

THE MARK OF A LEGEND



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Prologue

The wind howled and snapped at the canvas walls of my pavilion. The cloying stench of decaying flesh strangled the air. Shadows flickered across the room, cast by the dancing flames of the many oil lamps. I knew better than to think they were ghosts or the Sheduin, but the shifting darkness had a life of its own.

When death nears, the mind has a way of playing tricks on you. If Kasumi and Sarazan did not return soon, this place would be my tomb.

Damn! What an arrogant fool I'd been. I'd known the risks of thieving a body past childhood, but this mind and body had been too strong for me to resist the temptation. So I stole it anyway.

Fool that I am, I actually thought I'd succeeded. The transanimation had gone smoothly. The man's mind and soul had been cleanly purged, and his brain and body had become my vessel.

But the heart governs all.

Vendrian scientists had been wrong, as I'd always suspected. The heart is not just an organ that pushes blood through the body, but rather an emotional gateway that feeds the mind. It is the source of premonition, psychokinesis, and telepathy. And it is where the soul resides, or at the very least, the physical source that binds it.

Stealing a man's brain will only take control of his mind, eradicating his thoughts and absorbing his memories. But to truly gain control over another, heart and soul must merge.

And yet, I'd thought I could overcome the heart. But too much time had passed. The man's heart and soul had intertwined, and breaking the bonds between them had destroyed both. I suppose it is much the same as two lovers who've grown old together. When one dies, the other soon follows.

That's why we were here. That's why I'd brought all my shagan brothers and sisters to the edge of the world, to this permafrozen wasteland, where the last remnants of some dying people desperately clung to life.

I needed a new body, and my people had scoured the world for a worthy replacement. It

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was my best dreamseer, Sarazan, who had come across a boy like none that either of us had ever seen. A mind with near infinite potential. A mind I was determined to have, no matter the costs.

But my time as a body thief had taught me one very important thing--you never steal a body blindly. Before I could take the boy, I needed Sarazan to delve into his mind. To steal what memories he could, and if possible, to bring back a neural schematic. But mind transposition left the body incapable of protecting itself, so to keep Sarazan safe, I'd sent Kasumi, my own personal guard. I'd expected them to be gone for several hours at most, yet two days had passed.

A scream floated on the wailing wind. Gooseflesh rippled across my body, and I shuddered.

I parted the canvas door and stepped into the swirling snow. Like a thousand frozen needles plunging into my flesh, the biting cold wrenched away my breath. I yanked my furs tighter and gazed out into the haze of misty fog.

Just beyond the scattering of winterblooms, all twisted and stunted, lay the Andakar Wastes--a land locked in ice, where even in summer, life could not take hold. Ahead, lay only death.

I squinted, looking through the black, spindly branches and past the gnarled trunks that leaned like the bent backs of aged men. But with my failing eyes, I could see nothing.

I'd made the treacherous journey to the Northern Taiga before. Even lived there once in a past life. But I'd never dared venture beyond the forests. I'd lived long enough to know that every culture feared the Wastes, even the hearty Kants with their iron skin and the deadrisers who welcomed death. This was a place, after all, that rarely saw the sun or moon. As such, no religion that worshipped a deity of the firmament could ever find a home in Andakar. It was not only a place of death, but a place without a god.

Even pioneers and prospectors who could not be swayed by rumors of ice specters or dead cities returned with tales that would frighten the unfrightenable. Though few such men ever returned, and those who did were forever changed.

Thus, I knew the boy's people couldn't possibly live in Andakar. Surely they came here to hide.

I laughed. *They're running.* Did they think fear would keep us from entering the Wastes?

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It would not. Fear derives from ignorance, and we knew what lay beyond the Northern Taiga.

Another shriek ripped through the frozen air, this time louder. Weakness came over me, and I fell to a knee. My hands shook. Kasumi and Sarazan had been gone for too long.

Something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

It was time to act.

I took a deep breath, and with it, I moved into somnolence and out of consciousness. A surge of electrical activity spread across my brain, and as my sub-consciousness fully awoke, my mind came alive. Half-asleep, I could sense the microscopic chaos within my brain--the spiking of billions of neurons. Yet when summed together, these action potentials began to make macroscopic order. My entire nervous system oscillated with alpha activity, like the steady rhythm of ocean waves.

The many lifetimes as a body-thief had allowed me to hone my Mind-Master skills--secret powers I'd stolen from the Sagery and that I now taught to my shagan brothers and sisters. Like the dreammaker, capable of guiding his own dreams, I had learned to gain control of the deeper parts of my brain, and in turn, command my entire mind. Me, a general, and each neuron was my soldier to command.

One by one, I powered down my senses. I wove new pathways through my mind, until only one sense remained--sound: super powered.

The screams came into focus . . . *Pain. Absolute pain. The screams of a man dying. No, the screams of a man already dead.* My entire body shook. Each scream like an icy knife, pierced my already aching body.

The shared pain was too much.

It ripped me back into wakefulness. By instinct, homeostasis took over. Each neural connection returned to its stable state. Each sense returned, dulled. Only the pain of my rejected transanimation remained.

Sarazan, I'm sorry. I'd have wept, if my eyes could still shed tears. But this body was failing, and at most, I had only a few days left.

A sudden burst of pain ripped through me and I screamed--an echo of Sarazan's pain imprinted in my brain.

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*Did I reach out to you, instinctively, separating my soul to feel, to understand, to help?
Did I bring back a touch of your suffering by mistake? Or was it because I could not save you?
Because as Father to the shagans, when you suffer, I must suffer too*

I ground my teeth, pushing back at the pain. A tooth cracked. Fire spread from my mouth and surged up my face.

The agony of a rejected transanimation is like nothing else in this world. It causes the body to die and decompose simultaneously. Usually horrifically slow. Cells perish one by one, organs slowly fail. Eventually, blood vessels rupture. The skin sloughs off in sheets. Bones crack and crumble to dust.

Medicine cannot slow the process. Sedatives cannot ease the pain. I had only the strength of my mind to keep me from madness.

And yet, I could not shake the thought of Sarazan. I knew his suffering was greater than mine. Though in a way, his torment did not truly belong to this world, but rather to the one beyond. It is the agony of a mind destroyed when it battles another, when the metaphysical bonds that bind us to the living are severed. It is a place on the very edge of Oblivion.

I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, then shifted into the Body of Negation, one of the thirteen Mind-Master techniques. Focusing my mind, I merged my consciousness with my breathing. I visualized shutting off the pain centers in my brain, and then, I compartmentalized my mind, separating thoughts from senses. The agony abated.

In such a state, time becomes, as I suspect, much like that of an animal, if it had no internal biological rhythms. Foresight and hindsight dissipate. Time moves, and yet the conscious mind exists in the moment, for without access to higher cognitive function, time appears to stand still. An hour, a day, a week--they are but a single moment in time.

And yet, a key part of the mind is still alert and capable of waking from a threat.

A mind-wrenching scream pulled me out of the Body of Negation. Everything came into pinpoint focus. Through the swirling snow, I saw him. Stiff and lifeless, even his mouth looked dead, but out of it came an inhuman cry, so hideously painful it was like nails driven into my skull.

Pale white, with eyes to match, Sarazan was a shrieking corpse.

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“For Logeron’s sake,” I shouted, “put him out of his misery.”

I shifted into the Body of Accelerated Force.

A tingling wave rushed down my body. Adrenaline surged through my veins.

Acetylcholine burst from every neuromuscular junction.

In a fraction of a second my muscles expanded violently as a host of excitatory hormones flooded my body, ripping my brittle skin. But I felt only the swell of electrical current that blasted through me like bolts of lightning.

I’m sorry, my brother.

I exploded toward Sarazan. The arms that held him braced for impact, grips tightening.

In one fluid motion, my arm shot out, fingers pulling together, knuckles raising and bending slightly to form a knife edge, hand crashing into Sarazan’s chest.

My strike compressed his ribcage and slammed into his heart, stopping it instantly. Sarazan’s screams ceased.

I collapsed to my knees, exhausted. Every part of my body burned. “His brain was scrambled. He was beyond saving.” I could not bear to look up at Kasumi. “Sarazan was right. We should have never come here.”

“It’s too late for that, I’m afraid,” replied a man’s voice, deep and rough.

I looked up and was taken by a man standing beside Kasumi.

A giant, seven feet tall at least. He wore the robe of a monk, white as his painted face. A thick ivory beard hung down past his chest, intricately braided and adorned with tiny silver beads. His head was shorn and his eyes . . . those eyes could only be the eyes of a Whitevein. Sky blue, rimmed in glacier white, Believers called them the eyes of the divine, but I knew better.

“Delvos, is that you, my brother?” I had failed to see him amidst Sarazan’s screams.

He nodded. “Whitemane, my liege.”

“How long has it been?” I asked.

“Twenty years, two months, five days.”

“So soon.” I had to suppress the anger from my voice. “I sent you to infiltrate the Order.

To--”

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“And I have. The White Hand takes orders from me now.”

“Then why are you here, Brother?”

“Sarazan sent word. Said I must come at once. And now I see why.” His face twitched, and I could see pain buried just beneath the surface. A pain, after nearly a thousand years, he’d learned to hide well. But not from me. “You do not look well, my liege.”

“Death is near, Brother. I’m glad you’re here.” I couldn’t help but smile. It had been too long since Delvos has stood by my side. “How did you escape the Order?”

“I didn’t. We’re on the warpath. Hunting for blood cultists. I have a battalion stationed about a day’s march south.”

“You brought deathmonks here?” Kasumi snapped.

“Calm yourself, woman. There is no danger to us. The High Monk can’t simply leave Vendria to go about his own business. I needed a reason to leave the Order and to come this far north.”

“You play a dangerous game, Brother,” I said.

“For twenty years I’ve played a dangerous game.” He chuckled. “In truth, I’ve been playing at it since the day you made me a shagan, nine hundred eighty-seven years ago.”

I sighed. “I suppose you’re right.”

Kasumi threw a hand across her nose and mouth. Even out here in the open, the stench of my decaying body strangled the air. Her bright yellow eyes glowed within the darkness of her hood. “We must hurry, my lord. They know we’re here now.”

No. They knew we were coming all along. I nodded, and she closed the dozen feet between us in a blink.

“My body is too frail to fight,” I told her. “I’ll need your blades.”

Kasumi lowered her hood and stared icily up at Delvos, her narrow face as hard as stone. She removed her robe, revealing a body of corded muscle and sinew. Dozens of striations ran across her chest, muscles replacing what once had been her breasts. A leather belt hung below her navel, along with a thin strap of cloth covering her crotch and a sheathed blade of godsmetal resting against each hip.

Kasumi, the Mist. She was what we called a Burner, a body thief who burned through

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vessels fifty years faster than most. The warrior Mind-Master techniques, like the Body of Accelerated Force, were so taxing on the mind and body that no shagan could use them more than a few dozen times a day, if that. With the exception of Kasumi. She had learned to hone each newly acquired body until she could carry out such techniques at will and virtually without limit. She had never lived into her thirties. Every version of her had been young and beautiful and strong.

She unsheathed her swords, my gifts to her long ago for saving my life. A gift made from a metal so rare I'd never given it twice. Blue as glacier ice, the blades would never break, nor ever need to be sharpened.

"You'd best send a bird to Pip," I told her. "I want him to take Sarazan's place."

"Now?" she asked.

"Sarazan was like a father to him. And you know how sensitive the boy is. He'll need time to deal with the loss."

"All the more reason to consider someone else," she countered.

"Pip has shown the most promise to be my Dreamlord."

"The boy is talented, sure. But that isn't what worries me."

"Then this advancement," I replied, pausing to give her a smile, "should give him the confidence he needs."

Kasumi shrugged. "We shall see. Shall I send a murkwing?"

"No, a skytrain. I want to be sure he gets the message." I looked across the dozens of tents nailed to the frozen earth. "And Kasumi, rouse the others."

She nodded and left.

"Twenty years and still you have not changed," Delvos said.

"How so, Brother?"

"You're still in love with her," he whispered. "That's why you keep her near."

I'd loved Kasumi once. That's why I'd taught her the secrets of immortality and had given her a gift I could have used to buy a kingdom. I'd spent more years teaching her the Mind-Master techniques than anyone else, even though she'd only taken to two of them.

But she had never loved me back. She had never loved anyone but herself.

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“I keep her close because she’s the best with a blade.” There were more pressing matters than conversations of old love. “I’m glad to see you Whitemane. But your presence here troubles me. Explain yourself.”

“Every caution was taken, my lord.”

His time with the Order had changed him. The way he stood. The way he spoke.

“I received a letter from Sarazan on the 4th of First Sow,” he continued. “Written beneath the words of a priest’s penance, his words were concealed by *liar’s breath*. They were brief and said only this: *Our Lord is dying. But he seeks the Nightweaver. Come at once. The Wastes. Stay invisible.*”

“Sarazan made no mention of this to me. Nor did he once use the name *Nightweaver*.” His clandestine nature troubled me. “Why tell you and not me?”

“Fear,” Delvos replied. “When I found Kasumi and Sarazan waiting for me in Andakar, Sarazan was a wreck. Afraid and paranoid, he made little sense. Kept babbling about how he had warned you over and over and that it was best to just forget this madness. But he said that you would not listen.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “He warned me, yes. And it’s true, I told him I was determined to have the boy. But he never pressed me and he certainly didn’t act paranoid or afraid.”

“He must have had mind sickness. May not have manifested until he was close to the boy and the thought of transposition lay so near to his mind.” He shrugged. “Or perhaps he hid it from you. We all must make sacrifices.”

“If I’d known, I would not have sent him to his death.” I looked into his white-blue eyes. “Surely, you believe me.”

“I feared it was my death you were sending me off to when you ordered me to take the Whitemane.”

His words were a knife. A thousand years of friendship questioned just like that. “Has the Order taught you to hate me, Brother?”

“You mistake me, my liege. You’ve given me more than I ever had a right to. A thousand years of life, of friendship, of living beyond the veil of Vendria’s lies. Do you not see that we are

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all ready to die for you?”

A tiny tear leaked from my desiccated eye. “It is not your deaths I want.”

“And yet, for the cause, each of us is ready to give up our lives. And to concede the gift of immortality that you have shared with us all. I took it as an honor to be the first shagan to attempt to infiltrate the Order. And that the Whitemane was not only said to be the strongest of the Whiteveins in many centuries but also an empath, I knew that I must be the one to steal his body and mind. You were right to send me. You are always right. And that is why I am here now, Brother.”

“Forgive me Delvos, I”

“None needed or given, my lord.” He sighed. “But whatever truth Sarazan knew he did not wish to share. I do not know why. All I know is that he needed my help. As an empath, only I could guide him safely to the boy, and if things went bad, we both knew that he needed a strong weaver to pull him out. And I tried. Not a hundred seers could have pulled him out of that darkness. Even reaching in, it was a battle to get back out.”

“I shouldn’t have ignored his warnings. What good is a leader when he does not listen to those he leads? Arrogance cannot lead men. Nor can blind desire. Have I grown too greedy, my friend?”

Delvos smiled. “Only God is greedier than you, Brother.”

I laughed. “And did you find god in all your years with the Church?”

“Everyone there but me, my lord.” He chuckled. “But in all seriousness, there is none as giving as you. In time, that is what the world will know you for.” Delvos smiled. “You know, for a very long time, I believed there was no Founder. Only you and the mythology you’d given us. A made-up god to conceal your own divinity. In truth, I liked that more.”

“And what changed?”

A long silence passed between us. “I found that you were right.” Before I could ask him what he meant, he added, “There will be a day when we can speak about my time with the Order, but first, you need a body.”

I nodded. “What did you learn, Whitemane?”

“Not much. Sarazan wasn’t in there for more than a moment.” Fear sat behind his eyes. A

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rare thing for a man who'd lived as long as he had.

"Yes, but what did *you* learn?"

"I . . ." He swallowed hard. "I don't know. Once Sarazan started screaming I tried to pull him out. I tried. But I couldn't. Then we had to leave."

I watched the nearly imperceptible twitches in his face, the subtle movements of his eyes, the way his pupils dilated. "I know you well, my friend. What are you hiding? Tell me what's troubling you."

"Blood magic . . . and something else. Something I've never felt before. I know how powerful your mind is, but . . ."

"You needn't be afraid to tell me the truth. It will not weaken my resolve."

"Perhaps it should. Listen to reason and ignore this boy."

Delvos had thieved an empath's body long ago and had been fond of them ever since. Now he only stole bodies that flowed with empath blood. Being able to "sniff" out magic made him an invaluable shagan, but transferring to a mage was always risky. Many body-thieves had been lost trying to take a mage as their vessel. A wise shagan always brought his brothers and sisters with him to take a powerful mind. That's why I had brought an army.

"You said so yourself," I replied. "There's no time."

His eyes shifted. "We could do a blood binding. I've studied the ferrous runes. I even brought an iron suit--"

"Absolutely not! Transanimation onto an inanimate object is an abomination." In truth, the thought not only sickened but terrified me. A perversion of the natural world whose consequences could never be known or measured. "Besides, there's no proof it'll work."

I'd taught Delvos the very secrets of the Founder, everything I'd ever learned. He was not my blood, yet I valued him as much as I valued my own life.

And he doubted me.

I looked into his eyes. "You don't think I'm strong enough, do you?"

The slightest pause passed between us before he replied. "It's just that I've never seen a mind like his, and in your current condition, the transanimation could fail. Or worse, you could merge with the boy. Then you'd both be lost in each other's minds, forever."

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“That has always been the risk of immortality.”

“I know, but we can’t afford to lose you.”

“I’ve never seen you so frightened over a scattering of deadrisers. Even if they are necromancers, they’re certainly no match for three hundred shagans.”

“I never said they were deadrisers. I said I sensed blood magic. And something much stronger. More ancient.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Delvos shook his head. “It’s hard to explain to someone who’s not an empath. But I imagine it felt like the pulse of the Realmwalkers.”

I’d lived long enough to see the days of the Realmwalkers. Those were dark days that consumed the entire West with war. The Vendrian Church claimed that the Realmwalkers were the unholy children of the Sheduin and the Numinar, but as men of science, we shagans had never believed in the Church’s doctrine. I had seen what kind of power science could grant men, so I didn’t need to cling to the belief that the Realmwalkers profound magic had come from the union of some mythical god and evil spirit, or at the very least, from the entities that supposedly served them.

But as enemies to the Church, we could do or say nothing to quell the fears of the common man. Citing scripture to invoke scenarios of Armageddon, Vendria united the western empires and systemically hunted the Realmwalkers to extinction. And in turn, over the centuries that followed, they’d done the same to every other religion and people who do not follow the Church.

“That’s not all,” Whitemane said hesitantly. “When I reached in to pull Sarazan out, what had him was unlike anything I’ve ever seen in the depths of unconsciousness. A true abomination. Countless shadows sewn together by the hands of a madman, every surface brimming with needles, claws, razors, hooks. Each and every one of them forged from black ice, glittering impossibly in a world without light. And even when I let Sarazan go, it would not let me leave.” He shuddered. “Even now, I feel its frigid touch upon me, its ice in my veins. The burning sensation of ice dragged across hot flesh. And screaming. Endless screaming. Every part of my body turned cold and numb, yet burning, burning. And the harder I pulled, the stronger the

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burning and the screaming grew. It was not the mind of a boy in there, but of ten thousand wretched monsters.”

I had been in the minds of many whose people had vanished long ago from this world. Some, truly powerful. But even the most benevolent among them were monstrous beyond imagination within the dark depths of unconsciousness. So it did not matter what the boy was. All I knew was that there was something special about him, something drawing me to him. I wanted to share my feelings with Delvos, but at our core, we shagans were scientists, governed by sound logic and reason. As our leader, I could not be swayed by emotions or unexplainable hunches. And yet, after all my long years, I knew that sometimes intuition trumped reason. Some unknown force was pulling me toward this boy.

And he was powerful. So powerful that he'd scared both Sarazan and Delvos to the brink of madness. That was a power I could use to win our war.

My mind was set. “The necrosis of this vessel is accelerating. And the pain is getting worse. There is no time and no better choice.”

Delvos looked into my eyes, and for the first time in many centuries, what I saw staring back, frightened me. “You risk everything on this boy. But to triumph or to ruin, I'll follow. As will we all.” He turned. “I'll get Naya. We'll need her.”

I watched him go, and never had I been so unsure about what I would find when my mind crashed against the boy's. A lingering truth that Delvos sensed but only I knew. Within that child was a strength I had not felt since Logeron left me to find my own way, many thousands of years ago. That was a thought that truly frightened me. For even now, I was nowhere close to becoming him--a man who had transcended his own humanity.

As such, he had called in to question everything I had ever known about science and theism. Did his emergence prove there was no god, or instead, did it elucidate that since all things within the universe are made of the same stuff, that given enough time, life could evolve ever closer to an all-knowing, all-powerful creator? Was our universe a game of chance laid down by such a god? Or was our universe slowly making one? Knowing the enemy we were secretly fighting against, had left me asking that question more and more. It was why I needed this boy's mind.

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I hoped it would bring me another step closer to the Founder and the power he had unlocked.

Where did you go, my old friend? And why did you abandon me? Why did you abandon us all?

Delvos stood beside me, his breath steaming. He gripped my shoulder and stared out into the misty air as speckles of sunshine poked through the clouds. “They’re moving south. Getting closer actually.”

“They’re not running?”

He shrugged. “I can’t say. But I can feel the boy. A strong pulse of magic courses with each beat of his heart, and along with it, more than a thousand others.”

“So many?”

He nodded.

“Stay close to me. The boy will be guarded.” I looked back to the nearly three hundred of my shagan brothers and sisters who waited for my command.

I gave the signal, and my brethren marched past us. Beneath their robes lay cylindrical metal drums, machines built in our underground labs. It made them appear like an army of monstrous hunchbacks lurching through the edge of the forest.

Vaporized glycerin poured out of their sleeves and from beneath their robes, pumped through tubes that ran to the machines strapped to their backs. As it came into contact with the moisture in the air, a dense cloud of fog formed around each of them, concealing their movements.

A few dozen men and women stayed behind. Armed with their own specialized machines, they waited for a different command.

Then suddenly, a blast of heat, hot as a furnace, washed over me. The intensity burned away the fog, momentarily revealing us.

“We’ve been discovered,” I shouted.

Blurs of dark blue moved among the ice-frosted trees. Before my eyes could focus on whatever they were, a figure rose out of the ground, revealing the pale naked torso of . . . a

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monster, or maybe a man. Twisted, misshapen, most of his body was covered with leaves and twigs held to his skin by patches of black mud. His haunting blue eyes glowed as bright as the moon above. Even though I didn't believe in such superstition, I couldn't help but think that the Spirit Moon full in midday was a bad omen.

Then it occurred to me. They hadn't come here to hide. They'd come here to ambush us.

In a flash, the man's clawed hand closed around the leg of the shagan before him.

My shagan brother screamed, then spun, tearing the gray cloth in the naked man's grasp. Beneath the hood, I recognized my old friend, Yen. Waxy and pale, his face appeared lifeless. His pupils, mere pinpricks. His eyes, a lifeless gray.

Delvos was right. Blood magic. Yen was now under the mage's control, lost to us.

Yen reached into his cloak, searching for something to use against us--an explosive, a corrosive chemical, maybe even a biotoxin--and then he yanked out an unopened vial.

He went to uncork it, and I moved into the Mind-Master technique, the Mind that Stretches Time.

In perfect unison, billions of neurons propagated a unifying signal, flooding their surrounding synaptic environments with a host of powerful chemicals. That signal commanded the mind to rest, while specialized cells--heavy myelinated and mere millimeters behind the light-sensing neurons of my eyes--awoke. Like tiny brains, they began to process nothing but the incoming visual stimuli that poured in.

For a moment, light flickered all around me. Objects moved oddly as if the world was suddenly made up of stuttering images. Then, the images merged, and the flickering vanished.

Everything around me slammed to a halt.

The Mind-Master techniques took a vast toll on the mind and body. Using them would accelerate the degeneration of my body, but I had always known this would be a one-way trip. I would push this vessel until it disintegrated, and I would return with a new body. Or I would not return at all.

My eyes moved past Yen, looking out into the Taiga. Dozens of monstrous men hid among the dark silhouettes of the icy winterblooms. No longer blurs, as they had been just moments ago, they appeared as frozen as the trees, as still and silent as if locked in ice. Of

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course, that was only my accelerated perception, seeing the world at more than six thousand hertz.

In truth, the creatures were moving quickly, hunched over, hands and feet propelling them forward across the ground like beasts. I wondered if they were human or if their strange way of life had simply twisted them into monsters.

There were more of them peering up through holes like the one the blood mage had risen up out of. They had us surrounded. How had Delvos not felt them?

I turned back to Yen. With a snap of my wrist, cold metal slid down my forearm. The wooden handle glided into my hand, and I cocked the trigger back with a click.

Forgive me, Yen.

I fired.

My hold over the Mind-Master slipped away. Time sped up. A loud bang shook the air, and my hand kicked upwards. Yen's head flew back, brains spraying out in a bloody mist.

Lowering my eyes, I turned from the gruesome sight of having to kill one of my own.

I had never liked using the weapon. It was dangerous and highly illegal, and outside of the shagan community, no one had seen one since the First Age when technology had been banned. It was why I'd only ever made one.

The bones in my thumb cracked as I clicked the trigger a second time. Pain rippled up my trembling arm as I lifted the gun. But as I aimed for the blood mage's head, he vanished back into the hole from which he had sprung.

Delvos took me by the arm and lifted me to my feet. The tendons and muscles in my shoulder came apart. My vision dimmed. I swore he was going to rip my arm off. I bit my tongue and held back my screams.

I focused on my anger, using rage to bind the pain. "Set the ground afire. Leave them no place to hide."

Hoarfrost coated the ground in an icy blanket, protecting the dry tinder beneath. But as the flames blasted across the needle-laden earth, it turned the thin coat of ice to vapor, and the ground caught fire.

"Pump methane down the holes," I commanded, "then burn them out."

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Screams pierced the air--the sounds of men burning alive. I took no joy in it. Not because I knew well their pain, but because I'd killed more men than I could count and seen countless more die. Many of their faces still haunted me, as did their cries, which filled some of my darkest dreams.

Immortality bears a heavy price. I had not etched away my soul for everlasting life, but rather for the chance to set humanity free. If we shagans were to fall and our knowledge was lost, we would forever be bound by the strings of our invisible gods--or at least beings who fancied themselves as such. Never allowed to evolve as the Founder knew we could. That, I would never let happen.

I looked back to the two women who waited for my commands. My two specialists. Blood magic was dangerous, but a dark mage possessed far more powerful magic, and if there were as many mages here as Delvos had sensed, I'd have to use more drastic measures than fire.

"Naya, arm the bio-cannon."

Her emerald eyes narrowed and she grinned. Then she opened her cloak to reveal a hundred tiny pockets sewn into the thick, gray fabric. "With what, my lord?"

"Lifesbane."

"But the boy," Delvos cried.

"We have antidotes. Just get me to him quickly."

He hesitated. Lifesbane was extremely deadly. It took hold the moment it was inhaled, converting the body's energy to heat by causing the mitochondria to uncouple in rapid progression. Within minutes, the body burns itself out. The blood boils. Every cell turns to dust. There are few worse ways to die.

But only the boy needed to live, and in truth, I knew he was the only one who could.

Delvos nodded. He knew there was no other way.

Naya went to work. Beside her, Kasumi stood still and silent, her eyes fixed on me.

I lowered my head. Hundreds of swords slid from leather sheaths, long and curved and deadly sharp. A head nod was the only order I needed to give.

The burning creatures charged us with inhuman speed, running on all fours, their backs and legs twisted and misshapen to accommodate their unnatural gait.

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“Naya, wait for my signal.” I turned to Whitemane. “Lead me to the boy.”

Kasumi’s eyes were fixed on the approaching enemy. “Point me in the right direction and stay close behind me.”

When I was just a boy, I had a love for movies. This was, of course, before the Great Law had been established and the world had all but changed in the blink of an eye. I’d been fascinated that the still frames of pictures could be animated to show the smooth movements of life.

Watching Kasumi move and fight reminded me of those nostalgic days before Vendria had hanged my parents and nearly every one I had known for the unwillingness to forget the past.

Kasumi did not appear to run or move, she simply was someplace in one moment and in another the next. You could never see where she was or where she was going, only where she had been. She was the mist, something you could touch but never grasp, see but never truly behold.

Sometimes I would move into the Mind that Stretches Time and watch her. To see her move was to know genius, to see a master at work. Every movement was perfect, deliberate, and yet, so graceful, so poetic, like the hand-strokes of a Lelandian painter.

I’d spent many years of my life watching her train. The endless hours of her repetitive forms. She’d tried to teach me, but had never really had the patience to teach, and I never really had the skill to learn. Nor the desire for such wanton waste.

We moved quickly, following the carnage that Kasumi left in her wake. Bodies appeared to collapse on their own. Appendages dropped from bloodied stumps, and heads fell from severed necks as Kasumi moved through them like the wind, invisible blades severing everything they touched.

“They’re only familiars,” Whitemane shouted, “drawing us away from their masters.” He pointed south into the Taiga. “The mages are fleeing.”

I spun around. “Naya, fire the cannon!”

A thunderous boom shook the ground. A moment later, hundreds of sharp cracks sounded above. The sky turned white and rained death. The familiars collapsed as the lifesbane took hold.

“This way,” cried Delvos, pulling me through the trees.

My heels had split open, and each step felt like landing on a bed of razors. It wouldn’t be

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long before the bones in my legs would crack or break. Every beat of my heart hurt. Every breath burned like fire.

I gripped Delvos with what strength I had left, willing myself to keep moving. I could feel my approaching death. It wouldn't be long now before my veins would burst.

Just ahead of us, Kasumi reappeared in the midst of several dead familiars. She stood there, waiting for us to catch up to her. When we did, I collapsed at her feet.

Delvos stifled a cry and knelt beside me. "Are you still with us?" The look on his face was grim.

Tears welled in my eyes, and suddenly, I was blind. I tried not to scream but the pain was too much. I knew then it wasn't tears that flowed down my face. It was blood. The blood vessels in my eyes had ruptured. Every one of them. The pain was like a thousand fiery needles plunged into each cornea.

"The end is near," I whispered.

"How long?" asked Delvos, voice shaking.

Blood ran down my face and out of my mouth and ears. "A few minutes."

Strong pressure pushed into my back and under my thighs. Deep, blinding pain spread across my body, as if I was being crushed by the ground beneath me.

"I'll carry him," snapped Delvos.

"There's no time to argue." Kasumi's voice was sharp as a blade. "I'm stronger. You just lead us to the boy."

The whole world rose and fell, and with each moment, my body slammed against what felt like stone. My bones cracked, then broke and snapped with each thunderous step. The friction of my clothes shredded my skin, tore my muscles. *Give me death*, I thought, wanting to be rid of the ever-growing torment.

Must keep my wits. Must not give in now.

I moved into the Mind of a Thousand Mirrors. Transferring all the energy of my non-vital organs to my brain, I divided my mind over and over. One by one, and within each mind, I unlocked each Mind-Master. The Box of Contemplation and Silence gave me clarity; the Frozen Heart of the Iron Mind gave me resolve; the Mind that Stretches Time gave me insight; the Body

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of Negation took away the pain; the Mind of Compromising Perception stripped away all of my mortal senses.

The outside world came alive within me. I could sense it, almost see it. A world of darkness illuminated by the lights of all things, living and non-living.

Kasumi carried me in her arms, her heartbeat pulsing against me, beating like a war drum. In a flood of noise, her emotions and thoughts washed over me. And so did Whitemane's and those of a hundred other organisms nearby.

But I pushed them all aside and focused on just one. The boy's. He was near. The lifesbane had him in its grip, but the strength of what flowed in his blood kept it at bay, kept it from strangling him. How could such a thing be possible?

No time to think on it.

I could not see the boy, but I could feel him. He was close enough now that I could make my move. But he was not alone. His people were with him. I would have to trust that my shagan brothers and sisters would be able to defeat them.

Knowing what was about to come, I merged the separate parts of my mind, then detached mind from body. With it, I separated my soul from my heart, and transposed both mind and soul onto the boy. As I felt the telltale signs of our minds merging, I severed the ties from my former body, letting it die within Kasumi's arms.

The boy and I became one, two minds, two souls sharing a single vessel. That very second, I shut down all of his senses, blinding him to the outside world.

The many hundreds of times I had transposed my mind had allowed me to bear the horror of what was about to take place. The confusion, the madness, the incomprehensible pain.

As our minds merged, his psyche crashed against mine. All of my past began to weave its way into his. Our thoughts and feelings intertwined. His memories became mine and my memories became his. Along with our dreams, our fears, our deepest, darkest secrets. All of it melded as one.

Death pervades the air. Its cloying stench strangles me. But it's not the smell or the sight of the countless corpses neatly stacked side-by-side all around me that brings fear, it's the eyes looking back at me. They don't appear to be dead. There is life, a past, memories too vast to

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comprehend.

'Lay, my child.'

I hesitate, but she smiles and nods and motions for me to lie down. I do as she commands as do we all. The stone floor is cold upon my back but it's the bodies lying beside me that cause my skin to crawl, my hair to stand on end, my body to shiver. Not because their dead. But because of what must be done.

Her hand reaches out to touch me. Icy cold fingers burn like hot iron against my skin. She draws a pattern into my forehead and I scream, then gag at the smell of burning flesh. I cry out for mercy, but the only comfort she gives is her rhythmic voice, chanting in the tongue of the dead. Something within me stirs. Warmth fills my body. It washes over me, penetrates me. The fire burning across my forehead ceases and I become one with the warmth--formless, endless warmth.

Light bursts into the world. Infinite strings of luminescence fills my vision, permeates my mind. I bathe in the light. I feel its touch, hear its whispers. I am both its master and its slave, a servant to its wishes and a ruler to its actions.

Warmth turns to heat turns to fire turns to pain. Existence becomes a blaze. A fiery rage of pain that knows no ends. 'Stop the burning,' cries a cascade of voices woven as one. 'End our pain.' The light demands, and so I must act. For I am the keeper, the binder, the weaver, the maker. I give it what it wants. What they all want. What they've been whispering to me since the moment of my conception.

I reach out to touch cold flesh, icy and burning. My embrace is fire on the wind, light born in darkness. All at once the world dims, and the cold sting of stone reminds me of where I am, of who I am. A gasp of air echoes in the antechamber. It careens off the walls and ceilings like the sounds of a hundred men breaking the surface to breath.

I stand and watch the dead rise all around me

Memories, so many memories. So much emotion . . . pulling at me, unraveling me.

As the knife cuts quickly at the dead man's flesh, his shadow smiles down at me. I avert his gaze, still guilty for cutting him. I put it to my lips, pushing back the stench. After all this time, I've still not grown accustomed to the smell of death. What is wrong with me? Why can't I do

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this like all the others . . . ?

Must not let them become me. Must not forget

I gathered all of those raw feelings and recollections. In an instant, I split my mind in two and moved his past from one mind to the other. I wove all of his emotions and memories together as I called forth the Locked Mind Without a Key. Then I placed them inside. All of what made him who he was vanished from my perception, and I regained my own identity.

Who are you? he asked. *What are you doing here?* His words were woven with confusion and anger.

We could hear each other's thoughts, feel each other's emotions. But I knew how to keep mine at bay. I knew how to trick and lie without him knowing, just as if we were speaking face to face.

I am you, I replied. *But a part that you have buried.*

He was full of mistrust and utterly confused, for his mind was scrambling to process the memories and experiences of a thousand new lifetimes--a billion billion memories rushing in to him all at once. I would need to ease his fears and cure his bewilderment. But that would require his self-reflections, and they were hidden from me inside the Locked Mind. I could feel their imprints--a sense of longing, of something missing. Yet I could remember nothing about them. His past would not be mine until he was eradicated. Only then could I slowly assimilate them into my own memories and have the knowledge and wisdom of all he had seen and lived.

But it would not be long before his mind realized the truth. I would have to lull him into my confidence before I could sever the ties that bound him to this body. But just as he had transferred his past to me, so too had I transferred my past to him. He did not know his memories from mine, and I could ease his worries with my own reflections.

You're scared, aren't you? I pressed softly against him, infusing a sense of confidence, trust and strength.

He relaxed.

We're under attack, I added, *and you're unsure what to do.*

He stiffened at my words, and a part of him grasped for what stood right in front of him, what he could see with his own eyes if I had not blinded him. Our minds shared the same brain,

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and as long as I remained blind, so would he.

I am here to give you the courage to stand against your enemies and the power to defeat them. I pushed a little harder and flared a memory of mine to show him a great battle I had won.

Courage welled inside him, and his mind relaxed. Like a gap opening in a soldier's armor, I readied the blade to plunge into his flesh.

Then, a piercing shriek broke through the veil. A cry of pain closely familiar. That voice . . . it was Kasumi's.

My heart quickened, and I let down my guard. My hold over the boy slipped. The world came into focus, and all of our senses returned--sights, sounds, smells.

Kasumi knelt on all fours. From her mouth spewed blood and guts and a horrific gurgling shriek like that of a dying animal. Roiling boils spread across her skin, growing so large that the skin could stretch no further. They burst, expelling blood and puss that dripped down her shivering body like melting wax. Above her stood a hooded giant, stick thin and as tall as two men. Within his blue hood was a face pale as death, purple veins snaking beneath ash white skin. Long white hair leaked from out of his hood, and staring down at Kasumi were eyes of river blue, piercing and haunting and altogether otherworldly. I could feel him, a strange pulse that radiated out of his body, beating like a heart. Magic. Powerful magic the likes of which I'd not seen for ten thousand years.

Only feet away from Kasumi, a man laid dead, decapitated head resting beside him. His river blue eyes stared out into nothing. Like the others, he wore the same blue robe and had the same golden white hair and pale skin. Seeing him dead, the child's pain wrenched at me. Tears welled in our eyes.

I gazed across the once-white field, now spattered red with blood and littered with corpses. His people. My people. Our anguish intertwined, compounding upon one another.

Then a line of black caught my eye. Soldiers flowed over the sloping ridge and poured down across the hillside. The only sound was the thunder of their movement. Their faces and torsos were painted black, their pants gleamed a stark white. Deathmonks. It took only a moment to see that their numbers were greater than both of ours combined.

How had they found us?

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At their back trailed a single man dressed all in white. Face and hands ghostly pale. Not paint, but white ink tattooed into his skin. Could it be Ashvik, the High Monk? I reached out, transposing a part of my mind, looking to see if he could be the zealot my people knew as the White Hand of Death.

He grabbed hold of my projection as if he'd felt me coming. *After all these years, I've finally found you*, he said. *And I was beginning to think you were nothing more than a fabrication.*

And the Church will continue to think as much, I replied, *for I'll see to it that every one of you dies.*

Ashvik laughed. *You haven't even the strength to defeat the Corrupted and their Soulwarden, let alone my monks.*

Corrupted? Soulwarden?

The revelation of his words pulled me out of our interwoven stream of consciousness, and I was made to see what I had been blind to all along. Thousands of projections emanated from the boy, soothing the departed souls of his brethren and mine. Voiceless words guiding them, showing them the way.

Ashvik yanked me back. *So, he was right. You don't even know what you're up against. He? What do you mean?*

Ashvik said nothing, but through the stream I felt a sick satisfaction; a twisted glee welling up inside of him. A darkness bloomed in my mind, and I reeled.

Bottling away those dark thoughts, I refocused and pulled myself deeper into Ashvik's psyche. I could not battle two minds at once, but I hadn't come to wage a battle. Instead, I'd come to steal a thought.

Once inside, it was clear that Ashvik had learned to rebuild his mind, to fortify and strengthen it. But in a house with a trillion doors, not even the great White Hand of Death could lock them all. And when a weakness presented itself, I ripped two words from his mind. *A traitor.*

No! I shouted back. *I have no traitors.*

Or did I? I ripped through his thoughts, searching for a name. But whatever vulnerability

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he had shown had vanished. Pressing against his mind was like trying to move a mountain.

Wooden doors turned to steel. Locks and chains and pathways with no light.

Had he let me in by accident or was he playing games with me?

Untangling myself from his mind, I tried to gather my thoughts, all the while holding on to both the boy and Ashvik.

I'd underestimated the Order. Whether through torture or some twisted science they'd stolen the secrets of dreamweaving from my people. Maybe they'd even learned to body-thief. Maybe Ashvik had. How else could he have made his mind so strong?

My head spun with nausea.

With the boy's eyes, I looked out, searching the faces of both the living and the dead. The darkness within my mind spread like poison as I desperately searched for him; searched for the one man I could not bear to betray me.

No! It cannot be.

Like a blade carving itself into my flesh, the High Monk's mouth turned upward in a wicked smile. That single expression was an affirmation of horrific truth.

Whitemane, where are you? Did you betray me? Did you betray us all? Or did Ashvik break your mind?

Ashvik took hold of me, his iron grip like hands upon my throat. His strong, weathered voice was like a gong banging inside my head. *The Order will make me a prophet for killing you. And King Wardan will make me a lord for killing your people. But first, I'll let the boy break your mind.*

I could not know if Ashvik was an evil man or if the devotion to his faith had made his actions evil. But I knew he could not know truth without seeing it, for our ears and our minds and even our hearts are blind to it. We must be made to see.

And so I opened my mind to his, handing him the knife and my bare neck and hoping he would not cut. My life hinging on the hopes that he could still be made to see. But there was no other way. My people could not defeat them both. I could not defeat them both.

From my eyes to his, I gave to him the things that Logeron had seen and given to me. A burden no man should be made to carry, but one that Logeron had given to me nonetheless. *This*

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is a burden I give to you, Ashvik, should you see it in your heart to destroy me.

A shriek reverberated from my mind. Not my screams but his.

Ashvik wrenched free from my grip, and that small part of my transposed mind returned to the boy. Instantly, his raw emotions flowed over me. He knew who I was, knew that I had sent a dreamseer to probe his mind. The recollection of Sarazan, transposing his mind onto the boy's, turned the flame of his anger to wildfire. Rage boiled up like bile within him.

You are an abomination, he shouted, violating the natural order of our journeys. So many are lost because of you. So many that I cannot save them all. They cry out to me, endlessly, begging for the way. And now you would see me lost as well. Who then will show the wayward the path? Who then will save the lost?

His words shook me to my core. But he was not the first to have done so. Transanimation was always painful. Each time felt like killing a friend, a brother, a sister. Even worse, it felt like destroying yourself. Each death had etched a scar into my soul, and the guilt of it never faded. Never.

I am sorry, I replied, truly I am. But in the end, I will save far more than what I take. There can be no salvation without sacrifice.

That is because you are of the mindset that there can be no victory without war, he replied.

As a Soulwarden, there is little you cannot see. And yet, there are things that even you are blind to, child. I do not fight a war against men. Like the mountains or the oceans, what I fight against cannot be reasoned or bargained with. I fight an enemy that is not subject to the whims and fancies of humankind, or the joys and pains of mortals. You may think that all life is sacred, that none is greater or lesser than another, but you have not lived to see what I have seen.

A deep sadness ebbed and flowed from him. Many lifetimes of pain was buried in the depths of his young heart. Such burden is why the Soulwardens fell into darkness long ago. The pain had crushed their benevolent spirits and twisted them into monsters. They gave birth to their own monsters, and the bloodline turned to poison. Lost souls became their fodder and slaves to their command. What good there had once been had died. And yet, another shepherd to the lost

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had been born into this world. I did not know how or why.

If I had known, I would have never come to take him. But now I had no choice.

I looked out into the many faces one last time, searching. *Delvos, where are you? Had you known what the boy was and kept it from me? Were you an informer for the Church all along?*

A wave of anger pressed in around me, and suddenly, the boy's mind slammed against mine. Memories and emotions flooded my mind as he began his psychic assault upon me. The outside world turned to darkness once again. The metaphysical ropes that bound my mind to his began to break.

He swarmed me with the regimented focus of a hardened warrior and the precision of a mind that knew the weaknesses that lay within me. He grabbed at my own memories, plundering my past, taking hold of painful memories and sparking them like flint against kindling. They caught fire. Blinding me with the pain, he severed one tie after another.

I reeled. How was my pain not his? How could he separate my memories and emotions from his own? *He's only a boy, a mind too young to have such wisdom, such cunning.* Or was he? Had shepherding the lost matured and strengthened his mind to such a profound degree or had it simply allowed him to endure pain even I could not comprehend?

He pushed against me harder, and I began to slip away, about to lose my hold.

Focusing, I unlocked the Mind of a Thousand Mirrors, splitting my mind over and over. Each mind reached out and took hold of his. Hundreds of bindings became thousands, then tens of thousands. Then they began their own assault. A thousand minds working in a concerted effort. I poured a billion memories, and a billion billion thoughts and emotions into his mind.

Like a tapestry, I weaved my past into his, each mind unleashing several hundred lifetimes of loss, sorrow, heartbreak, and betrayal. All the pain I had learned to live with. But multiplied and compounded countless times over.

He screamed, a thousand screams begging for death. Over and over he screamed, until it reverberated within every one of my minds. The pulses of his consciousness spread outward in a vast wave of pain and confusion. A helplessness of such magnitude it crushed me like the weight of the world.

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To feel his pain within a thousand minds was unbearable. Seeking refuge, I began to merge them, but as I did, our interconnected memories compounded upon one another. *Must remember who I am. Must not forget.*

As I had before, I tried to lock away his memories from mine and keep the fabric of my own existence.

Remember your people. Remember your mother, your father. But so many faces sprang up, so many parents, so many pasts. Love, comfort, hatred, abuse. Which past was mine, and which ones had I stolen and made my own?

His confusion spread to me. Our entwined pasts grew ever more muddled, and the screaming within only grew louder. I could not stop the merging minds as each sewed part of itself into his. There was no undoing it. We were becoming one.

As our minds melded, and I opened my mouth to scream, I bottled the last fragment of that dissolving memory of who I was into the Locked Mind.

Pain ripped through me. I screamed, looked down at the blood that soaked my clothes. Then, there was only darkness.

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Chapter 1 - A Forgotten Past

I opened my eyes and found myself in an unfamiliar room. A nearby fire lit a pair of amethyst eyes that stared out from a figure hunched over me. The darkened form leaned forward. Dead-white hair and a face of cavernous wrinkles took form.

I shrank back into the bed, clutching the thick fur blanket wrapped around me.

“You’re awake, child. Praise Zeniton.” Her soft voice was soothing, nothing like I expected. The old woman smiled, further creasing the many wrinkles in her face. “Don’t worry, you’re safe here.” She reached toward me, and I flinched, but as she placed her hand upon my forehead, my anxiety faded, and the deep pain that coursed through my body subsided. “The fever has finally broken,” she said, turning to look across the room.

The floor creaked, and a moment later, a man peered down at me. He had prominent cheekbones and a strong jawline covered with a fine, black stubble. His dark-green eyes blazed. “What’s your name, boy?”

“My name?” The voice that came from my throat sounded odd, as if I’d never heard myself speak before. My stomach churned.

The man and woman exchanged a look.

Panic came over me. Where was I? Who were these people?

My eyes scanned the room, taking in my surroundings. Black iron sconces hung from white-washed walls. No windows, no decorations, no furniture other than the bed I lay in. The only escape lay far across the room--a large door made of a charcoal-black wood.

I tried to sit up. A burning pain shot through my body. I gritted my teeth and tried anyways, but found I lacked the strength to rise. My mind raced as I struggled to recall how I’d gotten here.

“Can’t even remember his own name,” the man said, shaking his head.

“Don’t you worry about that, child.” The woman ran her hand through my hair with a gentle touch, calming me. “Trauma can make the mind forget. Lucky for you, we excel at helping people remember forgotten things.” She gave me a playful wink. “I’m Lelikai, and this is Sedrick.” She turned to him.

“I know you’re scared, boy, but with my brother’s help, perhaps we can stir your memory

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and eliminate some of that fear.”

The old woman turned her gaze to mine. “We’d planned to take you home, child. But until you can remember enough for us to find your family, you’ll have to stay with us.”

Sedrick turned and left, and for a moment I felt at peace. But then I wondered, what would they do with me if I couldn’t remember? How long would they let me stay?

I lay in bed near the warmth of the hearth, pretending to sleep. I could hear the sound of leaves crunching and opened my eyes just enough to see Lelikai hunched over a burner, drying what looked like a handful of moss.

The door creaked open, and Sedrick entered. He was followed by a man clothed in a deep-blue tunic, the collar rimmed with black fur. The man had the same striking green eyes and long, inky black hair as Sedrick. But he looked nearly twice as old and half as friendly.

“Ah, Giok, so you’ve finally come to see the boy?” asked Lelikai.

“My brother tells me the boy’s lost his memory,” he replied in a gruff voice. “So here I am.” His gaze flickered up toward me, and I closed my eyes. “He still sleeping?”

“Aye. And I suspect he’ll sleep much over the next few weeks.”

“Well, let’s get him into one of the wagons,” Giok said. “We’re already behind schedule.”

“He can’t be moved,” Lelikai replied. “And it’ll probably be another week or two before he can.”

“A week or two! We can’t wait that long, and neither can the Grand Duke’s son.”

“The boy will never survive the trip in his condition,” Lelikai said. “He’s lucky to even be alive.”

“I’m inclined to agree with her.” That deep, smooth voice sounded exactly like Sedrick’s. “It’s nothing short of a miracle. Besides, brother, you can spend the time delving into his mind.”

“And what do I care about the ravaged brain of some vagabond child? Besides, the Grand Duke’s son is dying. Every day we delay is one less day they’ll have to save him. Would you trade his life for the boy’s?”

“All life is sacred,” Lelikai cried. Her words struck a chord in my heart. “This boy’s life

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is worth every bit as much as Esterly's son. I have the chance to save him now, and I will."

Tears filled the corners of my eyes.

"Only a fundamentalist would believe such a thing," growled Giok. "But if that's the way you feel, you can tell your son that. He already has the others in a fit. Keeps reminding everyone that we get paid nothing if Edrin dies before we return."

"I've heard enough." There was power in the inflection of Sedrick's words. They carried a command as sharp as the edge of a blade. "I'll speak with the others. You just help the boy to remember."

A soft touch pressed against my arm, and I opened my eyes to see Lelikai's smiling face.

She turned and tossed a handful of dark green herbs into the fire. They burst into pink flames, sending off a sweet, flowery scent. The intoxicating aroma eased my aching body and soothed my troubled mind.

"What is that?" I asked, having a strong sense I'd smelled the incense before.

She turned back to me and her smile deepened. "An old family remedy. *Igneus Unguentum*."

I frowned. "That sounds awfully familiar."

"Does it now?" Lelikai raised an eyebrow. "They're the words of a dead language. One of many brought by the Pioneers. There are few left in this world who know of it or of them. Do you know what it means?"

I shook my head.

"Fiery salve. It's burning fumes have healing properties." She looked to Sedrick and he bowed his head slightly.

"Morning, boy," Sedrick said. "This is my brother, Giok."

Giok looked me up and down. "I've come to help you remember."

Sedrick nodded. "My brother was educated in the Sagery and knows many intricacies of the mind."

Sagery? The word had a familiar ring to it, and as I repeated it within my mind, I found it gave me comfort.

Giok bridged the short distance between us and sat beside me. He took hold of my chin

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and turned my head from side to side. “Pale skin, bright-blue eyes, white-blond hair. You certainly look like a Northerner. And yet you speak the common tongue.”

“The what?” I asked.

He turned to Sedrick. “Guess that means he can’t be one of the Nama.”

“So sure are you?” Lelikai’s brows narrowed, and the purple in her eyes turned a pale blue. “*Dun Griapa Daistes Zola ti sia uou.*”

“And with you,” I replied without thinking, delivering the customary response to the blessing in the same language Lelikai had used. The words--*uou sia tu*--sounded strange to my ears, but even as I said them, I felt the warmth of Lelikai’s wish that the Great Mother, Zola, whoever she was, be with me.

Lelikai’s eyes widened. “The Nama do not teach their language to others.” She turned to Giok. “And if he were one of them, he would have been able to heal his own wounds. Right?”

Giok shrugged.

“Well, ask the boy something in Nama,” she said to Giok.

“Just like you, I only know the single greeting.”

Sedrick narrowed his eyes and placed a finger upon his lips. He tapped his mouth several times as if contemplating. Then he said, “*Ag Gik af du Kravin, Uncruk af Darat.*”

Unlike the words Lelikai had spoken, which were formed primarily at the front of the mouth and had a melodious, almost poetic quality, this invocation was guttural. The clipped syllables originated in the throat. Still, I was able to string the harsh-sounding syllables together in my mind and decipher their meaning. I did not know Kravin, God of Blood, any more than I knew the Great Mother, Zola, nor did I know why I should be bidden to honor him. But I knew the rejoinder, *blood of my enemy*.

“*Igid af mik sundig,*” I replied. Saying the words left a knot in my gut, knowing that one honored Kravin by bathing in his enemy’s blood.

Silence stretched across the room, sending a chill through me.

A slight smile tugged at Sedrick’s face. “Did you know that inherent abilities such as language are rarely ever affected by amnesia?”

I wasn’t sure if he was asking me or not, but before I could answer he added, “Only a few

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Vendrian diplomats have learned enough of the Kantic and Nama tongue to communicate with either religion. It was only in the hope of converting them. But that was long ago. No outsider has been taught either of their languages since.”

“But you speak them,” I replied.

“We only know a greeting or two,” Giok said. “And that is only because we are Seekers.”

“Seekers?” I asked.

“Think of us as keepers of history,” replied Sedrick. “And with such knowledge, we know things that most others do not, even the single greeting of a foreign tongue. So for you to be able to speak both, along with the common tongue, should be impossible. Unless you’re a”

Giok turned to Sedrick waiting for him to continue. “Unless he’s a what, brother?” Then his eyes lit up. “Unless he’s a Realmwalker? You well know they’ve been gone for millennia, wiped out in the Mage Wars. Thank God for that. Besides, if he truly had the inherent ability to decipher and speak all languages, he would have had his Awakening. Then, not even a squadron of deathmonks could have stood against him.”

“He has a point,” Lelikai said with a slight head nod. “As powerful and well-trained as the deathmonks may be, they’d stand no chance against a wizard wielding the magic of all three realms, even one as young as the boy.”

“Stop talking about me as if I’m not here!” I snapped.

The three of them turned to stare at me. The sudden swell of anger quickly passed, and I shrank into the bed, embarrassed and afraid.

“Forgive us,” Sedrick replied. “We’re only trying to unravel the mystery of who you might be. But you’re truly a conundrum. Perhaps our ramblings have sparked a memory?”

How could I speak these people’s languages, yet have no memory of them? It only made me more disoriented and scared. I blinked back tears. “No, nothing.”

Sedrick turned to his brother. “If not a Realmwalker, then what?”

“Well, the boy appears to speak the blood-cultist language, and brutish as they may be, some have learned the common tongue. And being at war with the Nama, it’s possible his people may have picked up a saying or two. The Kants are renowned for their brutality and torture does

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loosen the lips.”

“But he bears no Kantic marks,” Lelikai replied.

Giok continued to scrutinize me. “True, but the boy is young. Maybe younger than the ten or twelve he looks to be. Could be too young to take the blood-cultist ritual.”

Lelikai shook her head. “The blood-cultists would never venture out of the Northern Taiga.”

“They would for war,” Giok replied.

Sedrick shook his head. “Not to stand against the Order. Their numbers are too small.”

“That we know of,” countered Giok. “Could be that they’ve amassed great numbers in the far north. Or just maybe the Order found them and the cultists had no choice but to fight. You know the monks have orders to kill every heathen they find--man, woman, or child.”

My heart pounded in my ears as their words began to sink in. “You mean someone tried to kill me?”

“We’re not sure,” Sedrick replied. “But we weren’t about to leave you to die on the side of the road. No matter whom your people might’ve been.”

Then they’d saved my life. But why?

“My brother’s right,” Giok said. “You are a conundrum, and we’ll learn nothing without knowing what’s inside your head, boy.”

“It’s not proper to keep calling him *boy*,” said Lelikai.

“Then what are we supposed to call him?” replied Giok.

Sedrick turned to Lelikai. “Names are important. Too important for us to just give him one.”

“I know.” Lelikai sighed. Her eyes looked into mine. The deep purple in them all but vanished as her pupils widened.

For a moment I felt her searching for something within my gaze, almost as if she were looking for some truth behind my eyes. There was a gentleness in her stare, a sincerity that made me want to open up to her. If only I knew how.

“Although I was once a priestess,” said Lelikai, “and taught that the dogma of the Nama was not only misguided but evil, I have come to see that they may have borrowed one truth from

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us, even if they twisted it to conform to their own beliefs. You see, the Nama believe that all things were named by the Great Mother when she created the world, and by learning these *true names*, they are granted the power to control them. As silly as that may seem, we Seekers believe that names are significant as well.”

She knelt before me. “But the importance of names are far more reaching than their ties to history. Our holy texts teach us that every soul has a name--a *true name* if you will--given at the moment of creation by Zeniton. Only the soulless Sheduin that serve the Gmorgon are not given names. These disembodied spirits are commonly referred to as the Nameless Ones, and often mistaken for ghosts. Soulless, nameless, the Sheduin have no identities and cannot leave this realm. But without names they cannot be controlled either. Instead, they seek out bodies to control. They are abominations that the High Monks of the Order are constantly in search of. And so, in exchange for protection, they do the Gmorgon’s bidding.”

“The boy doesn’t need to hear your religious ramblings,” countered Giok.

“Ramblings?” cried Lelikai.

“Aye, ramblings,” replied Giok. “You want to scare him with talks of evil spirits and holy wars?” Giok turned to me. “Never mind Lelikai. All things, even the inanimate, are given names so that we humans can identify them. Parents often name their children for things they hope to become, or simply something or someone they are fond of. For instance, before my father sent me off to learn from the Sagery, he told me he knew the day I was born that I would do something great. So he gave me the name Giok, *the great one*. Sedrick on the other hand was given the name of an ancient philosopher and historian our father greatly admired.”

Sedrick nodded. “History remembers men and women by their names, and we Seekers remember all of them, even those history has forgotten.” He smiled. “But for some, names are taboo. In the old republic of Chundou, it was forbidden to speak the emperor’s name. To speak it meant death, not only for the speaker but for any who knew him--family, friends, even acquaintances. On the other hand, the Tongolese, a renegade faction of the Nama, eventually abandoned their names and no longer named their children.

“But names can also be sacred. Like the name of god, or for us, our founder. No one but us knows his name. You will not find it in any book, and we will never speak it before an

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outsider. But if one looks long and hard enough, they can find mention of his son, Valcor.”

An image flashed in my mind: *A shirtless man stands in darkness, lit only by the sword he grips in his hand. Blue as glacier ice, the blade pulses white light, beating in rhythm to the man’s heart. His platinum-white hair is long and thin and straight, flowing down his muscled back like silk, and beneath the hair, there are swirls of color. Some kind of mark, but it is too hard to make out.*

“Are you all right?” The voice was distant.

A soft touch brushed against my shoulder. The image faded and Sedrick was kneeling before me, his eyes staring into mine.

“Where did you just go?”

I told him of what I had seen, and his eyes lit up like fire. Giok and Lelikai inhaled a hushed breath.

“You had a vision of Valcor,” Sedrick said, awe in his voice, “a man who lived a thousand generations ago. Few know of him, and even fewer know what he looked like. And yet I mention his name, and the image of him comes to you as clearly as if you had seen him just yesterday.”

My pulse quickened. The three of them stared at me, judging me. I could sense their mistrust. See it in their eyes. They thought I was lying to them, or worse, that I was playing them for fools.

I didn’t know what to say, didn’t know how to react or to prove that I knew nothing of my past. I was so terrified that if I could have stood, I would have ran and never looked back.

Sedrick leaned in even closer and lowered his voice to a whisper. “We Seekers have never taken on an orphan before. We only take on men and women with great names.” He winked. “And there are few names greater to us than Valcor. It is a name I think would fit you well.”

“Valcor.” I whispered the name. The sound of it upon my lips felt as natural as breathing. Sedrick placed his hand upon my face. “It means *to see*.”

I repeated the name again in my head, over and over. *Valcor. Valcor. Valcor.*

Giok looked to his brother. “A great name for one who has yet to earn it.”

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“And when you were given your name,” I said, looking to Giok, “what had you done to earn it?”

Giok laughed. “I like the way you think.” He shrugged. “Then Valcor it is.”

“The others won’t like it,” Lelikai said.

Sedrick smirked. “You mean Brion won’t like it.” He turned his gaze back to mine. “You bear a name of legend now. That makes you worthy to join us.”

She grabbed Sedrick’s shoulder and hissed. “This isn’t what we agreed to. The boy can’t-”

Rage flashed across Sedrick’s face. “You dare question my authority?”

Lelikai’s face paled, and she shrank back.

Sedrick’s burning eyes met mine. His penetrating gaze seemed to pierce right through me, and suddenly, I felt naked. No, it was more than that. It was as if he was peering into my mind, into my very soul, and knew exactly who I was.

Then the depth of his stare weakened, and his face softened. “I’m sorry, Lelikai. I should not have spoken to you that way.” Sedrick’s eyes never left mine as he said it. “Brion has me on edge, and I am not myself.” Then he turned and took Lelikai by the hand. “You put your faith in me years ago, and have I ever led us astray?”

She shook her head.

“Then trust me now.”

Sedrick’s words seemed to mollify Lelikai, and she relaxed, nodding her head in agreement. But he had lied. He was not sorry at all.

I do not know how I knew this, but I did. He wanted something out of me. I could feel it. He knew something I didn’t.

Sedrick released Lelikai’s hand and turned back to me. “You could be the first foundling to earn the Mark in over fifteen millennia.”

“The Mark?” I asked.

He opened his shirt, revealing an intricate circular brand on his chest about the size of a man’s fist. Labyrinthine whorls of colors were tattooed into the pattern of raised flesh. “The Mark of the Seeker. It signifies that you are one of us. Earn the Mark and you will earn your

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name.”

The artwork burned and painted into Sedrick’s flesh awed me, in a way I felt as if nothing ever had. I didn’t know what it signified, or even what a Seeker was, but I wanted the Mark.

But then it felt odd to take someone else’s name, especially one so important to these people. And yet the swelling in my heart told me that I wanted that name as much as I wanted the Mark.

I puffed up my chest as best as I could. “I will earn it.”

Sedrick laughed, deep and hearty. “Good.”

Giok took a step toward me. “It appears there’s at least a memory or two floating around in your subconscious, after all. Let me see what else I might draw to the surface.” He knelt and looked into my eyes. “We found you a few days to the north in the Winterlands, bloodied and unconscious along the side of the Highroad. It’s not likely somebody dumped you there. Do you have any recollection of walking through the forest or of somebody carrying you?”

I pushed down my fear that someone may have tried to kill me and then tried to remember what had happened. The faint memory of a dream lingered, but in it, I could recall only darkness. “No.”

Giok rubbed the stubble on his chin. “Then let me help you. Take my hand and close your eyes. Breathe deep and relax. Let your mind drift.”

I took Giok’s large, meaty hand. He put his other one over mine as I closed my eyes.

“Focus on your breathing,” he whispered. “Let it become a rhythm.” He held my shaking hand steady.

I wanted to pull away from him, but his grip was too strong. Why could I only remember the image of a man long dead? And why no spark of memory for the Nama, the blood-cultists, deathmonks, or Realmwalkers?

The fire crackled and my heart thumped loudly in my ears. I breathed in deeply and exhaled. As I concentrated on each breath, a sense of calm came over me. Silence filled the room, and then a voice sounded in my mind. Giok’s voice. *Let me guide your thoughts. Let me pull the memories that lie just below the surface.* Out of the darkness, a splotch of gray formed. *Tell me what you see.*

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I opened my mouth and spoke as the memory took shape:

Gray clouds loom overhead as the smell of damp wintergrass fills the air. Thunder rumbles over a forest of black-needled trees. Surrounding me is a sea of faces, each one hidden in shadow. In the distance, a deep bellowing horn blows, and the faces around me all turn toward the sound. My heart takes off, pounding harder and faster with each breath.

A strong, weathered hand reaches down and scoops me up into a large, sun-browned arm. His other hand reaches out and I place mine against his palm. I run my fingertips against rough calluses. Then his fingers close, and my hand disappears within his, filling me with a sense of comfort. I look up into his face, but it's blurry.

He leans forward to kiss me on the forehead.

Even with his face mere inches from mine, I see no features, only a blur of colors. He sets me down, and tears well in my eyes. I have the feeling that I will never see him again.

As he towers above me, my eyes move down his shadowed visage to his muscled body, scarred and painted in dark red. His hand moves to clench a curved sword. A blood-red crystal sits atop the bone-white hilt. Pulling the scysra from its scabbard, he brings it to his chest. The blade bites through skin as he cuts a series of symbols into his flesh. Blood runs down his body as the weapon moves steadily and gracefully.

Mesmerized, I stare as he carves the same symbols into the ground. Then he whispers, "Blood. Flesh. Earth. I command you."

A piercing roar rips through the sky, and I throw my hands over my ears to blot out the terrible sound. Suddenly, the mass of shadowed faces around me rise. Each shirtless man holds a wooden shield, weapon at his side. Then a thousand swords are wrenched from leather sheaths and pointed toward darkened skies.

The clouds break, and the sun's rays reach out to touch the silver blades, igniting them in white fire.

As I look up, the sun is eclipsed in shadow. Black smoke fills the sky. Then, smoldering yellow eyes appear from within the haze, and wings of the darkest pitch stretch out as wide as a mountain valley. The monster opens its maw and Cimmerian shade pours out, writhing through the sky like inky black fingers.

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My breath catches in my throat, and I stumble backward.

The man before me drops to a knee and pulls his blade from the ground. Blackened earth coats the blade from the coagulating blood. He presses his thumb to the crimson stone and murmurs several words too faint to hear.

I reach for him as he turns to leave, but he pushes me away.

In unison, the men move out into the blue fields, wet and frozen. The ground trembles, thunder sounds, and the cry of a winged demon chills me to the bone. The Shadowbringer's ruinous breath spreads like wildfire across the sky, burning away the daylight, turning the firmament to ash. Soon, there will be no light left in the world.

Shivering, I pull my legs up to my chest. Under a sky of jet-black, all I can hear is my heart thumping heavy and the screams of men fighting, or dying, or both.

I shuddered and snapped my eyes open, trying to yank free my now burning-hot hand.

Giok's grip tightened. "Where did you hear that tale?"

"I dreamed it. I know now that I was dreaming it before I woke today."

"Dreams are the windows to the soul," Giok said, nodding his head. "Dreams say the things we cannot. They provide a glimpse into the repressions of the mind."

"Impossible," Lelikai cried. "He cannot dream of myths and religions that only we Seekers keep alive."

"Perhaps it is only a shadow dragon he dreams of," Giok countered.

"Only the Sun-Gorger Demon breathes Cimmerian shade--the darkness that consumes worlds. There is no doubt he speaks of the First Fall." Lelikai turned to me, eyes narrowed. "Tell me how you know this destruction myth." Her purple eyes weighed on me. "Well, speak!"

"Calm yourself, Lelikai," commanded Sedrick. "He's only a child."

"A child who knows far too much." Lelikai stumbled back, eyes wild. "The boy's a blood mage. He's stolen my memories." She spun to look at Giok. "Or yours."

The revulsion in her voice caught me off guard. All I could do was stare in horror.

"The blood mages are extinct, just like the Realmwalkers," Giok said.

"No. I've seen a blood-binding before. The blood mages still exist." She was trembling. "He's gotten blood from one of us. He knows our thoughts, our memories. He'll take control of

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me!”

“I didn’t. I wouldn’t,” I cried, fumbling for some words to put her at ease.

Giok laughed. “Oh, and I suppose while the boy was unconscious and on the verge of death he snuck some of your blood and did a binding on it.” He shook his head and turned to me. “Ignore her, Valcor. She’s all but lost her good sense in old age.”

Lelikai looked back and forth from me to Giok.

“Giok’s right,” Sedrick added. “Think it through, Lelikai. You never left the boy’s side.”

She put a hand on her forehead as her eyes shifted back and forth. “I . . . I . . . You’re right. I didn’t.” She exhaled a deep breath. “He never had time to do a binding.” Her eyes moved to mine. “I’m sorry.”

Sedrick crossed his arms and gave a smug smile. “But if he were a True-Blood--”

“I won’t hear of it,” Giok snapped. “The Realmwalkers do not exist!” He rubbed his temples. “Tell me more of this dream, Valcor.”

“That’s all I can remember.”

Giok turned to Lelikai. “If his conscious mind will not relinquish these memories, then we will have to find a dreamseer.”

“Absolutely not,” shrieked Lelikai. “No dark magic.”

“It isn’t magic, you old loon,” Giok shouted. “It’s shagan science.”

“Dark magic, dark science, it’s all the same,” she said. “It’s the Gmorgon’s work.”

“And what will you do when the boy’s memory returns and you find out he’s a blood-cultist, or worse, a deadriser? Will you turn him over to the Holy Order for being a heathen?”

“I’ll not have this conversation with you again,” Lelikai cried. “I gave up my priestess vows when I returned to the Seekers.”

“And yet you still hold to the ways of the Church after all these years. You’ve already accused the boy of being a blood mage. If something does not conform to the dogma of the Order, then you think it the workings of the Gmorgon.” Giok snorted. “Is that why you betrayed me for--”

“Not in front of Valcor,” growled Sedrick.

Giok turned to me, a look of pity on his face. “It’s best not to remember who you are,

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boy. You could end up being hanged in Vendria Square for it. Half-dead children don't end up beside roads here in the north out of happenstance. Someone either tried to kill you or died trying to save you."

My eyes grew wide, and I tried to shrink into the bed.

"I didn't bring you here to frighten him," Sedrick said.

"I'm sorry, Valcor," Giok replied, "but you need to know the truth."

Sedrick turned to me and said, "Whatever your past, we'll help you to find it, and you needn't be afraid of what we find. You're safe with us. I promise."

Giok released my hand and stood, then shot a glare at Lelikai. "If you want the boy to remember his past, a dreamseer is likely the only course. Not everything in this world that *your* religion can't explain is evil."

Tears welled in Lelikai's eyes, and the pain on her face wrenched at my heart. "And when did you stop believing in Zenitonianism? When did you abandon the Almighty God?"

"When you chose my brother to lead over me." Giok turned and walked out.

Sedrick shook his head. "I'll go tell the others that he'll be staying."

"You'd better talk to Brion, alone. He won't like it. He's already upset that we've been holed up in this inn for the past week while tending to the boy."

"Sometimes it's hard to believe that man's your son." Sedrick sighed. "He wanted me to let the child die on the side of the road." His eyes flickered to me as he said it. I knew the words were for me and not Lelikai.

Why he would tell me such a thing, I could not guess. It made me think of the young boy they were trying to save.

"What if he dies before you return?" I asked. "Won't I be to blame?"

Sedrick frowned. "Heard us, did you?" He shook his head. "I'm sorry for that. But no, it won't be your fault. There is no cure for what Edrin has. The boy has been wasting away ever since he was born. Esterly has tried nearly every form of medicine and magic. He's grown desperate, and now he wishes to try dangerous high alchemy. Hopes to transmute his son's blood or bones. If anything, he's likely to kill the boy himself."

"I'm against the whole thing," Lelikai added. "Alchemy is dark stuff, dangerous and

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unpredictable. But the Grand Duke is too powerful a man to refuse. So we do our duty.” She waved a dismissive hand. “Enough of this talk. You need your rest.”

Sedrick tousled my hair and smiled. “Lelikai may be set in her ways and difficult at times, but with her gift of healing, you’ll be on your feet in no time.”

She ran her fingers across my face, and her touch was like a salve against my skin. “I didn’t mean to upset you. It’s hard to let go of the Church’s dogged teachings and of all the things I’ve seen.” She turned to Sedrick. “You’d better tell Malina to start building another wagon. Valcor will need a place to live.”

When I was well enough, Sedrick took me to meet the others. I shuffled out of the inn and followed him through a thin line of winterblooms that loomed over a scattering of blue needles and cones.

Ahead of me, Sedrick walked with a swagger, his jet black-hair swishing above broad shoulders corded with muscles. He was leader of the Seekers, a man who moved with bravado and spoke with authority. I had liked him from the moment I met him.

The air was brisk, even beneath the bright, shining sun. I rubbed my clammy hands together trying to warm them. I still hadn’t been able to remember a thing of my past, despite all of Giok’s coaxing.

Sedrick turned back and waited for me to catch up to him. “I know you’re nervous, but you needn’t worry. I’ll look out for you.”

Was my fear that evident? I shot a glance past him, and in the nearby open field, I spotted dozens of covered wagons. Several fires were spread about the camp, each burning within a ring of stones. People were scattered about. The place was like a tiny town, bustling with activity.

There were so many of them. What if they didn’t like me? What if they were all like Brion and would have preferred to leave me by the side of the road to die?

Sedrick held out his hand and smiled. Hesitantly, I took it, and together we walked into the Seeker camp.

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Chapter 2 - The Rite

High atop the thornwood, I looked out across the city. My city. At least it would be mine someday, whether I wanted it or not. In the distance, cobblestone streets bustled with activity, twisting their way through the two thousand some homes nestled along the bottom of Zylaria. My eyes followed the gradual sloping land and the gravel path that wound its way past the farmlands and up into the training grounds, where I should have been honing my Siba.

I shifted my hand from the tree's black bark and the sharp needles that covered its surface. It was my last day to prepare, and after so many months of planning and training I should have been confident. But the thought of accomplishing something that was not only forbidden but had never been done before was frightening.

Tomorrow was the Rite, the yearly ritual that every boy and girl must take in order to transition from child to adult. At thirteen, I would not take it for another year. Teacher had said that no prince had ever failed it, but every year at least one person came back maimed or did not return at all.

I craned my neck up toward the top of Zylaria, high above the training grounds, where the oldest thornwoods grew in a circle, their thorny branches guarding whatever lay within the Sacred Grove. Tomorrow I would stand upon their crowns and see what trials would await me in the Rite.

"Hendor!" a sharp voice shouted from below.

Startled, I lost my footing and slipped.

Beneath me, someone screamed.

I flailed my arms and snagged a branch. Thorns bit into my hands, ripping flesh. I dared not let go despite the pain that radiated up my arms. Falling from this height would mean death.

I looked down to see Lyda staring up at me from the tall grass. Her eyes were wide, and her dark, bronzed skin had paled. It gave me strength to know she cared for me, even though she'd never admit it.

I pushed back the smile forming on my lips, found a nearby branch and swung for it. It bent under my weight but held. I let out my breath, shuffled the short distance to the trunk, and then climbed the rest of the way down.

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Lyda stood at the base of the thornwood, her arms crossed, her brow furrowed.

“For the love of Zola, you scared me half to death,” I said to her.

“I did not think a prince startled so easily.” She smiled and twirled a finger through her golden hair. “Nor did I think he could be so clumsy. Perhaps I should be the one to climb the thornwoods tomorrow.”

“You know the plan. Stick to it.” I gave her a playful smile. “Besides, I’m the better climber.”

She laughed. “You’re not the better anything.”

“Oh yeah? I’ll race you to the top.” I reached for the tree, but Lyda snatched my wrist. She turned my bloody palm over. “You’ve mucked up your hand again. Here, let me heal it.”

I yanked my hand back. “I can do it.”

“We both know you can’t.” Lyda rolled her eyes. “Some prince you are.”

I looked into her deep green eyes, dark and somber as the filalia trees that surrounded Zylaria and kept us hidden from the outside world. “Why do you have to be so mean?”

“You’re too thin-skinned to be king. I’m only trying to help.”

Lyda always spoke the truth, even a hard truth to a prince she had no right to. It’s one of the things I liked about her. Still, the truth of her words stung. As the crown prince, my Siba should have been the best among my peers. Instead, I had fallen behind everyone.

She placed a hand upon my chest. “So you can’t do Siba. Magic doesn’t make a king. It’s what’s in his heart. That is what’ll make you a great leader.” Her hand lingered upon my chest for a long moment, and my heart pounded in response. There was a tenderness in her touch I had never felt before, a feeling just beyond my grasp.

“Come,” she said, grabbing me by the wrist again, “I’ll take you home and fix you up there.”

We walked along the path, pebbles crunching beneath our feet. It wasn’t fair. Why did Lyda’s father have to be a lowborn cobbler? The Protector would never allow our marriage. He’d probably want me to marry one of the elder’s daughters. Ugly and snobby, every one of them. But I couldn’t imagine marrying anyone other than Lyda. If I was forced to be king, I would not

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be told whom I could marry. I would defy the elders and the Protector.

Lyda stopped suddenly. “What’s he doing here?”

In the training grounds above us, the Protector was speaking with Teacher.

“Did we mix up the days?” she asked. “Is the Rite today?”

I looked down at my cut and bloody palms. “If they see my hands like this--”

She placed her fingers on my wounds and I winced from the pain. “Hide them in your pockets and don’t let them see. I’ll go tell the others to get ready.”

But she didn’t move, and she didn’t let go of my hands. She just stared into my eyes, and as she held my gaze, my fingers began to tingle.

Suddenly, her face paled, and she swooned. She let go of me, and I reached for an arm, but she managed to steady herself before I could catch her. “Hands in your pockets,” she ordered. Then she turned and ran toward the city below.

“Hendor,” Teacher shouted. “Come here.”

I trudged over to them, keeping my eyes down, all the while feeling their gazes upon me.

“Look at me,” Teacher demanded. “And show some respect. Take your hands out of your pockets.”

My heart pounded in my ears but I kept my hands where they were. Teacher scowled and grabbed hold of my wrists. His hands were withered, gnarled like filialia branches, yet rough and strong.

“What’s wrong with you, boy?” he snapped, trying to wrench my hands free.

I fought him as he pulled. But he was too powerful.

Teacher twisted my palm upward and frowned. “What’s this?”

I blinked a few times at what I saw. Blood caked my hands, wrists, and upper forearms. But there were no cuts. Lyda had healed them and hadn’t wanted me to know she had. Why?

“Blood,” I said.

“I can see that. Whose blood? And why are your hands covered with it?”

My mind raced as I thought of an answer. “I, uh . . .” My eyes wandered in the direction that Lyda had run, then snapped back toward Teacher.

The Protector stepped forward, his giant frame casting a shadow over me like a towering

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motherwood. Within his hood, where a face would be, there was nothing but darkness, black of the deepest pitch. I'd always told myself that it was magic that hid his visage, but seeing that pit of infinite darkness was no less frightening than when I'd first stared into it, many years ago.

The blackness looked down at me. "You must forget about her. She is not for you."

"But--"

"I am the voice of Zola," the Protector bellowed. "I am Her power made flesh. I am not to be questioned!"

A cold shiver ran through me, and I shuddered. "Yes, Protector."

He turned to Teacher. "Leave us."

Teacher nodded, turned, and then left. I watched him go, wishing he wouldn't. The Protector had always frightened me. Even the adults looked uneasy around him. Teacher had said that he was our direct link to the Great Mother--wise, powerful, and as old as time. I wondered if such a thing could be true. But if a tree could live for thousands of years, why not a man? I supposed Zola was the one who decided such things.

What I did know for sure was that he came only once a year to conduct the Rite and to give the elders news of the outside world. We children knew nothing of what was beyond Zylaria. Our teachers would only instruct us of such mysteries once we had passed the Sacred Ritual and had transitioned from children to adults.

The Protector knelt and I could feel him look at me. "For a thousand generations I have watched princes ascend to kings, and never have I seen a prince as unprepared as you."

I clenched my jaw, fighting back tears. "I'm a failure, I know." I could not let him see me cry. "I've tried, Protector, I really have. I cannot learn the ways of Siba."

He shook his head, long and slow. "Siba is in your blood, in your breath, in every beat of your heart. You've not tried hard enough. You daydream and play with your friends when you should be studying."

"That's not true, I--"

"Do not lie to me." The Protector rose. "Even when I am not here, my eye is upon this place. I see everything."

I swallowed hard, wondering if he knew what I'd been planning the past few months.

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Had he seen me sitting under the motherwoods with Lyda, swimming in the Zyl River with Krung and Rygor when I should have been studying?

“Teacher said that dreams are important,” I countered, “and that learning to guide them would be of great value.” It was the one teaching of his I’d truly taken to heart. In my dreams, I had control over my own fate. I could do anything, be anyone. It’s why even when I was awake that I would often lose myself in a dream. Teacher was always scolding me for it.

“The power to control your own dreams is of great importance. But not daydreams. They serve only as a place to hide. They are for those who chose not to face the waking world, or at the very least, for those who are afraid to. What frightens you Hendor?”

He knew what it was that frightened me. He was not only the voice and the hand of Zola but also Her eyes and Her ears. What he wanted was for me to say it out loud, as if speaking the words was a way of confronting it.

I knew then that it wasn’t the fear of facing the Rite, or having to marry whomever the Protector would chose for me, or even of having to rule one day. It was much bigger than that.

“I’m afraid that I have no control over my own fate.” I’d thought those words a hundred thousand times, but never once said them aloud.

“And that is what makes you special, Hendor.” His body seemed to soften. “No king has ever admitted that to me before. Or prince. Or man. Or child. When you learn to conquer your dreams, you will be capable of do anything you put your mind to. But you must wake up first. And you, my boy, are still lost in a dream.”

Was he right? Had my fears kept me daydreaming, kept me from becoming the man I’d been told I could become? Or were his words nothing more than a ploy to get me to accept my own fate? Like every king before me?

“Then why must I learn Siba?” I asked.

“Do you find no relevance in learning the ways of our people?”

I knew I was supposed to learn my people’s magic because one day we Zylarians would go to war with the Evil--the monsters that had nearly destroyed us. Or so the story goes. But after so many thousands of years of us hiding in the forests and passing down the knowledge of Zola from one generation to the next, I doubted it would be in my lifetime.

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I shrugged. “Not really.”

“Then you would rather die?”

“No.”

“Make no mistake. Children die in the Rite because they are unprepared.”

Then it was true. Failing the Rite meant death. But why would the Protector hide us from the Evil, only to send us to die in a ritual of his own creation? I opened my mouth to protest, then shut it, too afraid to question his authority. “If I’m to be king, why must I take it?”

“Passing the Rite is the first step to preparing yourself to fight the Evil.”

“But kings don’t fight in wars. They order other men to.”

“That is where you are wrong, Hendor. As king, *you* will lead us against the Evil.” Two sparks of light emanated from where his eyes would be. “Our long wait in exile is soon to be over.”

I didn’t want to go to war. I only wanted to play with my friends, to swim in the Zyl River when it flooded in the spring and catch flutterbugs when the flowers bloomed in summer.

“Then let Rygor be king. I don’t want it.”

The Protector slammed his foot to the ground. “Rygor!” The sky groaned beneath his bellow. “He does not have king’s blood. He is not *you*! Only you have the strength to lead us, if you would but find it.”

I wanted to find that strength, to be strong like my father, but in that moment, I was more terrified than ever. I closed my eyes, felt every part of my body tremble. I listened to my heart pound so loudly that it drowned out the roar of the wind, the snapping of branches, the crackling of thunder. The Protector’s Siba was so strong that his fury was Zola’s. His tears the rain. His voice the thunder. His footfalls were the shake of the earth, and his was breath the gale of the wind.

The Protector grabbed me by the shirt and lifted me up to stare into his face, so close that I should have been able to see it, so close that I should have been able to feel his breath. Instead, I saw only an empty space and felt cold air that made every hair on my body stand on end.

Then his voice exploded, and I had to cover my ringing ears. “Do you think I like keeping my people in hiding?” As his voice grew louder, the sky grew more tumultuous. “This

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world was ours once, and it will be ours once again.”

I cowered in his grasp, searching for even a shred of courage. A thousand terrifying images sprung into my mind--war, blood, fire, death. Thousands of corpses burned and tattered, buildings and trees scorched to ash. Then Lyda’s face appeared. Her smile washed away the fear, and as I imagined her in my arms, a vision of my best friend Rygor standing beside us filled me with strength.

“If you want me to be king, then I want Rygor as my Fist and Lyda as my wife.”

The sky darkened. Lightning flashed and thunder crackled. Rage emanated from the Protector like heat from a fire. “You dare give me orders. You will do as I command!”

The bravado leaked out of me. I had no say in my life. I never had.

“I can see the cowardice in your eyes, Hendor. You would think to run and escape your duty.”

“No,” I cried, no longer hiding my tears. Yet the thought of fleeing had never been stronger. “I know that leaving would endanger Zylaria.”

“Endanger? Oh, no. Leaving would result in the death of everyone here. Step foot out of Zylaria and the magic that keeps this place hidden from the Evil would be broken.”

Known as the Law, it was the one rule we could never defy. It is why no Zylarian had ever stepped foot beyond the circle of our city.

“The magic it takes to keep this place hidden is not easy to invoke. It is ancient Siba, powerful illusion that warps not only sight, but thought. If you run, there will not be enough time for me to restore it. The Evil will learn of this place and they will come to finish what they started. Not even I have the strength to stop them. But one day you will.”

The fear that had resided in the back of my mind as long as I could remember washed over me. I could not run, nor could I give up my duty as king. But without command over Siba, how could I ever hope to lead us against the Evil?

“I don’t understand,” I cried. “Your Siba is greater than all of ours. And yet, you expect me to do what you cannot.”

“I do not see with mortal eyes. Within you slumbers a power greater than all of Zylaria. Greater than mine. It is time we awaken it.”

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What sort of power? And awaken it how?

The Protector exhaled a breath, and the clouds broke apart. The sky cleared. The wind dissipated. "I must see to the preparations for today's Rite." He turned without another word, then made his way up the hill toward the Sacred Grove.

The Rite was supposed to be tomorrow. Had we been wrong or had the Protector come early? Maybe he'd come today, thinking I would be unprepared, thinking I would not act.

I took a deep breath and looked up the long path that led to the Sacred Grove. I could not see it from here but knew that it sat atop the city and overlooked the surrounding Zylarian forest for miles. I was not allowed to walk up the path, for only those who were set to undergo the Rite, or who had already passed it, could do so.

The Protector continued the long climb and Teacher came to stand beside me. He placed a twisted hand on my shoulder and said, "I know you are curious to see the Sacred Ritual, but it is forbidden. You cannot know what awaits you."

"Yes, Teacher." I knew that I'd have to go through with my plan. I only hoped the others would not back out.

Teacher turned toward the houses below. "I must gather those who are to undertake the Rite today. Run along."

I turned to the west and the towering motherwoods that made up the Whispering Garden--our meeting place before we'd try and sneak into the Grove.

There was no turning back now.

I crouched behind a group of filalia trees in the training grounds, my friends Rygor and Bron beside me. Thousands of citizens made their way up the path to the Sacred Grove from the city below.

Lyda lay in the tall grass across the way from us, and Krung hid by a rock, a wide smile stretched across his face, his hands filled with poisonous retchweed. Impatient Krung, either truly brave or truly stupid--I hadn't decided yet. He glanced over, looking for me to give him the sign. I shook my head *no* for the twentieth time. I was still worried about having him swallow the toxic plant, no matter how much was at stake.

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I caught Lyda's eye, the deepest Zylarian green, and silently begged her to make sure Krung didn't do anything foolish. I smiled, and she looked away as she reached into her long, golden hair and twirled it around a finger.

"I don't know why you bother with Lyda, Hendor," Bron said. "You know the Protector will pick your bride after the Rite. Not even your father got to choose his wife."

"If I survive the Rite."

Rygor smacked me on the back of the head. "Don't talk like that. No prince has ever failed the Sacred Ritual."

"Teacher thinks I won't be prepared." I looked into Rygor's bright, blue eyes. "You know how far behind I am on my training."

"Then why've you been ignoring your lessons?"

I'd tried to learn the ways of Siba from Teacher, but no matter how hard I tried, I just fell further and further behind. So I'd stopped trying, stopped listening. "I just never thought--"

"That's why we're going to get you to the Grove." Bron clapped me on the back. "Then we'll know what truly awaits us."

I peered down the hill, waiting for the last of the stragglers to leave their homes. According to Father, everyone went to see the Rite, except for those of us who had yet to undergo the Sacred Ritual. I was thirteen, old enough to take it and be considered a man, but my time wouldn't come this year.

Teacher had said that failing the Rite meant death, but I had never believed him. I'd always thought it was his way of getting me to pay attention to his lectures.

Today I would find out the truth.

The elders were so worried about us children sneaking into the Rite that we were forbidden to leave our homes. But I had begged my father to allow us to pray in the Whispering Garden, since Bron's brother was undergoing the Rite today. He had consented, as long as Degro, my father's Fist, acted as our chaperone. A few drops of ground dream-twine leaf in our guardian's water this morning had solved that problem. He shouldn't wake until late in the evening. Father would be furious.

As the throng in the city below thinned, I gave Krung the okay to choke down the

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retchweed. It would make him sick, but it wouldn't kill him. All he'd have to do was puke on one of the two guards and make him think he was dying. It was Lyda's job to ensure the soldier took Krung to the elders for healing. Bron would then distract the second guard, as would Rygor if needed. It was up to me to make it the Grove.

Krung gagged a few times on the retchweed, but after several long moments of chewing, he managed to swallow it all. After that, we only needed to wait.

Once the city emptied, however, six men rather than two came to stand guard along the path. The others looked to me, and in their eyes I saw defeat. A sudden lump formed in my throat.

Krung reached for his stomach. He turned toward Lyda and slapped his hand across his mouth. Then he jumped to his feet and ran out of the training grounds. Lyda turned to me and shrugged.

"After him," I whispered.

Krung was halfway to the first guard before Lyda followed. He collapsed just as the guard went to intercept him. *Oh, Zola. What if I was wrong and the retchweed kills him?*

The guard stopped when he reached Krung's motionless body. The man stood for a moment, a bewildered look on his face, then knelt beside Krung and shook him. Krung did not respond.

As the guard rolled Krung over, my stomach twisted. Krung's bronzed skin had turned milkpod white. The guard stumbled backward. For a long moment he stared at Krung like a fool, too stricken to move. Then he clambered up and yelled to the guard nearest him, motioning for him to come and help.

By the time Lyda reached the two guards, she was trembling. She grabbed the nearest man and shook him frantically. Though I could not hear the words, her screaming told me just how dire the situation was.

It was all going horribly wrong. I stood, intent on going to Krung.

"Don't," Rygor protested, grabbing me by the arm. The skystone that glimmered on his bracelet matched his eyes. The elders had given it to him at birth, along with his name, Rygor Sky-Eyes, the first Zylarian ever born without green eyes. "Stick to the plan."

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I pulled free. "What if he dies?"

"You can't do anything more than Lyda can."

"Look," Bron said, "those two guards are taking Krung toward the city."

"I'm going. I have to make sure he's all right."

Bron turned and met my gaze. "This was your plan, Hendor. See it through."

"If I do nothing now and he dies, I'll never forgive myself."

"Not even a king can save someone who is meant for death," Rygor said. "Only the Great Mother, Zola has such power. As king, you will have to accept that people may die because of your decisions."

I clenched my hands to keep them from trembling. If he only knew the truth of his words. For thousands of years we've stayed hidden in the forests, waiting to go to war with the Evil. And now after all this time, I was supposed to do what even the great and powerful Protector could not.

But I knew Rygor was right. I could do nothing for Krung. "Fine." Then before I could say more, Bron stood up and bolted for the path.

"One day you'll be our king." Rygor smiled, trying to hide the fear that gleamed in his eyes. "And I will look back and know that this is the day when your rule began."

I embraced him, hoping he was right. "And as king, you'll be my Fist, Sky-Eyes."

"It's only fitting," he replied, "since I'm much better with Siba than you are."

I gave him a sad smile. "That's not saying much. Just about everyone is."

At the sudden shouting of men, I dropped to my stomach. Two guards had Bron by his arms and legs.

"I have to see my brother," Bron screamed, over and over.

"Good luck," Rygor whispered as he jumped to his feet.

"No, wait--" I protested. But it was too late.

Rygor had already made his way out of the training grounds.

Amidst the chaos of Bron yelling and struggling, the guards didn't even notice Rygor cutting across the gravel path and into the knee-high grass. Then he stopped suddenly at the edge of the trees. *What are you doing? Keep running.* But he just stood there looking at the guards.

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Then one of them spotted him. Rygor waved at the man, then turned and sprinted toward the Grove.

“After him,” ordered the man as he tried to hold Bron still.

Rygor disappeared into the trees and the other two guards ran after him.

I held my breath as the two guards holding Bron took him down the gravel road. Once they passed the training grounds, I sprinted across the path and dove into the grass.

I peeked above the yellow blades. No one was in sight. I leapt to my feet and ran along the opposite side of the path that Rygor had taken, then made my way up toward the Grove.

At the top of the hill, the Sacred Grove stood like an imposing fortress, a circle of towering thornwoods that grew so close together, they appeared impenetrable. Hoping to find a back way in, I skirted the entrance and headed around the side.

“Hey, what are you doing?” a man bellowed.

Heart slamming hard against my chest, I threw my hood over my head and darted into a small gap in the trees.

“Come back here!” the man shouted.

I scrambled up the largest of the thornwoods, being careful not to cut myself on the jagged, black bark.

Once clear of the canopy, I stared in awe at the spectacle beneath me. Below, the circle of thornwoods that made up the Grove was about fifty trees thick and surrounded an enormous field of grass. Thousands of citizens lined the trees within the meadow, and in the center stood the Protector. Even from afar, he loomed over everyone like a giant, twice the height and several times as wide as a normal man.

The Protector raised his hand, and the chatter quieted. He held his arm up for another moment. The sun shining down upon the Grove shifted toward the Protector, as if his magic, his Siba, drew its rays to him. Teacher had said that his connection to the Great Mother was so great that he commanded all of nature’s power and fury. After seeing his anger toward me for falling so behind in my studies this morning, I did not doubt Teacher’s claim.

But it wasn’t his power to draw the sun, the wind, or even lightning to him that frightened me. It was the dark crystal that hung from his neck. Not even the sun could brighten it. It drank

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the light, always remaining absolutely black. I'd stared into that crystal every time I'd seen him, and I swore a thousand eyes had stared out at me. I shuddered at the thought of it.

The Protector turned, and his gaze stopped on my father. I ducked down and nearly lost my balance. I stared at Father for a long moment. What if the man who'd spotted me went to him? What if he sent everyone after me? And then I wondered if my father knew that the Protector had ordained me to lead us against the Evil, or if instead, the Protector had lied to me so that I might listen to Teacher's instructions.

I looked to the old men, the council of teachers that stood behind Father. They had instructed us every day of our lives since we were five, teaching us the ways of the Great Mother, Zola, so that we would be prepared to undergo the Sacred Ritual. At their lead was my teacher, who had educated three generations of kings. He did not think I would even pass the Rite, let alone that I had what it took to be king. I'd show him he was wrong.

I choked back the bile rising in my throat and gazed off into the distance. As I stood high above Zylaria, the world revealed itself to me as it never had before. To the north, no less than the span of twenty men, the land fell below the trees in a giant precipice. One could not reach the bottom with ten motherwoods stacked base to crown. No one had ever told me our city sat atop a mountain.

A gravel-lined path led south, from the Sacred Grove to the training grounds. From there, the path split. One fork meandered east past the city's farmlands to my home, a castle of gray stone, and the other south, down to the city. The buildings looked like wooden boxes no larger than the size of my thumbnail. Even my home seemed small enough to scoop up into my hands.

Below, something scraped against the bark of the thornwood. I pivoted. A man, face obscured in the darkness of the trees, clung to the trunk. My breath caught in my throat. I slipped and grabbed the side of the tree to keep from falling. A sharp pain ran through my hand. I grimaced, set my foot back on the branch, and pulled my hand free.

The man's eyes glowed green in the dark undergrowth, and he raced up the tree with unnatural speed, using claws of hardened stone from his sudden transformation into the Body of Stone and Might.

I spun around and leapt from the canopy aiming for a nearby tree. Branches whizzed by.

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Sharpened needles tore at my face and arms.

A branch rushed up to meet me and snapped under my weight. I suppressed a scream, flailing my arms wildly, hoping to grab hold of something.

My hand snagged a limb. The razor-sharp bark ripped into my flesh. Fire radiated up my arm, the pain so intense, I yanked my hand back. I tumbled further down the tree.

My head bounced off the side of the trunk, and then my foot caught a branch. It cracked, but held.

Dangling precariously by my foot, I reached out and gripped the trunk of the tree with my good hand. My head pounded and my palm burned, but I pushed the pain aside and righted myself. Shaking, I tore off a piece of cloth from my pants and wrapped it around my bloody hand.

Then I made my way back up the tree until I found a close enough thornwood and jumped to it. I climbed up and down trunks, jumping from one tree to another, moving as quickly as I dared.

When I had the courage to look behind me, the man was nowhere in sight. I exhaled. My lungs burned. My arms and legs ached. The wounds in my hand throbbed as did the growing lump on my head.

Remember why you're here, I told myself. Have the resolve to see this through.

I pushed past my weariness, and ascended back into the canopy. Blue sky greeted me. So did the Whispering Garden to the west. Even though our prayer grounds lay far below the Sacred Grove, the motherwoods drew my eyes so high into the sky that I had to crane my neck to see their crowns. With green trees spreading from horizon to horizon, the blood-red motherwoods with their copper leaves seemed so out of place. It was as if Zola herself had reached down and put them in the earth.

A voice boomed from below, sharp and heavy as the explosion of a tree from a lightning strike. It was the Protector. He was dragging three strange-looking men, small and thin, each bound by what appeared to be a metal rope. Or maybe they were boys. They wore no shirts, only odd-looking shorts, and their skin was strangely colored. They did not have our golden skin, or our long, golden hair. One of them was kind of pinkish, with yellow hair on his body and head.

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Another of them was dark, almost black, and had no hair at all. The third was a light brown, like the earth.

I gasped. Were these strange creatures the Evil? The Protector had spoken of them with disdain, and these men were certainly ugly. And yet they didn't appear to be monsters worthy of fearing or hiding from. If anything, they should be pitied. But where had they come from? How had they gotten here?

Across from the outsiders stood one of the boys undergoing the Rite. I couldn't be sure, but I thought it was Idok. The Protector dragged the three strangers before the boy, and then spoke. Despite the Protector's loud voice, which seemed to emanate from the very trees, I could not understand what he was saying.

The Protector then reached out and touched the rings bound to the black boy's neck. The metal crumbled to dust. My jaw dropped. I had never seen a Zylarian do more than bend metal, even with the power of Siba.

After freeing the man, the Protector reached into his cloak and pulled out a curved piece of metal about the length of an arm. At one end, the steel tapered to a point, and at the other was a handle.

The black-skinned boy-man took the strange tool from the Protector's outstretched hand. I glanced down into the trees. No sign of my pursuer. Perhaps I had lost him. Then I spotted movement, the outline of a figure. Then another and another appeared. The three figures turned to six, then ten, then twenty. There was no way I could outrun them. I'd have to hide.

I moved up to the very top of the tree, hanging precariously as it swayed. Then I pulled myself up against the trunk and stood deathly still, until the tree stopped moving.

In the heart of the Grove, the dark man raised the metal instrument above his head and ran at Idok. Idok jumped back into a defensive stance and balled his hands into fists. The outsider brought the curved steel down and Idok threw up his arm to block it.

The steel ripped open a gash and Idok screamed. His blood-curdling cries were a wound in my heart.

The man wrenched the tool free and blood poured from the gaping wound. Idok grabbed for his forearm as it flopped like a waving hand. My stomach turned.

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The boy-man drove the deadly instrument forward. Idok lunged backward, narrowly avoiding the sharp metal point, but lost his balance and fell. His left hand hit the ground. Whatever bone was holding his forearm together broke. I turned, fighting the urge to vomit, but Idok's tortured screams ripped through me, shaking me to my core. I grasped the tree and shuddered.

When I looked back, the man leapt on Idok as he cradled his dangling arm to his body. The man raised his arm to deliver the final blow, and I closed my eyes, too afraid to watch Idok die.

The screaming ceased. I looked and saw Idok running away from the stranger, his forearm completely gone. He stopped suddenly and spun around. Raising his bloody stub into the air, he shouted, unleashing the Body of Stone and Might. Although I had seen the technique invoked several times before, Teacher had yet to show me how to do it.

Idok's body transformed. Muscles swelled twice their size. A crimson river gushed down his arm. But as his golden skin turned gray and began to harden to rock, the blood ceased. Stone formed around the wound, sealing it. Idok looked more a man now than the scrawny stranger before him.

"There!" shouted a nearby voice.

From the undergrowth below, a man pointed at me. Dozens of men scaled the trees all around me. I didn't have long but was determined to see all of Idok's Rite, even if they had to pry my bloody hands from the tree and drag me back kicking and screaming.

Wrapping my arms and legs around the tree with all my might, I turned my focus back to the meadow. The black-skinned man swung the tapered steel toward Idok's head. He ducked as the man's arm swept over him.

Idok sprang up and punched the man under his chin. Then he leapt forward and drove him into the ground with his fist. The boy-man's legs jerked violently.

To the roar of three thousand Zylarians, Idok slammed his fist over and over into the man's face until he lay still. A pool of blood encircled what remained of his face. Idok raised his bloodied hand and roared. It was not the same voice of the boy who had begun the fight.

People cheered and shouted, but I felt no joy. I was sickened.

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The Protector held his hand up for silence. A hush fell over the crowd as he reached out and freed the other two men from their bonds. Just as he had before, the Protector gave them the same curved, pointed metal. For Idok to pass the Rite, he would have to survive the attacks of both of them.

The entire tree bowed, pitching me forward. I clung to the trunk. Then a hand yanked my ankle so hard I had to bite my tongue to keep from crying out. Bark tore into the flesh of my arms as I squeezed the tree with all my strength. But no matter how hard I held on, I couldn't keep myself from being pulled down.

"Here, boy!" shouted an angry voice.

I gritted my teeth and kicked for a hand.

"Ugh!" wheezed the voice.

I pulled my foot free and scrambled back up the tree to watch. The two outsiders below spread apart.

Cautiously, the two men moved toward Idok, but he didn't wait for their attacks. Idok moved his right arm across his body and placed his hand against his left shoulder. Then his arm swept across his body in an arcing blur. The air in front of his fingertips rippled like wind against water, only the ripples moved a hundred times as fast.

The pink man yelped and his arm fell to the ground, metal tool still in hand. The man looked down and gawked at his bleeding stump.

Idok cocked his arm back, breathing heavily. Teacher had said it took many years to build up the stamina to invoke even a single Siba technique.

Waves exploded from Idok. The pale man shot a glance down to the red line forming across his stomach. He opened his mouth as if to scream just as his body fell in two.

All this time I'd been goofing off while my friends had been learning how to do that instead. I was shocked, appalled.

Idok put his good hand to his knee. His body heaved with each breath. The earth-colored man stood several feet from him, hands trembling.

Suddenly, thunderous pain flooded my head. My limbs grew weak and darkness crept around my vision. Strong pressure on my shoulder brought me back into focus, and I was

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wrenched from the tree.

Deep green eyes blazed before me as a face pressed close to mine.

“Hendor!” a deep voice snarled.

I didn’t recognize the man. When I tried to turn to look back down, he grabbed me by the hair.

“Don’t look,” he shouted. “You’ve seen too much already.”

I turned to look anyway, but his grip on my hair tightened. My scalp tore. I pushed past the pain and grabbed the tree, keeping my eyes on the meadow below.

Idok stood up. His legs quivered.

The brown man’s grip on the curved steel tightened. He crouched down and ran at Idok, thrusting his elbow back and pointing the metal tip forward.

Idok’s arm moved out and locked straight. He opened his hand, laid his fingers flat, then swung his arm up toward the sky as if pointing to the stars.

“Let go, Hendor,” a second man barked as he grabbed my left wrist and ripped it free.

With my right hand, I dug my nails into the tree and blinked back tears as the bark tore into my fingers. I slammed my legs into the tree and wrapped my feet around the trunk, ignoring the burns that spread from the fresh wounds in my thighs.

“Don’t you know what the elders will do to you?” said a third voice, one that sounded familiar. Another hand grabbed my other wrist and pried it loose.

As the three men yanked at me, the only thing holding me to the tree were the thorns embedded in my legs. Inside my head I was screaming, pushing back the fear and the pain that threatened to overwhelm me. Yet something inside my gut gave me the courage to keep fighting.

The men holding me grunted, giving one final pull. It would not be enough to pry me loose. After all my friends had sacrificed, I would see Idok’s fight to the end, no matter what.

Below, the man drove the steel toward Idok’s chest, just as Idok’s arm moved toward him.

The clang of metal against stone rang through the Grove. A hush went through the crowd, as if three thousand people were holding their breath.

Idok coughed, and blood poured from his mouth. The man released the handle of his

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metal tool, now lodged in Idok's throat. Idok took a sideways step then collapsed to the ground. His Body of Stone and Might had not been strong enough. The stone exterior had been no thicker than skin.

Tears welled in my eyes. The Protector shook his head, and then flicked his wrist as if swatting an insect. The brown-man's head exploded.

I lost my hold of the tree, legs now numb from the pain.

For a moment, I felt weightless as the three men lifted me into the air. Degro's hardened face stared into mine. I hadn't given my father's loyal servant enough dream-twine. He was probably the one who'd followed me into the Grove.

As the other two men released me, Degro held me by my shirt with one meaty hand. "Do you know the punishment for watching the Rite?" he asked.

Of course I knew, but I didn't care. I was so furious I could have spat in his face. Our parents were forcing us to fight and die, and they weren't even telling us. And the Protector . . . he was preparing us for war.

I yanked a thorn from my leg and slammed it into Degro's hand.

His arm jerked back as he let me go, and I fell backward. There were no nearby branches to grab, only empty air and trees just out of reach.

The screams of two dozen men rang in my ears as the ground rushed up before me.

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Chapter 3 - The Seekers

A cold wind blew through the Seeker camp as I huddled behind Sedrick. The white frost on the trees glittered like jewels beneath the sun. I peered around him, watching people at their fires--cooking and eating, others just looking to stay warm. At a nearby table, a man and woman mended shirts and shoes.

Sedrick smiled and led me to a grouping of large stones circling a crackling fire. Eight people huddled close to the warmth of the flames. One of the men softly strummed a corded instrument. The man beside him put his lips to a long wooden tube and blew, while his fingers moved across a series of holes. Together, the men and their music swept me up so quickly that I caught myself listening to it before I knew it had even begun.

Then a sweet and lilting voice began to sing. A hush swept over the camp. The haunting voice belonged to someone I could not see. A fire awoke deep within me. All the world seemed to disappear beneath her song, beneath the words of a woman who brought tears to my eyes. But they vanished just as quickly as they had appeared when the music stopped and dark yellow eyes peered up at me.

The stare belonged to a man, short and squat, with blond hair spilling over a rounded face. He stood and took a step toward me, clutching his instrument tightly. It was made of pale wood, long at one end and round at the other, with more than a dozen strings running from top to bottom.

"I see the little waif is well enough to walk." His brows narrowed. "I only hope he hasn't cost us six months of pay and the life of a future Grand Duke." His amber gaze met mine as his lip curled up in a snarl. "And you should know that his worth is infinitely greater than that of yours."

His cruel words should have hurt, but instead they angered me, stoking the fire that was smoldering in my heart.

"You only say that," said a voice from behind me, "because your jealous that we'd let you die before risking little Edrin's life, but not his. Must sting to know that you're worth less than an orphan." Giok strolled by me, the hilt of a sword sticking out the top of his black, fur-covered cape.

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I found myself smiling at the backhanded comment, glad that Sedrick wasn't the only one willing to look out for me.

Brion gaped at Giok, seemingly unable to return the snide remark. Suddenly an urge to say something nasty as well tugged at me, and before I knew what I was saying a mouthful of words spilled out.

"What, no clever retort?" I said with scathing sarcasm. "Your tongue must be as dull as your wits."

Giok rolled with laughter. "Tis true, Brion's dumb as a rock. But that's not why he's silent. It's the truth of my words that compels him to hold his tongue. After all, he's only a Seeker by blood. Took him nearly thirty years to earn the Mark, though I'd hardly say he earned it. Why I imagine you'll earn it in less than five."

Brion's face paled. He turned to Sedrick and cried, "You're letting him join us?"

"At least till he regains his memory," answered Giok, "and decides he's got better things to do than be around the likes of you."

"What, the all-knowing Giok couldn't cure the boy's amnesia?" Brion said, finally finding his voice.

"The mind is a difficult thing to unlock, Brion. Even your tiny brain would take me a week or two to unravel." Giok threw his head back and chortled.

I smiled widely, noting Brion's face twist up with rage. He gripped his instrument with both hands as his fair-skinned complexion turned red.

"You going to hit me with your lute?" Giok said with a snort.

"I would if it would shut you up. But in truth, this lute is worth more than your life."

"Only a has-been minstrel like you would consider a lute worth more than a man's life. It's no wonder not even your mother would choose you to lead us."

"She didn't choose you either. But then, you are a deserter, even less fit to lead than a has-been."

Giok's left hand closed in a fist. Then his right hand moved back to grab the hilt of his sword.

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My muscles tensed, and my heart thundered in anticipation of what was to come.

“Enough!” Sedrick commanded, stepping between them. “Valcor is staying with us, and I won’t hear another word about it from you, Brion. And Giok, put Exershius away. I don’t want to see you carrying it.”

“Valcor?” said Brion, voice rising.

“The boy has a legendary name,” Sedrick replied. “It’s one of the few things he can remember.”

Brion looked equally shocked and outraged. He opened and closed his mouth several times, gawked at me, then turned on his heels and stormed off to a nearby wagon. It felt as if I’d won some kind of battle, though I feared it would be the first of many and that I might not fare as well the next time.

Giok shrugged and wheeled around in the opposite direction.

Sedrick bent down and whispered, “Pay them no heed. They are often at each other’s throats. Old men set in their ways.” He smiled. “Besides, Brion doesn’t like me much either. Doesn’t like anyone not born as a Seeker. You see, Lelikai allowed my brother and I to join them. We were the first allowed in as outsiders for nearly two hundred years.”

To know that he had joined the Seekers as a stranger gave me peace, gave me confidence that I could earn the Mark like he had.

Next to Brion’s seat at the fire, stood a boy nearly two feet taller than me. He had the same blond hair and fiery, yellow eyes as Brion, and the scowl on his face was just as unfriendly.

Sedrick held his hand out to acknowledge the boy. “This is Pelenor, Brion’s son.”

Great.

“I am a musician,” Pelenor said, “like my father, and his father, and so on and so forth for more generations than you can count.” He looked to Sedrick. “Can he even count? Or read or write for that matter?”

Sedrick reached down and grabbed Pelenor by the shoulder.

“Ouch.” The boy tried to pull away from Sedrick’s grip.

I knew then that I had to say something, knew that I couldn’t keep letting Sedrick and Giok fight my battles.

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“Actually, I can.” I didn’t know if I could read or write but he wouldn’t know the difference either way. “I can also speak a number of languages, probably more than you can count.” I gave him a smug smile. “How many can you speak?”

“Enough,” he replied.

“Yes, well, one is *enough* to communicate.” I smirked. “Though considering who your father is, I doubt anyone could have anything resembling an intelligent conversation with you.”

Pelenor’s eyes went wild, and for a moment I thought he was going to punch me. Then he gave a placating smile. “You’ve got quite the little mouth on you. It’s amazing how one can train an animal to stand upright and speak. Though clearly it’s impossible to teach them manners or civility. That’s probably what nearly got you killed. Well, that or your parents botched the job of trying to get rid of you.”

Sedrick squeezed Pelenor’s shoulder. “All right, that’s enough. Both of you.” He released his grip on Pelenor. “I’ll hear no more of this. You’ll be civil to Valcor. You hear me?”

Pelenor rubbed his shoulder. “Yes, sir.” He turned and ran toward his father’s wagon.

Sedrick turned to me and winked, then mouthed the words, “Well done, boy.”

My heart was pounding so loudly in my chest that it seemed the only sound in the world. It had felt like I had gotten the better of Pelenor, and yet the last of his words stung as sharp as a slap to the face. I knew he’d said it only to hurt me. But what if it was true?

It wasn’t until Pelenor had gone that I noticed the girl. She must have been sitting behind him. She had eyes of the deepest blue, glacier blue.

“Valcor, this is Jayden Lutianis, and his wife, Anika,” Sedrick said.

I peeled my eyes off the girl and realized that Jayden had been the one playing the other instrument with Brion.

“They’re musicians too,” Sedrick continued. “And this is their daughter, Sunestra. She is regarded as one of the world’s best songstresses.”

Sunestra! I imagined her parents had given her the name in honor of the sun, the heavenly body that gave the world both light and life.

“And only fourteen,” her father said, his voice beaming with pride.

The girl curtsied, her golden curls bouncing. She held out a graceful hand, each fingernail

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painted to match her stunning blue eyes.

Something compelled me to take her hand and press it to my lips. My stomach fluttered as I kissed her soft skin.

Her jaw dropped, and she snatched her hand back. “Who do you think you are, kissing my hand like that?”

Holding my head up high I said, “You shouldn’t have offered it, if you didn’t want me to kiss it.” I batted my eyes at her. “And my name is Valcor.”

Her mouth dropped even further.

“As one of us, it’s a name he’ll have to earn,” Sedrick said. “Along with his surname.”

I gave Sunestra a devious smile. “And I will.”

She sniggered. “Not unless you can sing like he could.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “Well, sing for me, boy.”

I couldn’t recall ever singing a song, and even if I had, I didn’t know the words to one. All I could do was stand there like a fool.

She rolled her eyes and sang.

*“I am a peasant girl dreaming of love,
Praying to the Almighty God above.”*

Her voice set my every hair to stand on end as if her tongue was made of lightning.

*“Rescue me from pain and sorrow
That awaits me on the morrow.”*

Her voice was sweeter than honey, melodic as water flowing over stone.

I stood, still and silent.

“Sing back to me, Kiok,” Sunestra urged.

All I could do was give her a puzzled look.

“Do you not know the great love song of Salindria and Kiok?”

“Perhaps, but I’ve lost my memory.”

“Fine, then let me give you the words and see if you can repeat them.” She dropped her

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voice an octave and began to sing again.

*“I am a prince returning home today,
From the Slave Wars after my father’s fall.
Finding a slave in my uncle’s hall,
My only choice is to take her away.”*

She waved a hand at me, urging me to repeat her words.

I began to sing, but the words caught in my throat.

Sunestra cringed and turned to Sedrick. “That’s the worst singing I’ve ever heard. Maybe his parents should have named him *Gurzgul*.”

Her father laughed, and although I didn’t know the name, I knew it to be an insult.

“Well,” Sedrick said, “then you shall be the one to teach him how to sing.”

“What?” she cried. “I’d rather swallow bristle berries.”

“That can be arranged too,” he replied, “but you’re still going to teach him. I’m not giving you the choice.”

She crossed her arms and harrumphed, then scowled at me. “I could teach a tuskbeast to hold a note. So I suppose teaching you to sing couldn’t be that much harder.”

Sedrick nodded. “Song is the great vehicle of history, Valcor, and if you want to know what it means to be a Seeker, you could have no better teacher than Sunestra.”

She gave a smug smile. “And I’ve learned every song worth knowing.”

“Tis true,” replied her father. Tall and wiry, Jayden stood lazily as if leaning against a wall. The staff-like instrument he had been playing earlier rested on his shoulder.

Sunestra’s smile grew more pompous.

Despite her arrogance, I couldn’t help but be enthralled by her. “Do you have the Mark too?” I had only meant to think it, but the words found their way out anyhow.

She lowered the shoulder of her emerald velvet gown. “I am the youngest of the group to earn the Mark. Alistair gave it to me when I was twelve.”

My eyes widened. The design was identical to Sedrick’s, but only half the size of his. The intricacy of each line tattooed into the brand was exquisite, and some of the lines ran so close together that they couldn’t have been separated by more than a single pin-prick.

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I reached out to touch the Mark, but she pulled up the shoulder of her gown before I could. Blushing, I snatched my hand back.

Jayden straightened. “I don’t want my daughter teaching the boy without supervision,” he told Sedrick. “Make sure Pelenor stays with them.”

I fought the urge to grumble. As if her insults weren’t enough, I’d have to suffer Pelenor too. But if I could learn to sing half as well as she could, it would all be worth it, especially if it would help me earn the Mark.

“And I think we should reexamine this when we reach Vendria,” Jayden added. “My daughter has better things to do than teach an amateur how to sing.”

I flinched at the word *Vendria*. Giok had said I could be hanged there for being a heathen. Had he discovered my past and decided to hide it from me? Swallowing hard, I looked to Sedrick. “Why are we going there?”

“We’re treasure hunters,” Sedrick replied. “And we must return Esterly’s prize to him.” He hadn’t mentioned that they hunted treasures, only that they were bringing back something to save the Grand Duke’s son.

My eyes widened. “Treasure hunters?”

Sedrick nodded, then reached into his black cloak and pulled out a dark gray object about the length of his hand, embedded with tiny holes and cracks. “Petrified dragonbone, a rare commodity used in high alchemy. Savola, our alchemist, can teach you about both.” He pointed in the direction of a thin, gaunt-faced man sitting by himself, huddling in a thin blue robe before a lonely fire. “Before he joined the Seekers, he worked for the Vendrian government as a chemist. But the Great Law forbids him to practice his science outside of the restricted labs.”

I had no idea what Sedrick was talking about, but I didn’t want him to think me stupid, so I nodded knowingly.

“Come.” Sedrick led me to a small table, where two older-looking men sat facing each other.

Pieces of carved stone sat on a checkered board that was laid out before them. The men’s faces were identical, and their hair as gray as the odd-looking robes they wore.

“Sadon and Sadis,” Sedrick said, pointing each one out. “Twin brothers and former

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monks of the Holy Order. They are highly talented scribes and cartographers.”

My stomach dropped. “Monks of the Holy Order?” Giok had said they killed heathen children. What if they considered me to be one?

Sadon looked up at me. “No need to be frightened, child. We were scriptural not martial monks, trained in the High Church, not the Order.”

“Oh,” I replied. “What’s the difference?”

“You see Valcor,” Sadis said, “the Church and the Order are as different as the sword from the shield. One is to slay, the other to defend.”

I frowned. “But both are weapons of war.”

Sadon clasped his hands together. “My brother makes a poor analogy. Perhaps a better one would be the sword and the pen. While the sword is the symbol of war, the pen is the symbol of education. The monks of the Church are instructors, collectors and preservers of knowledge, as well as wardens to the sick and the poor.” The monk stood, and I was surprised by his size, considering he was little taller than I was. He put a hand on my shoulder. “While Lelikai tended to your wounds, we prayed for you, child. The Almighty God is benevolent, and He listened to our prayers.”

A dozen questions filled my head, and the urge to uncover the truth grew too strong to still my tongue. “Does the Almighty God heal heathens?”

Sadon raised an eyebrow. “That is a strange question to ask, child.”

“But I cannot remember who I am or where I came from. What if my people did not believe in the Almighty God?”

Sadon looked to Sedrick. “He knows more than what his age would reveal. Perhaps he is not as young as he looks.” His chestnut eyes fixed on me. “That is a cunning philosophical question you ask. Having told you the Almighty God was responsible for your recovery, your question attempts to either challenge my faith or prove me a liar.”

He crossed his arms and smiled. “Yet, it is an easy question to answer. You see, a man who has lost his memory is a man who has lost his past. Without a past you have no family. With no family and no memory you have no faith. You are like a newborn and shouldn’t be punished for what you have yet to be taught. And as a child born anew, you became the child of Lelikai,

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mother to the Seekers. Her faith is now yours. Thus the Almighty God healed you, regardless of what your people may have believed.” Sadon put his hand on my shoulder. “My brother and I will teach you our religion.”

“Ignorance,” Sadis said, “cannot undo acts of evil, brother, nor erase the beliefs of the damned.” His eyes never left mine. “We cannot teach him until he sees the head of our Order. Only he can cleanse the boy’s sins, should he have any.”

“Cleansing by fire?” Sedrick said. “I think not. Consider the boy converted, and teach him as you see fit, Sadon.” He looked to Sadis. “Until we reach Vendria, Sunestra will be teaching him. Until then, the two of you work out your differences.”

Sadis nodded, while Sadon said nothing. It seemed he would not contradict Sedrick, at least not in public. But the look on his face told me that the matter was not settled. I shuddered, thinking on Sedrick’s words. Were someone’s sins cleansed by setting them afire? How barbaric. How could I follow a religion that killed children for believing something else and forgave one’s mistakes by burning them?

And yet, what choice did I have? I would have to believe as they did if I wanted to keep safe. If I wanted to be one of them.

Sedrick took me by the arm. “The day is getting late and it’s time we get on the road. I’ll quickly introduce you to the others. On the journey to Vendria you can get better acquainted.” He gestured toward an older woman, arms all wiry with muscle, standing beside a small wagon. “That there’s Malina. She’s the one who built your wagon.”

“Really, she built that? For me?”

He nodded. “That’s your home now.”

A warm tingling rose up from my stomach, and I smiled. I had my own little place I could call home. But how could I possibly thank someone I’d never even met for such a gift of kindness?

Sedrick led me over to Malina as she leaned against one of the wheels. She had this look of pride--a spark of the eyes, a smile that tugged one side of her mouth up in a wide arc--that told me the work of building the wagon had been a labor of love. It had the smell of fresh cut kulooma--aromatic and earthy. Faint yellow lines ran through the bone-white wood. The

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familiarity of it, even though I couldn't remember having seen a kulooma tree, filled me with raw emotion. It truly made me feel at home. It felt like seeing an old friend.

"Thank you for the gift," I told her. "For someone who has nothing, it means the world to me." It was the best I could think to say to her.

She gave a slight nod, smile growing a little bigger.

Sedrick put his hand on my shoulder. "It's difficult working with the great weeping kulooma tree, but there is no carpenter like Malina. She would be welcomed with open arms in Lelandia, the great city of artists."

I ran my hand against the wood, smooth as polished rock. "It's beautiful." I blinked back tears. "It's home."

"A magical tree to some," Sedrick replied, turning to Malina. "You were right, after all." He put his arm around me. "Come."

There were so many other people to meet and remember I couldn't keep them all straight. It was a blur of names and professions. It was like the Seekers were a traveling city, self-reliant and self-sufficient, with each person filling a specific role.

When the lengthy introductions were over, Sedrick ordered that everyone pack up camp so we could be on our way.

As the fires were being doused, Sunestra trudged over to me. "Come on," she said, waving for me to follow her with a hand. "My father's waiting for us in our wagon."

Her father?

"Tonight, I'm going to teach you the first song I ever learned, *Deadman's Hymn*."