in the Forge. The crowd began to take up a cry of, “Coward!” Even half the sorcers and entourages gathered beneath the arches began to jeer at Narikis. Okarin was right: shame rained upon the bloodwood of Scree.

The insult worked wonders. To the crowd’s cheer, Narikis seized a vial of nectra in each blue-painted hand and pushed his way through the godseers. His envoy seized his arm, putting her face close to his ear. She appeared to whisper something before placing a kiss on his cheek and letting him go.

*Finally*, growled Serisi. I could already feel her lust for battle infecting me. *We get to fight.*

The godseer chased after him, scurrying between us with his hands held up for a silence he was never given. “In this the second bout of the third day of Forging, Paragon Tarkosi Terelta, of the Scions of the Sixth-Born, earth reaver and air carver – apparently – battles Maven Narikis of the Broken Slopes, water weaver of Scree!” he hollered over the tumult before fleeing the sand.

Narikis stood still as a tree trunk while we waited for the gong to sound. I shook with anticipation and dragged the sword from the sand to sheathe it in its scabbard with a clang. The black shadow of the Allmother’s riser hung between us. Once again, I hoped her eyes were upon me.

*This sorcer is afraid of us, Tarko*, Serisi told me. *A frightened enemy is a dead enemy.*

“They call me coward,” Narikis shouted, finding his voice. “But I want you to know I am no such thing. I hear the whispers about you, sorcer. They talk behind your back of evil in your veins, or that you made a pact with the dark spirits of the Hells, or that you are a deception that deserves no place in these proud walls.”

*He better be going somewhere with this*, whispered Serisi, as booing spread through the lower tiers of the. Blue light shone in my clenched fist. I let the demon creep into my mind.

Narikis raised a vial of nectra as a salute. “Yet I know the truth. We citizens of Scree worship the Three devoutly, and I can see their power in you. I do not wish to fight one so beloved of the gods. I stand with you, but I am left with little choice. I must fight for the glory and prosperity of my

bloodwood.” The sorcer pressed a fist to his chest for a brief prayer. “May the ancestors, the Three Gods, and all their spirits save us both.”

Although it was a fine and complimentary speech, I heard only excuses. I knew who the gods favoured, and that was me.

No sooner had Narikis thrown back his vials than the crash of the gong filled the air. I pounced quickly.

In the deafening wind of the crowd’s bellow, dust swirled about me while I formed six dart spells, one for each stone urn of water spaced about the crescent of the Forge. I pressed them into solid shards of earth and drove the air behind them. With each consecutive crash, an urn shattered and splashed its contents into the sand. Before Narikis could make his first move, I had already heaved at the mud and formed it into orbs that circled me. The crowd cheered as I swirled them faster and faster.

Serisi was pleased. *What an enjoyable new trick, I see, Tarko. Show this weaver the power he so eagerly worships.*

I saw the widening of Narikis’ blue eyes when I began to hurl them one by one like giant slingstones. The sorcer barely raised a spell in time. Ripping water from the sodden earth, he kept my onslaught at bay with a circular and spiralling shield. Narikis swung it left and right, batting each spell aside to collide with the ground, or the obsidian walls, or in one instance a walled section of the noble tiers high above. As splinters rained from above and mocking laughs came from below, I watched my last wave of orbs halted in mid-air. With a flex of Narikis’ fingers, the water was ripped from my spells and absorbed into his shield. My earth scattered to the ground before I could reclaim it.

Narikis extended a whip of shimmering water and lashed it at me in a wide arc. The demon saw to it that my reflexes were sharp as could be, and I felt the spell skim my helmet as I ducked. Before my enemy could bring the spell back around, I fired two more darts with all the speed I could muster.

The first blow of the duel smashed into Narikis’ shoulder, cracking the stone armour. The second dart was caught by a hasty shield.

The weaver and I circled each other for a moment. Narikis was breathing harder than I was. I felt his power in the mud I’d made, and our magic clashed as we fought for control of it, earth vying against water. Our efforts built a spiralling, tree-like tower of mud between us, and it leaned in opposite directions as we each battled to bring it crashing down on the other.

In the end, I let my control lapse while hurling myself sideways. The enormous mess of mud slammed into the sand at my feet. I used Narikis’ focus and the momentum of his magic to drag him forwards. And where else but straight into a fist of earth and mud? The sorcer sagged to the ground, dazed, but before I could pummel or trap him with, he threw out his hands with a cry.

A wave surged across the Forge towards me. It rapidly gained on me, cresting like the mountains of water that pounded Stormbeaten’s cliffs. It was my turn to barely raise a shield in time. Even with all my strength poured into the spell, the force pummelled me into the sand. The water blasted apart half of my shield, and in the places it snuck through, it collided with my armour. Some splashed my face and crept under the plates and leather that hid my neck. I fought my hardest to keep the pain from my face, but Narikis had already spied my hesitation and the wince on my face. Although he might not have grasped the full truth, he saw his chance and a weakness in the gods-chosen marvel he believed me to be. I saw the disappointment in his eyes.



The sorcer began to dance across the sand, hurling bolt after bolt of water at me. With grunts of effort, and with pain searing my skin, I fended them off with shields and quick movements. We duelled back and forth with quick spells and lashed out with tendrils. It was a marvellous display for the crowd, I had to admit, and yet with every strike and parry, I caught Narikis advancing on me.

*Though I enjoy toying with my prey as much as the next demon, the longer this battle goes on, the more he can hurt us. Let us finish him swiftly!*

Feinting in a different direction with my spells, I sprinted sideways in a zigzag. I raised my hands to make tendrils burst up from beneath Narikis' feet. By the way I toppled him onto his arse, it was a trick he wasn't used to. While he foundered upright, I closed the gap between us and let Serisi command my left arm. My demon whipped the sword from my belt and raised it to strike Narikis down. Although Pel had warned us of the lethality of water weavers at close range, we bargained Serisi was more dangerous than the sorcer.

We were wrong.

The silver sword stopped just short of the sorcer's face. Tendrils of water seized me from every angle. Pain shot across every one of my limbs.

Fortunately, Serisi had fought this fight before. While she roared in my head, she slipped my fingers from the sword handle and swiped Narikis across the face with my nails. It was more a slap than a punch, but it still scored a scratch across Narikis' nose between the sharp cheeks of his helmet. It bought me a moment to snatch up the sword and aim for his heart. His tendrils threw me backwards and pinned me. Water swirled, squeezing harder. The spell felt rough and malformed, but it worked. The pain of its touch grew to a fearsome strength, one that made me yell. No matter how I tried to make it sound one of battle-rage, I knew the pain was obvious. In my darting vision, I saw multitudes clutch at their faces in hope.

Serisi saved me.

*This water worm has overreached! He does not mind his surroundings.*

Even though the water was now seeking my throat and beginning to choke me, I tried my hardest to concentrate. My skin felt as if it were aflame, as though its layers peeled away with every movement of the water. My right arm and side of my neck were bonfires of pain. While I clenched my teeth and tried my hardest to breathe, Serisi pushed with all her might against the agony.

Blue and orange light entwined shone through the swirling water as I brought my crude air magic to the fore. Surge spells battered from all sides, almost driving the weaver off balance. I was relieved to feel the spells waver for a blessed moment before Narikis redoubled his efforts, clutching my throat anew. I smashed a blade spell into the armour of his ribs. I pounded another against his thigh, making him sag, but Narikis' armour was strong.

*More, Tarko!* I heard Serisi bellow as the pain approached unbearable levels. The edges of my vision took on a shadow.

Narikis found time to voice his disappointment. "You are not as much of a marvel as we thought were, Tarkosi."

"You speak too soon!"

Behind Narikis' back, I formed a clawed hand of dirt and air and stretched it upwards like a gloomsprite reaching from the undergrowth. His entourage cried out for him to turn around, but I wasted not another moment of pain. I brought the claws crashing down on Narikis' helmet, seized him tightly, and hauled him into the air. The spell had so much force in it that he flipped head over heels twice before crashing down onto his face.

The water released me immediately. I was dumped in the mud and wet sand, and with Serisi's fury driving me to my feet, I sprinted across the Forge to finish Narikis off.

I hadn't beaten him yet. Bloody-faced, his helmet clamped around his skull, Narikis got to his knees and groggily attempted to summon waves of water to trap me.

*Let me, Tarko.*

"Not this time," I hissed. "Remember what Pel said about ripping air from his lungs?"

A gamble though it might have been, I heard Serisi's appreciative growl as I reached for the air around Narikis. This was a spell I had never attempted before and I needed to be quick.

At first, all I could manage was a vortex that wrapped him in a column of biting sand. It was enough to keep him at bay while I focused on pulling the air to me. My grip was slippery from pain and weakness, but I dragged my vortex wider so it pulled the air taut. I bent all my concentration on spinning the vortex faster, and as the wind became a fierce whine, I saw Narikis' wincing face. He was clutching for the ground, trying his hardest to squash me with wild tendrils and bolts of water that Serisi made sure I dodged with ease.

I cheered wildly as I saw Narikis reach for his throat and gasp. I might not have pulled the air from his lungs, but I challenged him to breathe. He fought on for an impressive amount of time, driving my endurance to my limits. My right hand shone blindingly as I battled to keep the spell up.

In a wild moment of luck, one of Narikis' desperate spells clipped my head and sent my helmet rolling. The pain scorched me again, and I pulled with all my might, driving a gale across the sand that knocked over several warders.

I closed in on him once more. As Serisi raised her sword, I seized the sling from my belt, whirling it like a club, and broke the rest of the helmet from Narikis' head. He reeled, sagging onto his heels with his blue hands in the air. Serisi and I stood over him, sword poised and sling spinning, a twitch away from ending his life.

"Wait! I submit!" the sorcer cried out in a hoarse and breathless voice. "There is no need—"

I saw that familiar realisation in Narikis' eyes as he stared at the black veins across my neck and jaw and at the shine of orange in my sword-hand. Perhaps he had noticed the wildfire in my eyes and seen the demon lurking behind them. Serisi and I were melded together completely once more. I felt every sense and instinct in Serisi intertwined with my own. Neither of us and both of us were in control.

"By the blessed Three, it's true!" Narikis gasped, almost retching from disappointment. His voice was but a whisper. "There is a foul spirit within you. You are not of the gods' will at all!"

*End him, Tarko!*

Before I or the godseer already running onto the crescent could react, Narikis lowered his hands to his chest. I thought it was to seize his knives and make a lunge for me. By the time the prayer for forgiveness to the gods spilled from his mouth, my battle-rage had already found its target.

I seized Narikis in tendrils of earth, lifting him up to the crowd and smashing him with all my might against the nearby wall of obsidian between the tiers of crowds. He struck it head-on, and I swore I heard the crack of bones amidst the crash of stone on stone. Narikis collapsed to the sand on his back, head against the wall so that he faced me, his neck at a gut-twisting angle. The crowds, their zeal knocked out of them, surged to the railings to stare down at the defeated sorcer. Even the godseer was motionless.

From his frantic blinking, Narikis was still alive.

“It was nothing but a prayer,” he gasped, clearly beginning to panic. Not a twitch came from the rest of his body. “I... I can’t feel anything.”

The moment had me rooted to the sand. With the anger fading from my heart, I felt the heat in my cheeks and a different kind from the lingering scorch of the water’s touch. A shriek dragged my eyes to the arches, where I saw the Scree envoy sprinting towards us across the sand, hair trailing in the wind. Her warders tried their hardest to keep up, but her agony lent her speed they couldn’t match.

She fell at Narikis’ side, clutching his limp arm with both hands.

“I can’t feel anything,” Narikis repeated, with a face as pale and sickly as parchment. “I can’t feel my body!”

The envoy wailed at the top of her lungs. “Healers! Bring me healers, curse it!”

Narikis’ eyes found me, and I had to avoid his watering stare, drenched in accusation. Even Serisi held her tongue. I couldn’t hold his gaze, and I looked back to the arches instead, where I saw two utterly different reactions. The first was Haidak Baran, arms still folded and yet this time that trademark grin plastered all over his face. The second belonged to the Scions. I locked eyes with Ralish and saw the slow shake of her head. Pel was no different. Only Atalawe looked satisfied.

# 37

## CHAMPIONS

*Tzatca? She might as well be a myth, I tell you. Hardly anyone ever sees her these days. The wait for an audience is so long the queue could reach between all the bloodwoods. Dorla Sel's run by the sages, I'm sure of it.*

### OVERHEARD IN A DORLA SEL ALEHOUSE

It took the crowd a moment to find its voice again. Most erupted into a cheer for me with baying yells fed on blood and brutal victory. The rest murmured between themselves or shouted their displeasure at my cruelty. Several began to boo me.

*A victory is a victory, Tarko. How were we to know? Serisi's voice rose above the riotous noise. We are champions.*

I struggled to find the same satisfaction as I had with Zerocta, but I held my tongue. This prize was not worth the feel of Ralish's eyes upon me. What had I become with this demon in my blood? The word "monster" echoed in my head.

I was given no time to dwell on what I had done to win. The godseer burst from the walls between the crowd and bustled to my side. He seized my left arm with a grip that was strong for such a wizened fellow and thrust it into the air.

"By submission and incapacitation, Paragon Tarkosi Terelta has been decided triumphant! May the Forging look upon its second champion of the day!" he bellowed, before reducing his voice to a growl just for me. "And may the Three Gods have mercy on you."

Before I could take three steps to retrieve my helmet and hide away my dark marks, two columns of Dorla Sel highwarders appeared alongside me and hemmed me in with shields. I felt the demon inside me bristle, but the Stormbeaten sorcer had received the same treatment when she had won. The champions were kept out of retribution and jealousy's way until they were escorted to the Star of the Tribes. Though I could not ignore the faces of the Scions, I also couldn't ignore the thump in my heart over my victory and the fact we had won a chance to see the Allmother.

And yet I would have to wait to bend her ear to matters of demons and Fireborn. The third day of Forging was only halfway done, and there were two more duels left: one for Datlak and one for Dūnekar, and with any luck they would both fight each other.

I watched Narikis being gently lifted onto a broad stretcher and carried behind me. The envoy stared daggers at me when I glanced over my shoulder.

"You did this! He had submitted, curse you! May the sky fall upon you, Tarkosi!" she yelled, before her matriarch and the crowd silenced her. Muttering prayers beneath their breath, the entourage of Scree vanished under the arches, while I was taken elsewhere to a tall stairway leading to the coveted balcony of champions. Not even the Scions could follow me.

Standing at its centre and also surrounded by highwarders was the first champion of the Forging: the air carver sorcer of Stormbeaten. She needed no introduction. Her name had filled the Forge not two hours ago: Iro of the Rainwalk. Her broken left arm was bandaged by her side in a

mosscloth sling. A bruise darkened one of the eyes hiding beneath her sweat-drenched hair of teal and black. She looked at me with a practised indifference, hovering just on the edge of scorn.

I raised my chin as I took my place halfway down the balcony, so that my highwarders rubbed shoulders with hers. Another cheer from the multitudes shook the Forge as I stood at the polished obsidian wall separating me from a long drop to the sand.

Serisi was still sizing up Iro and her sword of fish-teeth. *She is weaker now than she was in the fight. She poses little threat in the final battle.*

“Take a moment, Serisi. If the Allmother believes in us, there may not be a final battle,” I breathed.

*You sound almost glad for that.*

“Perhaps I should be,” I said, swimming in the roil of emotions that numbed me. I was not sure I wanted to see myself as that monster once more.

*Now is not the time to doubt us. We have come too far to turn back.*

The godseer had returned to his place at the centre of the Forge. The crowd was growing louder and hungry for more, as if my battle had already been forgotten. I leaned against the stone, listening for the names I was desperate to hear.

“And so we continue! In this the third duel of the third day, we see Sage Aben Dūnekar of Shal Gara, water weaver...”

I swore the pause in the godseer’s announcement was just for me and the Scions far beneath me. My fingers squeaked on the obsidian. My right hand almost matched its colour perfectly.

“...is pitted against Braided One Penek Bako of Orso Ora, water weaver.”

I slammed my hand against the obsidian, drawing stares. “Curse it to the loam!” Dūnekar, for all the dislike we shared for each other, was a terrifying sorcer. He would have crushed Datlak and kept Haidak out of the Allmother’s palace. Now it was up to the gods and fate to keep Datlak from winning his bout, and I already felt the nausea of doubt.

*Braided One Penek Bako of Orso Ora. What a mouthful. Must be related to the warrior I bet on the day before the Forging.*

“You have a good memory, demon,” I whispered again, using the noise of the Forging to keep the highwarders from hearing me. Bako and Dūnekar emerged from the arches and took their places. While the sage still spurned the idea of armour and was clad in nothing but another scarlet and silver robe, Bako was covered in thick spotted pelts of a creature I didn’t recognise. A horn protruded from his simple helmet of iron. Before he reached for his nectra, he spread bark chips around him in a circle as the other Bako had done.

The gong sounded before I could speak another word.

I pitied the moron who bet against Dūnekar. It was painfully obvious from the start that Bako never stood a chance. No matter how much Bako danced and dodged around the crescent, Dūnekar pressed and harassed him into corner after corner. The sage looked to be taking his time, clearly in no hurry to win. Dūnekar wielded great hammers of water against Bako’s shields. The braided one was knocked back and forth across the crescent like a weaver’s shuttle.

Bako managed to strike Dūnekar with a few cheap shots, that much was true, but his efforts ended up as futile as a sword against a bloodwood root.

Dūnekar seized Bako in a whirlpool that spun him around while battering him with fists of water. Within moments, Bako was knocked senseless and dropped unceremoniously upon the sand. The duel was done.

The godseer lifted Dūnekar's hand as he had mine and Iro's, and the Forge was given its third champion. At least Shal Gara would be a voice in our favour in the Allmother's presence. If the gods saw fit to punish me and Datlak won his bout, then the battle for Tzatca's support would be even.

It did not take long for Dūnekar to appear on the balcony. Iro gave him the same indifference as she gave me, but Dūnekar was far easier to read. He passed me by with contempt twisting his face. I couldn't help but notice there was barely a bead of sweat on his forehead.

"You do not belong here, Terelta," he told me.

"And you've forgotten the real enemy, Sage. Why don't you put your petty vengeance aside and do some good with that magic? You should listen to your envoy."

"How dare the likes of you lecture me!" Dūnekar snapped "Three months ago, you were nothing but a worker. Now you think you are fit to stand before the Allmother? You follow in the footsteps of your father and the disappointment that is Pelikai, with reckless ideas far above your station. It is a bloodline of travesty, if you ask me."

I assumed my father would be proud of me. I imagined he, out of everyone, would understand the sacrifices of doing what was necessary. He had certainly paid a price for his stubbornness, including his own family's hatred.

"Then it's fortunate that nobody asked you, isn't it?" I shot back. "I'm glad that it'll be Okarin speaking sense to the Allmother and not you. You'd doom us all."

In silence, Dūnekar took his place at the wall. It was satisfying that the cheer for the hog-faced sage was much quieter than mine.

Serisi snorted. *That man grows uglier by the day.*

I concentrated on playing my part of champion, remembering to lift my head high.

Datlak's bout was starting. For what I trusted was the last time, I watched the godseer shuffle from his alcove. With his wooden tablet held high once more, he read the final names of the Forging's penultimate duel. It was all I could do to hope that a sorcer with enough magic and power would perform the Swathe an enormous favour and murder Haidak's pawn for me. My fingers gripped the obsidian railing tightly.

"And now, to decide who shall claim the title of the fourth champion of this Forging, we invite Paragon Datlak Baran, earth reaver of the late city of Azcalan, to test himself against Braided One Enenca the Wise of Dorla Sel, air carver."

Judging by the hurricane of noise that filled the Forge, the crowd had enormous love for its homegrown sorcer. I watched Datlak storm from the arches, insulted by the cheering and yelling obscenities at the crowd. Datlak had spiked his patchwork Baran hair to add an extra hint of intimidation. A spiked club lay in the brute's red hands, and he spun it around so the weapon whistled and shrieked. His crude crimson armour made him look drenched in blood.

Gold and green stood against him. The sorcer in shining Dorla Sel colours looked equally formidable. Not through sheer size or might but through the metal armour that wrapped Enenca the Wise in an intricate chrysalis. It was far finer than the armour of any other sorcer in the Forging, mine included.

And if the armour failed to impress, then the giant sword Enenca had propped up on her shoulder would have done the job. It was as long as I was tall and a handspan thick. My hope bloomed.

"Who would you put your gems on, Serisi?" I asked. We had seen Enenca fight once before, and she was a fierce sorcer.

*I would not gamble on such equal odds, Tarko. It is anybody's battle.*

Datlak thumped his club in the sand. “For Azcalan!” he yelled, finding some favour with the crowd. I imagined Haidak had given him that line. Datlak didn’t seem the type that cared for sentiment.

The gong crashed once more, sending both the crowd and Datlak into a frenzy. With a snarl, he poured his nectra into his mouth and proceeded to slap his forehead repeatedly with both hands. It wasn’t a technique I’d seen before, and whether it worked or he was simply quick with his nectra, Datlak’s eyes came alive before the faintest glow shone beneath Enenca’s helmet.

Datlak began with an onslaught of raging dart spells, as I would have done. Enenca dug her huge sword into the ground and used it as a shield to block half of the attacks. The rest she diverted with her magic.

My hope soared when I saw her raise a construct above her. A lancewing, no less, made of swirling air, sand, and earth. With another thump of her sword, the construct dove for Datlak.

I thought him outmatched until I saw his tendril sneaking under the lancewing, his spiked club in its clutches. While Datlak threw up a shield of wall spells that barely saved him, the other spell, hidden by the explosion of dust and magic, landed an underhanded blow to Enenca’s helmet. The club stuck for a moment until Enenca wrenched it free. If my eyes were right, a trickle of blood came from the hole punched by one of the spikes.

*Though it irks me to say it, I do not like the golden sorcer’s chances.*

“Have some faith. She’s fine,” I hissed, even though I could feel my hope wilting. I longed for Serisi to be wrong just once.

Enenca staggered briefly before raising two spinning wheels of air that gouged the floor of the Forge. The blade spells were daunting in their speed and size.

“See?”

*Just you watch.*

The spells raced across the sand at Datlak. I was poised to cheer only to be denied by Datlak. Enenca’s aim was off, and as he turned to the side, the blades missed his nose and arse by an inch on either side. The spells crashed against the old godseer’s alcove instead, and warders and scholars scattered with outraged cries. The godseer sat calm and comfortable, safe behind the shield of his own personal sorcer.

Datlak pressed on Enenca with brutal energy. Darts pummelled her wall spells. Waves of dirt assailed from every direction. Tendrils jabbed. The barrage was incessant.

In a gut-wrenching moment, Enenca stumbled again. She almost struck Datlak down with another spinning blade before she took a knee. All she managed was to score the earth reaver’s scarred head, and it was the last upper hand she grasped.

The bombardment only increased as Datlak drove her into the sand. I could see the brute grinning as he marched upon her. The crowd howled in encouragement for Enenca, but she could not rise. The blood leaking from her helmet now coloured her entire left side. The giant sword swung in great arcs that slowed as her strength faded. Datlak dodged closer and kicked the blade from her hand. He picked up his club, raising it to the crowd while Enenca swayed on her knees, looking fit to topple at any moment.

The crowd was torn. There were those that called for her submission and mercy. Others that called for her death. Some even wailed for the Dorla Sel sorcer to rise. The latter cries were futile no matter how hard I wished the gods would listen to them. Datlak had already decided Enenca’s fate.

Taking aim at Enenca's head, the brute swung his club. All that fine armour counted for little under the force and sharpness of the spikes. The weapon punched deep. Enenca sagged, but Datlak left his club embedded in her skull. Using it as some kind of macabre lever, he turned her head slowly to the side, waited a moment to drink in the deafening roar, and then wrenched the club around. With her neck snapped, Dorla Sel's finest crumpled to a limp heap.

*And so Haidak wins a seat at the Allmother's table.*

I stared at the corpse of our last hope. The godseer's announcement washed over me unheard. I did not watch Datlak strut about with his mouth agape and his tongue out. Only when the brute climbed the stairs to the champions' balcony and stood at my side did I choose to look at him.

"We meet again, Tarkosi. How good it is we get to face each other at last. I have been saving myself for it," Datlak rumbled.

"If the Allmother listens to me instead of your vile cousin, then you might be lucky enough to escape that fate. Though it will be a shame not to put you in the dust."

Datlak removed the half-mask from his face to show me a grin only a Baran could summon. "You have fire, boy. I like that in my enemies. You squirm more before you die."

The gong sounded again. Drums pounded like a storm. The godseer raised his hands to our balcony. The highwarders at our side lifted their spears in unison.

"Look upon your four champions, witnesses of the Forging! Only one can win, and on the morrow, the victor will be left standing before us!"

I felt the tremble of the Forge as the crowd cheered alongside the drums. Iro, Datlak, and even stoic Dūnekar raised their hands to drink in the adulation. I was the only one who stood still, staring at the Allmother's riser as petals filled a sky that was beginning to darken with clouds. It was no longer a battle of might and magic. That part was over, and now I had to wage a war of words. Two champions petitioning for chaos, and two champions fighting for survival, and the decision lay in the ancient Allmother's hands. I couldn't decide whether the gods still smiled on us or not. As Serisi had told me, the odds were too equal to gamble on.

It was still anybody's battle.

When at last the crowd's cheering died, the highwarders stamped their feet and turned to face the stairs as one. We were ushered to the floor of the Forge where the godseer waited with trusty tablet in hand. The entourages of Stormbeaten, Azcalan, Shal Gara, and the Scions of the Sixth-Born stood close by, waiting for the necessary ceremony. Naxāko stood near to Haidak. Okarin lingered separate from all of us, and I caught the subtle nod of her head. The Scions, all save Ralish, stared at me.

"Congratulations and commendations on surviving the third day of Forging, champions. Yours is a blessed future, for now you will have the honour and privilege to stand before the Allmother Tzatca herself. As is tradition in the Forging, you may be joined by your upholder or choose to greet the Allmother alone. For the safety of the Allmother and her sages, no weapons will be allowed in the Star of the Tribes, and all nectra is forbidden."

"And what about Tarkosi Terelta, who has no need for nectra?" asked Dūnekar.

I heard Okarin hiss at her sage.

*It will be a shame if we do not get a chance to fight him. He could use a lesson in holding his traitorous tongue.*

"These highwarders will ensure that calm and decorum is maintained at all times," replied the godseer. "You will meet with the Allmother and sages together, and then each of you will have a



short time alone in the presence of the Allmother to make the traditional petitions and requests for your bloodwood or city. After that, you will be ensconced within the Star until your final battle tomorrow. There will be no raised voices. There will be no arguments or rivalries, no drunkenness or lewdness, and there will be no violence of any kind while you experience a much-coveted audience with the Allmother Tzatca. Now you may collect your upholders and prepare to journey to the Star.”

The highwarders dissolved, leaving us facing our entourages. Finding it difficult to ignore Haidak and Naxāko so close, I stood before the Scions.

“I know this isn’t quite the victory you hoped for, but I did it, just as I promised,” I said, clenching my right fist to make my magic glow. Pel nodded solemnly. Atalawe found enough of her old strength to smile. Ralish at last found me with her pale eyes. I ached to go to her, but Eztaral came forwards to poke at a scratch on my helmet.

“You can see the marks of the water on your skin. Looks like you’ve been burned,” Eztaral said with a tut. “You’ve fought this far, Tarko, so you better not ruin it at the last hurdle, correct? It all rests on you and the Allmother now, and whether our words are more convincing than Haidak’s and Naxāko’s. You and Serisi can’t pummel, smash, or kill your way out this one.”

My demon grumbled.

“Then I hope you’ve got one of your speeches ready, Eagleborn,” I replied.

Eztaral shook her head, briefly sinking my fervour. “Not me, Tarko. Only upholders are allowed to accompany champions. Those are the rules, and though I’d love nothing more than to break them, it’s known who each of us are. Our good Matriarch Caraq will be joining you.”

Caraq stood tall amongst the Scions, thumping her spear twice on the stone floor. “Never thought Noluk’s daughter would be raising a cup of grog with the Allmother. Don’t you worry, Scions, I’ll speak for you and Lostriver. I might not be as eloquent as you, Eagleborn, but I can speak well enough to make up this old woman’s mind.”

I went to Ralish, even with our enemies and the others watching. Although she let me clutch her hand, she shook her head. “Not now, Tarko. You focus and do what you need to do.”

Pel seized my hands and pressed his forehead to mine but spoke nothing of what he felt. I imagined they didn’t want to give me the distraction of doubt. Atalawe gripped me by the shoulders, and Eztaral folded her arms as she surveyed her Scions and me.

“No matter what was come to pass, or how we’ve got here, we will believe in you, Tarko.”

I matched the eagleborn’s stern frown. How she had become the only one who trusted trust both me and Serisi, I didn’t know, but I was thankful for it. Perhaps she knew more than the others what victory cost. She had been the smith behind making me a weapon, after all. I clasped her hand.

“You know,” added Eztaral, with her frown breaking into a faint smile, “if you can hold yourself back from wringing Haidak’s neck in the Allmother’s presence, and if you curb that tongue of yours just long enough, we might just have a chance.”

“And if Tzatca doesn’t believe us?” I asked, shuddering with nervous energy. “What if she submits to Haidak?”

“She *will* believe.” Eztaral raised her chin. “Otherwise we’ll show Dorla Sel what a demon looks like whether they like it or not, and force them to believe. And hopefully killing that reeking bowel movement they call Haidak in the process, of course, but I won’t spoil myself with hope.”

Pel pulled the wingmaster close. “Caraq, we’ll signal your Cloudriders to bring our caged demon prince to Dorla Sel tomorrow.”

“Aye.”

“Champions, it is time to gather!” the old godseer hollered. “The Allmother prefers her honoured guests to be punctual.”

“Shall we finish this?” I asked of Caraq, shuddering with two souls’ worth of anticipation. Serisi was restless.

The wingmaster rubbed her hands together with relish. “Let’s. How did you put it before, Ralish? Into the tharantos nest?”

Ralish smiled politely while staring at me. I could see the battle between love and aversion in her eyes and wondered which would win.

We stood together while the emerald Dorla Sel scholars saw to our weapons. Though it made Serisi growl to be touched, never mind disarmed, I stood with my hands outstretched as they removed the sling, stones, and scabbarded sword from around my waist and placed them on a broad cushion.

Caraq had already relinquished her leaf-bladed spear, but she was far from done. The scholars removed another three obsidian knives from around her belt. A jāgu fang with a leather handle was taken from the small of her back. Another two came from the feather-clad shins.

“Is that it, Matriarch?” a scholar asked, to which Caraq laughed and proceeded to take another pair of sharp daggers from beneath her bone vambraces and added them to the pile.

The scholars paused before they let us go, torn between protocol and suspicion, but Caraq shook her head. “That’s it, unless you want my hands and feet, too? Or my teeth? I don’t need weapons to be dangerous, young man.”

“Neither do I,” I said, flexing my right hand at my side and feeling the new sharpness of my rough nails.

Disturbed as the scholars seemed by that admission, they left us be and turned to provide the confiscated weapons to our entourages. Two by two, the champions and upholders rejoined the godseer. I stared down the line of us and narrowed my eyes at Naxāko, standing small yet proud by Iro of the Rainwalk. The pair of them ignored my stares, just as Sage Dūnekar did.

Both Haidak and Datlak watched me closely. Both wore their infuriating grins. For all the crowd and scholars knew, they were simply proud and elated, but I knew the malice that hid behind those pale teeth. Serisi rumbled in my head, yearning to pounce there and then, stakes be damned. Our hatred wove together, and she and I both had to hold ourselves back. It would be an onerous evening playing nice for the Allmother. The weight of it sat like an orokan perched on my shoulders, but we had little choice. This had always been the plan.

“I feel the same urge, too, Tarko. I see it in your eyes and fists,” said Caraq, muttering from the side of her mouth as the crowd cheered our names one last time, and the drums pounded. “But I have a feeling they will get what is coming to them soon enough. Believe in that, speak your mind, and all will be well.” She too gave me a smile. “At least that’s what I’m telling myself.”

I smiled back. “I’ll take comfort in the hope that the Allmother, should she listen to our words, might allow me to personally exact their punishments.”

*That, I would enjoy,* said Serisi.

Caraq thumped me on the back. “That’s the spirit, lad.”

The drums reached their earsplitting crescendo, and in the wake of their echo, all eyes turned to the Allmother’s skyriser. In unison, the highwarders lining its tiers slammed fists against shields in one crack of thunder. The riser lifted into the sky, sending lancewings and parrots flitting in all directions.

“This way, champions!” crowed the godseer, as the highwarders stamped their feet.

# 38

## THE STAR OF THE TRIBES

*The most hapless sorcer in the history of the Forging was Haikura the Lucky. He competed four times during his short life. The first time, he knocked himself out cold with his own axe in his first bout. At the second Forging, he tripped, impaled his leg on his opponent's knife, and had to have it amputated by the healers. The third time, Haikura came back one-legged and made it to the second day, only to have his arm taken by a carver's blade spell. His fourth and final Forging? He somehow won, but not before he was mortally wounded. His opponent slipped in his pool of blood while celebrating prematurely and landed on Haikura's axe. Haikura lived long enough for the Allmother to bestow upon him the title of greatest sorcer in the Swathe. That is why, whenever you see a statue or carving of Haikura, he will always have a broad smile, as he did in death.*

*FROM THE STUDIES OF ORAKAL ALAMSA*

To the smart tramping of the glittering highwarders, we were escorted beneath the arches. The throngs of sorcers and their entourages parted before us. Applause filled the hall.

Like the crowd, they were mixed in who they cheered for. More than a few of them looked at me with concern or hatred before we escaped onto the risers at the rear of the hall. We split into two groups, ascending the Forge separately. Thankfully, it was Dūnekar and Okarin who shared our riser, kept separate by a line of warders. At last, I could breathe easy.

I heard Serisi growling. "What's bothering you, demon?" I mouthed.

*I have never fought a battle with words, Tarko. Nor have I ever played had to play... nice. We stand so close to our most despicable enemies. It is not the demon way. We have not become a weapon for this.*

I shrugged off the memory of Narikis lying broken at the foot of a wall. I wanted to prove I was not the monster. "We'll do just fine. We do it the human way this time. We are the best of each, might and magic, remember? There's magic in words, so Atalawe says, and we'll trust to that. If I can be a demon on the battlefield, you will have to be human for an evening. It'll be just like hiding you in Shal Gara, and we managed that. Well, for the most part."

*Ugh. If this Allmother does not listen to us—*

"She will."

*Tarko—*

"If she doesn't, then proof will arrive and you might just get your big battle, Serisi, so stop your worrying," I muttered.

Caraq nudged me, nodding to a few highwarders sneaking glances at us. I focused on our journey and glancing at Haidak as the other riser came into sight between hollow sections in the Forge. We rose to the roof of the enormous ring and were politely and reverently shepherded onto another, grander riser that reached into the upper branches. A chill had infected the air. Clouds had gathered to turn the sun goddess into a dim white eye. The longsun was slowly fading.

We champions were not left in peace just because we were beyond the Forge. Our adoring fans spun around the riser on the backs of lancewings and all manner of feathered beasts. I swore I saw one individual riding a giant bat.

Every branch we passed was lined with citizens vying to get a glimpse of the vaunted final four. Clearly news of my brutality had been slower to reach the rest of the bloodwood, and I heard my name drowning out the cheers for my opponents. One branch that came close waved a giant sheaf of parchment with my name scrawled across it. It was spelled Tarqo, of course, but I forgave them that for the look of anger it put on Dūnekar's snout.

I heard Haidak clear his throat as if stifling a chuckle. "Look at our good sorcer of... Lostriver, was it? He looks so pleased with himself, as if he's already won. Don't you think, Datlak?"

"Looks like it," grunted the lumpish sorcer.

"What are his chances, Naxāko?" Haidak called.

The child matriarch chose not to answer. Iro looked between me and Caraq as if trying to decide who to dislike more.

Haidak laughed. "To think a worker and the son of a drunk gets to stand amongst the finest sorcers of the Swathe, and see the Allmother. Boggles the mind."

"You sound almost impressed," I snarled.

"I am simply happy for you, Tarkosi. It must be nice to be noticed and to have some attention for once, I imagine. A fine experience before you meet your end," Haidak told me, his smile fading into a face of stone.

*How I loathe his presence, Tarko. One swift push is all it would take...*

"I was just thinking the same about you, Haidak," I said. "But I don't hear many cheers for you or Datlak. Seems you're not as admired as you think you are."

"Decorum!" the godseer reminded us with a shrill shout.

The riser took its precious time climbing into the branches. When the Star of the Tribes became a murky shadow in the clouds, we were swapped between risers once again. The following of birds we'd gathered were driven away by a squadron of hefty Dorla Sel lancewings, and once they surrounded us in a deafening ring, we rose to the very crown of the bloodwood. Copper-red leaves, some the size of the riser, swayed gently in the wind as if wafting us upwards. Nobles waved from the towers and spires that poked from the bloodwood's canopy. In the clouds, the chill breeze graduated into a spitting rain. Several scholars produced square umbrellas to cover us, but the rain still snuck in at an angle. I tried to hide the feeling of the drops on my skin, but I was already raw from the duel. I was made to put my helmet on.

Haidak had noticed. "Do you not like the rain, Tarkosi?" he asked.

I stayed silent this time, not giving him the satisfaction. I was glad the armour covered my neck up to the jaw, and he couldn't draw attention to the spread of the dark veins.

"How decidedly odd," Haidak mused.

*This is going to be torturous.*

I couldn't agree more.

\*

I felt a strange popping sensation in my ears as we drew close to the humongous Star of the Tribes. I had thought Danaxt's hall had been a palace, but I saw now I was wrong. The Star was a true palace.

Curves of bloodwood branches formed a sweeping building that looked grown, not built. Faithful to its name and shaped like a star, each of its spikes – one for every tribe of the Bloodlaws – pierced the canopy as if it had fallen from one of the Six Heavens and stuck there. Eyes of painted sandglass covered most of the walls and roof. Statues of stone and carved spires that resembled the Ancestor Towers near Shal Gara gave the palace a spined crown. A web of candlevines and ropes suspended the Star from the topmost branches of the bloodwood. Below its sprawl, a slim and sharp tower hung down towards the Forge, glowing faintly far below.

Before I could take in all the detail, the riser docked at one of the Star's points, and we were moved along a walkway towards an opening beneath the sharp roof. A familiar and what I hoped was a friendly face waited for us.

Sage Alpa the Tenth, with a bristling crowd of highwarders at his back, waited to greet us with open arms. He brought his hands together in a sharp clap as we halted.

"I have enjoyed the pleasure of overseeing four Forgings, and I never get tired of this moment, let me tell you. Greetings, champions! A warm welcome and good tidings and all that. I trust you are not too exhausted from your bouts? What a fierce competition it has been this season! I look forward to what will no doubt be a riveting finale." Alpa's gaze rested on me for a moment before he continued. "But first, before one of you is crowned champion above all and named the greatest sorcerer in all the Swathe, you are to be blessed with the Allmother's presence. No doubt old Hakawith has bored you with all the rules that must be observed?"

"Sage Alpa, perhaps I could—" began the Forge's godseer.

"Yes, yes. You should rest your voice for the morrow, old man. You want to keep the company of the Allmother? Then you should become a sage. Or better yet, win a Forging. I will escort them from here on. As is tradition, no?"

Godseer Hakawith clutched his tablet. "As is tradition."

"Good!" With another clap of his hands, Alpa turned on his heel and entered the Star. "I invite you to follow me, champions."

"Will we see the Allmother straight away?" asked Naxāko, as we delved into a wide corridor that glowed with the warm light of fireworms. Pillars of gold and jade and malachite glistened. Rain pattered on the triangular windows that spread across the ceiling.

"Gods, no. The Allmother has a very particular nose, you see, and while you upholders are dressed in your best, I'm sure, our champions here are thick with the dust and blood of battle."

"Somebody should tell the matriarch of Lostriver," Haidak piped up.

"Sage Haidak Baran," said Alpa. "It is good to finally meet you. I hear a lot of talk."

"Is that so?"

I scowled, trying to decide whether it was an act.

Alpa held Haidak's gaze without blinking or missing a stride. "My condolences for Azcalan."

Haidak bowed his head. "An awful shame."

Before Alpa could speak further, we came to the core of the Star, where six more corridors spread out before us. We were shown to four separate doors that led to opulent chambers. Servants and more warders waited silently smiling. The smell of cloves and cinnamon drifted to my nose.

"Welcome to your chambers!" Alpa announced. "Bathe, bind your wounds, rest, take time to prepare your petitions, and you will be called upon before lastlight to meet the glorious Allmother."

Before I was ushered into our new chambers, I caught Okarin's eye while searching for Haidak's. She gave me a lingering look of encouragement and solidarity before she disappeared.

Caraq's first act was to shoo all the servants away with her big hands. They left their bowls of steaming water and platters of unidentifiable foods behind in a hurry and scarpered from the room. The door was locked shut behind them.

"This tharantos nest is rather nice, no?" said the wingmaster, rubbing her hands. "Cosy."

I threw myself down on a flat couch and removed my helmet. "Gods, this is challenging," I said.

"Haidak Baran's got a big mouth for certain, but you keep it up now, hero. Keep calm," Caraq urged as she began to check the various nooks and doors of the chamber. The floor was solid jade and the ceiling a whorl of varnished bloodwood. More fireworms buzzed in their sandglass prisons.

Lying upon a table that grew from the wall, fresh finery had been laid out, including two disgusting lancewing-feather scarves that had been dyed in Scion colours.

I pointed at one. "Are we supposed to wear those?"

"I would imagine so," said Caraq as she began to sift through the garments. "They want a matriarch, do they? I'll show them a matriarch. You better get to cleaning the dust off that shiny new armour, young Tarko."

I drummed my fingers on the couch.

"You did well battling against the water weaver. How does it feel?" Caraq asked.

"Still painful. For more ways than one."

The wingmaster nodded. "Few seasons back some nomad bandits learned of Lostriver from a disgruntled exile and thought we'd make quite the easy prey. We gave them fair warning three different times, and each time, I warned them that only death would welcome them to Lostriver." She held up three fingers as she paused. "The first time, I went alone on Ana to meet their caravan. There were hundreds of warriors with their women and children and beasts all in tow. I tell them to turn around and they chased me off with arrows. The second time, I brought all my seconds, and together we told them to turn around and that only death awaited them. Arrows came again with laughter and threats. The third time, after I had let them hack a path within miles of Lostriver, I brought twenty lancewings. What did I tell them?"

"To turn around?"

"You got it. Did they listen? Not in the slightest. More arrows and more threats. So we did what we had promised," said Caraq, staring at the ceiling. "I am not and never will be proud of it, but we murdered them all with the full force of Lostriver."

"All of them?"

"All. None could be allowed to spread the word of Lostriver. We even hunted down the exile and covered all their tracks," she replied. "I think of it often. I hear the screams in the noise of the waterfall at times. That kind of thing brands the mind. I ask myself why we stooped to such violence. Because it was necessary. Sometimes you can't avoid doing the wrong thing for the right reasons."

I dug my nails into the arm of the couch. "I assume you're talking about Narikis. Or Zerocta?"

Caraq winked. "Oh, I'm just talking."

The wingmaster had found an ornate grey robe and a circlet of silver with dangling gems that glowed green. An array of paints and powders waited upon another table, and Caraq painted a black stripe along her bald head before putting the circlet on.

"Hah! If Ogarosh could see me now, he'd have a frothing fit. Do I look as good as the other matriarchs, Tarko?" Caraq said through a grin.

“Better,” I replied, finding a moment to calm my breath and heart. I would’ve taken the darkest night in the loam over knowing Haidak was sitting a stone’s throw down the hall, but I judged he was as trapped as I was. Serisi’s keen ears heard no clicking of locks or tramping of feet, just the murmur of voices. The Allmother’s laws were a shield between us.

After a rumble of my stomach, I picked at the morsels on the platters: little towers of nuts, fruits, and crumbled cheeses. They were far too delicate. I had to eat a dozen of them to feel remotely full. An alcove filled with fire crackled at the far end of the wedge-shaped chamber, and I stretched my hands to the flames. It seemed to help with the lingering ache of the rain and water spells.

“What will you tell the Allmother, Tarko?” asked Caraq.

“The truth: that there are demons in the world, and we have a prisoner to prove it. I should be good at it by now, after all the times we’ve tried to explain it,” I answered, deep in thought. I tried to approach the challenge like a duel, thinking up all the ways my enemy might try to pincer me.

“Haidak must be using the promise of riches and power with the other nobles. And if that doesn’t work, then I wager he turns to spreading fear and making threats. The Allmother has no need for riches, so I think he will either try to intimidate her or appeal to her sensibilities and promise the safety of her people. That’s more likely. He’ll negotiate a peaceful surrender to the Last Clan in return for Dorla Sel’s nectra.”

*It would be a false promise, Serisi piped up. My kin would not accept it. Over the eons, we have witnessed far too many uprisings of conquered foes.*

“I’ll use the same fear,” I went on. “I’ll remind Tzatca that three bloodwoods have already fallen and the same could easily happen to Dorla Sel. I’ll offer proof that Haidak cannot, and if she can’t wait for Bathnarok to arrive, then I’ll show her Serisi. And then I’ll offer her the easier alternative of destroying the Fireborn and the Iron Icon’s chances at opening a doorway.”

Free of my mind, the plan sounded simple and solid. It bolstered me.

“What about you, Caraq? What will you say?”

“I’d intended to remind the Allmother of the loam and the citizens of the Swathe beyond her bloodwoods. Of the thousands upon thousands that would die at the hands of the demons. But after hearing your plan, Tarko, I think I’ll just sit back and do some encouraging murmuring and nodding.”

While she spoke, Caraq found an ornate stone shelf lined with berry wines and fermented spirits. With a shrug, she poured herself a small measure of drink in a jade cup. “Gods’ courage?”

I straightened, feeling my body healing the bruises from the duel. “Can’t hurt.”

Caraq paused midway to handing me a cup of my own. “Wait. Were we supposed to bring a gift?”

\*

The harsh fists came rapping at the door within two hours, just long enough for me bathe, sharpen up the polish on my armour, and stare into the flames, crafting all manner of arguments for the Allmother.

The knocks stoked all the tension I’d spent the hours ignoring. My throat grew tighter, and I felt hotter than I usually did.

With Caraq standing before me, the door was opened to reveal a smiling Sage Alpa.

“You dress to impress, Matriarch. You look quite the noble. And Tarko, I’m glad you appreciate the armour I sent you. It suits you, pardon the pun.”

“You sent this?” I blurted. “Why?”

“I felt your old armour needed something of an upgrade, as the architects say. That, and we couldn’t have you appearing so shabbily before the Allmother. You’re wearing the finest Dorla Sel armour made by the best smiths in all the Swathe, I tell you.”

“Then I should say thank you, Sage. I appreciate it.”

Alpa beamed. “Let’s hope it does its job.”

*Seems as if this jolly worm is on our side after all*, mused Serisi.

“Is it time?”

Alpa waved a hand towards the hall beyond the door. “That it is. Tzatca awaits. And don’t forget your feathers, Tarko. The Allmother herself asks you wear them.”

I grumbled to myself as Caraq placed the draping scarf of lancewing feathers over my shoulders. It was strangely heavy, and the feathers that grazed my cheek made me itch.

“Fetching,” Alpa chuckled.

“And the others?” I asked, finding nobody but highwarders outside my door.

“Already waiting for us. You are the last to be fetched. I thought it best to keep you and Haidak apart as long as possible.”

“Probably for the best, Sage.”

“He is quite the bastard, isn’t he?” said Alpa.

“You have no idea.”

The sage and his highwarders led us down a stairwell at the centre of the hall that spiralled to levels below. A vacuous chamber waited for us, filled with the quite keening of panpipes. A tree of pure gold grew in the middle of the room. Around it stood a wall of warders, and then a ring of servants tending to the meagre gathering that occupied the hall. All the sorcers and upholders were already there, along with those I assumed to be the sages of Dorla Sel. Their stilted conversation died to the sound of our feet on the stone floor. Piercing the room was the Allmother’s throne: a single column of jade veined with gold and carved with face after face, and Alpa guided me to stand at its feet.

“Every previous Allmother stares down on the current,” Alpa quietly explained, before striding away to clap his hands at the wizened godseer, Hakawith. “Tell the Allmother’s warders that we are all gathered!”

“Paragon Terelta,” Okarin greeted me with a nod as Caraq and I lifted crystal cups from servants’ hands. “Nice feathers.”

“Same to you, Envoy.”

She wore the same uncomfortable scarf, though hers was painted red and silver for Shal Gara. Naxāko and Iro’s feathers were black and teal, and Haidak’s an unwitting Fireborn crimson.

“You fought well today,” she said. “Tell me the truth: did you think you’d make it here?”

*Never had a doubt*, said Serisi, and I stole her words.

“Just as I expected,” said the envoy with a smile. “Though it pains me to have Haidak here.”

“And his pawn Naxāko.”

A shape loomed in my peripheries. It was the sage of Dorla Sel’s scholar tribe. He was an abnormally lofty man. He must have stood two heads taller than I did. With his crown of feathers, he reached almost eight feet tall.

“Paragon Terelta and Matriarch...”

“Caraq Gaakaran of Lostriver.”



“I am Sage Alamsa, and you have my congratulations on making it this far,” said the sage in a sonorous voice.

I bowed my head in thanks.

“And Envoy Okarin of Shal Gara, I believe? My condolences for your bloodwood. We have not seen the fall of a single bloodwood in hundreds of seasons, never mind three. It is fascinating.”

I could tell Okarin also struggled to hold her tongue. The white beads in her hand clacked loudly. “Fascinating is certainly one way to put it.”

Alamsa nodded deeply. “After the Forging, I would be intrigued to record your impressions of the fall, if I may.”

“My impressions?”

“A witness account, if you will, to see if other bloodwoods might learn and avoid the same tragedy. I also hear an intriguing rumour that Shal Gara remembered how to move before its end.”

Okarin spoke through a cemented smile. “All will be revealed soon, Sage Alamsa, I’m sure.”

With nothing more than another nod and his work seemingly done, Alamsa moved away to the clump formed around Haidak and Naxāko with a musical humming.

“Do you hate this as much as I do?” Okarin asked me.

“Probably more. I have two tempers to lose.”

Okarin smirked. “Have you thought more on what I said about returning home?”

“Although I appreciate it, the Swathe is my home now, Envoy,” I told her. “And the Scions are my family.”

“And Ralish?”

“Especially Ralish, if she’ll still have me after all is said and done.”

Okarin kept her smile as a gong sounded and put a silence to us. The harsh rhythm of highwarders approaching stole our attention. The highwarders already spread around the hall began to march in time. The sages and servants receded away from the champions and our upholders. Sage Alpa held his hands to the lofty ceiling and cleared his throat.

“Allmother Tzatca arrives!”

No sooner had he spoken than a mass of glistening warders appeared at the rear of the grand hall. Several bore golden torches belching green smoke that stank of herbs and cedar. There, in the spiral of colour, and to the nervous lurch of my stomach, I at last laid eyes upon the Allmother of the Swathe.

