

Escaping Destiny

Jeffrey Pierce

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Without someone willing to be lost in another world, a book is simply a static collection of words. The places, people, and events are frozen in text until you open the pages and your imagination brings them to life. This book is dedicated to you, the reader. Thank you for giving this story and its characters a home.

CHAPTER ONE: DISCOVERIES

Sovay stood to her feet, reaching for the cloud-speckled sky, letting out a long moan as the stiffness stretched from her lean body. Turning in a slow circle, her deep green eyes searched the boundaries of her world, drinking in the landscape she had memorized since birth. From the small hut she had built by hand, her gaze traveled over the ring of stones that marked where her fire would be set that evening. Beyond that lay the lake she was forbidden to swim in, commanded by her mentor not to stray from the shallows. As she turned, her eyes found the surrounding forest she was ordered not to explore, that had beckoned to her since she had been old enough to crawl. Ancient evergreens towered overhead, their heights lost in the glare of the sun, their trunks as thick as the tiny shelter she lived in. All too soon, the circle was complete, her gaze returning to the small hut. The expanse of her world was no more than two-score paces across.

Bending over, her snarled mane of wild blonde hair falling into her eyes, she picked up the small wooden bowl she had carved by hand. Tymurran had harvested the wood by a method she was told she was not ready to learn, presenting her with the unworked block at winter solstice. The wood had waited beside her head while she slept, seasoning in her dreams, until the spring equinox arrived and she was told it was time to begin its crafting.

The first cut had been made with the new moon, her

mentor pushing her to finish the rough outline of the bowl before the moon left the sky. She had finished with minutes to spare, her callused fingers aching from the effort, her clothes covered with chips of wood she had separated with mallet and chisel. Once more, the bowl had been placed at the head of her bed. With each full moon, it had been refined. First, a double ring had been carved around its wide rim. Then, at the height of the next lunar cycle, thirteen glyphs had been carved around its circumference, one for each of the moons of the year, spaced evenly between the narrow rings. She had thought the bowl complete when it was sanded and polished, the basin worked to a glassy smoothness. Her elder had told her that her scrying bowl still needed to be charged, a task best left until daylight as things were more clearly seen in the light of day than in the dark of night. He had promised to aid her in the ritual, saying that he had business to attend to but would return in a day or two.

An entire moon had passed since he had left.

Sovay shook her head, staring at the bowl. “Where is he?” she asked, her eyes narrowing in frustration and concern, wishing that the bowl had been charged, that she could fill it with water and find her answers reflected in its basin. She was too young for wrinkles, but the sun and wind of her nineteen summers had tempered her features, adding a strange maturity to her freckled and sunburned cheeks.

She turned her gaze from the bowl she held to the forest around her, running her fingers through her thick tangle of hair that had never felt the touch of a comb or brush. Her mentor, Tymurran, had forbid her to explore the depths of the woodland, keeping her within sight of the tiny hut as he taught her how to harvest the bounty of the wilderness, as he showed her which herbs could save a life and which could kill. She knew there was no way that she could hide her disobedience from her wood fae mentor if she chose to leave the tiny area where she had spent her entire life.

“But he’s been gone so long,” she whispered, as if

asking the permission of the wind and sky, her own voice seeming strangely loud after her mentor's long absence. "He'd understand, wouldn't he?"

Not hearing an answer, she began to move toward the perimeter of her encampment, only to stop, staring at the bowl she held. Tymurran had trained her in the ways of magic, awakening her to the subtle weave of energy that united all of reality. Sovay had only begun to learn how to read its patterns, how to wield it as a tool, and she couldn't understand the quiet urging that caused her to pick up the satchel that held her woodworking tools. Slung the leather bag over her shoulder, she carefully deposited her scrying bowl in its depths and began to walk toward the ancient evergreens that towered above her. An excited anticipation filled her eyes with each step, tempered only by the fear of testing her independence.



The forest was cool and dark, the loam soft beneath her feet, the air heavy with the scent of evergreens. Sovay's heart was pounding in her ears as she neared the deepest point in the forest she'd ever ventured. Tymurran had always been at her side, forbidding her to explore the woodland alone. As she thought of her mentor, an uncertainty entered her stride, causing her to pause, to glance back toward the only world she had ever known.

"He'll understand," she protested, her voice quiet and unsure, wondering how deep the disapproval would sink into the depths of her mentor's brown, wooden eyes. She could imagine the way the grain of his face would shift as his narrow lips frowned; she could hear the rhythmic click of his wooden fingertips as they drummed absentmindedly while he quietly scolded her, the way his mossy eyebrows furrowed in disapproval. "Even if he doesn't understand, he can't expect me to stay within sight of that hut forever," she added, her confidence returning, a self-assured grin turning up the corners

of her mouth. Sovay's green eyes sparkled with determination. "And if he doesn't understand, I'll make him," she grinned rebelliously.

Certain of her course, she stepped over a broad fern, the plant marking the limit of her previous journeys. But as she moved past the fern, Sovay stopped, her eyes wide with astonishment as her leg disappeared, the air surrounding her limb wavering like ripples on a pool of water.

"By the gods," she whispered in shocked disbelief, pulling her leg back, watching as her limb reformed. She could see the land beyond the fern, the old growth forest stretching as far as the eye could see. As she knelt amidst the moss and ferns and cautiously reached out with a trembling hand, Sovay watched in astonishment and fear as her fingers disappeared, as the air swallowed them like the shallow waters of the lake she bathed in.

Pulling back her hand once more, Sovay turned toward the tiny hut, feeling the pull of its safe familiarity, knowing that she would be safe as long as she stayed within sight of the structure. Sovay shook her head as if rejecting the offer of safety. She swallowed hard, reaching out to push the air before her with both hands, watching as her arms disappeared up to her elbows, ripples spreading out from her submerged limbs, warping the image of the forest beyond. Taking a deep breath, Sovay leaned forward, closing her eyes as if she was afraid to see what she would find.

There was no sensation as she passed the barrier, nothing to signify that it had any substance. But as Sovay opened her eyes, she gasped, her breath catching in her throat as she stared at the landscape before her. It was as if the colors of the world had run before they had completely dried, like the time she had spilled water on the cloth she had dyed. Above and below her lay a colored plane of swirling hues, the colors moving slowly, as if they were alive. The ground below mirrored the sky above, each a perfect clone of the other. The universe was an artist's canvas that had been left in the rain, the

mottled patterns stretching as far as she could see. In the swirl of muted colors, Sovay could discern what had once been an image, finding blurred and twisted landscapes as if seen from above.

As she raised her eyes, gazing into the distance, Sovay found a handful of large, silver spheres suspended between the sky and earth in an even row. Each sphere was the size of the only world she knew. A strange realization sent a cold shiver across her shoulders and down her spine. Turning, already knowing what she would discover, Sovay twisted to look over her shoulder, finding that she emerged from an identical sphere behind her.

“Where am I?” she asked, not expecting an answer but unable to hold the words within. She had been taught to question everything, to delve deep in search of the final truth, the answers that would reveal the secrets of the world. But this was completely outside of her realm of experience.

Sovay leaned backward, only to be engulfed by the forest once more, the strange, muted landscape erased by the boundary of the sphere. Slowly shaking her head, she took a deep breath, rubbing the back of her neck with a free hand as she wrestled with the unknown.

“If this sphere holds my world,” she said, the words tumbling slowly from her lips, struggling to find a cadence, “then it makes sense that the other spheres also hold worlds.” She stopped, thinking. “So why is my world here? What does it do?”

Sovay frowned, wrinkling her forehead. “Tymurran and myself are the only people that live here,” she began, hoping that by beginning the answer, she would find what she needed to complete it. “Tymurran doesn’t live here. So what does he use this world for?”

Sovay suddenly stopped, the answer hovering in the air before her. “He keeps his student here,” she said slowly, her words rich with realization. “Tymurran keeps me here for some reason. If those other spheres hold other students,”

she began, only to stop as a thousand possibilities flooded into her mind. “By the gods,” she whispered, her eyes wide, her shoulders sagging under the weight of the knowledge as she suddenly felt the need to sit down. Kneeling on the forest floor, Sovay slowly shook her head. “I’m not alone,” she said quietly. “There are more people like me out there. I thought I was the only one.”

She had always been alone. From her earliest memories, she had lived in the tiny hut, being raised by Tymurran; a human being nurtured and instructed by the fae. When she had grown old enough to care for herself, her mentor had left her for days at a time, going places where he forbid her to follow. But now she held his secret; she knew there was a world beyond the clearing where she had spent her entire life.

A quiet anger began to flood her veins, Sovay’s eyes narrowing, her jaw growing tense. “There’s an entire world out there that he’s kept to himself,” she said aloud. “Let’s see how he likes it when he has to wait days for me to return.”

Standing to her feet, Sovay cautiously moved forward, testing the air before her until she emerged in the space beyond the sphere. Shifting her weight, she felt for the edge of her world, grasping the slender arc in her hands. She twisted awkwardly, moving one leg beyond the boundary, then a second, hanging ungainly from her elbows and arms as she tried to rearrange her grip, her legs kicking in space. Sovay had never climbed a tree, had never been suspended above the ground, and she realized her error too late. There was nothing she could use for leverage, nowhere for her feet to gain purchase. Each time Sovay shifted, hoping to find a way to grasp the edge of the sphere with her hands and lower herself to the plane below, she would slide closer to her edge of the abyss. She tried to support herself with her forearms, but the panicked kicking of her legs worsened her grip; her body became a pendulum that swung back and forth, her arms sliding closer to the lip of the sphere with a horrible rhythm. Swallowing hard, Sovay surrendered to the inevitable and fell,

tumbling toward the plane of swirling colors below.

Twisting in the air, reaching out with her hands, she sought to brace herself, prepared to roll and distribute the force of the fall as Tymurran had taught her. But the impact never came. Sovay gasped in astonishment as she fell through the swirl of faded colors and was engulfed in the arms of the night, landing hard on a shadowy forest floor, the wind knocked out of her.

Wincing, she sat up, coughing as she fought for air. Opening her eyes, she stared at a landscape unlike anything she had ever seen. Stunted trees, dead or dying, loomed like skeletons in the darkness, their branches bare fingers that clawed at the nocturnal air. In the distance, she could see the light of a city, the illumination blurred as if seen through a faint mist.

“Where am I?” she asked aloud.

Sovay began to stand, but hands grabbed her roughly from behind, pulling her off-balance as powerful fingers covered her mouth in an unyielding grip. The whispered command was so low she could barely discern the words, the stranger’s lips brushing her ear with a frightening intimacy. But the words were urgent and demanding and there was no doubt in Sovay’s mind that the price the speaker stated was one they would both have to pay.

“You make another sound,” the stranger whispered, “and we both die right here.”

Sovay stood rigidly, afraid to breathe, afraid to move.

“If you understand, don’t say a word, just nod.”

Sovay did as she was told.

“Good,” he whispered, the stranger’s voice barely audible. “I’m going to take my hand away now,” he said, his words calm and even. “If you scream, we’ll be dead before you finish the sound. If you so much as breathe too loudly, neither of us will see morning. Stay with me, walk where I walk, and you’ll make it out of here okay. Am I clear?”

Sovay nodded.

She turned as the stranger pulled his hand away, seeing that he had pulled her into the burned out trunk of a massive Douglas Fir tree, the dead forest giant's husk sheltering them from prying eyes. In the deep shadows, she could barely make out the man's features, his face hidden further by dark camouflage that disguised his identity. But Sovay's heart beat faster as she realized that he wasn't one of the fae like Tymurran. The stranger before her was human, like her, the only other human she had ever met.

"Put this on," he ordered quietly, handing her a carefully folded black cloak. "It will help conceal you."

"Who are you?" she whispered, instantly silenced by his commanding glare.

"My name is Kai," he answered quietly as he scanned the darkness beyond their sanctuary, his words barely audible above the whispering wind. "Tymurran sent me. If we live beyond tonight, I'll tell you more."

"What's going on?" she asked, slipping into the hooded cloak, her voice as quiet as Kai's own.

Kneeling on the forest floor, he beckoned her to join him. Sovay looked where he pointed, following his gesture into the shadows of the forest. At first, she couldn't see what he pointed at, finding only dead trees and mist shrouded by the dark night. But as her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, the forest came to life. A long line of cloaked figures moved silently through the night, bows held at ready, arrows nocked, ready to be fired in an instant.

"Who are they?" she asked.

"I don't know," he admitted quietly, never taking his gaze from the hunters. "I was only told that they would be here."

"What are they hunting?"

Kai turned toward her, his eyes bright against the darkness of his painted face. "Us."

Sovay reared back, reaching out to catch herself as she began to fall. But Kai was quicker, grabbing her arm with his

free hand, steadying her and keeping her kneeling beside him.

“They’re hunting us?”

Kai nodded.

“Why?” she whispered.

“I’ll explain later,” he offered, his eyes fixed on the line of dark shadows that moved ever closer to their shelter in the burned-out tree. “All you need to know is that they will kill you if they find you. And when they’re done with you, they will come for me.”

Sovay held his features with her gaze, trying to find a trace of deception, searching his eyes to see if Kai knew more than he shared. But the stranger was focused on the night, his body motionless and tense, completely absorbed in the hunters’ movements.

“They’re coming this way,” he whispered. “Stay low, follow me, and don’t make a sound.”

Sovay just stared at him, the revelations too much for her to digest, her mind reeling as her understanding of her world and her place within it were shattered under the weight of the reality around her.

“Are you with me?” Kai asked, his gaze taut with a quiet intensity. “If we don’t go now, we’ll never make it out of here.”

Sovay nodded. “I’m with you,” she whispered.

Without a word, her new companion moved out into the night, staying in a silent crouch. Sovay followed, the two humans moving through the shadows of the dying forests like ghosts drifting on a gust of wind, slipping away from the hunters as the new companions headed farther from the beckoning lights of the city.

CHAPTER TWO: BORDERLANDS

Kai and Sovay slipped from the shelter of the burned out trunk, moving through the forest of dead trees in a silent crouch, their footsteps scarcely more than whispers on the carpet of dry twigs and fallen leaves. As they passed through pools of muted moonlight, the pale illumination revealed Kai's taut silhouette and Sovay realized that her companion's ability to move without a sound had been taught for a dark purpose. Where Sovay's movements were careful and hushed, there was a dreadful intent behind the way that Kai glided through the shadows of the night. Every step was carefully placed, his body never off balance, ready to instantly spring into action to meet any threat. Kai's body turned in slow semi-circles as he moved, his eyes scanning both the path ahead and the strangers that pursued them, carefully analyzing the landscape around them for dangers that required his response.

As Kai paused in the broken moonlight that slipped through the bare branches of the dead trees, crouching to look over his shoulder at their pursuers, Sovay saw his face for the first time. Kai was a few summers older than she was; although the camouflage paint hid the shallow wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and broke up the pattern of his features, it was something she could sense, something she could see in the intensity of his gaze. Even hidden beneath his loose, dark clothing, Sovay could tell that he had the lean, muscular body of a warrior. There was nothing soft about Kai. From the way

he appraised their pursuit to the tightly focused intent with which he moved through the forest, Sovay could sense that something inside him had been turned off. The part of him that knew how to laugh and how to cry had been locked carefully away. As she watched the glimmer of moonlight in his eyes, she could see that he was weighing their options, deciding how he could best kill their hunters if he and Sovay couldn't escape the pursuit. She didn't know if she should be sad or afraid. He had lost a part of him that was so much of who she was and that loss had given him the ability to do things she was afraid to even consider.

Without warning, his gaze softened, replaced by a deep resigned sadness, the transformation catching Sovay off guard. She realized that the man before her wasn't a cold, heartless killer. It was a paradox she couldn't resolve. One instant he seemed ready to end a life without thought or remorse; the next, it seemed as if the very concept cut Kai to the bone.

Silently he turned away, moving through the forest once more, only to stop and glance back over his shoulder, the intensity of his eyes doubling as his furrowing brows twisted his gaze into a hard glare. Sovay could feel it. There was a decided shift in the energy around them. What had once been a diffused menace that seemed to drift around them like the tendrils of midnight fog, suddenly became frighteningly focused, leaving Sovay feeling naked and exposed.

Before she could make the connection between the tension that filled the dead forest and the hunters that pursued them, Kai grabbed her arm, yanking her forward. Breaking into a run he pulled her behind him, Sovay stumbling as she sought to match his pace. Silence was forgotten, exchanged for a desperate speed as they began to sprint through the darkness and the endless maze of dead trees.

"Run," he hissed, pushing her ahead of him, his hand on her back goading her onward.

They fled through the night, the skeletal trees flashing passed them. There were no shouts from their pursuit, no

words from Kai. The only sounds that broke the silence were the pounding of their racing feet on the forest floor and the explosive gasps of breath that burst from Sovay's lungs.

An arrow flashed passed Sovay's head, striking the trunk of a dead tree at the instant she changed direction to maneuver around it. From the corner of her eye, she watched as the arrow's shaft shattered, but instead of splintering into fragments of wood, the broken shaft burst into tendrils that entangled the trunk of the dead tree, crushing it unmercifully. Sovay turned to look over her shoulder as she ran, watching as the wood warped and aged in the arrow's grasp, the tree decaying before her eyes until it crumbled under the weight of its dead branches, crashing to the forest floor in an explosion of dust.

"Run," Kai growled, his hand on her back once more, his touch demanding that she move faster.

She was exhausted, her breath coming in ragged gasps, but somehow she kept moving. Her legs felt heavy and lifeless; her soft, deerskin boots seemed as if they were hewn from stone. Sovay knew that she couldn't keep up the pace, that as afraid of the hunters as she was, she was beginning to slow, her body not accustomed to running when the only world she had ever known could be counted at two score paces across.

Kai suddenly grabbed her shoulders with both hands, yanking her off her feet and throwing her roughly behind the trunk of a large tree. She turned to him, suddenly afraid of the focused rage that burned in his gaze, frightened even more by the delight that glimmered in his eyes in the face of the challenge before them. She realized that he had been bred for war, just as surely as she had been raised to learn the ways of nature and magic.

And then the anger and exhilaration were gone, replaced by sorrow and an ill-concealed embarrassment.

Kai pointed at a distant line of living trees and thick brush. "There," he commanded. "Get beyond that point and

you'll find a stream. Wait for me on this side of the water. Count to forty. If I'm not there by then, follow the bank to your left and don't stop until you find a place where the water moves fast over the stones. Cross there; the water's shallow. Once you reach the opposite side, move straight away from the stream and keep going 'till morning. You'll find a small encampment in a deep valley. Give them my name and they'll take care of you."

Silently slipping a long knife from its sheath, rotating the weapon so the blade was hidden along the shadow of his arm, he turned back the way they had come, crouching low to the ground, peering around the trunk they sheltered behind.

Kai didn't turn as she cautiously laid her hand on his back. "What about you?" she asked.

There was a slight pause before he answered, but Kai's words were cold and determined. "I can't protect you and slow our pursuit."

Without another word, Sovay began to back away, moving toward the brush that bordered the stream. Looking back over her shoulder again and again, she tried to find the tree that Kai waited behind, but the trunk was lost in a forest of dead trees. It wasn't until her eyes were drawn toward the sounds of battle that she found where he had hid, realizing that her companion had moved from where they had taken shelter. The combatants made no sound; no one roared a battle cry; no one bellowed in defiance. Sovay stopped, watching in horror as men exploded into action, as the sound of steel cutting through mortal flesh filled the silent forest and bodies fell to the ground, their lifeblood seeping into the dead soil, the warriors too proud to scream as they died.



The hunters rushed in, surging toward the lone warrior like the surf crashing upon the shore. Kai spun, a whirlwind of steel amidst a sea of cloaked combatants. The darkened

warriors were a chaos of shadows, a kaleidoscope of flesh and steel that constantly repatterned itself with a horrible speed and grace. His long knife was quickly paired with a dead hunter's sword, the dual blades a choreographed blur, each deadly arc blocking an attack or cleaving through mortal flesh. Kai was utterly silent, his teeth clenched as he moved through the deadly dance with an unholy grace, a horrible beauty to his movements. He moved with a terrifying ease, his body and blades controlled and sure, attack and counteract offered with an offhanded precision. A strange music filled the midnight air, a symphony of cutting flesh and the ringing of steel on steel, punctuated by the gasp of death and the quiet sound of bodies falling to the earth. Within moments, the deadly song ended, the forest suddenly still. Kai stood amidst the dead and dying, his chest heaving with effort, the fallen as silent as the warrior who stood in their midst.

He quickly counted the slain. Nine men had died in as many heartbeats. Kai turned his eyes to the night, trying to ignore the remorse that crept in around the edges of his focused mind, trying to see the men he'd killed as faceless enemies, not grown children for whom a mother would forever mourn. He gritted his teeth, fighting to still his mind, his eyes scanning the shadows, his awareness extending beyond his body, beyond the ragged circle of crumpled corpses in which he stood. As his breathing stilled, Kai felt the air around him, the circle of his perception expanding outward as he extended his mind, the warrior becoming the dead trees that filled the forest around him. His awareness moved with the wind, drifting through the nocturnal woodland, peering into each shadow that hid like a black pool in the darkness of the night.

He felt the hiss of the arrow slicing through the air even before the sound reached his ears. With reflexes honed through endless training sessions with an immortal mentor, Kai dropped toward the earth, spinning away from the sound of the arrow. Those reflexes were the only thing that saved his life. The razor-sharp arrowhead sliced through his dark tunic, the steel

arrowhead skipping along his collarbone as Kai spun, carving a long gash across his upper chest and shoulder as he fell to the ground. His eyes fixed in the direction that the arrow had come, Kai heard the projectile strike the ground beyond him. Laying motionlessly on the cold soil, he watched as the hunter slipped from his hiding place, assuming that Kai was dead, and raced toward Sovay.

Kai silently rolled to his feet, wincing as the icy chill of the arrow's venom spread from the wound, burning as it slowly seeped through his flesh. If it had struck him straight on, he would have died on the spot, crushed into aged oblivion; left untreated, even the shallow wound it had sliced across his torso would kill him. But Kai was lost in the battle, his entire being focused on the shadowy form that raced toward the stream where Sovay waited. Breaking into a full sprint, Kai tore through the forest, his footsteps falling silently as his mentor had taught him, his breath focused and even as the poison spread from his shoulder and chest, filling his body with liquid fire.



Sovay waited in the shadows of the stream's bank, counting slowly as Kai had ordered. She reached forty and began to turn when movement caught her eye.

"Kai?" she called, her voice unintentionally loud, her call raising above the sound of the gurgling stream. But as the figure stepped out from the trees, Sovay caught sight of the hunter's cloaked form, her breath catching in her throat as he drew back his arrow and took aim with his bow.

The forest lining the stream exploded as Kai burst from the trees, tackling the hunter. The two men tumbled into the stream as the arrow released into the sky, her companion landing on top of the archer. Sovay turned away as the sound of Kai's blade ending a man's life filled the air. In an instant Sovay's protector was beside her, his free hand capturing her

upper arm in a unyielding grasp, his grip wet as he urged her to hurry down the embankment.

“There are more,” he explained, his voice strained.

Turning to meet his eyes, Sovay saw that Kai was covered with blood that seeped from his clothing, the crimson liquid bright against his pale skin where Kai’s tunic had been cut away. Her eyes were drawn to Kai’s wound, the skin around the incision already discoloring, the poison spreading from the shallow cut in dark streaks where it polluted his veins.

“You’re wounded,” she observed, her concern quivering in her voice.

He ignored her. “We’re not safe until we make the encampment.”

“You’re hurt,” she said again. “I’m trained as a healer. Let me see it.”

Kai’s eyes were laced with steel. “It won’t kill me before we reach the camp,” he said evenly, the icy tone of his voice leaving no room for debate. “But the men who pursue us will.”

Sovay held his gaze for a long moment, wondering what he had sacrificed to claim his strength, wondering what he had given up to become the warrior that stood before her.

“Come,” he said, guiding her with his hand as they started down the embankment.

“You’ll let me see to that wound once we’re safe?”

Kai nodded, his face grim. “Once we’re safe.”

They hurried on their way, bordering the stream, looking for the place to cross.

“Who were they?” she asked.

“I’ll tell you once we’re safe.”

Sovay let out an impatient breath. “Why was that forest dead?”

“It’s not,” Kai told her, urging her with his touch to hurry. “We’re not in the world of the living. We’re between the realm of the living and the world of the dead. This stream is a boundary, but we can’t cross it where it’s deep. There are

worlds beneath its surface that we could never escape.”

“Where are we then?” she asked, her voice uncertain and afraid.

“The borderlands,” he explained evenly. “It’s a world of dreams; a place between life and death; a gap between the threads that weave the tapestry of worlds. This land is inhabited by spirits and those mortals who need a portal to travel from one world to the next.” He stopped, pointing across the moonlit stream to where the water rippled and churned over the shallows. “There. That’s where we cross.”

“And once we’re across, we’re safe?”

Kai shook his head. “We’re safer than we are here. That bank is in the mortal realm. But we have a journey ahead of us. The encampment is just a gathering place.”

“What then?”

“We find some answers.”

Kai began to wade across the stream, pausing to extend his hand to Sovay, guiding her across the slippery rocks that formed the wide stream’s bed. The water tugged at their legs, the current struggling to pull them into its embrace. Kai made sure his feet were carefully placed, that each would hold before he took another step. Sovay was unsteady, having never crossed a stream, her life relegated to a small hut in a tiny world, but her companion’s hands were sure and he kept her from falling when her feet slipped on the slick stones. He didn’t say a word, even though his hands trembled and beads of sweat formed on his brow. Sovay could tell he was hurt and as she slipped and fell against his chest, she watched as Kai spun his head away from her, his teeth clenched against the pain, his face pale beneath his smeared camouflage.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to look at that wound?”

“I’ll make it,” he promised through gritted teeth, his voice little more than a strained whisper.

“And the hunters?” she asked, looking over her shoulder in the direction they had come, her eyes worried and

afraid. “They only exist in the borderlands?”

Her companion shook his head. “No. They’re mortal, like us. They only entered the borderlands to claim your life.”

Sovay stared at her companion’s lips as if the weight of her gaze would elicit an explanation. An endless stream of questions filled her mind. “*Why would they want to kill me? How did they know I was going to be there? Who are they?*”

But Kai was silent, intent on leading them across the stream that marked the boundary between the two worlds.

Sovay struggled against the current, the water pulling at her legs. Instinctively, she turned her eyes to the stream as her feet sought a safe purchase between the large slippery stones of the riverbed. She gasped, recoiling in shock and terror. More than water pulled at her limbs. Beneath the surface, mirroring the flow of the water, willowy pale figures clutched at her, pleading at her with empty eyes to join them beneath the surface.

“They’re harmless,” Kai promised her.

Sovay turned her eyes toward his voice, finding a reassurance in his weary gaze.

“They can only claim you if you should submerge. If you were to fall beneath the water, you’d never leave their realm.”

Sovay swallowed, summoning her strength. They were nearing the center of the stream, the air around them deepening into a thick mist that clung to her flesh, the air clearing as they neared the opposite bank. Sovay turned her eyes upstream, seeing cloaked figures forming in the mist, some on foot, others on horseback, their forms transparent and indistinct, quietly watching her as she crossed the boundary between the worlds.

At last they reached the opposite shore, the mist clearing into a cloudless night sky sprinkled with stars. Kai moved up the steep embankment, leading the way into a forest that immediately reminded Sovay of the old growth that filled the world she had grown up in. Trees reached toward the starry sky overhead, the open spaces beneath them populated with

mosses and ferns. Mushrooms grew in wide circles; game trails crisscrossed the moonlight.

“Will they follow us, now that we’re across?”

Kai nodded. “But it’s not much farther now.”

Sovay was silent for a long moment as they moved through the forest with a hurried pace, thinking about the man that led her through the night, that had entered a nightmare world simply to make sure she passed safely through it.

“Thank you,” she said at last.

Kai didn’t turn when he asked, “For what?”

“For coming for me.”

He stopped, turning to find Sovay standing motionless in the moonlight. There was a freedom to her smile that he envied, a childlike appreciation in her eyes that forced an unfamiliar smile across his lips.

“You’re welcome,” he answered, slowly shaking his head, unable to suppress a self-conscious grin. “Now, come. We’re not safe yet.”

“You look tired.”

Kai nodded. “It’s the wound. I’ll let you treat it when we’re safe. Deal?”

Sovay hurried to catch up with him. “Is it much farther?”

He shook his head, pointing to a long incline that rose before them. “That rise empties out into a narrow valley. The encampment’s there.”

“You’re going to be okay until then?”

He nodded. “I’ve made it through worse.”

Sovay let it drop, promising herself that she’d keep an eye on her companion’s condition, not wanting to know what he’d been through that was worse than a nightmare landscape and the hunters that still pursued them.

CHAPTER THREE: THE ENCAMPMENT

As they slipped from the towering evergreens that opened into the small clearing, Kai staggered, losing the battle against the poison that slowly seeped through his veins. His body was wracked with fever, his face twisted into an agonized grimace. The pale moonlight that spilled into the clearing framed his pale face, his features masked by a deadly maze of darkened capillaries, his eyes unsteady as they fought to hold onto consciousness. Stumbling, Kai fell. Sovay reached out to catch him but couldn't hold his weight, the young woman gasping in concern at the feverish burning of his skin. She watched, helpless to stop his fall as Kai slipped from her hands and crashed to his knees. Closing his eyes, Kai's strength wavered, his body swaying as he fought to steady himself. He toppled forward, supporting himself with his palms on the ground, his body ravaged by the rapidly spreading poison.

"Come on," she encouraged him, tugging gently on his arm, goading him to stand. "It can't be much farther now."

Kai shook his head, fighting for breath as he tried to speak. His arms trembled under the weight of their load, Kai's body threatening to collapse, abandoning him to the earth's cold embrace.

"You can make it," she insisted, trying to help him stand once more.

Her companion licked his lips, swallowing hard. "We're here," he said, his voice strained and weak.

Sovay turned her eyes to the night, scanning the empty clearing. The grass had been grazed short by the animals of the forest, the footprints of deer and elk engraved in the soft earth. Kai and Sovay were on a shallow rise in the middle of the meadow, but they were alone. There were no companions, no encampment; whoever Kai had hoped would meet them had already left or had never shown.

“There’s no one here, Kai.”

The warrior closed his eyes, feeling his consciousness waver even as he fought to speak, his voice trembling, the words spilling from his lips in ragged fragments. “They’re here,” he gasped, his voice barely audible. “They’re hidden, but they’re here.”

“Where?” she asked, turning in wide circles, her eyes scanning the night. She stopped, turning back to face him, crouching beside her companion. Sovay’s body blocked the moonlight, casting a deep shadow across his form, the darkness hiding his features from her eyes. “I need to see to your wounds, Kai,” her gaze equal measures of urgency and concern. “If your friends are here, they need to show themselves now. You’re not going to hold out much longer.”

“They’re coming,” he promised. His words trailed off as he hung his head, his arms trembling beneath his weight, slowly losing the fight as he slipped down into the wet grass, his body shivering at the chill touch of the moonlit dew.

“Kai?” she asked, her voice tinged with worry.

But there was no answer.

Kneeling at his side, she struggled to roll him onto his back, gasping as his face turned to the moonlight. The arrow’s venom had spread through his body; every inch of skin was a spider web of black veins, the poison consuming him from within. The pale patches of flesh that peered from between the dark capillaries had turned a horrifying gray, the combination presenting his skin like parched earth, cracked and burned in the heat of a drought-powered sun.

With a concerned urgency, Sovay reached into the

satchel that held her woodworking tools and pulled out a small knife, cutting away his tunic. She turned away once more, pulling vials of herbs from her bag, stopping as her eyes found his skin. Kai's lean, muscular torso had begun to change, the transformation spreading out from the wound to slowly consume his body. His skin had turned gray, dark ridges marring its smoothness, the raised skin following the lines of his blackened capillaries. Reaching out, she gently touched the new flesh. It was pliant, but hardened like soft leather.

Her eyes were pulled to a beam of light that cut through the darkness, spearing out into the night from the base of the small rise she knelt on. A doorway had opened in the earth. Sovay watched in disbelief as an older man, his hair visibly thinning and beginning to gray, emerged from within the low hill. At his side was a young woman, the girl in her mid-teens. The girl's eyes grew wide with concern, rushing to her fallen companion's side.

"Kai," she exclaimed, the fear in her eyes making her seem younger than her years as she knelt next to her friend.

"What happened?" the older man asked, joining them, his features wracked with concern.

"We were in the borderlands when," she began, only to be cut off by the stranger's voice, his tone gentle, but insistent.

"What caused the wound?" he asked gently, clarifying the question.

"An arrow," Sovay answered. "A hunter's arrow."

"They haven't given up yet," he said, staring off into the night, his gaze focused in the direction Sovay and Kai had come from. "We have time. Kai wouldn't lead them here if they were close behind. But we need to get you within."

"Within?" Sovay asked.

The man nodded, grunting as he knelt to lift Kai. "It's where we've made camp."



Sovay paused as she stepped through the opening in the earth, her eyes slowly drifting over the interior of the low rise, amazed at what she saw. They were inside a dome of earth and stone, as if the soil had parted to welcome them within its embrace. In the center of the circular chamber lay a small ring of stones, waiting for a campfire to be ignited, a stack of dry wood carefully arranged within. A handful of mortals gathered around the unlit campfire, their faces illuminated by the flickering light of scattered candles, every pair of eyes fixed upon Kai's fallen form. A man about Kai's age knelt in the shadows, staring at her uneasily. A young girl, still summers away from her early teens, measured her with eyes much older than her age. Across the unlit fire, a woman a few years older than Sovay clasped her hands tightly, her eyes filled with worry and concern, her knuckles white under the strain. The teen that had escorted them within the earth hurried to the woman's side, the two women wrapping themselves in each others arms, finding comfort in the familiar embrace.

The older man carefully positioned Kai on the earthen floor. Sovay knelt beside her fallen companion, uncapping the vials of herbs she held, laying their stoppers on the earth beside her.

"I need a bowl," she said to those that watched her, "preferably one made of wood. And water; fresh."

The man who had carried Kai within handed her a small wooden bowl, waiting for her to steady it before he filled it with water from a leather skin.

"I'm Beltross," he offered with a faint smile, his thin lips barely perceptible.

As Sovay smiled her thanks, she felt the gesture waver as Beltross blinked, opaque inner eyelids quickly moving side to side as they moistened his pale eyes.

Raising his hand, his palm facing her, he spread his webbed fingers as if in explanation. "I'm only part mortal," he said quietly. "My mother was mer."

"I'm Sovay," she said.

Taking a deep breath, Sovay forced herself to smile, not sure of what else to say. Instead of speaking, she turned her eyes back to her patient. Pouring half of the water over his wound, she gently washed away the dried blood and dirt. As she set the bowl on her thighs, trying to balance it, Beltross took it from her, holding it in his hands where she could easily reach it.

“Just tell me what to do,” he offered.

The young girl moved closer, standing behind Sovay, peering over the older woman’s shoulder.

“Is he going to be okay?” the girl asked, her voice soft and quiet, filled with concern.

“I think so,” Sovay answered. “It might take a few days for him to recover, but he should be fine.”

“You’re lying,” a man’s voice accused coldly from across the room.

Sovay turned to glare at the man who knelt in the shadows.

“You don’t know what’s happening to him,” he pointed out angrily, his icy blue eyes staring through his dark, unkempt bangs. “You’ve never seen anything like this before. You’re not even sure if you can save him.”

Beltross growled at the young man, the sound strangely empowered, like the crashing of the surf. “Daen,” he warned.

Daen closed his mouth, glaring at them from across the room.

“He is going to be okay, right?” the other woman asked.

Sovay met her eyes. The woman would have been pretty if her face hadn’t been twisted with concern. Her red hair was cropped close to her head, her large brown eyes and scattered freckles lending color to her pale, fragile features. She held the teenager’s hands in her own, the girl watching Sovay intently, daring to search for hope in the stranger’s answer.

“Daen is right,” Sovay admitted, turning away to mix the herbs in the bowl Beltross held, forming a thick paste.

“I think Kai is poisoned, but I’m not sure with what. These herbs should help. If the poison is something that exists in the natural world, the poultice I’m making will begin to pull it from his body and give him a fighting chance. There’s a broth I’ll make from the same herbs that should do even more.”

“But if the poison is something else,” Daen added coldly, braving the mer’s warning glare as he goaded Sovay to continue.

Sovay shook her head, taking the bowl from the mer. “I don’t know,” she answered honestly, the quiet finality of her voice silencing the conversation.

As she began to stir the poultice, her eyes were drawn to the young girl that had moved to stand beside her.

“Can we help?” she asked, a child’s innocence mixed with an adult’s self-assurance and strength.

Sovay smiled, ready to gently dismiss the girl, but was interrupted as the girl continued.

“All of us came from the spheres,” she said, her blue eyes seemingly older than her years. She was a slight wisp of a girl, a tomboy from the make of her clothes and the adventurous set to her jaw. The girl’s dark hair was cut in the same short style as the red-haired woman.

“Is she yours?” Sovay asked.

The woman across the chamber shook her head; the teenager beside her did the same.

“Your mentor taught you how to heal,” the girl pointed out, drawing Sovay’s eyes back to her voice. “Mine taught me things too.”

“We can work together,” Beltross offered. “What are you trying to do?”

“These herbs are for purification,” Sovay explained warily. “Later, the broth will continue the process and help him regain his strength.”

The mer turned to the young girl, smiling as he met her eyes. Sovay regarded him for a long moment, realizing that his hair wasn’t thinning, that it had been sparse from birth, a

compromise between his mortal genes and the heritage of the sea. Where a mortal's cheeks and flesh would blush with the color of life, the skin that stretched over Beltross's features was tinged with blues and greens, the remainder so pale it was nearly white.

Taking the bowl from Sovay's hands, he held it out to his young companion.

"What's in the bowl?" the young girl asked.

"Herbs and water."

"The water is from a stream up in the mountains," the girl offered, leading Sovay toward the information with her insistent tone. "Where did you gather the herbs?"

"In a forest," Sovay answered quietly, her voice hesitant, unsure of what was about to transpire. "Near the base of an old tree."

The girl bent over the bowl that Beltross held, as if she wanted to smell the mixture. But as Sovay watched, the girl's mouth began to move, whispering words too quietly for Sovay to hear. An innocent promise only an unencumbered child could know began to fill the girl's eyes as she continued to whisper, her features coaxing the poultice to life.

"Leiron has a way," Beltross offered quietly. "Watch."

Sovay turned her eyes back to the young girl, the woman's gaze drifting from the child to the bowl as Leiron moved away and the poultice came to life. The mixture swirled around the circumference of the bowl, the deep greens of the poultice exploding with light, the hues of the forest illuminating the subterranean encampment. In the glow that rose from the bowl, tiny creatures began to dance, their movements synchronized to the flickering light. Their humanoid bodies were no larger than Sovay's index finger, their transparent forms crafted from the very plants that she had gathered in the wild. Limbs drew upon stems and roots for their shape; leaves of different sizes formed their faces, their features wavering like their native plants dancing in a gentle breeze.

“You’ll need to hurry,” Leiron said softly. “They won’t stay like that for long. It’s been too long since the herbs were gathered; their spirits will be aware for only a moment.”

Without pausing to question, Sovay scooped the living mixture from the bowl, spreading it across Kai’s wound. She watched in enchanted disbelief as the light was drawn back within the poultice, the glowing mixture moving on its own, finding the wound, stretching along the shallow incision.

She was motioned aside with a gentle touch. “It’s my turn,” Beltross explained simply.

Moving to take Sovay’s place as she stepped aside, Beltross positioned his webbed hands above the wound, his palms facing the glowing incision. Closing both sets of eyelids, the mer tilted his head back and began to softly sing. Sovay closed her eyes, holding back her tears as the beauty of the wordless song washed over her. It was as if the sound of the gentle wind and lullaby of the waves had been set to music. There were no words, only the purity of tone and intent that rose and fell from Beltross’s thin lips. The sound held the deep emotion of the sea, the power of an unchained storm, transmuted into the gentle lapping of the waves that danced around a child’s bare toes.

Opening her eyes, the tears falling down her cheeks, Sovay watched as Beltross began to waver, as the mer side of his being came to life. The white of his pale skin deepened into a soft green. His features melted until they were indistinct, his ears little more than holes in the side of his head, his lips so thin they were but a line drawn above his chin. The sound washed over the gathered mortals as the herb’s illumination began to grow beneath the mer’s touch. As it grew in brilliance, hiding Beltross and Kai behind a curtain of shimmering light, the song rose to a crescendoing height, only to fall away into a faint whisper, the light fading as the chamber grew still, their shelter bathed only in the faint flicker of candlelight.

Beltross slumped forward, exhausted, his features

returning to the way they had been when Sovay had first seen him.

“Kai will live,” Daen proclaimed flatly from his place across the room.

Sovay turned toward her unconscious companion, watching as the dark venom that polluted his veins slowly retreated, pulled toward the poultice, her friend’s breathing growing deep and easy as he slipped into the arms of his dreams.



Sovay sat at Kai’s side as he slept, monitoring his condition. Although she didn’t quite understand what had transpired, the poison had left her friend’s system. He would be weak for some time; Sovay was certain that magic couldn’t also restore his strength. But Kai would live and that was more than she’d been sure of when they had first crossed the stream and slipped from the hunters’ grasp.

She turned toward their new companions, quietly observing them from where she watched over Kai. Beltross and Leiron sat against one of the encampment walls, deep in conversation, oblivious to the world around them. From the way they interacted, Sovay could see that the mer had picked up where the child’s mentor had left off. But it was more than a simple understanding between teacher and student that bound them together; there was something more, a friendship, an understanding of who the other truly was that formed a kinship that was as rare as new snow in late spring.

Looking to the right, she found Traela, the teenager that had emerged from the earth with Beltross to usher Kai and Sovay within the encampment. Her straight, raven-black hair was a tangle of different braids, as if the girl couldn’t decide what style to wear it in, trying several, only to give up in the midst of her experiment. The girl wore a simple buckskin dress with blue trousers on underneath, a mismatched collection of

necklaces and bracelets further confusing the ensemble. She still sat next to Caraine, unwilling to leave the woman's side since Kai was first carried into the earth.

Caraine slept uneasily, curled into a protective ball, her head resting on a folded tunic. From time to time she would shift uncomfortably in her sleep, mouthing words that never left her lips, only to slip back into her dreams without waking.

Sovay found Daen staring at her from where he crouched in the shadows, his glare intensifying as she met his eyes. The small, wiry man didn't say a word and didn't look away. It was Sovay that broke the connection, turning back to her companion, feeling Daen's satisfied smirk from across the room.

A low moan filled the encampment, Sovay instinctively turning to Caraine's sleeping form, only to find that the sound came from the earth around them, as if the soil writhed in pain.

"It's them," Leiron whispered from beside Beltross, her wide eyes raised to the earthen roof overhead. "It's the hunters."

Sovay turned, meeting the young girl's gaze.

"The earth can feel them," she explained, her eyes wide and uneasy, her fingers wrapped tightly around the mer's webbed hand. "It will get louder as they near."

As if on cue, the sound rose in volume, deepening as other voices were added to the agonized chorus. The sound was a low baritone, filled with a deep, aching pain and an uneasy fear that raised the hair on the back of Sovay's neck. Caraine awoke, covering her ears; Traela buried her face in the woman's tunic, trying to hide from the approaching enemy.

Sovay turned to Beltross, hoping for an answer, only to see the mer lay his finger across his lips, signaling her to be quiet.

The moaning continued to grow in strength, the sound layered, overlapping itself as countless voices were added. It grew to an agonizing cry that flooded the subterranean chamber. Below its surface a terrible percussion joined the

horrifying song; the sound of approaching footsteps resonated as a deep chaotic drumbeat, amplified as it was pulled into the earth.

Daen rose from where he had knelt in the shadows. Snatching a candle in his hand, he stalked across the room, stopping before Leiron, the girl adamantly shaking her head.

“Do it,” he growled.

Beltross glared at the order, wrapping his arms around Leiron from behind, supporting her decision.

Daen turned to the center of the chamber and knelt, touching the candle flame to the wood in the ring of stones, the dry fuel instantly igniting as the fire began to grow.

“Do it,” he ordered, scowling into Leiron’s eyes.

“Bring it to life.”

Leiron shook her head once more, a horrible fear tingeing her defiance.

“Kai can’t help us,” Daen growled. “It’s up to you. You need to bring the fire to life. You need to burn them,” he ordered, jerking his head toward the sound of the approaching hunter’s that filled the earthen dome.

Caraine glared at the command. “Will they find us?” she demanded. “You can see the Weave, Daen. Will they find us?”

He angrily shook his head. “I can’t tell.”

“Then we’ll wait,” she stated coldly, standing to her feet. “If it comes to the point where a child has to do our killing to protect us,” she glared, crossing the distance between them, her voice filled with ice, her eyes laced with steel, “then I’ll be the one to make that call.” She stood close enough to feel his breath on her face as she gazed down at the shorter man, glaring in defiance. “Am I clear?”

Daen turned to his companions, seeking an ally and finding none. Offering Caraine a smirk and a low bow, he backed away, retreating to his corner.

With the confrontation ended, no one spoke, the wailing of the earth growing in volume and strength, the deep boom of

the approaching footsteps deafening, the sound reverberating through the chamber.

“They’re here,” Leiron said quietly, her words lost beneath the sound.

The footsteps stopped above them, the companions’ eyes fixed on the walls and ceiling of their encampment, as if somehow they could see through the earth. Sovay turned at the movement behind her, staring in disbelief as Kai struggled to his feet, his eyes girded against the effort, fighting against his exhausted body.

“Where’s my sword?” he asked, mouthing the words beneath the deafening moan that rose and fell; the sound washing over them, filling the companions with despair.

Traela hurried to his side, carrying the sheathed blade.

Standing wearily, Kai drew the sword with an ease that belied his weakened condition. The firelight echoed along the polished blade, gleaming in the pattern of runes and glyphs that were worked into the steel.

A terrible scream ripped through the encampment, emanating from the earth around them. It was a cry of agony and pain brought on by horrible wounds and an unspeakable violation.

“They found us,” Kai gasped, glaring as he slipped against the wall, using the earth to support himself. “They’re digging.”

He turned to Leiron. “Can you make me a door when I tell you?”

The young girl hurried across the chamber, standing beside the arc of the wall near her protector, laying her hands on the earth in response.

“You can’t be serious,” Sovay countered. “There’s no way you can fight in your condition.”

Kai ignored her, shifting his gaze to Caraine.

“I’ll need your help,” he said simply.

She moved to stand before him, gazing up into his eyes, her features filled with uncertain hesitation.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

Kai closed his eyes and slowly nodded, pushing himself away from the wall, fighting to stand.

Caraine took a deep breath, laying her palms against the center of his chest. “Let me know when you’re ready.”

Kai closed his eyes, his chest rising in a long, deep breath. Somehow, in the midst of the terrible screams that echoed through the chamber, his body began to grow still, his breathing began to slow. Moments that seemed to stretch into eternity were lost as Kai quieted his mind, summoning a part of himself to the surface that lay hidden deep within his being. His body grew completely still, Kai’s features relaxing until they were an emotionless mask. Then he slowly nodded.

Caraine stepped forward and closed her eyes, her brow furrowing in concentration as she raised her hands to frame Kai’s features. Beneath her fingertips, the warrior’s skin began to waver, rippling like the touch of the wind on still water. The wrinkles that laughter had etched on his face were erased; softness, warmth and gentleness disappeared beneath Caraine’s hands. Kai’s gaze hardened, growing cold and cruel, until there was no remorse, no compassion in his eyes, only an unfathomable anger and a desire to kill.

The woman’s hands moved over Kai’s body, leaving lean, hardened muscle behind, his body transforming in the wake of her caress. But Sovay’s eyes were fixed on Kai’s gaze, not on the changes that Caraine’s touch brought out in the reluctant warrior. Somehow, Caraine had erased everything in Kai that Sovay would call human. There was no joy, no laughter. All that was left was a merciless killer that waited to be unleashed.

Beltross whispered in Sovay’s ear, his thin lips close to her skin, the sound nearly lost beneath the wailing of the earth. “Caraine has the ability to transform any being into what they believe they are,” he explained. “Kai has set aside everything that is human about him; everything except his concept of what he is as a warrior. He’s only done it once before.”

Kai's body had transformed, becoming even leaner than before, each movement pregnant with power, ready to explode to life. There was a darkness to the man that stood before them; a cold, demonic strength emanated from Kai's new form. Turning, his eyes passed over Sovay and she shivered under his icy glance, the warrior's gaze empty of mercy or remorse. She swallowed, her eyes filled with an equal measure of terror and sympathy, wondering if Kai truly believed he was the killer that stood before them.

As if on cue, Leiron began to whisper to the earthen walls, the soil before her parting, opening out onto the night.

In a silent rush, Kai was gone, slipping through the portal as Leiron immediately closed it behind him. The companions listened as the screaming of the earth instantly stopped, leaving only the wailing chorus of the trespassing hunters. Voices began to fall from the terrible melody, the hunters' lives ended with a terrifying speed. In moments it was silent, the quiet terrifying in the ease with which it quickly descended, the stillness of the earthen chamber broken only by the crackling of the campfire that slowly consumed the dry wood.

"Is he?" Sovay began to ask, only to stop in the midst of the question, as if she was afraid of the answer.

"Is he alive?" Beltross finished for her, slowly nodding. "Yes. He's still alive. Caraine will go to him in a moment and bring balance to his being again."

Sovay turned as the sound of a young girl's cries met her ears. She turned to find Leiron standing with her hands braced against the wall, her shoulders shaking as she wept. Moving to her side, Sovay laid a hand on the girl's shoulder, surprised that Leiron didn't turn to face her.

"He killed them all," she whispered, her young voice trembling as if it threatened to break.

"Leiron," Sovay offered, trying to comfort her young friend. "He saved us. They would have killed us if he wouldn't have stopped them."

The girl was quiet for a long moment, her shoulders silently shaking as fresh tears streaked down her face. “You don’t understand,” she said, still facing the wall, her voice trembling as she cried. “I can still feel their spirits. They hate so much, they feel so much darkness that they can’t leave. They’re still out there.”

“They’re gone,” Sovay insisted gently, only to be stopped by the mer’s touch. She turned to find him slowly shaking his head.

“Leiron can do more than simply awaken spirits,” he said softly, whispering so that only Sovay could hear. “She can talk to them. She can sense them. To us, we’re safe and the night is still. Even the earth around us is quiet. But to her, they’re still alive. I can only imagine what she hears right now.”

Sovay turned to Leiron, her eyes filled with compassion for the young girl.

“Leiron is strong,” the mer explained in the same hushed voice. “Stronger than either you or I.” He paused, waiting for Sovay to meet his gaze. “The person you should mourn for is Kai.”

“Kai?”

Beltross nodded, his eyes grim. “Imagine what it’s like to give up your humanity, to know that you can kill without a second thought, that the being you’ve become not only lives for the kill, but thrives on it. Enjoys it. All of those feelings and memories will still be with him when Caraine returns him to his natural form. He won’t talk about it; he won’t even admit it. But sometimes when he doesn’t know you’re watching, you can see it haunts him when you look in his eyes. And my mother’s people, the mer, we can sense human emotion and thought in ways no other being can. I know what he goes through. I’ve seen his hell. Kai was never meant to be a warrior; he feels everything much too deeply not to be haunted by the man he’s become.”

Caraine moved to the young girl’s side, laying a gentle

hand on the child's shoulder. Leiron opened the portal in the earth once more, the red-haired woman slipping out into the night.

Caraine paused at the mer's words.

"Be careful," Beltross warned. "He won't know it's you."

The woman nodded. "I will," she promised. Turning to Leiron, she added, "I'll call when we're done."

Caraine slipped into the night, Leiron closing the portal behind her.

Sovay met Beltross's gaze. "How long will it take?"

"It depends," he said simply, slowly shaking his head. "First, she has to find him. In his current state, that's not always an easy task. Then she has to convince him that she's not a threat. If she can do that, she'll need to help him release his hold on his warrior nature, to give up that strength and entrust himself to her care."

"If she can do that?" Sovay asked incredulously.

Beltross nodded. "It's harder than you'd imagine."

"How long?"

It was Daen who answered. "Mid-morning. The sun will be three fingers above the horizon."

Beltross turned back to Sovay. "Daen knows things," he offered simply. "It's his gift."

"Not everything," Daen interrupted with a self-confident smirk, "but enough."

Sovay met the mer's eyes once more. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Beltross shook his head. "Get some rest," he offered, turning to Leiron.

The young girl faced the curved earthen wall where she knelt on the floor, her forehead pressed against the cold soil.

"I need to see to my friend," he explained, and moved to sit at his student's side, his hand on her shoulder, silently offering his aid. Leiron didn't move for a long moment, kneeling motionlessly, leaning against the earthen wall.

Without warning, she suddenly burst to life, slipping into the mer's arms, Beltross holding her gently, whispering the gentle words of wind and sea as the young girl wept in his embrace, her body wracked by her tears.

CHAPTER FOUR: RELEASE

Sovay surprised herself when she awoke. When she had curled up along one of the walls, cradling her head on her folded arms, she had told herself that she was only going to rest her eyes, not realizing that the events of the previous night had claimed so much of her strength. Sitting up, she was surprised to find the pale hues of early morning spilling through the doorway opened in the earth. Casting her eyes around the subterranean encampment, she took inventory of her companions. Caraine and Kai had yet to return; Leiron was missing; the others still slept. Sovay wondered for a moment if she should wake Beltross, but decided against it, choosing to look for the girl on her own.

She stretched as she stepped into the sunlight that shimmered on the dew-laden grass, Sovay working out the kinks that had formed from sleeping on the cold earth. Sovay felt her unease begin to melt away as her eyes drank in the morning, watching as the sunrise painted the forest, the colors of dawn drifting across the streamers of mist that wove their way through the woodland and blanketed the small clearing.

Slowly turning, her eyes found Leiron kneeling in the fog. The young girl's face twisted into a mask of despair and remorse, her lips forming words the woman couldn't hear. As Sovay began to move toward her, the mist between them thinned, revealing the bodies of those that Kai had slain, that Leiron even now tried to coax to release their hold on their

spirits. As she neared the girl, Sovay gasped at the carnage. It had been a massacre, the hunters unable to stand against the warrior her companions had unleashed. Limbs hung by tattered streamers of flesh or were missing altogether, the wounds that carved the dead flesh cleaved impossibly deep. The grass was a sea of blood and gore, their enemies' lives spilled on the earth, kept moist by the morning dew.

Leiron raised weary eyes to Sovay as the woman neared.

"They won't let go," the girl explained, her voice trembling with grief and frustration. "They just keep saying horrible things."

Sovay crouched beside her, gazing down at the corpse Leiron knelt beside. The hunter's hood had fallen aside, revealing a face hidden beneath a mask of scar tissue, the wounds raised in careful patterns, etched with an artistic touch. Spirals and clipped lines had been carved into the man's flesh, the wounds treated with an unknown substance that had caused them to heal as hardened scar tissue. Swallowing hard, the woman traced the swirls and eddies with her eyes, unable to understand their horrible purpose. She had never seen anything like the scars that marred what would have been a handsome face, like the brands that marred every inch of exposed flesh. The dark patterns extended down the dead man's exposed neck and throat, slipping beneath his blood soaked tunic.

She thought back to what Kai had told her of the hunters, remembering how he had said that they were stronger in the borderlands, but that they could cross over into the world of men. Appraising the scars once more, she thought back to an evening with her mentor. They had been talking of runes and sigils, of how the patterns of magic could forever change a thing, enchanting a simple object or linking it to a specific type of energy. As they talked, he had absentmindedly traced patterns in the earth with a long finger, Sovay more interested in the intricate design he sketched than in the lesson Tymurran sought to teach. Staring at the complex collage of scar tissue,

a dread realization filled Sovay's eyes as she began to realize what the men before her had done.

"They were like us once," Leiron explained. "They asked for this life."

Sovay turned, meeting the young girl's eyes.

"But they won't let go," she concluded, her gaze falling to the earth at Sovay's feet. The young girl was heartbroken and exhausted.

The woman reached out, laying her hand on the girl's knee. "I remember once," Sovay began, "when we cut down a tree for use in a rite. Every night I dreamt that there was a woman trapped in the stump, that her feet were caught in the dead roots and that she couldn't escape. Every night in my dreams, other men and woman slipped from the trees around her, trying to help, but they couldn't free her from the dead wood."

"What happened?"

Sovay offered her a reassuring smile. "When I told my mentor about the dreams, he showed me how to help the spirit free itself, how to let it go into the night." She paused, letting the words sink in. "Would you like me to show you how?"

Leiron nodded hopefully.

The woman shifted her weight, moving closer to the body that lay before them. "My mentor told me to put my hands above the center of the being like this," she said, crossing her hands above the dead man's solar plexus, Sovay's palms facing the corpse. She closed her eyes, her voice soft as she continued. "Then you think about its life, the way it lived until you can feel it beneath your hands." The woman's face grew grim as she entertained unpleasant thoughts, thinking of what she knew of the hunters, of the way they had stalked them through the dead forest of the borderlands, tracking them across the boundary and into the world of men. "When you can feel it," she explained, her eyes still closed, "then you offer it a blessing and lift and spread your hands, helping the spirit into the air."

Sovay paused for a long moment, her lips pressed tightly together. “May you find the peace in the next life that eluded you in this one,” she whispered pulling her hands away as she lifted them above her head, pointing her palms toward the sky.

When she opened her eyes, Leiron was smiling in wonder and amazement, the spirit’s release reflected in the glow that brightened the girl’s features. The joy faded as Leiron’s gaze returned to the mangled tapestry of the dead, the other spirit’s voices still in her ears.

“Would you like to help me?” Sovay asked.

Leiron nodded, her eyes much older than her years would attest.



As Daen had predicted, Caraine and Kai returned at mid-morning. The woman looked tired and drained, her features haggard and pale. Kai had returned to his natural form and walked under his own power, but his steps were slow and deliberate, a strange counterpoint to the edginess in his eyes. There was a distance between the two mortals, as if events had transpired to push a wedge between the companions. Caraine smiled a weary greeting, but Kai just kept walking, heading toward a stream that sang in the distance.

As she neared the portal to their encampment, Caraine found Beltross waiting and slipped into the mer’s comforting embrace, physically and emotionally exhausted from her ordeal.

“Where’s Kai going?” Sovay asked.

It was Caraine that answered.

“He needs some time alone,” she said coldly. After a long pause she added, “And he wants to wash off the blood of the slain.”



The small amount of gear the companions possessed was quickly packed, the bags and packs arranged in the sunlight as they vacated the encampment. Sovay stood and watched in wonder as Leiron knelt and whispered to the spirits of the earth, laying a gift of two beautiful stones within the doorway to the chamber before stepping back into the embrace of the sun. As she did, their shelter slowly deflated, the earth reclaiming the low rise as its own, the even grade of the meadow reforming before Sovay's eyes.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Beltross smiled.

Sovay simply nodded, her eyes fixed on the transformation before her.

"Makes me wish I would have taken my own mentor's lessons more seriously," he grinned, slowly shaking his head. "Leiron wants to learn everything and isn't satisfied to only partially understand a concept. I'm told that all of us here have this kind of potential. But what makes me wonder is when I think about where she'll be in another four or five summers, what she'll know by the time she's a teenager."

"Why are you all together?" Sovay asked. "You and Leiron make sense, but Daen?"

Beltross nodded. "There's an old story I'll tell you sometime. It speaks of thirteen mortals who will be the keys in a time to come, who will alter the very fabric of reality."

Sovay raised her eyebrows in disbelief. "And that's us?"

The mer slowly shook his head, his thin lips stretched into a tight grin. "You'll have to ask Daen for that answer. Prophecy is his gift, not mine."

"If it's true, why are there only seven of us here?"

Her friend's smile instantly faded as the light left his eyes. "Because there are others who also believe in the words of prophets. If you hungered for power, if you wanted your way of life to reshape reality, what would you do if you knew where to find the keys?"

“The hunters,” Sovay said quietly, making a connection between those that had pursued them and the prophecy the mer spoke of.

Beltross shook his head. “Why should darkness be any more eager to win than the light? The seven of us are those who have chosen not to be the tools of either side, but to find our own way.”

“And the other six?”

“Five,” he corrected her. “We’re hoping to find one more.”

“We’re all from the spheres?”

It was Daen that answered. “We’re all from another world,” he interrupted, his words filled with an angry charisma. “All but Beltross here. We come from somewhere where there are people like us, where mortals aren’t a segregated minority. This world is backstage, behind the scenes; it’s where reality takes form before it fills the mortal plane.”

“But you all have gifts,” the teenager, Traela, interjected. “I have nothing,” she added with an unhappy grin, the look in her eyes branding her as the outsider, as the one who felt she didn’t belong. “Good old Traela,” she offered. “Totally mortal. Totally useless.”

“Didn’t you have a mentor?” Sovay asked.

The teenager was silent and looked away.

Beltross laid a hand on Sovay’s shoulder, the woman turning to meet his eyes.

“My mentor wasn’t like the rest of yours,” Traela answered quietly, her back to the conversation.

Sovay began to call out as the teen walked away, Traela’s eyes fixed on the distant mountains, but the woman’s words were silenced by the mer’s touch.

“It’s just the way things are,” Beltross explained. “She won’t talk about it. We’ve all tried. When she’s ready, she’ll open up. But until then, we respect her silence and simply let her be.”

“Quite a world,” Sovay said with a long, lingering sigh.

Beltross shrugged as if he couldn't dispute her observation. Slipping his pack onto his shoulders he prepared to leave the encampment, his companions following his lead and doing the same.

Sovay looked off in the direction Traela had disappeared, the teenager moving toward the stream where Kai had gone to wash. "What about Traela and Kai?"

"They'll catch up," Beltross promised. "Both of them know where we're going."

The woman raised her eyebrows, hoping the mer would continue.

"Cathedral," he answered with a smile. "It's a small human settlement a full day's hike from here. We'll stay there for a day or two to resupply ourselves and plot our next move. From there, it's on to Raven's Roost to meet with the last of the thirteen."

Sovay looked toward the stream once more, her gaze tainted with a serious concern. "I don't think Kai can make the journey in his condition."

Beltross offered her a reassuring smile, the gesture tempered by a strange sadness in his eyes. "Those who have chosen the warrior's path are able to access a strength that is beyond the reach of the rest of us. Right now, the part of himself that Kai summoned last night is still echoing within his veins. Not only would he not want us to slow our journey for him, he would find the offer deeply offensive. That nature will settle in the next day or two. Until then, everything for him is a challenge he will want to meet on his own."

"And Traela?"

The mer slowly shrugged. "She's not Kai, but she'll be fine."

With a nod in the direction of their destination, Beltross began to move, the companions falling in behind, Leiron walking at her friend's side. As they slipped into the shadows of the forest and began to climb the steep slopes that led out of the narrow valley, Sovay turned over her shoulder, hoping to

find Kai. But all she found was the level clearing where their camp had once been hidden, marred with blood and the bodies of the fallen, the slain left to scavengers and the hand of time.



Traela crouched in the shadows of the brush that overhung the stream's bank, the shallows lapping at her ankles, the sound of the water drowning out the pounding of her heart. Kai sat on a large boulder in the middle of the narrow river, bare to the waist, his legs crossed before him. His slender frame was insulated with lean slabs of hardened muscle, as if a sculptor had fashioned a body upon a wire frame with thin strips of clay. Kai was built for speed, his strike that of a viper, of the wolf that leapt in and tore the flesh, darting out again before the wound could be returned. What he lacked in raw power, he made up for with quickness and finesse and a complete control over his body and mind.

His hands were held before him, his palms to the sky, holding his sword at shoulder level as if he presented the blade to the sun. Not a bead of sweat tricked down his naked flesh as he sat rigid and upright, his eyes closed, his breath slow and even. His hands were steady, the muscles in his shoulders, back, and arms tensed only enough to hold the weapon motionlessly, but not flexed hard enough to quiver and fatigue.

Traela watched in fear and awe. She had intended to talk to Kai privately, away from the others, but as she crouched before his solitary ritual, the teenager felt her will begin to seep away, as if carried downstream by the swirling water.

"I know you're there, Traela," Kai said without opening his eyes, his words even and serene. The teen felt her heart leap as the warrior called her out, but she stayed in the shadows of the embankment, unwilling to leave their shelter.

"How did you know it was me?" she asked, ashamed of her trembling voice, the soft quiver that filled her words.

Kai lowered the sword, resting the blade across his

knees. Stretching his lean frame, reaching wide to embrace the air, he opened his eyes and smiled.

“You have a very distinctive footstep,” he admitted. “Everyone’s pace is a little different.”

“How did you hear me over the water?”

Kai simply offered her the hint of a grin.

Traela’s gaze fell to the water that swirled around her feet, suddenly wishing she wouldn’t have come.

“Did you need something?” the warrior asked.

“I guess not,” the quiet answer came.

Kai nodded and slipped into the water without a sound. His dark trousers were stained from combat and the black tunic he slipped into was still wet from where he had scrubbed it clean. Traela stood motionlessly, watching him as he moved to the stream’s bank, securing the sword across his back with a thin leather harness, the strap reinforced with a thick braid of dark fabric where it crossed his shoulder. A broad pouch was strapped around his waist, the pack nestled into the small of his back.

Turning to the girl, Kai motioned toward the trail that led back to the embankment. “Are you coming?” he asked. “Or did you just come to say goodbye?”

Traela slowly slipped from the shadows, unable to meet the warrior’s gaze as she fell in beside him, matching him stride for stride. “When you were in the sphere,” she asked at last, her voice quiet and uneven, searching for its cadence, “were you only taught how to fight?”

“Being a warrior is about much more than fighting,” he answered simply, his eyes focused on the trail ahead.

The teenager was quiet for a long moment. “Did your mentor teach you anything else?”

“Like what?”

Traela shook her head. “I don’t know,” she said at last. “It’s just that everyone else can do things. You know, special things.” She stopped, hoping that Kai would pause to meet her eyes, but the adult kept walking. Breaking into a quick jog, she

caught up with him again. “It’s just that everyone else can do magic. And you,” she began, only to stop in mid-sentence, the confidence disappearing, her words left unspoken.

“And all I can do is fight,” Kai finished.

The young woman was silent.

“There’s more to being a warrior than knowing how to wield a blade,” he continued evenly.

“I know,” she answered, her words lacking conviction.

“It’s just that you and I seem to have been forgotten.”

Kai stopped, turning to meet Traela’s eyes. Although his gaze was without malice, the girl suddenly wished she could hide, prayed that she could manifest Leiron’s power and slip beneath the earth.

“If I were to attack you,” Kai said without emotion, “you would die where you stand.”

Traela swallowed.

“But then I would be a murderer, not a warrior.”

The girl looked at her feet, unable to meet her companion’s gaze.

“The first difference between a killer and a warrior is that a killer ends a life because he can; a warrior takes a life because no one else can.”

Traela’s eyes darted toward the sound of Kai’s sword being drawn, the color draining from her face as the warrior met her gaze.

“This is not the warrior’s primary weapon,” he said, laying the blade down on the grass beneath his feet, kneeling beside the sword. “A warrior begins his fight here,” he said, laying his palm across the center of his chest. “And when he can feel the fire burn within him,” he continued, moving to lay the tip of his finger against the center of Traela’s forehead, “he uses that flame to forge his weapons here. If the blade leaves its sheath, the battle is already lost because someone will die. Each death takes away a part of this,” he said, gesturing toward his heart once more. “And without that fire,” he said, standing to his feet, claiming his weapon from the grass and sheathing

his blade, “a warrior is nothing more than a man with a sword.”

Kai turned away, continuing down the path, but Traela stayed where she stood.

She called out to him, her words little more than an uncertain whisper.

“Teach me.”

Kai stopped, turning to meet her eyes.

“Teach me,” she said again, her voice firm as she stood straight, raising herself to her full height.

The warrior nodded toward her. “Teach you what?” he asked with a smile.

“Teach me to be like you.”

Kai slowly shook his head. “That I can’t do.”

“Teach me to fight!” she insisted.

“Fighting is the final option,” he answered evenly.

Traela licked her lips, closing her eyes as she summoned her confidence. “Teach me to be a warrior.”

When she opened them again, Kai was standing before her, the adult having closed the distance between them without a sound. Startled, Traela’s breath caught in her throat, but she felt a small glow of pride as she willed herself not to jump or pull away.

“Do you think you’re ready?” he asked.

The teen nodded.

“Why?” he asked.

Traela swallowed. “This will be my fifteenth summer,” she began, only to be silenced by Kai’s quiet words.

“A warrior transcends age.”

Licking her lips, she tried, “I need to be able to do something to help the others.”

“Then learn to cook,” Kai smiled. “Help Caraine with that or Beltross with gathering herbs. I could even teach you to hunt, if you only wanted to help.”

Traela closed her eyes. “I need what you have,” she said, unable to look at the man that stood before her. “I need to be strong like you are.” She opened calm eyes that welled

with tears, her words soft and steady as she continued. “I need to find a path through what I feel,” she said honestly. “And I think that you can show me how to find that for myself.”

“Then here,” he said seriously, handing her a small twig. “When you can make something beautiful with this, then you’ll be ready for the next lesson.”

Traela let out her breath in a huff of disbelief.

“One of us is a warrior,” Kai reminded her, laying a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “One of us knows what it takes to complete the journey. If that someone is you,” he continued, his voice even and calm, “then you can choose the form your lessons will take. But if you are to learn from me, you’ll trust that what I ask you to do is an important part of this path.”

The young woman’s gaze fell, resting on the slender twig she held. It was barely as long as her palm, fragile and thin.

“How am I supposed to make anything out of this?” she asked, wavering between skepticism and defeat.

Kai smiled, taking his hand from her shoulder. “Figure that out for yourself,” he said as he turned to continue down the path, “and you’ll be ready for the next step.”

CHAPTER FIVE: CATHEDRAL

The clouds that had gathered as the companions worked their way through the forest opened up, a gentle rain blanketing the woodland in a soft curtain of sound. A fine mist worked its way past the boughs that stretched overhead from the forest giants, the trees forming an incomplete barrier against the rain.

Beltross stopped, turning his face to the sky, basking in the touch of the precipitation. A faint smile turned up the corner of his thin lips, the other hikers moving past him, following the trail that continued to work its way higher into the mountains.

“It won’t stop before nightfall,” Daen announced, his disgust at walking in the rain evident in the tone of his voice. “We’ll be soaked by the time we reach Cathedral.”

“Try to enjoy it,” the mer offered with a smile, not moving from where he embraced the gentle rainfall.

“I’m not a fish,” the prophet growled.

“Just a small, angry man,” Caraine whispered conspiratorially as she slipped past the mer, continuing toward their destination.



It was nearly dark when Kai and Traela reached the top of the mountain. The trail that had stretched lazily over the soft forest soil had hardened as it carved its way through the stone

of the mountain's spine. With each step, the trees had begun to thin, their trunks stunted and small.

"Why are the trees shorter here?" the teen asked.

"It's called the timberline," Kai explained. "If this peak was a little higher, you could draw a line where the trees stopped growing."

"Why?" she asked. "Is it because this is where they touch the sky?"

Kai smiled, offering her a friendly shrug in response. "Some might say that."

"What do you say?"

"I don't really know." There was a long pause as Kai looked to the north. A wide plain extended to his left; a massive range of towering peaks formed a wall to his right that stretched behind them, a snowcapped border for the grasslands that disappeared into the distance. "That river," he pointed to the wide valley that carved a line from east to west, separating the mountain where they stood from the landscape beyond, "is the Firedrake River. If you were to follow it, you would first reach Node and then the ocean beyond."

"Node?" Traela asked, her eyes wide in surprise at the mention of the human city. "We're that close?"

Kai nodded. "Half a moon by foot; less than that by water."

"Is that where we're going?"

The warrior shook his head. "It's not in the plans. We're going to Cathedral and then Raven's Roost. Both are human settlements."

Traela moved to stand beside him, looking to the north. "What's beyond the river?" she asked, pointing to the landscape before them.

"The lands of the fae."

The young woman turned to meet his eyes, her gaze uncertain. "We can't go there, can we?"

Kai shook his head. "There are laws that forbid mortals from trespassing," he said, his seriousness twisting into a

knowing smile. “But I’ll tell you stories about it sometime if you’d like.”

“You’ve been there!” she exclaimed, the sound a mixture of delight and disbelief.

Kai smiled, motioning toward the trail with a friendly nod. “Come. We still have a ways to go.”

Traela paused, the joy in her eyes wavering as her gaze flooded with the darkness of her memories. She was surprised as Kai stopped, drawn by the melancholy shadows that crept across her features.

“You’re not like my mentor,” she said at last.

Her companion stood quietly, honoring her silence, watching her struggle as she searched for the words she wanted to share.

“I have a gift,” she said at last, her voice quivering with memories. “I was trained to experience emotion,” she said softly, turning eyes filled with tears toward the sky, her cheeks catching the gentle rain. “Do you know how you teach someone to do that?”

Kai was silent, waiting for Traela to continue.

“You make them feel everything,” she said at last, turning cold, hard eyes toward her friend. “Not just the good stuff,” she added with a smirk that quickly faded away into a painful scowl. “Rage. Hatred. Despair. Rejection.” She stopped, licking her lips, gazing at the earth before her feet. After a long pause she turned her eyes back to her companion. “Fear.” Traela was silent again as she searched the depths of Kai’s gaze, wrestling with something she held inside her. “That’s why I need your strength. It’s all right there. I can feel it all.”

The warrior reached out, gently clasping her arm. “If you can make it through that,” he said softly, “you already have what it takes to be a warrior.”

The two companions resumed the journey, the trail descending into a sea of trees that filled a broad mountain valley. The forest was dark, the sun slowly slipping from

the sky, the last light of day muted by the rain clouds and the canopy of boughs that stretched overhead.

“Kai?”

The warrior turned to meet the eyes of his student, the two maintaining their pace.

“Why do you think he did that?”

“Did what?” he asked gently.

Her voice was muted as she answered, “Made me feel things.”

Kai shook his head. “I don’t know,” he admitted honestly.

“It’s not like emotion is a power or anything.”

The warrior fought to suppress his smile.

“What?” she demanded. “It’s not. I can’t do anything with it.”

“Only because it controls you,” he said softly. “Wait until you learn to control it.”



Leiron stopped in the middle of the trail, blocking the path as she drank in the landscape before her. Massive trees, their trunks so thick that the companions couldn’t reach more than half way around if they linked their hands and made a human chain, were spaced like enormous pillars holding up a ceiling of green. Beneath the towering canopy, the forest floor had been shaped into rolling hills, each rise filled with windows that spilled light from the earth, as if they were stars nestled in the soil. Wooden buildings were scattered amidst the subterranean dwellings, the structures conforming to the terrain around them with such precision that a casual glance missed them altogether. Music slipped from open doorways, the sound muffled by the soft rainfall.

“Wow,” the young girl said at last.

“Welcome to Cathedral,” Beltross said from behind her.



Kai paused before one of the wooden buildings that conformed to the rise and fall of the surrounding landscape. The structure was two stories high at its tallest point, the front sloping down to the left, mirroring the flow of the hill behind it. The rear of the building extended into the low rise; windows peering from the earth showed where additional rooms had been built.

An intricately carved wooden sign hung suspended from a wooden post, the pole entwined with ivy. The Bell and Book was announced by an open wooden tome, a simple hand bell carved between its pages. Reaching up with both hands, Kai untied a red cloth ribbon that had been tied around the crossbar of the sign, closing his hands around the strip of fabric before slipping it into his pockets with an introspective glance.

“This is the place,” Kai announced, reaching for the door. Traela’s eyes lingered on the sign for a long moment before following her friend within.

The door opened into a large chamber dominated by a single long table that was flanked by rough hewn benches. A handful of patrons gathered around the fire that crackled merrily in a large stone hearth, sharing stories and catching up on the days events.

“Welcome,” a voice said, Kai turning to find a young woman, no older than twenty wiping her hands on a small towel. “I take it you’re with the other group that came in? They said there would be two more.”

Kai nodded.

“They’re upstairs in the great room. It’s the door at the end of the hall.”



The room was large and spacious, flanked with rows of single beds. The chamber was held beneath a peaked roof

and exposed rafters that sloped down toward the heads of the bunks. A large, rough hewn table dominated the center of the room, the majority of the companions gathered around it, eating a dinner of roasted meat and cooked vegetables, pouring a thick amber liquid from stoneware pitchers. Daen sat on one of the beds, a plate held above his crossed legs with one hand.

“We saved you a place,” Leiron called cheerfully.

Traela immediately took the offered plate, slipping into an opening on one of the long wooden benches that flanked the table, serving herself from the platters. Kai shook his head in response, walking to one of the empty bunks where he began to undress.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” Caraine asked, watching the warrior as he slipped out of his wet clothing.

Kai shook his head once more. “No,” he offered quietly. “I have something to do.”

“Come on,” Beltross encouraged. “It’s even better than it looks. We’re safe here, Kai. You can take an evening off.”

“He’s going to meet someone,” Daen cut in, his eyes on his plate as he played with his food, his gaze hard and cold.

“A girlfriend?” Leiron goaded playfully. Both Traela and Caraine looked uncomfortable at the idea.

Kai shook his head with a shallow, friendly grin.

“There are other warriors here,” he said, pulling a scarlet tunic from his small waist pack. His lean torso stretched and turned as he worked his way into the form-fitting garment. It was a long-sleeved turtleneck woven from a brilliant fabric that hugged every contour of his slender, well-muscled frame. Loose trousers, tailored from the same material but dyed a midnight black, were quickly slipped on a leg at a time. Kai knelt as he laced up his boots, knotting them tightly where they reached mid-calf before pulling the trouser legs down over them.

He stood, smiling as the others stared at him with a mixture of astonishment and amusement.

“Wow,” Caraine said softly, the distance that had stood

between her and that warrior fading. “You look really good.”

Kai blushed as he ran his fingers through his short dark hair.

“Do warriors always dress like this to impress each other?” the mer teased.

“Some do,” Kai admitted with a friendly grin as he strapped his sword around his waist.

As the warrior crossed the room, his passage was stopped by Traela’s hopeful gaze.

“Can I come?”

The young woman shrugged away as Kai playfully mussed her hair. “Not yet,” he replied. “One day,” he promised, “but not yet.”

“This is beautiful fabric,” Caraine marveled, stepping closer, watching how the weave glimmered in the flickering candlelight that illuminated the room. She reached out, her hand brushing his arm, amazed as the color deepened, radiating out from her hand as the garment transformed.

She pulled her hand away, uncertainty filling her gaze.

“It’s okay,” Kai promised. “It’s symbiotic. The fabric responds to my emotions and my desires.”

“Seems like strange stuff for a warrior,” Sovay commented off-handedly.

“It’s tougher than it looks.”

“Where did you find it?” the mer asked. “No mortal cloth does that.”

“It was a gift,” Kai said with a faint smile, his gaze clouded by memory. “A gift from a friend.”

Caraine stood still, wondering if she should touch it again, when Kai stepped away, moving toward the doorway.

“Don’t wait up for me,” the warrior grinned.

“Don’t worry,” Beltross promised. “We won’t. I’m not used to that much hiking. If I wasn’t so hungry, I’d already be in bed.”

Kai slipped from the room, closing the door behind him as the companions returned to their meals, friendly

conversations sprouting up among them. Only Daen sat alone, absentmindedly playing with his food.

“We won’t be asleep when you return, Kai,” he mumbled to himself. “Not tonight,” he added, his shoulders slumped as he pulled deeper within himself.

CHAPTER SIX: WHAT THE EYE CAN'T SEE

Kai paused outside the low wooden building, listening to the coarse laughter and loud conversations that spilled into the night through the kinks in the structure's walls. The rain had stopped, the clouds carried away by the winds that blew off the distant western sea. Taking a deep breath, he summoned his strength as if preparing to step into the large warehouse, but instead stood within the shadows of the night, staring at the light that slipped between the seams of the building's double doors. Closing his eyes, Kai mastered the emotions that raced within him, opening his eyes once more as he moved toward the building, his exterior calm, much more so than the thoughts that spun through his mind.

He opened the double doors with both hands, throwing them wide as he was bathed in the light that poured out into the cool night air. Scattered glances turned toward him from the warriors gathered around tables that had been hastily positioned in the warehouse's interior. Kai closed the doors behind him, his eyes sweeping over the gathering. The collected warriors wore their finest garb; what they donned grudgingly for princes and kings, they willing did for each other. It was a sign of respect for those that heard the calling of blood and steel as much as it was a celebration of life and a remembrance of those who had fallen. Silks and satins dominated the gathering; almost half of the women wore gowns. The laughter that echoed through the warehouse was

tinged with loss and sacrifice that fell away amidst good-natured barbs and the companionship of those who intimately knew the price that was paid for walking the warrior's path.

Raising the strip of ribbon to the muscular man that stood just inside the doorway, Kai stepped into the room, his eyes surveying the gathered assembly. Scanning the faces situated at the scattered tables, his gaze came to rest on a mismatched group of individuals that circled a table in the far corner of the room. An easy smile appeared on his lips as one of the warriors nodded in recognition, Kai's expression changed to a comfortable familiarity and an open joy that seemed strange on the warrior's face. With a confident stride, he made his way toward the familiar faces, only to be stopped by a hand on his arm.

"I wouldn't play that game if I were you," and unfamiliar voice warned. "There are more than just mortals at that table."

Kai shrugged off the hand, not bothering to identify the hand's owner, his smile fading under an ill-hidden displeasure. Even within a close brotherhood like that of the gathered warriors, the roots of prejudice grew deep. It was an outlook on life that Kai couldn't stomach and one he didn't share.

Five warriors gathered around the round table he approached. One was a massive mortal, his hands dwarfing the circular cards he held. His face was hidden between a thick tangle of red beard and a crimson mane that poured from his head and cascaded down his shoulders. To his right sat a young blonde-haired woman. She wouldn't have been considered pretty, even without the scar tissue that closed one eye and marred most of her left cheek. Next to the one-eyed warrior sat an old man, his face decorated with wrinkles, his hair line having receded until it was no more than a broad wreath that circled his skull. He held his circular cards in both hands, his eyes strangely calm as he regarded the hand he'd been dealt. To his right sat a mortal with skin the color of rich soil. He was tall and slender and his deep brown eyes were

laced with steel.

Kai took the empty chair across from the last card player, nodding a greeting as he sat down. To even a casual glance, it was obvious that she wasn't mortal. A waterfall of thick curls filled with the rich colors of the forest flowed down her shoulders, her hair streaked with deep browns and greens the color of pine needles. Her skin was so pale it was almost white, but where a human would be colored with the blush of life, the fae's complexion deepened in hue, her high cheekbones brushed with faded blues and greens like flowers trying to push through a thin blanket of snow. Her eyes were a pale blue, so light they were almost white.

"Are you in?" she asked, one side of her mouth curling up in a mischievous grin that danced in her eyes as she shuffled the cards. Her lips were so thin they were almost non-existent and her eyes closed quickly, an inner eyelid blinking side-to-side in the room's flickering candlelight.

Kai untangled the ribbon that he'd wrapped around his fingers, tossing the strip of fabric in the center of the table.

"I hope you have more than that to play with!" the bearded man laughed, the other card-players smiling at the double meaning.

"Gold or stones?" Kai asked with a good-natured shrug, dropping twin pouches onto the table.

"Either will do," the man smiled.

"I trust you all remember Kai Oakman," the dealer offered. "And Kai, I trust you remember the other players."

"I do," he said softly, holding the dealer's gaze for a long moment.

"The game is chandra," the fae offered, a full smile blossoming under Kai's gentle stare. "Ante is standard fare, extra cards double. A win goes to the player that dominates the table," she paused as she continued to shuffle the cards with her slender fingers. "Losses are what you make of them."

Kai took two blue stones from one of the pouches and tossed them into the center of the table, the other players

anteing with stones or coins. Nine circular cards were quickly dealt to each of the warriors, each player carefully arranging their hand. Kai looked down, appraising the colored symbols emblazoned on each card. The shape of the symbol denoted that card's strength, the color its power. The red of fire was the strongest and most predictable, scorching earth, strengthened by air, and extinguished by water. Earth was transformed by water and negated by air. Air and water complimented each other in endless combinations, dependent on the surrounding cards.

“Standard rules apply,” the dealer continued.

“Civilians at the center of the board,” she said, tossing out three cards. “The battle around them,” she added, dealing three more into a wide circle around the first three, “and the environment surrounding all,” she concluded, adding the final three. “We’ve got,” she announced as she appraised the table, “air in the center for a vocal population, fire and water for uncertain battle, and,” she shook her head, “lots of fire in the environment. Looks like a drought. Fire commands the table; air is subservient; water a variable.”

The game progressed quickly, each player adding the cards they played to one of the three areas of the table. It was a concept that warriors struggled with daily, the interconnectedness of battle with the civilian populations and the land around them. Each card that was played changed the table dependent upon the element of the card and the strength of the symbol. The first hand was won by the one-eyed warrior who went for the kill from the beginning, continuing to play red cards until the other players could no longer counter. Kai narrowly lost the second hand, the fae that had originally dealt taking the table on the last play. It was the third hand and he was well situated. The table was slowly being dominated by water, a suit that he held in abundance but chose not to play, throwing lesser cards into the fray, waiting for the correct moment to strike. He could feel it drawing close, telling himself to wait until two more rounds of cards had been

played, when there was an unexpected commotion at the doorway, a familiar young voice slicing through the fray.

“I am a warrior,” Traela insisted to the man that blocked her path.

Kai cursed. “I’m out,” he growled, tossing his cards face down on the table as he got up to deal with his student. He could feel every eye upon him as he crossed the warehouse and Kai winced as Traela called out, “See! There he is.”

Kai was silent as he passed the man that blocked her way, grabbing the young woman’s arm and pulling her out into the night. He ignored her protests as he directed her away from the building and toward the silence of the forest. They stopped amidst the shadows of the great trees, the sounds of the warriors’ celebration muffled and low.

“Listen,” he said evenly, the intensity of his voice silencing her arguments. “I agreed to teach you, but there is a process that every student goes through. The people that are in there tonight have earned the right to be there. For you to go in there without going through what they have negates the sacrifices they have made on this path.”

“But Kai,” she began, only to be silenced once more.

“When you’ve earned the right, you will be allowed within and it will mean something to you, just as it means something to them. Until then,” he ordered evenly, “I don’t want you anywhere near that warehouse.”

“It’s not fair,” she protested.

“It is fair,” he answered quietly. “Have you finished your first lesson?”

Traela held out her hand, the small twig resting in her palm. “I can’t do anything with this,” she admitted softly. “I don’t understand what it has to do with being a warrior.”

“It has everything to do with it,” he replied. “When you’ve completed that lesson, I’ll explain the reasons behind it. Until then, you’ll do it simply because a more experienced warrior ordered you to.”

“But,” she began, only to be cut off once more.

“Do I make myself clear?”

“Yeah,” she said at last, looking at the earth at her feet.

“Is she yours?” a woman’s voice asked from behind him.

Kai turned to find the chandra dealer standing behind them. She was tall and slender, wearing a deep blue gown woven from the same material as Kai’s trousers and tunic, the dress hugging the gentle arc of her curves.

“Traela, this is Ko’laru Domae, one of the finest warriors to ever draw a blade.”

The teen stared awestruck at the woman that stood before her, her eyes filled with an astonished disbelief. “You’re fae,” she said at last, Traela’s words scarcely more than a hushed whisper.

Ko’laru extended her hand. “And you’re mortal,” she offered with a playful grin as Traela accepted the offered greeting and shook. “It’s nice to meet you,” she said as Traela released her grip. “You’re what, second moon? Third?”

“First,” Kai answered, seeing the confusion in Traela’s eyes. “We’re still working on our first lesson.”

“Ah,” the fae said with a knowing smile. “That explains the warehouse. It’s a hard lesson to learn, that you can’t always be where you want to.” She glanced at Kai, as if her words held more than the obvious meaning. “It’s one you’ll keep revisiting your entire life.”

With a suddenness that unnerved the young mortal, Ko’laru and Kai both snapped their heads toward the trail that led from Cathedral to Raven’s Roost, the fae’s eyes narrowing to a hard glare, the mortal’s hand straying to the hilt of his sword.

“What is it?” Traela asked, only to be silenced as Kai held out his free hand.

“Riders,” Kai said quietly, his words burning with a terrible focus. “Can you feel them?”

The fae nodded.

Traela stared in the direction that the warriors watched.

“I don’t feel anything.”

He licked his lips. “Traela, go to the warriors and tell them that the shadows have awoken. They’ll look at you like they don’t believe you, but tell them that riders are on their way.”

The teen stood silently, holding the warrior’s gaze for a long moment.

“Go!” Kai growled.

Traela bolted from the trees, racing toward the warehouse at full sprint.

Kai’s eyes were drawn to Ko’laru’s gaze as she took his hand, his fingers intertwining with her own.

“It’s good to see you again,” the fae smiled. “It’s been much too long.”

Kai felt himself smile self-consciously. “I’ve missed you.”

“As I have you,” Ko’laru agreed.

Kai let go of the woman’s hand, pulling the collar of the turtleneck over his face, feeling the fabric come to life as it molded to his features and covered his head, closing in a seamless mask. The scarlet color faded until it blended with the shadows around them, slowly growing transparent to let the moonlight flow through until even Kai’s shadow disappeared from the forest floor. He was nothing more than a whisper on the wind, his body a faint outline that only appeared when he moved, as the fabric mimicked reality a moment too slow, bending the world where he passed.

He turned his eyes to the fae, watching as her gown molded to her flesh and she faded from sight.

“Just like Lo’claera ‘no Wae,” she said softly beside him.

“Hopefully, this is nothing like the Wildlands,” he said quietly, his voice hushed and low.

“The night,” she offered, her transparent blur slipping silently through the forest, Kai a step behind, “the approaching riders.”

“We lost seventeen warriors,” he reminded her.

“Only one was mortal,” she said, a strange coldness to her words.

“But all seventeen walked the path.”

The sound of approaching hooves began to grow, echoing between the trees, filling the shadows as the galloping riders thundered toward the sleepy village of Cathedral.

“Ready?” Ko’laru asked.

“With you beside me?” Kai replied, his smile evident in the tone of his voice. “Whoever they are, they don’t stand a chance. Are you armed?”

Even though he couldn’t see her, Kai could feel the woman that slipped through the forest before him grin.

“I’m fae,” she said with a smile. “Isn’t that enough?”

“I’m wielding steel,” he warned her. “When it’s drawn, my cloak will fail.”

Ko’laru was silent.

“And be sure to keep your distance,” he suggested warily. “I don’t want to lose you,” he added, knowing that the slightest touch of steel was enough to seriously wound a fae.

Even though her footsteps were silent, he could feel her stop in the shadows ahead of him. “I’m more concerned with the blades that are trying to kill me than I am with the one watching my back,” she replied.

The darkness stirred as Ko’laru reached out, laying a hand on his shoulder. “If you’re this concerned about me,” she added softly, “you’re not ready for the battle.”

Kai nodded and closed his eyes, focusing on his breathing. In his mind’s eye, his body was filled with light, laughter and memories drifted through his form, the emotions and events of the past and present defining who he was. As he crouched in the shadows, his body invisible within the clothing that had been a gift from the fae, Kai began to erase the illumination he held within, replacing it with a quiet darkness. It was if candles were slowly extinguished, leaving the still black of night that held no promise and no past. With

each breath, Kai's emotions faded away, his ability to feel was slowly released until he was a weapon that saw his fellow man, not as a living person, but as threats of varying levels.

Ko'laru turned away. With her faerie sight, she didn't need Kai to tell her that he was ready. She could feel it. Where before he was vibrant and alive, where she could feel the heat of his passion and the way his smile lit the shadows like a gentle rain after a long drought, there was only an empty hole in the night, a void where nothing was felt, where nothing lived.

Whispering hushed words in the language of forest and magic, the fae laid her hand on the trunk of a nearby tree, feeling the wood transform around her touch, growing soft and pliable. Reaching within the forest giant, she pulled out a thick vein of heartwood, the material hardening into a long quarterstaff, pointed at either end, the weapon fading from sight as it was completed, as it was pulled within the obscuring aura of the fabric she wore.

She turned her eyes toward a long, distant rise, toward the sound of galloping steeds that grew like approaching thunder. The sound roared beneath the forest boughs, growing in strength until it was an endless wave that filled Cathedral. She could feel the warriors spill from the warehouse, already armed for battle. She could sense the inhabitants' fear, the common folk taking shelter in root cellars and behind barricaded doors, the local militia drawing weapons from their armory.

But her eyes were fixed on the sound that rolled over the distant fold in the mountains; that continued to grow in strength as it grew ever nearer. And then the first of the riders swept over the ridge, followed by an ocean of warriors mounted on horseback. They were an army, an endless surge of flesh and steel that swept toward the village, threatening to devour it like the merciless sea eating away a child's castle of sand. She wanted to run, to grab Kai's hand and flee to her homeland, to spend the rest of her days in peace with the

mortal she loved. But as she felt her lover burst from the shadows beside her, as she watched reality warp around his cloaked, racing form as he rushed toward the oncoming tidal wave, she remembered that she had sacrificed her freedom and her life so that others could live free. As she leapt up from where she crouched and followed the man she loved, she realized it was that mutual sacrifice that had allowed them to find each other in a world where mortal and fae were forbidden to intermingle, where her kind hated mortals as much as they despised her race.

Instantly, she was engulfed in an avalanche of stampeding horses, the flood of steeds directed by masked warriors in dark cloaks. Reality was erased by the roar of hooves that turned the rain-soaked forest into a sea of mud, by the blur of riders that flashed by, their war cries buried beneath the charge of their steeds.

Bracing herself, dropping low as she swung, Ko'laru swept the legs of the nearest horse out from under the mount, rider and steed crashing to the muddy earth. With an unnatural speed and grace, she leapt free as those behind the crippled horse slammed into the downed rider, the steeds slipping in the slick mud, the stampede wavering into a screaming, writhing heap of broken bones and injuries.

Turning toward the flash of moonlight on steel, she saw Kai do the same, his blade cleaving through the steeds, taking away the riders' advantage. Each time he drew his blade, his cloak would fail, the steel negating the power of faerie magic that enchanted the weave of the cloth he wore. In an instant he would appear, his blade describing a deadly arc that ended with the weapon back in its sheath, with Kai slipping from view once more. They stood in a sea of mounted warriors that surged passed them into the heart of the village. In the space of a half-dozen heartbeats the wave of death swept past. The sounds of battle filled the air as Kai and Ko'laru turned to run, slowed by the earth that had been ripped up by the stampeding hooves, the mud sucking at the warriors' legs as if trying to

keep them from the battle.

They attacked the invaders from behind, not giving them a chance to defend themselves. To Kai, they were a threat that demanded an end. An enemy that swept down upon a peaceful village in the dead of night did not deserve honor; to Kai, they simply deserved to die. He would kill them before they could kill others, knowing somewhere deep within his emotionless shell that each invader that took an innocent life would create a ripple of mourning and loss that would tear through the tiny community.

A rider screamed as Kai's blade severed the man's spine, cleaving the invader almost in half. Before the dead man hit the ground, Kai was in the man's saddle, spurring the mount into the midst of the fray, his form uncloaked as he held his sword at ready, his features hid by the scarlet mask that had parted to reveal the mortal's icy glare. Three men died before his mount fell beneath the rain of arrows that filled the sky, Kai vaulting out of the saddle, using his steed as a shield as the horse collapsed, the first volley ended before the creature collapsed into the unforgiving embrace of the soft earth. Kai fell hard in the mud, his feet slipping out from beneath him. In an instant he was up, running through the writhing tangle of dead and wounded warriors, weaving through the screaming steeds that thrashed, dying in the quagmire. His blade was sheathed, his form fading until it was nothing more than a flicker of reality as he raced toward the heart of the fray, seeking to end the threat that had swept down upon Cathedral.



Traela had been amazed at the warriors' response to her words. The man that had met her at the door had instantly turned, shouting the words, "The shadows have awoken!" Before the echo had faded from the air, conversations and card games were forgotten, the men and women that filled the warehouse leaping to their feet, drawing weapons and rushing

into the night.

She'd watched from the shadows of the warehouse, pressed close to the wooden planks that formed its exterior, as the sea of horsemen sweep down upon the sylvan village. Traela had never watched a person die, had never seen another human cut down a member of her race. The scenes before her were amplified by her training, the emotion sweeping through her, consuming her from within. What began as terror swiftly turned to a hatred for those that attacked the village, the hatred turning to an inferno of rage. Her body began to shake, every muscle taut, her fingers spreading wide as if they had a will of their own. She watched, unable to comprehend as she instinctively raised her hands toward the battle. A crimson light exploded from her palms, the beam ripping through the darkness, slicing through the heart of the conflict. She watched in horror as tendrils of light wrapped themselves around her enemies, as the light burrowed beneath their skin, raising massive welts that raced under their flesh. Riders and steeds screamed, writhing in pain, the horsemen clawing at their bodies, at their faces as they fell to the ground, trying to escape the torturous agony that engulfed them from within.

Traela's eyes grew wide, horrified at the sight of the men and steeds dying before her, at the realization of what she had done. As tears filled her eyes, as she vigorously shook her head, mouthing, "No, no, no," the young woman turned and bolted into the night, fleeing into the obscuring embrace of the shadowy forest.



Daen smirked coldly from where he sat on his bunk, cross-legged, appearing at ease. The others crowded around the windows or cowered in corners, wanting to see the carnage outside or trying to hide from it. But the prophet knew that the battle wouldn't come for them, that the warriors that had gathered in Cathedral would die to prevent the innocents from

coming to harm.

“Can’t you at least pretend you’re worried,” Caraine growled from where she peered around the edge of a windowsill.

Daen shrugged, then laced his fingers together and laid them in his lap as he smiled at her. “Why should I be worried?”

“Kai’s down there,” she spit. “He’s risking his life and you’re sitting up here grinning.”

The prophet shrugged once more. “Kai will be fine, too. Besides,” he began, holding her gaze for a long moment before continuing, “he’s with an old friend.”

Caraine turned away, returning to her perch where she watched the battle. “Bastard,” she whispered to herself. She couldn’t understand Daen, couldn’t decipher why he felt that she should be tormented by the knowledge that Kai was with an old friend.



Beltross could feel the tide of the battle begin to turn. Where before the only voices had been the war cries of the invaders and the defiant roar of the warriors and Cathedral’s citizen militia, the mer could hear the defenders calling out orders, maneuvering their forces to mop up the last of the enemy. Where there had only been rage and fear, there was now hope and a growing sense of loss as the number of casualties was slowly realized.

He turned back to his student that he held in his arms, Leiron sleeping fitfully, her cheeks stained with trails of salt that glittered in the pale light that crept through the exterior windows. At the first approach of the invaders, she had been overwhelmed by the hostility and hatred ingrained in their spirits. As men and women began to die, she wept at their fate, at the loss she felt as families watched loved ones fall.

It was almost over, the end of the battle growing near.

With a webbed hand, he softly brushed her short dark hair. They had come together for a purpose, all seven of them. But Beltross was tempted to spirit Leiron away, to take her to the sea and let her embrace the peaceful ways of his mother's people, rather than be tortured by events she could feel, but couldn't block out.



Kai was tending to the wounded when Ko'laru found him. There were healers enough for the villagers, the townsfolk skilled in the art of herb lore and the midwives familiar enough with the trials of labor that they could tend to many of the injured. But the warriors had pulled away from the civilians, retreating to the warehouse. The tables had been moved to make room for the wounded, the dead wrapped in colorful fabric that had been confiscated from the supplies that filled the building, their bodies laid in long rows. Of those he had played cards with, only he and the fae would live. The bearded warrior would see daylight, but he wouldn't live to see another night.

Kai turned as the fae laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. His eyes were tired, his body staggering under the weight of the loss, his emotions filling him once more.

"How many?" she asked, her eyes drifting over the rows of casualties that lined the floor.

"Six can still walk," he answered quietly, standing wearily to his feet. "Of the fourteen injured, maybe eight will live. Only one will ever fight again. Twelve dead."

Ko'laru let out a long quiet sigh, her gaze falling to the floor before rising to meet Kai's voice.

"It was the horses," he explained simply. "The horses and the mud. More were trampled and crushed than cut down."

She led him to the open double doors, the two warriors stepping out into the pale grey light of dawn. Both mortal and fae were tired and covered in filth. Kai wanted nothing more

than to take a long bath and then curl up in a comfortable bed with Ko'laru as they had done so long before. But the fae pointed to the distance, toward a young woman who knelt in the wet earth, furiously directing her energy into something on the ground before her.

"I think someone is going to make you proud," Ko'laru offered, nodding toward Traela, motioning for the warrior to go to his student.

Kai offered her a grin laced with irony, the warrior slowly shaking his head. He was pleased that his student had done something worthy of the praise from the fae, but wasn't sure he could push himself to attend to one more responsibility, regardless of how simple the task was.

"Where are you staying?" he asked, their past reflected in his eyes.

Ko'laru's lips curled into a warm grin. "Out there," she said, pointing into the forest. "I think you can find it."

"Mind if I join you?"

Ko'laru offered him a mischievous grin. "I'll be waiting."



Kai stopped in the shadows of the trees, watching his student work. The previous night's rain had softened the earth and Traela had swept away the carpet of pine needles with her hands, leaving a canvas of pliable earth underneath. With the fragile twig Kai had given her carefully held between her fingers, Traela had begun to draw. The pass that had led from the valley of their encampment to Cathedral lay before her, the lands of the fae that could be seen from the heights were drawn from memory. The teen was on her hands and knees, putting the final touches on two figures, one a man, pointing off into the distance, the other a young woman that watched where he pointed.

Sitting back on her heels, she appraised her work with a

faint smile, jumping as Kai's voice startled her.

"It's good," he appraised, a proud smile illuminating his eyes.

Traela held up the twig with a sense of accomplishment. "I made something out of it."

Kai nodded. "Yes you did," he beamed.

"Is this what you thought I would do?"

The warrior shook his head. "I didn't know that you would use it for," he admitted, "only that you would find a way."

Traela let out a long, slow breath. "I understand why you wanted me to do this now," she said, her smile and pride fading as if they sank into the earth before her.

"Why?"

She held his gaze for a long moment. "I killed last night," she said simply. There was no joy in the revelation, nor was there any sorrow or remorse. It was as if she was resigned to her fate and knew that she couldn't change the past.

"How are you?"

Traela offered him a cold grin partnered with a weary glance. "I don't know. I don't know what I'm supposed to be feeling now. I'm just," she paused for a long moment, searching for the words to continue. "I'm just empty. I don't feel anything about it. It was horrible, but if I wouldn't have killed them, someone else would have died." She waited for Kai to say something, but her mentor was silent. "I guess I feel guilty about not feeling anything," she said at last. "And I don't like to think about it."

Kai stepped from the trees to gain a clearer view of her drawing. "Why this scene?"

Traela shook her head, smiling as she avoided meeting his eyes. "It was the last really happy thing I could think of."

When she looked up, Kai was holding out his hand, waiting for her to stand. She took the offered aid, the warrior helping her to her feet.

"Do you know why I asked you to do this?" he asked.

“Because it helps make the ugliness go away?”

“That’s part of it,” Kai agreed. “A warrior’s path isn’t about killing. It’s about protecting what is beautiful - whether that is a loved one, an ideal, or the trust an innocent places in you. To know beauty, you must first be able to create it.” He stopped, offering her a proud smile. “And you did really well. This is good.”

Traela blushed, looking away.

“But there’s more,” he continued. “You were put in a situation where you didn’t see an easy answer. You had to adapt. A true warrior can adjust to any situation and turn it to their advantage. Who knew you could create something wonderful from a simple twig?”

Traela blushed again, but this time met Kai’s gaze as she glowed under his praise.

The warrior reached into a small pouch that hung from his belt and drew out a rolled up piece of scarlet cloth. Drawing his sword, he cut a small strip of fabric from the roll and sheathed his blade, returning the remainder of cloth to his pouch.

“The warriors that are here will be laying our brethren to rest tonight,” he said, holding her gaze for a long moment, letting her feel the seriousness of his words. “Afterwards, we’ll be having a celebration to remind us that life still goes on.” He reached out, pressing the strip of fabric into her hands, his student staring at the cloth as if it were alive, wondering at the significance it held. “Only warriors will be allowed to participate. You’ll need this to enter.”

“But I,” she began, only to be silenced by Kai’s smile.

“But you’ve earned it,” he reminded her. “You sacrificed yourself to take a life and protect something you believed in. You showed that you could adapt, that you could create beauty. Just because you’ve only begun the path, does not change the fact that you are a warrior.”

Traela leapt to embrace her teacher, hugging him fiercely.

Kai held her close, then roughed her hair with a friendly hand, Traela pulling away as he did.

“Go get cleaned up and then get some sleep,” he suggested seriously. “We’ll meet at the warehouse just before sunset.”

She turned to go, but stopped as Kai stayed where he stood.

“What about you?” she asked.

“I’ll meet you tonight,” he promised with a far away smile. “I have other commitments to attend to.”

CHAPTER SEVEN: CELEBRATION

Traela stirred sleepily at the sound of the knock at the door. From the depths of her dreams, she heard an unfamiliar voice ask, “Is there a Traela here?” and Beltross answer something she couldn’t quite make out. A muffled conversation was held and the sound of the door closing was followed by footsteps crossing the great room where the companions stayed. Slowly stirring from her slumber, Traela’s eyes flickered opened as the mer sat on the edge of her bed, holding a carefully folded bundle of black cloth.

“What’s that?” she yawned.

The mer shrugged. “I don’t know. The messenger said it was for you.”

Struggling to sit up, Traela took the fabric from her companion and carefully unfolded it.

“By the gods,” she whispered, her eyes opening wide with awe and delight, a broad smile pushing away the last thoughts of sleep.

Leaping out of bed, she held the dress against her body, measuring its fit with her eyes. It was an unadorned black gown, elegant in its simplicity. The sleeveless dress with the modest neckline shimmered in the light as Traela turned around and around in slow circles, imagining what she would look like in it.

“Who is it from?” she asked in gleeful desperation.

Beltross shook his head, smiling at the young woman’s

joy. “The messenger didn’t say. Only that you would know what it was for.”

“It’s beautiful,” she offered quietly, her voiced suddenly hushed.

“That it is,” the mer agreed.

Traela’s face suddenly burst into a look of girlish realization. “I have to get Caraine to do my hair!” she exclaimed, hurrying off to find the older woman, leaving Beltross to smile and slowly shake his head in her wake.



Kai stirred lazily beneath the soft, heavy blankets, his eyes still closed, the warrior unwilling to awake. Ko’laru repositioned herself, the cool touch of her arm across the mortal’s naked chest, her face nested in the hollow of his shoulder. One of the fae, she did not need sleep, but basked in the glow of the dreams that came to her when she was in her lover’s presence. The dreams were of times of peace, set in a world where she and the mortal she loved could live openly, free from the prejudice that haunted both their peoples.

She felt herself smile as his fingers lightly traced the line of her spine, playfully drawing circles over her bare skin as he reached her shoulders and upper back. Shifting so she could see his smile, she cuddled closer, knowing that they would soon have to dress but not wanting to leave her small encampment hidden under the boughs of a massive douglas fir, a distance from the human village. Here, the rules were what they made them. There, even in an open-minded community like Cathedral that still followed the old ways and dealt with the fae from time to time, their closeness would be frowned upon by some and openly confronted by others. But she put the thoughts of discrimination from her mind, unwilling to let the outside world intrude on the lovers’ private sanctuary.



Traela sat silently, grimacing as Caraine combed the tangles from the young woman's hair. Tired of hearing the older women say, "Sit still," the teen had accepted the ritual of forcing the comb through her knotted hair as a rite of passage, the sharp, sporadic pain as a way to earn the right to attend the gathering of warriors.

"There," Caraine announced at last, "that's the last of them."

The young woman was proud that she didn't audibly sigh in relief.

"So what kind of look are we going for?" Caraine asked as she ran her fingers through her friend's hair. "Some braids? Something straight? Do you want me to cut it?"

Traela turned to meet the older woman's gaze, the teen's eyes filled with seriousness and a very real need. "Something grown up," she said, pleading with her eyes. "Something beautiful and elegant."

Caraine moved to stand in front of her young friend. "Is something going on I should know about?" she asked inquisitively.

Traela shook her head. "No," she said, getting up off of the wooden stool she had sat on to collect the dress from where it laid on a nearby bed. "I just need to look like I was meant to wear this," she said, holding up the gown.

"Wow," Caraine said, moving to touch the fabric. "This is wonderful. Where did you get it?"

The teen shook her head. "I don't know," she answered honestly. "A messenger brought it. I think it's from Kai, I mean who else would have done it? I'm supposed to go to a gathering with the other warriors tonight and I think he wanted me to look nice." She paused, raising her eyebrows conspiratorially. "You saw how he looked last night."

Caraine blushed as she nodded. "I'm glad I wasn't the only one that noticed."

Traela took her place on the stool again as Caraine

moved behind her, working her fingers through her friend's hair as the older woman began to imagine Traela in the gown, wondering what would best bring out the young woman's natural beauty.

"Do you want to wear your hair up or down?" she asked at last.

"Up."

Caraine nodded her agreement. "I think you're right. Hold on, I need to get something to pin it up with."

Traela waited as the woman retrieved a small box. "Caraine," she asked at last, "do you think Kai has a girlfriend?"

There was a slight pause before the answer came.

"Why do you ask?"

The teen began to shake her head before the warning, "Don't move," came as the woman behind her began to pin up Traela's hair. "I don't know," she continued. "There's this fae that he was with, but I think she's probably just another warrior."

"Fae?"

Traela began to nod, only to catch herself. "Yeah. Not like Beltross either. I don't think there's any mortal blood in her at all."

Caraine was quiet for a moment. "Mortals and fae don't mix, Traela. It's just the way things are."

"I know," the teen agreed, "but I never really thought about Kai as a guy before last night."

The woman behind her smiled, hoping that Traela couldn't sense the gesture. "I think you're probably a little young for Kai."

The teen began to turn to meet Caraine's eyes, only to be stopped with a harsh, "Don't move!"

Traela sighed. "I'm not that young. I'm coming up on my fifteenth summer. We've passed through two villages since you found me and there were women my age or younger that were already having children."

She felt Caraine let go of her hair, the woman moving in front of the teen, kneeling to look into her eyes. "I'm not going to tell you that you're too young," Caraine said seriously. "It's obvious that you're beginning to feel things, that you're thinking about what it would be like to be with a man." She smiled as Traela blushed, but Caraine's features quickly returned to their solemn mask. "But you need to think of these things as a journey that will forever change you. Each step you take into a romance will require you to give a little bit of yourself. Not all of those romances will last. And if they end badly, you may forever lose what you gave. Love can be a wonderful thing if both people are willing to give equally." She paused, offering Traela a knowing smile. "And sex can be really, really good if it's done with the right guy."

There was a long pause as Caraine moved to continue pinning up Traela's hair. It was the teen who broke the silence at last.

"Do you ever think about you and Kai becoming a couple?"

"Love or just sex?" the older woman asked. Without looking, Caraine could feel the teenager blush.

"Both, I guess," Traela replied.

Caraine grinned broadly. "You saw him last night. I didn't know a guy could look that good in clothes."

"I saw him with his shirt off," Traela announced with a guilty smile. "Down at the stream by our last encampment."

"I've seen him bathe," Caraine replied with a conspiratorial purr.

Both women laughed, the teen's teetering on the edge of a girlish giggle. Caraine patted her on the shoulder. "Enjoy the place you're at now," she advised. "You've got all the time in the world to take the next step. And it will probably be with some guy who will make you wonder how you could have ever been attracted to an old man like Kai."

Traela laughed. "Really?"

Caraine returned to the young woman's hair. "Really. I

promise.”



Caraine opened the door that led into the great room where the companions were staying. “May I present to you the Lady Traela,” she announced, gesturing toward the open doorway with a grandiose sweep of her arm.

Traela stepped into the room, the mer staring in surprise, Daen answering with a muffled, “Damn.” It was Leiron who broke the silence, the words slipping from her lips.

“Wow, Traela,” she whispered with childlike honesty. “You look beautiful.”

The teen blushed, holding out her arms as she slowly turned for her friends’ inspection. The gown fit perfectly. Modest enough not to be sultry, the dress traced the curves of her developing womanhood, displaying a beauty that teetered on the line between child and adult. Caraine had pinned the young woman’s hair off her shoulders, her neck and face framed by a cascade of curling tendrils. “Do I look okay?” she asked with a smile.

“You look beautiful,” Beltross assured her, moving to give her a friendly, approving hug. “I don’t know where you’re going, but you’re going to knock them dead.”

The teen beamed under his praise. Daen shook his head. “You look really nice,” he admitted grudgingly.

The mer gently cupped Traela’s face in his hands, appraising it with a familiar gaze. “You need just the final touch,” he announced at last, fixing her eyes with his smile. “May I?”

Traela nodded.

Leaning close, the mer’s thin lips so close to her skin that the teen first thought he was going to kiss her, Beltross began to whisper. Traela shivered as she felt his breath on her forehead, as it slowly traced her hairline down to her cheek and to her jaw. As his lips passed her ear, Traela swore she heard

not words, but the soft rumble of the distant surf, the way the sound ebbed and flowed as it washed up upon the ocean shore. She watched as Beltross moved his hands to frame his mouth and then pulled away, his hands inches above her skin, tracing a path down her throat and across the back of her neck, trailing down the outside of her shoulder. Traela turned to watch as he worked down her exposed arm, her breath catching in her throat. Beneath the mer's hands, flowers blossomed. Tiny blue flowers and pale red rose buds appeared across the surface of her skin, as if he had painted them into being with a brush. As Beltross reached the back of her hand, he pulled away, stepping back to appraise his work.

"It's beautiful," Traela said, her eyes moving from her arm to the mer. "Thank you," she beamed.

The mer blushed in appreciation, the blues and greens of his cheeks deepening in color. "I saw a vase of rosebuds in the common room," he offered simply, "and there are some small blue flowers that grow outside. I thought, if Caraine was willing, we could weave some into your hair and complete the look."

The narrow band of flowers was drawn along the path that Beltross had traced with his breath and hands, stretching from her hairline to her fingertips.

"How?" Caraine asked at last.

"The sea echoes in mortal blood," he said simply. "Don't worry, it won't hurt you," he offered quickly to Traela. Turning back to Caraine, the mer continued, "And it will fade by morning. The pink of passion, the blue when you're cold; I can only do certain colors. But I thought if Traela was going to look so beautiful and didn't have any jewelry to accent her look, that maybe I could do something."

"Thank you," Traela beamed to the mer, and then turned to the woman who had done her hair. "Can we put flowers in my hair?" she asked, suddenly seeming so young in the face of her exuberance.

Caraine nodded with a smile. "Let's go see what we

can do.”



The warriors, mortal and fae, lay in a warm tangle of limbs, basking in the afterglow of their lovemaking. Ko’laru lay with her back pressed into Kai’s naked chest, holding his arms close to her as he held her in his embrace, their legs intertwined.

“We should get ready soon,” he offered without conviction.

The fae responded by pulling Kai’s arms tighter around her.

“You’re right,” he agreed with a smile. “I’m sure our clothes aren’t quite dry yet.”



Traela stepped into the warehouse, the ribbon of cloth Kai had presented her with granted her passage to the world within. The bodies were gone, the tables replaced, but the empty seats and low voices were a stark contrast to the joyful celebration of the night before. Unable to find Kai as she scanned the gathered warriors, Traela found a place to stand out of the way, her back against the warehouse wall, waiting in the shadow of one of the evenly-spaced beams that supported the structure’s ceiling.

She had not waited long when an unfamiliar warrior stepped through the doorway and announced that the preparations had been completed. In response to the announcement, the seated warriors immediately stood, making their way out of the double doors and into the night, Traela following in their wake.

The solemn procession slowly worked its way through the nighttime forest. No one spoke, no one smiled. It was a time to think about those who had died; the moment to

celebrate that one still lived would soon come.

They stopped at a massive unlit bonfire laid with wood and bodies wrapped tightly in colorful fabric like long bales of cloth. As the warriors spread out to encircle the dead, Traela spied Kai opposite of where she stood. Her mentor was dressed all in black, barely discernable against the shadows of the night.

Stepping forward, Kai spoke, his voice sure and loud. "With the passing of Tontra Golon, I am now the senior warrior in the northwest province. If there are any who would challenge my right to lead, may they step forward now so that one of us may join the dead as they journey to the next world."

The gathered warriors were silent.

Kai nodded. "Then let us remember those who gave their lives so that others may live."

One by one, members of the warrior community stepped forward telling tales of those that had died, stories of battles fought, of heroism and courage, of mercy and kindness. Some were told with a pride born from knowing a man or woman who would become legend; others were told with a quivering voice and tears that welled in the speaker's eyes. But each person who came forward to offer their remembrance finished with the words, "Journey well, dear friend," to which the warriors thrust their fists in the air and roared, "Journey well!"

At last the gathering was quiet; no one stepped forward to speak.

Kai stepped into the center of the circle, a warrior presenting him with a flaming torch. Turning to face the mound of the dead, he spoke, his voice sure and clear, "Ride to the next world on steeds of flame, so that those who receive you will know there's a warrior in their midst."

Flames leapt from the torch to the bonfire as Kai touched it again and again to the base of dry wood, slowly making his way around the circle. By the time he completed the circuit, an inferno had grown, the light illuminating the

forest clearing where the bonfire had been built, the flames throwing dancing shadows against the encircling trees.

The warriors were quiet for a long moment, thinking of those that had given their lives, of friends and comrades who would await them in the next world. In the midst of the silence, a single warrior began to sing. The voice was mortal, but the words were in a tongue that the young woman had never heard before. The music was strange and melodic, long vowels stretched until the listener was lost in the tone, the note change by a quick, soft consonant, the song rising and falling like the wind through the trees or the gentle sound of the surf. Scanning the encircling warriors, Traela found Kai, his eyes closed, his face turned to the stars scattered overhead as he offered the song to the dead.

Traela was startled by the voice that whispered in her ear, instantly realizing it was the fae that spoke, Kai's friend Ko'laru that he had introduced to her the night before.

"It's an old song for the fallen," she whispered, the words too low for the others to hear. "It was sung long, long ago by the first mortals that lived in this land, even before my people entered the world."

Traela turned her eyes to the fae in disbelief, but Ko'laru ignored the question held in the young woman's stare.

"Ride on, ride on," the fae translated as Kai sang, "on steeds of fire and song. To the battlefields where no one dies, and days of peace are long. I'll join you there, amidst the starry sky, when I earn the right to stand, when others lived because I died."

The last note of the song hung in the air, slowly fading until it was hidden beneath the crackling flames of the bonfire. Traela watched the gathered warriors, surprised by the tears that sparkled on a number of faces, at the wetness that glittered on Kai's cheeks. She could feel their emotion tugging at her, struggling to turn the knobs on doors that her teachers had opened inside her during her time within the sphere. But Traela fought to hold back the tears, feeling that she would

somehow taint the loss around her if she allowed herself to feel a pain that wasn't her own.

Kai stepped forward once more, his tear-stained cheeks sparkling in the firelight. "Those who have gone before us do not mourn their fate!" he announced with a loud, confident voice. "They are warriors worthy to take their place among the heroes of legend! Let us celebrate that we still live and are given the chance to prove ourselves worthy to one day join them at their side!"

A cheer went up from the gathered warriors as the circle broke and sprang to life. Kegs of beer and ale were retrieved from where they had been stored among the trees; warriors produced stringed instruments and woodwinds as lively music filled the air. Here and there, a warrior who still mourned was embraced by a close friend, pulled aside as they struggled under the weight of the loss, but the solemnity was quickly replaced by a joyful celebration, by smiles and laughter that danced amidst the flickering firelight.

Traela turned to the fae that stood beside her. "I don't understand how they can be so happy," she said, turning her disbelieving eyes toward the celebrating warriors. "I mean, all these people died," she said, gesturing to the bonfire.

Ko'laru smiled gently, holding the young woman's attention with her pale faerie eyes. "A true warrior does not fight so that he or she may live," she said softly. "They fight so that others may live. To lose your own life to save another, to know that your sacrifice was not in vain because it turned the tide of the battle, that is the greatest gift a warrior can give. It is that gift that we celebrate, not the loss that each of us feels."

Kai approached, carrying three large mugs, giving one to each of the women and keeping the last for himself. "To those that have gone before," he offered, raising his mug in toast.

"To those that have gone before," Traela and the fae agreed, touching cups and drinking deeply. The young woman coughed, blinking away the tears that filled her eyes from

the sharp bite of the liquid. But as she met the gaze of the other two warriors, she couldn't help but smile. She finally belonged.

The night became a blur for the young woman. There were dances with other warriors, Traela laughing as she tried to learn the intricate footwork the jubilant music required. A thousand toasts were raised, the teen reeling under weight of the alcohol, laughing with a childlike inhibition, the joy flooding through her with a freedom even her teachers couldn't create. Her last memories were of Kai sweeping her in his arms and carrying her from the dying embers of the bonfire as the light of dawn began to fill the sky, the teacher carrying his student to a place where she could sleep peacefully, basking in dreams of the night's celebration.



Sovay looked up from where she tended to the wounded members of the civilian militia, her eyes spying the firelight through the trees, shaking her head as she turned away from the window. They were in a large shop that had been converted into a makeshift hospital. The midwives and healers of the village had done their best, but Sovay had learned more about herb lore and medicine than the men and woman of Cathedral had ever imagined could exist. Already there had been offers of a home and a small salary if she wished to stay, if she would agree to settle in the small forest town to teach and to heal.

Standing up and arching her back, working the kinks from her tight muscles, Sovay found the offer appealing. Her companions had spoken of prophecies and battles between darkness and light, but all Sovay ever wanted was to explore the world beyond her tiny hut. In the two days since she had slipped from her sphere, she had found that the land was a place of warfare and pain, where warriors like Kai could celebrate death while those around her mourned.

Shaking her head, she turned back to her patients. She

felt needed here. For the first time since she was a very young girl, she felt like she had found a home. Sovay knew that it would be time to leave soon, that her companions would be eager to move on, to continue their quest. But as she tended to the wounded, as she thought about the Cathedral and the offer that had been extended to her, Sovay wasn't sure she would be accompanying her friends when they went on their way.

CHAPTER EIGHT: DEPARTURE

The companions gathered around the long wooden table that dominated the center of the great room, helping themselves to the breakfast that had been carried in on large platters. There were three kinds of meat, a large tray of cooked eggs, and more types of fruit and pitchers of juice than most of the group had ever seen. The feast was an expression of gratitude from the people of Cathedral for those who had stood against the enemy that swept down upon the isolated village and for those who had helped to heal the wounds the conflict had inflicted.

Beltross was awake and alert, a large tankard of apple juice held comfortably between his webbed hands, an absentminded smile forgotten on his face. His student, Leiron, sat next to him, attacking a large plate of eggs and linked sausages as if she were coming off a long fast. Caraine slowly worked through a plate of assorted fruit, smiling knowingly at Traela; the teen was wrapped in a blanket, looking as if she were still asleep, the plate that had been set before her empty.

Daen maliciously waved a plate of food under the young woman's nose. "Eggs?" he grinned.

Traela just groaned, pulling the blanket over her head.

Smiling, the mortal took an empty chair near the head of the table. "You don't have to be a prophet to see someone had a little too much to drink last night."

Traela laid her head on the table, burying her face in her folded arms.

A self-satisfied smirk twisted Daen's lips as he turned to his breakfast.

Sovay turned from her perch at the window, leaving the pale gray light of the misty dawn behind. "Where's Kai?" she asked with a frown, the gesture tinged with a growing annoyance. "I can't believe he's keeping us waiting."

"Look who got their moon blood," Daen mumbled quietly.

Sovay glared.

"He'll be here," Beltross assured her, trying to keep the peace. "It's still early."

Traela moaned her agreement.

"Have something to eat," the mer encouraged the woman by the window.

Sovay shook her head. "I'm not hungry," she said without emotion, turning to stare out the window once more.

Beltross turned to Daen, hoping to find a revelation in the prophet's expression, but the mortal avoided the unasked question, staring down at his plate as he focused on his breakfast.



Kai raced over the low hills that surrounded Cathedral, the massive trees flashing past as he made his way through the forest. His clothes clung to his sweaty body, the fabric pasted to his skin, his breath coming in steady, explosive gasps.

"I don't understand why you do this," Ko'laru said from where she ran beside him, her breathing easy and relaxed.

The mortal ignored her, focusing on his morning run.

"I can see that it's some kind of challenge," she said off-handedly, "but is the challenge physical or mental?"

"Both," he gasped, increasing the pace, pushing his body to ignore the fatigue, ordering his mind to keep running. Ko'laru quickly caught up, running easily beside him as Kai fought against the irrational annoyance her presence created. It

wasn't that he didn't care for her, just that what he struggled so hard to accomplish, the fae could do with ease.

At last the low buildings of Cathedral drew into sight and Kai slowed to a quick walk, focusing on mastering his breath, concentrating on slowing his racing heart and the bellows of his lungs. He stopped, slumping forward, resting with his hands on his thighs.

"It's that wound, isn't it?" the fae asked, her voice tinged with concern.

Kai nodded, not ready to stand. "It was a hunter's arrow. The poison was stopped by magic and herbcraft," he offered in a ragged cadence as he slowly caught his breath, "but I still don't have my strength back."

Ko'laru laid a gentle hand on her lover's shoulder. "It will come in time."

Kai stood, offering her an impatient smile. "I know."

"I'll bet that breakfast with a beautiful woman would help," Ko'laru smiled mischievously, her pale eyes the color of the early morning mist that draped the earth around them. "Afterwards," she promised with a pixie's grin, "I'll help you bathe."

The mortal laughed softly, shaking his head. Standing, he stretched his weary muscles. "I have people waiting for me," he said regretfully. "You'll be coming with us though," he said, more of a question than a statement.

Ko'laru nodded, her smile wavering. "To the outskirts of Raven's Roost. I can't promise anything beyond that."

Kai took her hand in his and softly kissed her on the cheek. "I'll see what I can do about convincing you," he grinned as he stepped back. "But I've got to go. I'm running late."

The fae nodded as Kai turned and hurried off into the mist, heading toward the clustered buildings that lay beyond. She watched as he slipped through the doorway of one of the inns, wishing that she could forever remain at his side, knowing that the world around them would never allow that to

happen.



“Sorry I’m late,” Kai apologized, collecting a large apple and a slice of bread still warm from the oven, before taking a seat across from Traela. The teen had let the blanket fall away and was slowly picking apart a small cluster of grapes, eating the fruit one at a time.

“If there are no objections, we’ll head for Raven’s Roost this morning.” Turning to Daen he added, “That’s where we’ll find the last of us.”

“Of us?” Sovay asked coldly.

Kai nodded, but it was the prophet that answered. “The last of the thirteen.”

Sovay moved away from the window, stopping at the foot of one of the narrow bunks that lined the room. “The last of the thirteen? From that prophesy?”

Daen didn’t answer; he simply stared at the woman.

“What if the prophesy is wrong?” she asked. “What if we don’t find them?”

The prophet began to answer, but was cut off by the warrior that sat near the head of the table. “That’s not a chance we’re willing to take.”

Sovay scowled unhappily. “So what happens after we find them?”

“That’s not something we’ve decided upon,” Kai answered honestly. “I imagine that we’ll withdraw to somewhere that’s safe until we understand the situation better.”

“And what exactly is the situation?” she demanded.

Kai raised his eyes at the underlying tone of hostility in Sovay’s words.

“There’s an old tale of thirteen mortals who will transform this world,” Daen answered, setting his fork down on his plate as he focused on the woman’s eyes. “The elders of the fae believed that each of us were part of that prophesy,

and to train and protect us, they secreted us away between the seams of reality.”

“The spheres,” Sovay said aloud without meaning to.

Daen nodded. “But for some reason, those elders disappeared. I cannot see their fate. A short time later, we began to slip from the spheres. Some of us gathered together as you see here. Others,” he said ominously, “have already chosen sides.”

“Sides?” Sovay asked.

The prophet ignored her. “Armies will soon gather to battle for possession of the thirteen,” he offered evenly.

Kai interrupted. “Unlike the other mortals that are woven into the prophesy, we have chosen to find our own way. We obviously can’t fight an army, so we’re going to slip away and pray we can’t be found until the conflicts have ended or the moment when we were prophesied to change reality passes us by.”

“What if the last of the thirteen doesn’t want to go with us?” Sovay asked, a strange hesitancy to her words.

Kai tilted his head to the side and shrugged as if to say they would cross that bridge when they reached it.

Sovay swallowed, summoning her courage. “What if I don’t want to go with you?”

Every head in the room turned toward the woman.

“I’m needed here,” she offered with a guilty smile. “I know more about healing and herb lore than anyone in this village.” She stopped uncomfortably, her nervous resolution quivering in her voice as she searched for the words to continue. “They’ve offered me a home here, a place where I can simply heal and teach.” Sovay paused, offering the companions an honest smile. “I’m very tempted.”

“It’s not safe here,” Leiron insisted. “What about the bandits that attacked?”

“They weren’t bandits,” Kai corrected.

The room was silent, half of the companions waiting for Sovay’s to continue, the others hoping Kai would explain.

“Did anyone look at the enemy’s faces?” he asked.

“They wore hoods,” Beltross offered quietly. The other companions stared silently, waiting for Kai to continue.

“Their faces bore scars,” he told them evenly. “Not to the extent of the hunters that waited for Sovay when she slipped from her sphere, but they were from the same faction.”

“Then it’s already begun,” Caraine concluded.

The warrior nodded. “It’s why I want to move on to Raven’s Roost this morning. A handful of hunters is one thing; mounted warriors is quite another. The first can operate independently; the second could be the first tendrils of an army.”

“What about the warriors gathered here?” Sovay scowled. “You’re blaming everyone for having a role in this but your own kind.”

“Most of them are headed to Node,” he answered evenly. “A handful are heading east, over Coldwinter Pass. There are only so many roads through mortal lands. It was just luck that they happened to be here when the attack came.”

Sovay looked away.

“Can we agree that we need to move on to Raven’s Roost? It’s where Daen says we’ll find the last of the thirteen.”

The companions nodded; Sovay didn’t respond, staring out the window that overlooked the forest settlement, her thoughts on the village below.

“Sovay?” Kai asked.

There was a long pause. “I’m staying here,” she answered, not moving from the window.

Traela began to protest, but Kai silenced her with a raised hand. “Your company will be missed.”

The woman turned to regard the warrior. “I appreciate all you’ve done for me,” she began awkwardly, “and I’ll never be able to repay you for saving my life in the borderlands.” She stopped, pursing her lips as she wrestled with her response. “But I’m not made for war,” she continued at last, meeting Kai’s eyes. “And neither are these people. I feel at home here. If I continued on, I have a feeling I would always regret it.”

The companions were quiet for a long moment.

“I have patients to attend to,” Sovay offered at last, moving toward the door only to be stopped as Beltross stood to block her way. The mer stared at the mortal for a long moment, before taking her in the arms and hugging her farewell.

“Take care of yourself,” he offered.

“I will,” she promised and slipped from his arms and disappeared from the room.

“And so another of the thirteen slips away,” Daen whispered himself. “A wonderful omen to begin a journey with.”



Sovay stood with the elders of Cathedral, watching as the companions shouldered packs filled with supplies. The provisions were a final gift of thanks from the people of the sylvan village for the aid strangers had given during the surprise attack.

“You’re sure you won’t come with us?” the mer asked, taking Sovay’s hands in his own.

She closed her eyes, nodding, signaling that she would stay.

“Then be blessed and be safe,” he offered. “May the rain fall softly where you plant, may the sun never be too harsh where you seek to grow.”

Beltross stepped away as Kai moved forward to take the mer’s place. “You’ll be missed,” he said with a melancholy smile, “but I understand your desire to find a home.” The warrior moved to the elders of Cathedral, two women and a man, who waited patiently to see the companions off.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” Kai offered. “I look forward to returning under more pleasant circumstances.”

“You’re always welcome here,” one of the women offered. “May the trail before you be clear and even and always lead you home.”

Kai began to turn away, but was stopped by the older man who gently, but insistently clutched the warrior's arm.

"There's fae about," he warned quietly, his voice too low for the other companions to hear. "It's been shadowing you all morning, off in the trees," he said, nodding in the direction of the forest. "Steel will keep them at bay, but iron works best."

The warrior's smile faded into a strained neutrality. "Thank you for your warning," he offered, the tension in his voice quickly slipping away as Kai mastered his emotions, "but we'll be fine."

Kai began to turn away, but was stopped once more.

"Here," the man offered, pressing a cool iron talisman into the warrior's hand.

Kai looked at the quartered circle suspended on a cord, the amulet designed to neutralize the magic of the fae.

"Thank you," Kai offered evenly, draping the talisman around the elder's neck, "but I can't accept this."

The elder began to protest but was silenced by the touch of one of the women that stood beside him, the co-leader gently laying her hand on her peer's arm.

"We too deal with the fae from time to time," she interjected, the words as much for her companion's benefit as they were for Kai's.

"Thank you once again for your hospitality," the warrior added. "We'll be on our way now. May your people find prosperity and peace renewed with each dawn."

"Thank you."

The warrior turned away, his smile fading as he rejoined his companions, the handful of mortals slowly working their way down the trail that wove through the ancient forest. Kai knew that Ko'laru's ears were sharp enough that she heard the entire conversation. He only hoped that she understood the need to strike a balance between defending the woman he loved and keeping relations open with a settlement they would one day return to in the course of their journeys.



The trail from Cathedral wove through an endless forest of massive trees, their tops lost in the low cloud cover that had draped itself over the forest. Mosses and ferns grew in abundance and the winding path the companions followed was crossed by numerous game trails, worn into the earth by the passing of deer and elk.

By mid-morning, the path had begun to climb out of the valley that sheltered Cathedral, the trail slowly working its way toward the peaks that loomed ahead.

“Is that where we’re going?” Traela asked Kai as she walked at the warrior’s side.

Kai shook his head. “The trail curves off to the north. We’ll be traveling to the right of the peaks you see ahead.”

“Have you ever gone there?” she asked. “To the mountains?”

“No,” he answered softly. “They are wild places, still inhabited by the fae.”

“Here?” Traela asked in surprise. “In mortal lands?”

Kai nodded. “There are still a few places where the fae feel at home.”

The young woman was quiet for a long moment. “Is that where Ko’laru lives?”

The warrior smiled. “No. Each of the fae are connected to a certain place. The mountains are home to those fae who are born from stone and sky. Ko’laru’s people are closest to the trees that grow along the banks of rivers and streams.”

A measured silence passed between the two companions before Traela spoke again. “You guys are close, right?” she asked, slowly probing with her words.

Kai nodded, smiling.

“So, you’re like a couple or something.”

“Something like that,” he agreed.

The teenager's gaze was tinged with a disappointment that quickly passed. "So why isn't she with us?" she asked.

Kai's smile faded. "She is," he answered, stepping off the trail as the rest of their party continued past. The warrior knelt, looking through the trees, his eyes searching the forest. "If you'll look right there," he said, pointing, "you can see her."

Traela knelt beside her mentor, looking where he pointed, a smile turning up the corners of her mouth as she spied the fae's waving hand. The young woman returned the gesture and then asked Kai, "Why is she out there? She could walk with us."

Kai stood, resuming the journey, following in the wake of their companions' footsteps. "She could and she knows that she would be welcome," he explained. "But when we reached Raven's Roost she would be forced to leave our company. It's not like Cathedral," he offered. "They wouldn't see her as our friend but as something less than human." He stopped, pursing his lips. "I suppose she would rather choose her own time to keep her distance than to have that moment dictated by someone else."

"I don't think I'll like Raven's Roost very much," Traela offered seriously.

Kai shrugged. "You may be surprised," he offered, his eyes clouding over with distant memories. "Then again, you may be like me and go there only out of necessity."



The campfire burned brightly, throwing shadows of the companions dancing across the backdrop of encircling trees. Their path had led them deep into the pass that led between the towering mountains and the wind that blew off the snowcapped peaks was cold enough that the party huddled close to the fire, wrapped in blankets given to them by the people of Cathedral.

Daen still scowled from where he crouched next to the flames, unhappy with Leiron's decision not to raise a shelter

from the hard stone beneath them. “The mountain’s bones my ass,” he murmured unhappily. “It’s just rock. There’s nothing she could do to hurt it, spirits or not.” At last he had grown quiet, curling up next to the campfire and slipping into an unsettled slumber.

Beltross and Caraine were already asleep; Kai had slipped from his place near the flames and disappeared into the night, leaving Leiron and Traela to stare into the heart of the fire, sharing stories, hopes and dreams, Traela finding herself cast in the unaccustomed role of the adult. The young girl chattered endlessly, but as the night went on, Traela found herself growing more and more introspective, her thoughts turning to the conversation she had held with Kai earlier in the day, wondering what kind of people they would find in the settlement ahead.

“I can’t wait to get to Raven’s Roost!” Leiron exclaimed. “I’ve heard so much about it. There’s this library there with more than a hundred books. My mentor taught me to read a little and I can’t wait to see them.”

Traela smiled impatiently.

“Do you know how to read?”

“Sure, I know how to read,” Traela answered uncomfortably.

“Not many people know how to,” Leiron continued. “Usually just scribes and merchants and priests. Maybe if we stay there for awhile you could teach me to read better.”

Traela looked away into the night.

Leiron grew quiet. “Your spirit is uneasy.”

The young warrior turned to meet the girl’s eyes.

“What do you mean?” Traela asked.

“There’s something bothering you,” she pointed out. “You’re worried about something. I can feel it.”

Traela let out a long breath. “Kai has this friend,” she began, only to be interrupted by Leiron.

“I know. She’s fae.”

The young warrior nodded. “Kai said that the reason

Ko'laru wouldn't join us is that the fae weren't welcome in Raven's Roost."

Leiron's forehead wrinkled as she wrestled with the thought. "I can't imagine why she wouldn't be. Raven's Roost is a place of peace. It's really just a big church."

Caraine slipped from the shadows, joining the young women by the fire, taking a seat on one of the large stones as Leiron handed her a cup of hot cider. "The night was dark when Wittia followed the whispers of the gods through the depths of the midnight forest," she quoted, her eyes closed as she summoned the words from the depths of her memory. "Her path led to a high cliff overlooking the Firedrake River and the faerie lands that lay beyond, the landscape illuminated with the pale light of the full moon. 'Build my temple here for this is holy ground,' the voices told her, 'and all the lands that your eyes see shall know peace.' And as the rising sun began to light the sky to the east, Wittia began to build."

"Wow," Leiron said quietly, her eyes wide with awe.

"So if it's a place of peace," Traela asked, her voice filled with uncertainty, "why wouldn't anyone be welcome there?"

"From what I understand, all people are welcome there," Caraine replied, "regardless of their homeland or the color of their skin."

"What if they're fae?"

The older woman raised her eyebrows. "Fae are a different story," she offered slowly, each syllable framed with care.

"Why?" Traela demanded.

Caraine took a deep breath. "Because mortals typically have two responses to what they don't understand. The either fear it and try to destroy it, or they decide that because it's beyond their understanding, it must be from the gods and they worship it."

"People do that with the fae?" the young woman asked, shaking her head in disbelief.

Caraine nodded. "It's rare when you find someone who will try to understand something for what it is."

"I mean," Traela continued, "I understand that they look different than mortals, but mortals look different from each other."

"It's more than that," Leiron answered. "Fae are closer to spirits than they are to men."

"But our mentors were fae," Traela protested.

"And so were the teachers my mentor passed me on to," Leiron continued, undeterred. "But that doesn't change the fact that they're not like us."

"But they are people," Caraine interjected.

"Not really," Leiron replied, shaking her head.

"Beltross is fae," Traela growled angrily, leaping to her feet. "Are you trying to say that he's not a person?"

Leiron's eyes widened in surprise at the hostility in the young woman's words. "Beltross is different," she said uneasily. "He's half mortal and not like the pure fae at all."

Caraine met Traela's eyes, her patient, motherly smile asking the young woman to sit. Traela resumed her place next to the fire, "I just don't see what the difference is."

"I'm not saying it's a bad thing," Leiron explained, "or even that they should be treated differently than us. Just that they are different, that they aren't mortal."

Traela stared broodingly into the flames.

"You know how I can talk to the spirits and ask them to do things?" the young girl asked.

Traela raised her eyes, wondering where Leiron was going.

"The fae can do that to a person."

Traela stared in disbelief. "Ko'laru would never do that."

"Not many would," Caraine agreed.

"But they can," Leiron interjected, her passion tinged with a childish innocence. "And that's one of the reasons why people are afraid of them."

“And is that why they can’t go to Raven’s Roost?”

Traela asked.

Leiron began to answer, but Caraine stepped in.

“Raven’s Roost is a place established to promote and honor a certain set of beliefs,” she replied. “Anything that doesn’t fit into those beliefs won’t find a home there.”

“And that includes the fae,” the young warrior concluded unhappily.

Caraine nodded. “Not everything in life is the way we would like it to be.”



The forest was dark, the fragile moonlight that slipped between the broken clouds muted by the shadows of the trees and surrounding peaks. Kai sat with his back propped against a large boulder in the outcropping of mountain stone that he and Ko’laru had taken shelter in. The fae sat between his legs, her back against his chest, his arms wrapped protectively around her.

“We’re a talkative lot,” she offered with a wry grin.

Her words surprised him, as if they pulled the mortal from a deep sleep. “Sorry,” he offered self-consciously. “I was just thinking.”

Ko’laru turned to regard him over her shoulder, offering Kai a mischevious grin. “About me?”

The mortal shook his head, unable to suppress his smile. “No,” he replied, the corners of his mouth turning downward in a pensive frown. “About the days ahead.”

“Unless it helps you to prepare for them,” she began, only to have Kai finish her words.

“It’s wasted effort.”

“Raven’s Roost?” she asked.

“No,” he answered, meeting her eyes. “It’s the whole prophesy thing.” Kai paused for a long moment, wrestling with his thoughts. “How do you escape a prophesy? Is it

something that could happen or something that's unavoidable?" He shrugged, smiling at his own uncertainty, realizing that Ko'laru's admonition was correct and that his worrying was simply wasted effort. "It's just that Sovay's leaving caught me off guard," he explained, the words as much for his own benefit as they were for the fae's. "I didn't see it coming. Somehow, I just assumed that everyone would want to follow us into hiding until the moment passed when we were supposed to change the world." Kai stopped, shaking his head, frowning once more.

"Prophecies are funny things," the fae offered quietly. "They aren't often as clear-cut as you would like them to be. If the people you loved were threatened by war, could you stay in hiding and leave them to their fate?"

Kai simply stared, an uncomfortable realization filling his eyes.

"And what if your intervention saved them, if it turned the tide of that one battle, which in turn changed the outcome of the war? What if the victory enabled one philosophy to dominate and the conquerors chose to bend the other cultures to their way of life? There would be resistance but, over time, perhaps generations from now, that victorious army's view of the world would dominate the landscape and change the world we know."

Kai pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and index finger, closing his eyes as if in pain. "So the only way that I can assure that the prophecy won't come to pass is to do absolutely nothing."

Ko'laru shook her head, offering him an ironic smile. "But what if your absence was the factor that changed that pivotal battle? What if the handful of mortals you've gathered to you are the only thing holding this world together?"

Kai closed his eyes, raising his face to the sky, the weight of the road before him weighing heavily on his spirit. "So what do I do?"

He felt the woman he loved turn to face him, kneeling on the earth before him. When he opened his eyes he found

her smiling at him, ready to meet his gaze.

“You follow your heart,” she reminded him, the corners of her mouth turned up in a promise that everything would turn out alright. “You do what you believe is right and choose the path where you stay true to yourself. If you do that,” she swore, “whatever the outcome of the days ahead, you will look back and realize you have no regrets.”

Kai felt his features mellow into a warm smile. “So I should follow you into the land of the fae,” he offered quietly, reaching out to run his fingers through her thick, forest-colored hair. “It’s a lovely thought,” he whispered, gazing deeply into her pale blue eyes, “but one I should sleep on before I make any promises.”

“Who said anything about sleep?” she purred, leaning forward, closing the distance between herself and the mortal she loved.



Kai’s eyes blinked open, squinting against the pale gray light of dawn. It was as if the sun had come alone to wake the land, leaving the hues of sunrise tucked somewhere in the folds of the night. The sky was overcast, heavy rain clouds drifting below a blanket of grey that cloaked the heavens, the sun hidden behind the veil. Rolling onto his side, he began to pull Ko’laru’s naked body close to his exposed skin, but stopped as he sensed the tension that quivered through his lover’s frame.

Sitting up, the blanket falling away, the cold mountain air wrapping around his bare chest and shoulders, Kai tried to meet her eyes but followed her stare down the distant slopes.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Can you feel it?”

Vigorously rubbing his face with the palms of his hands, Kai forced himself fully awake. With a shake of his head he cleared his mind, focusing on the mountain stone until he could feel it cold and steady around him. Slowly expanding

his awareness as his mentor had taught him, he let the circle that his mind embraced widen, feeling Ko'laru's presence next to him, her heart a raging inferno of life, her body tense and unsteady. His awareness moved farther out until it touched the forest around them, but his understanding of the weave of energy became confused by the tapestry of individual trees and wildlife that filled the mountains and stretched toward the distant river.

"I can't feel anything unusual," he admitted, his focus wavering under the solidity of his words, faltering until his mind was dominated only by what he could see and hear.

Ko'laru stood, Kai's eyes drawn to her naked body as she stepped toward the forest. Where a mortal's skin would be colored by the weave of blanket and stone, waking with red patches and wrinkles from the folds in the bedding, the discoloration brought out the connection between the fae and the land she was born from. Leaves appeared along her back and side where she had slept, their colors faint as if they were trapped beneath a thin layer of ice. Her cold fingers and hands rippled with the waters of the streams where her people fed, her awareness focused on the distant disturbance, her mind losing its hold on the form she wore.

"There," she said, pointing toward the Firedrake River.

Wrapping a blanket around himself, Kai joined her, staring over an ocean of trees toward the thin ribbon of water that slipped from the mountains and cliffs as it worked its way to the sea.

"I don't see it," he admitted.

Slipping behind him, Ko'laru cupped her lover's head in her hands, her fingertips caressing his temples. As the fae focused, Kai was gripped by vertigo, the distant landscape rushing toward him, until it seemed as if he peered from the trees at the river's edge. Foot soldiers dressed in armor of boiled and hardened leather stood with swords and torches, directed by men dressed in white. Common folk knelt at the soldiers' feet, the peasants' faces twisted in despair, begging to

be spared the fate before them. Kai couldn't hear their voices but one of the foot soldiers turned toward the men in white, the infantryman slowly shaking his head. At the commander's order, men with axes began to attack the trees, one of the peasants bursting into tears. Only then did Kai see the altar of carefully stacked stones in the center of the encircling trees and as his attention shifted, he found the grove scattered with stumps, the freshly fallen trunks laying beside them.

"That's sacred ground," he whispered, his voice a low growl. "How can they do that?"

Ko'laru was silent for a long moment as the peasant fell face forward on the ground, silently weeping, the others watching with tortured impotency as the soldiers slowly cut down the holy grove.

"This is what I see," she offered quietly, her voice devoid of emotion.

Instantly, Kai's vision shifted. Slender fae writhed and screamed, their feet trapped within the stumps of the fallen trees. The spirits that lived within the grove wailed in agony and fear, unable to leave the trees that were their home, that composed their physical bodies. With each blow of the axe, the spirit of that tree winced as if struck, writhing in unbearable pain.

Kai watched as the air around one of the peasants began to waver, deepening in hue until he was surrounded by a crimson aura. The commoner exploded from the ground in a defiant rage, rushing toward the soldiers that cut down the tree, only to be bore down from behind by other infantryman who fell upon him, beating him with their fists, kicking him when he lay prone on the earth.

"How can they do this?" Ko'laru asked, pulling her hands away, Kai stumbling as his vision abruptly changed, until the scene was only a distant part of the river's embankment that he couldn't quite see.

"It's called conversion," he said at last, his voice quiet and angry. "It's what happens when a religion takes their eyes

off of God and places them squarely on the Church. No longer does it matter how someone lives their life or how they worship the divine; all that matters is how many souls you can harvest for your faith.”

“There’s an entire religion like this?” Ko’laru asked, her eyes afraid, her voice appalled.

Kai shook his head. “No. There are men that use religion to further their own goals and cloak themselves in glory.”

The fae stopped, staring toward the distant river, her eyes widening in fear. “Kai,” she said unsteadily, her voice trembling, “they’re cutting down the last tree in the grove.”

He laid his hand on her arm as if to comfort her, but Ko’laru quickly shook it off as she turned to him, as Kai realized it was the first time he had ever seen her afraid.

His lover swallowed heavily, her words laced with tension and fear. “Do you know what happens when you slay an entire grove of awakened trees?”

Kai shook his head.

“We need to go,” she said, moving toward their tiny encampment to dress and collect their gear. “We need to go before the spirits realize we’re here and,” she stopped, turning back toward the distant river. As Kai pulled on his trousers and slipped his feet into his boots, he watched the remaining color fade from Ko’laru’s face, the fae’s eyes growing wide with terror.

“Run!” she roared, grabbing his hand and racing toward the forest.

Without question, Kai burst into a full sprint, hard-pressed to keep pace as the fae tore through the forest, leaping over fallen logs and hurling herself over ferns and shrubs. An anguished roar began to build behind them, coming from the direction of the river, growing closer with each stride. Without warning, Ko’laru threw Kai to the ground, forcing him face down into the forest loam, asking him to trust her, to stay where he lay as she pressed a gentle, insistent hand into his

back, the fae kneeling protectively over the mortal.

A storm wind ripped through the forest, the sound tinged with the cries of the slain. Kai covered his head with his hands as the tempest ripped branches from the trees around him, lifting debris from the forest floor and hurling them in an unstoppable maelstrom of fury and anguish. Pelted with stones and soil, buried beneath the roar of the hurricane, Kai felt Ko'laru stand to her feet, her hand leaving his back, her voice raised in defiance against the storm. Musical words filled with a righteous fury spilled from the fae's lips, answered in kind by the winds that howled around them. Kai buried his face in the earth as Ko'laru fought with the wind, harsh words cast back and forth, the debate rising in volume and fury. The mortal warrior tensed as he heard the snapping of a mighty trunk, the cracking sound of splintering wood followed by the sound of the forest giant crashing to the earth. The winds plucked at his flesh, trying to lift him from the ground, and somehow Kai knew the only thing keeping him from the storm's embrace was Ko'laru's defiance.

With a horrible scream that echoed into the distance in every direction, the storm instantly stopped, Kai bracing himself as he was pelted by a rain of soil, twigs, and small stones. At last, the forest was quiet and he raised his head, shocked by the devastation around them. The earth around where Kai laid had been ripped away, leaving the mortal and fae on an island of soil surrounded by a deep trench. Several of the trees around them had been uprooted, leaving a wide clearing where the pale light of the gray sky filtered in, unobstructed by the shadows of the forest.

Kai slowly climbed to his knees then carefully found his feet. Turning, he found Ko'laru staring off into the distance, the fae's jaw still set defiantly, the soil that marred her cheeks streaked with tears.

"What happened?" he asked carefully, moving to stand beside the woman he loved.

Ko'laru was quiet; her back rigid; her hands balled

into fists at her sides. A quiet sigh slipped from her lips as she felt her strength fade away, as she intertwined her fingers with Kai's.

"They wanted vengeance," she offered quietly, her words trembling with a faint quiver. "When I wouldn't slay the men that did this, they wanted your life instead." She turned, meeting Kai's gaze with a melancholy smile. "I told them that you were no longer mortal, that your soul was so intimately entwined with mine that they were impossible to separate."

Kai felt the shadow of a smile turn up the corners of his mouth, the joy quickly fading as he met the sorrow in Ko'laru's eyes. "So where did they go?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said honestly, her pale eyes welling with tears, her chin growing taut, her lower lip beginning to quiver. "They're twisted creatures now, only thinking of retribution and revenge. They'll find some corner of the forest to haunt and passing mortals will pay the price for what was done."

Ko'laru tried to be strong, to sound defiant as she offered Kai the words, but her shoulders began to shake as the tears fell, as she began to weep. The mortal took the fae in his arms, holding her close, feeling her collapse into her embrace. Only then was he reminded that she was a spirit herself, that her people were born from the trees at the river's edge, and he wondered who it was she condemned to their fate, simply to spare the life of the man she loved.

CHAPTER NINE: RAVEN'S ROOST

A cold drizzle obscured the forest as the companions made their way through the mountains, the sound of the falling rain blanketing the world around them with a curtain of white noise. Kai drifted far behind the party, walking amidst the mist shrouded trees, barely visible through the veil of rain. Beltross was quiet, his eyes introspective; even the water that fell around him was unable to lift the mer's spirits. Caraine walked beside him. The two girls led the group, Traela quiet as she left her mentor to say his goodbyes, Leiron's words filled with an excited anticipation as they neared Raven's Roost.

Kai stopped, hidden from prying eyes by the tapestry of trees and rainfall. Taking Ko'laru's hands in his own, he searched for the words to say farewell, but his tongue was still, as if it was unwilling to allow him to leave the woman he loved behind.

"You don't have to go," she offered with a reluctant smile.

Kai nodded. "We both know that I do," he answered quietly, feeling as if his destiny were the bars of a cage that forever separated him from the woman he loved. "I have a responsibility as a warrior to see this through."

Ko'laru closed her eyes. "It always seems that duty and honor pull us apart, Kai," she said softly, her words trailing off until they were lost beneath the sound of the rain. She stopped, as if waiting for an answer, before opening her eyes once more.

“I know you have to go,” she admitted with a wane smile, a light kindling in her gaze, the glimmer darkened by the heavy hand of sacrifice. “But I don’t have to leave your side.”

Shaking his head vigorously, Kai protested. “You can’t come with me,” he insisted, his gaze filled with a grim seriousness. “Fae are not welcome in Raven’s Roost.”

She released his hands as she offered him a playful smile, her eyes both wondrously happy and deeply sad. “They can’t stop me if they think I’m mortal,” she offered.

Kai watched, the meaning of her words slipping into an astonished understanding as the woman he loved closed her eyes in concentration, the pale colors of her skin deepening with the flush of mortal life, her high cheekbones brushed with a gentle blush. Ko’laru’s hair began to change colors, the deep browns overcoming the streaks of lush green until the fae wore a mane of auburn curls. Opening her eyes, the lids parting vertically as a human’s would, her deep blue eyes twinkled in anticipation of her lover’s response.

“You can’t do this,” he protested breathlessly, his eyes sparkling with a maelstrom of emotion, Kai overwhelmed with her sacrifice.

“Not for long,” she agreed with a warm smile. “But if we stay no more than a sunrise or two, I’ll survive.”

“But you’re so,” he began, his words faltering, unable to slip into the air. “When you’re like this you can’t,” he tried again, the admission fading away as unsteadily as it began.

Ko’laru nodded. “I can’t feel anything,” she offered sadly. “I’m cut off from the weave of life around me,” she said, a faint smile gracing her mortal face. “But I’m with you. And for me, that’s worth the price.”

Kai beamed, ashamed at the joy he found in her sacrifice, wishing that he was the one that could bear the burden. Swallowing hard, he realized that her words were true. As he met her gaze, he could see his love for her reflected in her own eyes and that connection, the emotion that united them, pushed aside everything but his joy at having her near

and his pride in having her walk by his side. “Would you mind if I introduced you as my lifemate?” he asked, his eyes dancing around his wide smile. “They’ll allow us to share quarters that way.”

“Is that a proposal?” she grinned.

The mortal’s smile faded as he answered. “It will be when I can pledge my life to you and not the blade.”

Ko’laru nodded, a seriousness to her gaze. “And you already know what my answer will be.” She stopped, her mouth wrinkling into a pixie’s grin. “Until then, I’ll be Karu, your lifemate and fellow warrior.”

“Karu?” he asked, as if testing how the name felt on his tongue. “I kind of like that.”

“It’s what my father used to call me,” she replied, the color of her blue eyes deepening with the memory. “And it’s not so obviously fae.”

“Come on,” he gestured, motioning toward Raven’s Roost. “The others will be almost there.”

Taking her hand, the two lovers ran through the trees, laughing in the rain. Although Ko’laru smiled with the joy of being at the side of the man she loved, her eyes were clouded with her loss as she struggled to keep pace with Kai, as the mortal body she wove lost the power and grace of her faerie form.



The white stone walls of Raven’s Roost emerged from the mist, the low clouds parting before the massive keep. Tall towers rose into the thick fog, overlooking the massive cliffs and the Firedrake River below as the slender columns supported thick fortifications of white stone. In the center of the walled courtyard, an enormous cathedral loomed, its stained glass windows brilliant against its pale walls. Spires reached toward the sky, the highest lost in the low clouds. Countless buildings clustered around the holy structure, the

stronghold built for both worship and defense, dedicated to both religion and the sword.

“Wow,” Leiron said breathlessly, her eyes wide in childlike wonder. “It’s bigger than Cathedral.” She stopped, turning to regard Traela with a wide smile. “I wonder which building is the library.”

The teen shook her head, watching as Kai took the lead, hand-in-hand with an unfamiliar mortal woman. It wasn’t until Traela saw the familiar grin that Ko’laru wore that she realized it was the fae, somehow changed to human form.

A middle-aged man, his body hidden by dark robes woven from a rough cloth, his scalp covered only with the shadow of freshly shaven head, emerged from a broad portal to greet the companions. An iron portcullis hung overhead as the man’s sandals padded across the wooden drawbridge that spanned a large, empty moat.

“Welcome to Raven’s Roost,” the man offered pleasantly, his mouth transforming into a neutral grin. “May the ways of Wittia bless you during your stay.”

“Thank you,” Kai replied, stopping before the monk. “We’d like to stay within your walls a day or two if we may.”

“All are welcome here,” the man replied. “I am Brother Samuel. It’s my honor to welcome you to Raven’s Roost.”

“I’m Kai Oakman,” the warrior began, “and this is my lifemate, Karu,” he added, the fae nodding her head to the monk. “This is Traela and Caraine and Beltross,” he continued in turn, only to be interrupted as he introduced the fae.

“You are mer,” the monk commented evenly.

“My father was mortal,” Beltross replied.

Brother Samuel nodded, as if corrected by an elder. “We don’t judge children for a father’s indiscretion. You are welcome here, Beltross.”

Kai winced in anger at the monk’s words, but quickly mastered his emotions. “And this young lady is Leiron.”

“Can we see the library?” she interrupted, instantly rewarded with the monk’s smile. “I can read.”

Brother Samuel nodded. “Once I show you to your quarters, you will be free to explore to your heart’s content,” he smiled. “And I believe Brother Daniel remembers the way to the library,” he added, nodding to the young man that stood toward the back of the party.

The prophet offered the monk a strained smile. “The name is Daen.”

Brother Samuel bowed his head in apology. “I stand corrected,” he said evenly. “But once a member of the Order, you always have a home here within our walls.”

Daen tried to smile in response, but the gesture was twisted, appearing as a pained grimace.

“Come,” the monk offered, gesturing toward the open portal. “Let me offer you the hospitality of Raven’s Roost. Dry clothes and refreshments will be brought to your quarters,” he continued as he ushered the companions within the stronghold’s walls. “If you would like to join us, the Hearthwarden would be honored if you would consent to dine with him tonight.” Brother Samuel smiled, motioning for them to follow him. “I’m certain you will enjoy your stay here.”



Brother Samuel led the companions through hallways decorated with richly woven tapestries, each depicting a story of Wittia’s life, of the founding of their religion and the trials their matron had faced on her path. The corridors were lit with large candles and clean-burning oil lamps, the candlesticks worked from gold and silver, the lamps from hand-blown colored glass.

“Everything is so beautiful,” Caraine remarked off-handedly, her eyes drifting from a multicolored vase on an ornate table to a marble statuette of Wittia looking over the lands of the fae from the cliffs that would one day be the foundation for Raven’s Roost. “But I thought that the adherents to Wittia’s teachings took an oath of poverty, that

they devoted their lives to the Order.”

The monk nodded, continuing to usher the companions toward the guest quarters. “We do,” he agreed simply.

“Individually we have nothing. What you see around you are gifts from noble visitors and the spoils of war.”

“War?” she asked again, hurrying to walk at Brother Samuel’s side. “But I thought the path Wittia taught was a way of peace, just as its founder refused to shed blood for her beliefs.”

“Wittia chose compassion and kindness as her weapons,” he explained without passion, as if he had answered the question so many times that the words were but a reflex that fell from his lips. “We live in another time. Where she would face a handful of adversaries, armies march against us. Although men of the faith such as myself do not ride into battle ourselves, others are eager to wield arms in our name. New Orders have grown and built their homes here to defend the path and the teachings that we hold sacred. The path of Wittia is not just for those of us who take an oath of poverty and peace. It calls to many. Who are we to deny them the right to follow their own calling, or to deny them the chance to protect the way of life Wittia worked so hard to create?”

Caraine was quiet, her mood dark as if she wasn’t satisfied with the answer.

“There’s a story we’re taught that when Wittia was ambushed by bandits during her travels that led her to Raven’s Roost, that a swarm of hornets emerged from the forest to drive her attackers away. Our bees just happen to wear armor; instead of stingers, they wield swords.”

Caraine was silent.

“I take it that you don’t agree with our methods?” the monk asked.

The woman beside him licked her lips in distaste. “I just don’t know how Wittia would feel if she were here today.”

“I think she would be proud of our accomplishments in her name,” Brother Samuel answered honestly. “I take it that

you follow the path?”

Caraine shook her head. “No,” she answered hesitantly, as if she had to sift through a mountain of decisions and memories to find the words. “Once, long ago I did. But not anymore.”

“May I ask why you strayed from the path?” the monk asked with an honest interest.

The woman’s mood darkened under the probing question. “People change, Brother Samuel,” she said evenly. “I needed to grow in ways that your religion couldn’t accommodate.”

“I can understand that,” the monk answered with his words, his eyes filled with a mixture of disappointment and compassion at what he obviously felt was her loss. He stopped before an ornate door, the wood carved into a tapestry of towering cliffs and endless forests, the scene showing Raven’s Roost as seen from the Firedrake River below.

“The women will be staying here,” he said, opening the door onto a lavishly decorated room. “One of the Sisters will be along shortly to see to any needs you may have. I apologize that we don’t have private quarters for everyone, but we have other guests here as well. Kai,” he said, turning to the warrior, “you and your lady will be next door. And if the gentlemen will follow me, I’ll show you to your room.”



Leiron stood with wide eyes and an enchanted smile that teetered on the edge of disbelief, the young girl turning slow circles as she drank in the books that lined the walls and were carefully laid on the tables that filled the small room.

“By your smile, I’d say that you like books,” a grandfatherly voice gently commented.

Leiron nodded, meeting the old man’s eyes. He was dressed in robes identical to those that Brother Samuel had worn, but his hair had been lost by the hand of time, not by

another monk's razor. The librarian's face was creased with deep folds, like a wrinkled tunic that had been left at the foot of the bed at the end of the day. He smiled, the lines shifting, eyes clouded with cataracts twinkling in the candlelight.

"I'm Brother Tremaine," he said, offering his hand in greeting.

The young girl was taken aback by the frailty in his grip. "I'm Leiron," she said breathlessly, turning back to the collected volumes. "There must be a hundred books here."

"Three hundred and eight," he smiled proudly. "The largest mortal library outside of Node."

A friendly laugh escaped the monk's lips at the look of wondrous disbelief that passed across Leiron's face. "Do you know how to read?"

Leiron nodded. "A little."

"You're welcome to stay here as long as you like and to explore these pages to your heart's content." He paused, a grandfather's pride in his descendents sparkling in his eyes as he gestured to the tomes that lined the walls. "If you don't mind spending your time with an old man and his collection of dusty books."

The young girl smiled broadly, her eyes filled with an overwhelming joy. "But I don't even know where to start."

"I'll make you a deal," Brother Tremaine offered with a warm smile, "I'll help you decide if you'll take the time to read them out loud to me."

Leiron met the old man's gaze, staring deeply into his cloudy eyes. "Are you blind?" she asked with a child's honest simplicity.

The monk shook his head. "No," he answered softly, "not quite. But I don't see well enough anymore to be able to read all the words."

"Then why are you here?" she asked, concerned. "It doesn't seem fair that you should have to take care of books you can't read."

"Oh, but I wouldn't trade it for the world," he answered

with a conspiratorial grin, his wrinkled face shifting into a smile that mirrored a lifetime of literary joy. “I came here as a young man and have read each of these so many times that all I have to do is run my hand over the spine and I can remember the stories.”

“But you could be out there,” she began, only to be silenced as Brother Tremaine gently shook his head.

“This is all I know,” he said softly. “I’m too old to find a new calling in life and no one wants a blind old man getting in the way. In here, I’m out of the way and kept out of trouble.”

“But, don’t the other monks read?” she asked in disbelief.

“From time to time,” he replied, his smile fading into a frown of open disappointment. “But it’s usually just to look up a bit of trivia to silence an argument between them. They think they have all the answers and don’t feel that a bunch of old books could teach them anything new.” Brother Tremaine shrugged indifferently. “Maybe they’re right.”

“If I lived here,” Leiron announced confidently, “I don’t think I would ever leave the library.”

The old man laughed, the gentle sound filled with kindness and old memories. “I remember feeling that as a young man,” he said with a pleasant grin. “The problem was, that feeling never went away.”

“So what do you want me to read first?” Leiron asked with a child’s eagerness.

Brother Tremaine smiled. “That depends on what you’re interested in.”

The two walked deeper into the quiet library, the aged monk listening intently to the young girl’s dreams and opinions, using them to steer them through the vault of books to find the volume that would bring a smile to her lips and rekindle the fire in an old man’s soul.



Beltross and Daen laid their packs in their quarters, the two men snug between the close walls of the tiny room. The mer looked uncomfortable within the walls of Raven's Roost, his shoulders tense, his brow furrowed above eyes that darted toward every sound. In his own way, Daen was just as uneasy, pacing the length of the small room, wringing his hands with an uncontained anxiety, murmuring quietly to himself.

"Maybe we should go somewhere," Beltross offered at last. "We're not doing ourselves any good just sitting in here."

Daen violently shook his head. "There's nowhere here that we're welcome," he said sharply, his eyes burning with memories. "You have faerie blood in your veins, Beltross. While they tolerated you in front of the others, it wouldn't be the same if you were to wander out alone."

"But I'll have you beside me," the mer offered unconvincingly.

The prophet shook his head once more. "I don't need the sight to tell me what will happen, my friend," he continued quietly. "The others would be told that you decided to go back to the forest, that you would await them outside of the walls and that I had gone with you," he stopped, meeting the mer's eyes, making sure that Beltross was listening. "And no one would ever see either of us again."

The mer smiled uncomfortably, the gesture failing, faltering into an unpleasant grimace. "What?" he demanded. "They'd toss us in the dungeons? Just because I'm mer?"

Daen was quiet for a long moment. "There are no dungeons here. The followers of Wittia don't believe in bars and cages, just as they have no tolerance for someone with a demon's blood running in their veins."

Beltross scowled angrily, but Daen continued before the mer could speak.

"We both know that fae are not evil," the prophet agreed with the unspoken protest, "just as Wittia herself knew. But these are different times, the Order is a different place, and

the prejudice that exists outside these walls is magnified by the self-righteousness within.”

The mer was silent, turning to look away and finding only a stone wall. There were no windows in the small room, the tiny chamber decorated only with two narrow cots and a bowl and a pitcher of water set on a low table.

“Is that why you left, Daen?” he asked at last, turning to face the prophet.

The mortal laughed, the sound cold and unpleasant. “Do you really think I’d be the champion for some faerie’s cause?”

Beltross glared without meaning to. “So why did you leave?” he asked, his words spoken with a sharp edge, his tone of voice cold.

Daen licked his lips. “You really want to know?” he asked angrily. “I’ll tell you why, Beltross. Because I’m a prophet; because I can see things that are going to happen and I have no way to stop them or change the outcome. Every night for eleven years, I dreamt of a dark army pouring through the gates of Raven’s Roost, of the Order being slaughtered at the hands of hooded warriors and men with faces masked by scars.”

“Did you warn the priests?”

The mortal smirked uncomfortably, shaking his head as if he couldn’t believe the response to his revelations. “And for my efforts I was told to pray, to purge my soul of darkness. That I was simply making myself vulnerable to fantasies and delusions.” He stopped, the cold smirk that cracked his lips tinged with unpleasant memories. “I prayed like no one has ever prayed, as if my salvation, as if my sanity hung in the balance. I fasted until I was so weak I couldn’t stand. I meditated on all of Wittia’s precepts. And for my troubles, the visions grew stronger. I began to see what was to come everywhere I looked. Sometimes it would just be something simple; a cook dropping a platter of food before it slipped from his hands; rain over the horizon. But the dreams of war never

stopped. They only grew more vivid, until I would wake up screaming, the vision of myself laying on the cobblestone path of the garden echoing through my mind as one of the scarred warriors raised his blade to end my life.”

Beltross stood motionlessly as silence engulfed the two men, Daen’s words hanging in the air.

The prophet laughed, the sound cold and lifeless. “And here I am, back at Raven’s Roost. I guess even a prophet can’t escape his death, even when he sees it coming.”

“Why did you come back?” the mer asked with an honest curiosity.

Daen tried to smirk, but the softening of his features turned the gesture into a self-conscious smile. “Because my friends came,” he said simply.

The mer reached out, laying a hand on Daen’s shoulder. “I won’t let you die,” Beltross promised.

The prophet simply looked away.



“How do we find the last of the thirteen?” Ko’laru asked, sitting on the edge of the wide double bed. The room was lavish, decorated with tapestries and ornate candlesticks. A large porcelain bowl, adorned with an intricate weave of delicately painted trees, sat on a stone table, accompanied by a pitcher of the same design. “We just can’t go up to a monk and ask,” she pointed out.

Kai nodded. “Maybe Daen will know.”

The fae let out a long sigh, her gaze dropping to the floor before she raised it to meet her lover’s eyes. “I don’t like it here.”

“I know,” the mortal agreed, laying an understanding hand on her shoulder. “Neither do I.”

A loud knock filled the chamber, echoing from the doorway. “Dinner is about to be served in the Hearthwarden’s dining room,” a high-pitched voice called from beyond the

portal. “Your company has been requested.”

“One moment,” Kai called. He turned to Ko’laru, meeting her uneasy gaze. “Are you up for this?” he asked with an honest concern.

The fae nodded. “I’ve been through worse,” she answered with a strained smile, mirroring her lover’s earlier words.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Kai prodded with a conspiratorial whisper. “It all depends on how arrogant the Hearthwarden is.”

Ko’laru laughed, Kai taking it as a good sign. Standing up, he opened the door to find a young boy in monk’s robes, his head shaved like the others. The young man was slender and frail, no more than six or seven summers old

“I’m B-brother Rann,” he offered unsteadily, staring first at Kai, then Ko’laru.

Kai smiled a greeting, but the young man stepped back, his eyes growing wide with disbelief and fear.

“You’re from the spheres,” he stammered in terror. “You’re the ones the demon told me about.”

Kai began to kneel, hoping to comfort the boy by talking to the young man eye to eye, but the monk began to shake, his face turning white with terror. He tried to scream, his wide, horrified eyes locked on Kai’s face, but his voice was lost beneath the weight of his fear, a whispered gasp the only sound slipping from his lips.

Rann turned to flee down the corridor, but Kai was too quick, snatching the young monk’s robes in his hands and pulling the young man within their chambers. With a quick look down the hallway to make sure they weren’t seen, he closed the door behind them.

With his face buried in his hands, the boy prayed with an urgent desperation, his voice quivering with fear. “Wittia save me from the demons with your holy light. Wittia save me from the demons with your holy light.”

“We’re not demons,” Ko’laru offered with a kind voice, kneeling beside the terrified young man.

“Wittia save me from the demons with your holy light,” the young monk prayed over and over, his words trembling with a horrified conviction. He was hyperventilating, his breath coming in ragged gasps, his voice growing louder in desperation.

“Here,” Kai offered, handing the boy a cup of water.

Rann stopped, staring uncomprehendingly at the offered vessel held in the stranger’s grasp.

“It’s water,” Kai explained evenly.

The boy took the cup in shaking hands, the water sloshing over the sides of the porcelain vessel. He sniffed the liquid and then sipped gently, cautiously, his ragged breathing wracking his body.

“Breathe slowly,” Kai instructed. “Focus on your breath and take small sips.”

Rann did as he was told, his breathing slowly returning to normal, his eyes remaining wide and untrusting.

“Why are you here?” the boy asked at last, his eyes filled with a grim resignation.

Kai and Ko’laru exchanged glances.

“Are you here to steal my soul?”

The fae laughed out loud; Kai merely shook his head, fighting unsuccessfully to suppress his grin.

“But that’s what the Brothers said would happen,” the young monk insisted, his conviction beginning to waver in the light of the strangers’ response. “They said that’s what would happen if I let you near.”

“What would we do with your soul?” Kai asked in friendly disbelief. “Could I wear it as a hat? Will it keep me dry in the rain?”

Rann shook his head, his fear beginning to slip away.

“We’re here,” Ko’laru added, “because we’re like you.”

The boy teetered on the edge of the words, needing more, his gaze tense and unsteady.

“Each of us came from the spheres like you did. All of us except for Karu here, and she’s a warrior and my lifemate.

There are thirteen of us that share something that no other mortal shares.”

“But the Brothers said the spheres are in the afterlife,” Rann protested, “in the place where souls are born before they enter this world. They told me that my mentor was a demon sent to lead me astray, to lead me into the darkness.”

“What do you remember of your time there?” Ko’laru asked, the question catching the young monk off guard.

He paused for a long moment, considering the question. “I learned a lot of things,” he answered simply. “And my mentor was good to me.”

“Does that sound like something a demon would do?” the fae asked.

Rann itched his nose absentmindedly. “No,” he replied softly. “But the Brothers,” he began to protest, only to be interrupted by Kai.

“Every man has to choose his own path,” he interjected. “There is honor in following an Order like this one. But you have to know that it’s right for you, that this is where you want to belong more than anywhere else in the world.”

The young monk was silent.

“Is this where you want to be?”

Rann looked at him, his eyes unsteady, not with fear, but with a realization that he’d never been given the choice to decide.

“We’ll be leaving in a few days,” Ko’laru offered gently. “If you choose to stay, we will wish you well and leave you here,” she paused, smiling, “your soul intact,” she added, watching Rann grin self-consciously at his previous fear. “But if you would like to leave these walls, you’re welcome to accompany us. You don’t have to pledge to join us. You’re simply welcome to travel with us for as long as you like.”

“You mean you wouldn’t be mad if I decide to stay here?”

Ko’laru shook her head; Kai offered him a gentle smile.

“I’ll have to think about it,” he answered simply, a self-

conscious grin playing across his lips.

Kai stepped toward the door. “Take your time, Brother Rann. Now if I remember correctly, you were about to escort us to dinner.”

The young monk leapt to his feet. “We have to hurry or I’m going to get yelled at!” he exclaimed.

“Then we’ll hurry,” Ko’laru promised, waiting for Rann to open the door before the trio quickly walked down the corridor toward the Hearthwarden’s dining room, their fast pace a strange counterpoint to the slow meandering of the monks they passed.

The young boy hurried several paces ahead, Ko’laru slowing Kai’s pace with a gentle hand on his arm. Letting the boy pull away, the two warriors dropped back, the fae leaning to whisper quietly in Kai’s ear, matching him stride for stride.

“Why are we dining with the Hearthwarden?” she asked, her voice phrasing the question as if it were a key that opened up a doorway that had been hidden from their eyes.

“I don’t understand the question,” Kai answered honestly, slowing even more at the trepidation he found in his lover’s eyes.

“We aren’t anyone special, Kai,” she offered, her eyes glancing to the young monk that led them toward the feast. “We aren’t nobles. We gave the man at the gate nothing more than our names.” She paused, letting the implications set in. “And yet he already had an invitation from the Hearthwarden to extend to us. Why?”

Kai shook his head, his gaze turning over the possibilities. “Perhaps it’s standard procedure for the Order.”

“You’ve been here before,” she pointed out.

The mortal nodded, his pace slowing even more.

“Have you ever been invited to dine with the Hearthwarden before this?”

“No,” he answered softly. “I’ve never even met the man.”

“Rann told us that he spoke with the monks about

the spheres,” she continued, cautiously offering Kai another piece of the puzzle. “If that’s true, then they know about your mentor. They may even know about the prophecy.”

Her lover stopped in the middle of the hallway, turning to face her, his unease deepening with each syllable.

“Why are we here, Kai?” she asked, a strange finality in her voice.

“To find Rann,” he said with a terrible understanding as the implication began to sink in.

“Why?” she asked, wanting to hear the words from her lover’s lips.

“Because we are the keys to the prophesy,” he said coldly. “Because we will determine what reality becomes when our world is rewoven.”

“We came for one key, Kai,” she offered, her voice drawn taut with a dreadful tension. “They’ve just gathered six.”

Spinning around, Kai raced back the way they had come, throwing open the doorway to the women’s quarters, cursing as he found it empty.

“They’ve already gone,” he informed her, his teeth clenched, fighting to hold back a string of curses.

His lover closed the distance between them. “Then we join them at the feast, Kai,” she said evenly, as if the road that lay before them were nothing more than a high stakes game of chandra. “We concede this hand. They don’t know that we’re aware of their plans.”

Kai offered her a dark grimace in reply. “Do you think it would wrong of me to wear my sword to dinner?”

Ko’laru offered him a wry grin. “A true warrior is measured by the deeds of his heart, not the strength of his blade.”

The mortal warrior shook his head in uneasy disbelief, unable to suppress the hint of a smile.

“Besides,” she reminded him, “the Wittian Order is a path of peace. What are a hundred monks against the survivors

of Lo'clavera 'no Wae?"

He raised his eyebrows in response, letting out a long breath. "I hope you're right."

Rann raced toward them, stopping anxiously half-way down the hall, gesturing furiously for them to follow. "Please!" he insisted with hushed urgency, glancing at a pair of passing monks that looked disapprovingly at his open distress. "They're all waiting for you. I'm going to be in so much trouble if you don't come right now!"

Kai nodded to the woman he loved, feeling her fingers intertwine with his own as they walked hand-in-hand into the arms of fate.



Daen stopped just outside of the double doors that led into the dining hall, an uneasiness twisting his features. Turning to Beltross, Traela and Caraine he asked, "Where's Leiron?"

"She must still be in the library," Traela offered.

The prophet swallowed hard.

"Is there something wrong?" the mer asked with obvious concern.

"I'm going to go find her," he announced, his voice unsteady. "Don't hold up the dinner for me."

"Are you okay?" Caraine asked.

Daen tried to smile, but the gesture failed.

"What do you see?" Beltross asked.

"Just the stuff of old dreams," the mortal admitted, stepping away from the dining room. "I'll find Leiron." He began to back away from the dining hall, but stopped, turning to meet the mer's gaze.

"Be on your guard," he whispered, the tension growing in his eyes. "And remember your promise to me," he added, his eyes filled with fear as he turned and hurried away from the waiting feast.

CHAPTER TEN: DINNER GUESTS

Kai ate slowly, chewing his food with a thoughtful thoroughness, letting the conversation weave its way around the table while he remained silent. His eyes watched the monks and knights that dined with the companions, eating only the foods that they first ate, carefully avoiding the meat pastries that a visiting merchant seemed to enjoy, the man eating the delicacies one after another. They sat untouched at the edge of Hearthwarden's plate, the captain of the guard staying completely away from the entrée for which Raven's Roost was most renown.

Glancing around the room, Kai took stock of the situation once more. Counting the five present members of his own party, twelve men dined with the Hearthwarden. Daen and Leiron had yet to appear. Three of the guests were prominent priests who oversaw the local area, those who shepherded Wittia's flock sporting fat bellies and a softness around their mouths and eyes that spoke of a life of ease. Their robes were of a softer weave than those of the acolytes, and Kai spied a glimmer of brightly dyed silk within the sleeve of one of the clergy as the man reached for his goblet of wine, wiping the crumbs of a meat pastry from his lips. The captain of the guard sat erect and ate carefully, mindful of his bearing, even when he ate. Like the companions, the man was unarmed, but even in middle age his movements were athletic and sure, and he was book-ended by two unarmed knights. A wealthy

merchant was seated across from the guard; the vendor dressed in brightly colored finery; gold chains hung around his slender neck. Next to the Hearthwarden sat a man Kai couldn't place, the mortal warrior regretting that he and Ko'laru hadn't arrived in time for the introductions. Kai judged that the man was his equal in height, but the stranger's broad shoulders and barrel chest promised twice the warrior's weight. A thick mane of dark hair flowed over the man's shoulders and down his back; his clothes were simple, loose and dark, mirroring the inky pools that glimmered in the depths of his eyes.

Kai looked away as the man met his gaze, the warrior's eyes drifting to the walls, measuring the value of the weapons that hung as spoils of war. Crossed spears stared at him from the wall across the table; paired swords hung above the Hearthwarden's head. As one of the hooded monks who served as attendants offered to refill Kai's wine, the mortal took the opportunity to glance over his shoulder as if to meet the server's eyes, only to seek a glimpse of the display behind him. A massive maul was pinned above a polished shield. Kai could only hope that the weapon was sturdy and strong, that it had been forged to be wielded in battle, not crafted as a trophy for some nobleman's wall.

He returned his gaze to his plate, following the movements of his fork as he speared a daintily cooked vegetable and raised it to his mouth. Looking up, the mortal warrior met the eyes of the stranger that gazed at him from his seat at the Hearthwarden's right hand. There was a misplaced confidence in the man's eyes, as if he were in on some private joke that the others had yet to discover. Kai immediately decided that the stranger was the most dangerous man in the room.

"What do you think of our humble community?" the Hearthwarden asked, carefully directing the conversation. "Is it what you expected you'd find when you traveled to Wittia's home?"

"I've been here before," Kai answered carefully, setting

his fork down on his plate, the morsel still impaled on the utensil's tines. "Not much has changed."

"Things are changing every day," the captain of the guard argued. "Our philosophy and our ways are changing. Rather than allowing the world around us to dictate our path, we've chosen to go out into the world and plant our own seeds."

"Just yesterday we converted the last non-believers in a local village to our path," the fattest of the priests offered. "Captain St. Claire's men were an indispensable aid in our efforts," he added with an acknowledging nod toward the captain of the guard. "There is no one within a day's march that doesn't know of the teachings of Wittia and no one who doesn't follow her ways."

Kai reached to clasp Ko'laru's hand under the table, trying to calm her as he felt her clench her teeth, the memory of the sacred grove fresh in both their minds.

"But didn't Wittia say that all are free to follow their own hearts, their own ways?" Caraine interjected. "I don't see how forcing them to follow your religion stays true to that."

"We don't dictate what anyone must believe," the priest countered, the Hearthwarden staying strangely silent. "But the beliefs that fill the uneducated and poor are dangerous things. They speak with demons. They even court them. Your own companion is testimony to one of those unions," he added, gesturing off-handedly to the mer.

"Wittia was led here by voices," Caraine began angrily, only to be cut off in mid-sentence by the priest.

"Those were the voices of our gods, not of the demons that haunt the forests."

"Who are you to decide that?" she growled, planting both hands palm down on the table as she rose to her feet.

"We dedicate our lives to deciding that," the man answered with a smug self-righteousness. "Through meditation and prayer we are purified and Wittia herself guides our hands. Everything we do, we do in her name, for her glory."

“Meditation and prayer?” Caraine sneered. “I notice that you didn’t mention fasting.”

The captain of the guard laughed out loud; his knights snickered; even the Hearthwarden smiled.

“You were part of our Order once, weren’t you,” the priest asked, his eyes burning, his face red.

“Once,” Caraine agreed, her gaze growing uncomfortable as she reclaimed her seat.

“Until you were run out, if I remember correctly,” the man continued smugly, his eyes still burning.

“I left!” she answered with a growl.

“I remember hearing stories that you,” the priest began, only to be cut off by the Hearthwarden.

“Enough,” he ordered simply. “They are our guests, Father,” he directed to the priest. “Once a member of the Wittian Order,” he nodded to Caraine, “you will always have a place within our halls and within our hearts.”

Caraine pressed her lips together, lowering her eyes to stare at her plate.

“But my friends are correct,” the Hearthwarden continued, “times are changing.” He paused, his brown eyes passing over the gathered guests. He was old, his hair white, cut close to his scalp, unlike the other members of the order who had shaved their heads. “There is an old prophesy that is spoken of in these lands; even Wittia acknowledged it in her time.”

Kai felt Ko’laru begin to grow tense beside him, the mortal warrior sensing the same change in the energy of the room as the Hearthwarden began to speak. A hooded monk stepped forward, bending forward to fill Caraine’s goblet across the table from the Kai. The human warrior’s hand instinctively reaching for the pommel of his absent sword as the light of the torches and candles crept under the monk’s hood, playing across the network of scars that had been carefully raised across the man’s features. Kai whipped his eyes toward the stranger that sat near the head of the table, the stranger meeting

the gaze with an icy, confident smile as he slowly nodded.

“The Wittian Order realizes that it will need friends in the days ahead,” the Hearthwarden continued. “Alliances will be forged; sacrifices will be made by all.”

Reality slowed to a desperate crawl as Kai leapt to his feet, planting both hands on the table to vault across the feast, keeping Caraine’s body between him and the monk that poured the wine beside her. He felt Ko’laru spring to life as he leapt for the spears that hung on the wall, throwing one to his lover, claiming the other and hurling it in a single, fluid motion, the weapon racing toward the heart of the stranger at the Hearthwarden’s side.

With a quick gesture from the stranger’s outstretched hand, the spear stopped in mid-air, hanging suspended above the table. The man smiled, closing his fingers into a tight fist, and the weapon faded away, removed from the weave of reality.

“Who are you?” Kai demanded, his glare laced with steel.

The stranger stood to his feet and Kai realized that he had misjudged the man’s size. The dark mortal was a full-handbreadth taller than the mortal warrior, and as he rose to his full height, his loose clothing draped over the thick curves of his heavily muscled frame.

“I am Nollon,” he said simply.

The Hearthwarden nodded to the captain of the guard and St. Claire stood, moving toward the unarmed warrior. Nollon snapped his fingers and the monks threw back their hoods, revealing their scarred visages as they drew blades the length of their forearms from beneath their robes.

“What are you doing?” the Hearthwarden demanded, turning to face Nollon. “We had a bargain.”

The dark mortal gestured to his men who moved to capture the guests. The merchant and priests were easily cowed, moving sleepily as if drugged. St. Claire and his men began to back toward the Hearthwarden, ready to sacrifice their

own lives to guard the man they were sworn to protect. The scarred warriors took a step back as they watched the practiced ease with which Kai dropped into a fighting stance, the other companions protected by the fae who wielded the spear Kai had given her like a staff, her hands a blur, the weapon a windmilling hum that held the enemy at bay.

“We had a deal,” the Hearthwarden continued, as if he were excluded from the events that unfolded before him.

“Do you think I really needed all of them?” Nollon asked with a smile.

The Hearthwarden just stared.

“Have you ever played chess?” he asked nonchalantly.

The older man nodded, his eyes widening with an uncertain dismay.

“The only objective is to capture the king.”

“I’m the king,” the Hearthwarden confessed, staggering under the weight of the revelation.

Nollon laughed. “Rann is the king,” he corrected.

“The boy?” the old man exclaimed in disbelief.

“I am the queen,” he grinned viciously. “Those you brought here for me are merely pawns. Any of them can be removed from the board. All that’s important is the king.”

“The Order of Wittia will stop you,” the old man boasted, lost in his own delusion. “The six men you have here are nothing against our might.”

“I have twelve men within your walls, Hearthwarden,” Nollon smiled.

The old man stared, not understanding how the mortal could find such confidence in such a weak force.

“Six here to subdue your guards and capture you,” Nollon began, speaking off-hand as if her were nothing more than a merchant reciting a list of goods from memory. “Two to slay the guards that man your gate and open your walls to my main force.” He paused, smiling as the Hearthwarden’s face grew pale. “Two more to seal the door to your knights’ barracks and set the building aflame.”

“Bastard!” one of the knights exclaimed, moving toward Nollon only to be stopped by one of the scarred warriors and his long knife.

Taking advantage of the momentary distraction, Kai sprang to life. With an instinct honed through countless battles, he leapt upon the table, running between the startled clergy and leaping over the merchant’s head, the warrior tearing the heavy maul off the wall as he landed.

Turning, he began to whirl the weapon above his head with both hands, daring the dark warriors to test his skill. The first leapt upon the table and Kai changed the angle of the maul, the weapon smashing into the knife-wielder’s pelvis, crushing bone as the man collapsed screaming across the platters of food. Kai instantly directed the weapon’s arc back to where he could control it, revolving above his head in a deadly arc.

The two other warrior-attendants that faced him paused on the far side of the table, waiting for Kai to tire. Instead, the mortal released the maul, the heavy weapon streaking across the feast and catching one of the men in the center of his face, the scarred man crumpling to the floor where he lay motionless in a rapidly growing pool of blood.

Seeing his prey weaponless, the last remaining warrior charged, leaping across the table and lunging with his blade. Catching the man’s wrist in both hands, Kai shifted his weight, allowing the man’s momentum to carry him over his fallen comrade, Kai pivoting to drive the scarred warrior face first into the dining hall’s stone wall with a sickening crunch and a muffled gasp of pain. Still holding the offending wrist, Kai wedged his body into the socket of the man’s shoulder, using the wall as a base, the arm for a lever as he rolled away. The warrior screamed as his shoulder gave way, the arm popping out of its socket, his useless hand dropping the blade it had once held. Snapping the weapon out of the air, Kai spun out of reach as the man staggered away from the wall, clutching his destroyed shoulder with his good hand.

“Run or die,” Kai growled, watching his enemy’s eyes harden with hatred as the man lowered his head and charged. Leaping into the air, Kai met the rush, driving one knee toward the ceiling to give him height and momentum, snapping the foot of the opposite leg up in a brutal kick that caught the scarred warrior under the chin, shattering teeth and leaving the man to fall to the stone floor in an unconscious heap.

“You’re mine,” Kai spit, turning to point the blade he’d claimed toward the stranger that waited at the head of the table.

“Not yet,” Nollon answered simply, turning to claim one of the swords from the wall above the Hearthwarden’s head. With a growl and a mighty, two-handed swing, Nollon cleaved through the Hearthwarden’s neck, the head of the leader of the Wittian Order rolling onto the table, the blade sinking deep into the wood of the high-backed chair.

The knights tensed, ready to leap to avenge the leader of their Order, but unarmed, they knew they would only be throwing their lives away if they rushed the man who had betrayed them.

“You’ve killed the Hearthwarden,” Nollon pointed out with an even voice, speaking to Kai, the corners of the larger man’s mouth turned up in the shadow of a dark grin. “The Wittian Order may preach peace, but when one of their own falls, I guarantee their only conscious thought will be of vengeance.”

Kai didn’t lower the blade, his gaze hard and cold.

“No one will blame Kai,” St. Claire growled, his eyes fixed on the betrayer.

“Do you think you’ll be alive to support his claim?” Nollon sneered coldly.

“We will never submit to you,” Kai snarled, his gaze hardened into a piercing glare.

To the warrior’s surprise, the man tilted his head back and laughed. “I don’t want you,” he grinned with a vile twist of his upper lip. “Only the boy.”

“Rann?” Kai asked in disbelief, not understanding how

one child could be of more importance than an entire prophesy.

“My men already have him,” Nollon revealed with a confident smile, the man’s grin straining as he wrenched the sword from where it was imbedded in the wood. “He was in our grasp before you lifted the first bite of food to your lips.”

“Why all this?” Kai demanded, trying to find the larger thread that ran through the deception. Spinning, he turned toward the boom that suddenly filled the chamber, his eyes finding his companions racing to brace the double doors that they had used to enter the feast hall, rocked backward as another clap of thunder bowed the massive wooden portal inward. The warriors that Ko’laru had held at bay lay dead or unconscious on the flagstone floor, laying motionless where they had fell, defeated by Ko’laru’s skill with the spear.

“What is your gift?” the stranger asked in response, his voice strangely curious.

Kai turned and met Nollon with a cold glare, not comprehending the man’s words.

“The young woman there,” he offered, nodding toward Traela. “She feels emotion. I can smell it from here. The child that takes sanctuary in the Order’s library speaks to spirits. Brother Daniel can see the future. What’s your gift, Kai?”

“How do you know all this?” the warrior demanded.

“Did you learn all that your mentor had to teach you?” he asked with an off-handed assurance. “Or did he slip away, your lessons incomplete?”

Kai didn’t respond.

“Only three of us were fully trained,” he grinned slyly. “I was one. Leiron was a second. My question is, are you the third?”

Kai began to step forward, a cold confidence burning in his eyes. “Do you want to find out?” he goaded, testing the blade’s weight in his hand. But his bravado was short lived, the thundering attack on the door accompanied by a horrible crack as the wood began to split.

“Kai!” Ko’laru called, a growing panic in her eyes. Her

mortal shell had fallen away in the battle, the power and grace of her faerie form bursting through as she focused her intent on the men that threatened the companions. “The door isn’t going to hold!”

Sparing a glance toward the doorway, he found the fae bracing the portal with the remainder of their companions. His attention divided, Kai felt Nollon move and the smaller warrior spun around just in time to catch the sword the stranger casually tossed his way.

“You’ll need it more than I,” the larger man smiled, heading for the small doorway that led toward the stronghold’s kitchen.

Kai hesitated, reluctant to let Nollon slip away, but unwilling to abandon his companions to those that assaulted the dining hall’s door.

“Should we follow him?” one of the knights asked, ready to race after the man.

“No,” St. Claire answered, torn between the need to act as the situation demanded and the hunger to avenge his leader’s murder. “Right now, he’s one man in the midst of our stronghold. If we can keep it that way, he’s at our mercy.”

Kai turned once more as the door splintered, the companions falling backwards, the wood splitting to reveal a sea of monks, their faces twisted in rage, assaulting the door with a long table they wielded as a battering ram.

“Get to the barracks!” St. Claire screamed, his face twisted into a determined grimace. “And man the walls! We’re under attack!”

Kai watched as the monks dropped the table, turning to race in all directions to carry out St. Claire’s orders. Turning toward the captain of the guard, Kai offered him a cautious glance.

“You consort with demons,” the man glared, gesturing toward Ko’laru.

“She’s one of the best warriors of either race,” Kai countered coldly, “and your Order is fighting for its life.”

St. Claire swallowed, glaring wordlessly at the mortal warrior. Shaking his head, he turned to retrieve the remaining sword from the wall. Testing its weight, he grunted, as if it would do. The man licked his lips and met Kai's gaze, staring silently for a long moment as if measuring the fae's soul.

"Is she better with the blade than I am?" he asked, nervously moistening his lips with the tip of his tongue, his gaze drifting to the fae as she approached to stand at her lover's side. "If so, I offer her my sword."

Kai smiled at the gesture, but shook his head. "She's fae. She can't bear the touch of steel." He paused. "But thank you."

"Warriors are warriors," St. Claire nodded. "Sometimes with all this around you," he continued, gesturing to the room around them, "you forget that."

Beltross stepped forward, retrieving the maul that Kai had once wielded. Ko'laru stood between her lover and the mer, Traela a step behind. Caraine remained near the shattered door.

"We're willing to fight by your side, if you'll have us," Beltross offered with a grim finality.

"I'd be honored," St. Claire smiled, reaching forward to clasp the mer's shoulder. "What about the girl?" he asked Kai, nodding toward the teen.

Kai turned a cautious glance toward his student, but was answered by the passion burning in her eyes.

"She's a warrior," he said evenly, turning his gaze back to the captain of the guard. "She'll fight at our side."

"What about her?" St. Claire asked, nodding toward Caraine.

"She not a warrior," Kai answered simply.

"I can fight," the woman insisted.

"You can fight," the knight continued, "but can you heal?"

Caraine nodded. "A little."

"Then you'll be needed in the cathedral. One of my

men will escort you there,” he offered, nodding to one of the warriors at his side. “The Sisters will be there and we’ll use it as a hospital. If Nollon’s words were true, there will be casualties today. You’ll be needed more there than on the front lines.”

“And if the fighting comes to the cathedral?” she asked.

St. Claire stood a little taller, his face cold and determined. “The Wittian Order does not surrender. If the battle comes that far, we will fight to the last man; until even the women and children are slain.”



Daen burst into the library, quickly closing the door behind him. The prophet leaned heavily against the portal, gasping for breath as the old man and the young girl turned their eyes to him in unison, raising their gaze from a large book that lay open on a low table before them.

“What is it, Daen?” Leiron asked.

“We need to get out of here,” he said, pushing himself away from the door and hurrying over to Leiron. Grasping her by the arm, he pulled her roughly to her feet. “We need to go now.”

“Brother Daniel?” the old man asked with a curious gaze. “Is that you?”

“It’s me,” Daen answered awkwardly, as if he was embarrassed by his response.

“But you saw,” he began, only to stop as if he were afraid of the shape the words would take if they slipped into the air around them. “We talked. I believed you. We found the confirmation in the journals of an old monk.”

Daen swallowed hard. “That day has come.”

The color fled from the old man’s face, leaving him pale and frail. He wavered where he sat, as if losing his balance. “By the gods,” he whispered, his strength leaving him.

“What’s going on?” Leiron asked, shaking off Daen’s

grasp, her eyes darting from the prophet to the librarian.

“The end of our Order,” the librarian whispered, hanging his head in exhausted defeat. “The death of us all.”

Daen shook his head, taking Leiron’s arm once more. “Not the end, Brother Tremaine.”

“And with the coming of the tide of darkness, the white walls fall,” the old man recited from memory. “The righteous lay still. The unholy raise toasts with the sacred wine. They defile the sanctuary with their curses. They walk in the blood of the redeemed.”

“We need to go,” Daen insisted, pulling the young girl toward the door.

Leiron planted her feet, fighting against the prophet’s grasp. “Not without Brother Tremaine.”

Daen grimaced, his lips pressed tightly together with anger and anxiety. Letting go of Leiron, he hurried over to the old man, taking the librarian’s arm. “Brother Tremaine,” he said as calmly as he could muster, “we need to go now.”

Raising his wrinkled face to the prophet, the monk slowly shook his head. “You were once my student, Daniel,” he said with a wistful familiarity. “You know me. You know I can’t leave my books behind.”

Leiron stepped forward, kneeling before him, laying her hands flat on the old man’s knees. “You said that you’d read these books so many times that you could recite all the stories,” she offered, raising her eyes to Daen, hoping for a sign that she could continue. But the prophet was lost in his own fears, his gaze darting toward the sound of men running and shouting outside of the library’s doors. “Bring those memories with you. Teach the stories to us. We’ll keep the books alive.”

The old man shook his head. “No,” he said with a quiet resignation. “I don’t have many years left.” He patted her hand. “If I’m going to die, I want it to be here.”

Daen grabbed the monk under his arms and lifted the old man to his feet, Leiron stumbling backward as Brother Tremaine was forced to stand. “We’re going,” Daen growled

angrily. “And you’re coming with us.”

The monk began to protest, but Daen cut him off.

“Leiron won’t go if you don’t go,” he spit, his anger growing. “And I can’t go unless she goes. And I’m not going to wait any longer.”

The argument was silenced by Leiron’s scream as the library’s double doors burst open and a scarred warrior, dressed in black and wielding a wickedly curved sword crouched in the open doorway, appraising the three with an icy grimace.

With a strangled gasp, the man crumpled to the ground, broken beneath the mer’s savage overhand strike, the maul crushing the scarred warrior’s bones beneath the vicious force of the maul.

“Are you okay?” Beltross asked.

Daen nodded. “Where are Kai and Ko’laru?”

“They’re with St. Claire,” the mer explained. “Raven’s Roost is under attack.”

The prophet shook his head, cursing under his breath.

“I told you I wouldn’t let you die,” Beltross offered with a dark smile, nodding toward the man he’d slain, the humor lost in the death that lay before him.

“In the vision, I was in the garden,” Daen growled, pulling the old monk behind him. Leiron following in their wake, her horrified eyes fixed on her friend and teacher, unable to comprehend how the man who so often comforted her was capable of such brutality.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: PROPHECY

Kai and Ko'laru raced down the carpeted hallway with a squad of St. Claire's men at their heels, the unlikely allies hurrying to regroup at the cathedral that lay in the center of Raven's Roost. The battle for the walls had been lost even before the reinforcements had arrived. Nollon's men had carried out their task with a frightening efficiency, a hoard of scarred warriors pouring through the open gates as Kai and Ko'laru pulled into sight. Now it was a battle to reach the cathedral. Defenders and invaders clashed in the maze of corridors as the Order of Wittia withdrew to sacred ground, hoping to make a stand in their temple, ready to descend into the catacombs and slip away should the cathedral fall into the enemy's hands.

A handful of hunters spilled from a doorway that opened onto a perpendicular hallway. The knights hesitated but Kai and Ko'laru continued forward, allowing their momentum to carry them into their opponents' midst. Kai had paused in the defense of Raven's Roost long enough to retrieve his sword from the room he had shared with his lover and the blade was a well-balanced wheel of death that ended lives with frightening ease. Ko'laru drifted out of the reach of the sword as Kai described a deadly arc, his blade disemboweling an opponent who had parried too high, Kai's weapon continuing its strike to block an incoming attack. Kicking through the man's knee, the scarred warrior screaming as he dropped his sword and

collapsed to the ground, Kai's foot continued the strike, riding the destroyed joint to the floor, even as Kai's blade moved to parry another blow. Feeling movement behind him and catching a dark blur in the corner of his eye as he began to turn, Kai thrust behind him with both hands, the sword angling upward, cutting easily through flesh and bone as it sheathed itself in a dark warrior's chest.

Withdrawing the blade, the man crumpled to the floor and Kai spun, carving a man from groin to chin with a vicious, upward strike, the dead man falling to the floor in a gurgling, twitching heap. His attack coming in a single, fluid blur, Kai twisted away, dropping to the floor as he rolled away and Ko'laru waded in with her spear. The blunt end struck a scarred face, shattering bone and crushing cartilage. Rebounding from the strike, the fae drove the spear point under a second attacker's chin, the iron head piercing the man's jaw and driving itself upward into his brain. As he fell, Ko'laru used the leverage of his collapsing corpse to break off the spearhead, her hands moving in a rapid dance that spun the spear around and drove the jagged, broken end through their last opponent's ribs.

The knights stood motionless, staring at the two warriors. The attack had ended as quickly as it began, scant heartbeats passing before five men were dead and two others lay wounded and defeated on the monastery floor.

Scanning the stunned faces of their allies, Kai suddenly realized that someone was missing.

"Where's Traela?" he asked, turning to Ko'laru, his voice colored with the hues of anxiety.

"Didn't she go with Beltross?"

Kai shook his head, his eyes staring past his lover, searching the corridor they had run down. "No. She was with us."

Ko'laru pursed her thin lips. "I don't know, Kai," she said with a compassion that quickly grew uneasy in the face of her lover's distress. "But we can't look for her now."

The warrior turned away, nodding, prepared to lead their men toward the cathedral and the defense of Raven's Roost.

"What do we do about the wounded?" one of the knights asked.

"Leave them," Kai ordered, not turning to look at the man who had asked the question. "Tie up the one that can still walk and drag him out of reach of his friend. The other can remain where he lies."

"What about Traela?" the fae asked, moving to lay a gentle hand on her lover's arm.

Kai swallowed uncomfortably, as if he had to gather his strength in order to summon the words. "We leave her," he said with a cold defeat. "She chose this path. We're outnumbered and can't go look for her. We can only pray she can reach the cathedral on her own."



Traela had slipped away from her warrior mentor, not understanding why, knowing only that something beckoned to her like a whispering voice she couldn't quite hear. It was an indescribable call that pulled her down the maze of hallways, her step silent on the plush rugs that covered the stone floors. The teen had no idea where she was or where she was headed; she didn't know how to use the sword she'd claimed from one of the men Kai had slain or even why she had stopped to take the weapon in her hand. All she was sure of was that it was the right thing to do, that she needed the sword for whatever task she was called for, that whatever tugged insistently at the corners of her mind was something she couldn't ignore. It was more than just a feeling that led her down the deserted corridors of Raven's Roost. It was if she had somehow slipped into the very weave of reality and followed its threads to her destiny.



As Brother Tremaine reached for the handle of the large oak door that led out onto the monastery's gardens, he was stopped by the heavy weight of Daen's hand, the prophet clutching the librarian's wrist with a trembling grasp. The old monk turned, finding a cold horror in the young man's eyes.

"What are you doing?" the prophet demanded, his face white as he swallowed, his whole body beginning to gently shake.

Tremaine was startled by the fear and growing hostility he saw in his old friend's eyes.

"The others will be regrouping at the cathedral," the old man offered with a halting voice, withering beneath Daen's glare, "just as your friend, the mer, said. This is fastest way to get there. We would have to backtrack around half of the monastery to find another way."

"This door leads through the gardens," the young man replied, his pale features hard, his gaze filled with a terror that had grown through years of staring at an inescapable fate.

"A number of them do, Daniel," the old monk replied, trying to soothe his friend with the confident tone of his voice. "What better way to be reminded of the beauty Wittia loved so dearly?"

Daen swallowed hard, staring through the librarian, his eyes fixed on dreams that had haunted his sleep for so long he couldn't remember a world without them. When he finally spoke, his voice was barely a whisper, as if he had bolted upright in bed, trying to scream, horrified that his terror drowned his voice, that his nightmares had left him alone in the dark grasp of his fear. "We're going back."

"Back?" the old man asked, his eyes filled with disbelief. "Back where?"

"Through the monastery," Daen answered, his voice weak, his hands noticeably beginning to tremble. "We can't go this way."

“Daen,” the librarian protested, “we’re almost there.”

“We’re going back.” The words were hard. Daen’s eyes were cold as marble. There was no room for debate.

Leiron began to speak, but was silenced as the mer stepped forward. “I made you a promise.”

Daen avoided Beltross’s eyes, the mer trying to meet his gaze.

“I swear upon the blood of my mother’s people,” the half-fae promised, his words slow and even, “that if need be I will lay down my own life to make sure that you live.”

The prophet swallowed hard, his eyes unsteady, looking as if he wished he could flee.

Brother Tremaine pulled open the heavy door, revealing a wide porch that gave way to a path of white flagstones the path weaving its way through immaculately tended gardens of flowers, herbs and fruit trees. The walkway branched into an even-armed cross, the path that led to their left disappearing behind a wing of the monastery.

“If you ran,” the old monk tried to smile, “and didn’t fall when you took the corner, you could be at the cathedral by the count of thirty.”

Daen stared at the path before him, his eyes wide with terror, his gaze filled with the images of his death that haunted his dreams every night, visions that prayer couldn’t hold at bay, that righteousness wouldn’t still. He couldn’t run. He couldn’t move from where he stood, watching as the scene unfolded before him. The prophet stared in silent horror as he lay upon the garden path, raising his hands as if they could stop the blade, seeing the hatred in the scarred warrior’s eyes as the enemy raised his sword for the final blow.

“We’re almost there,” Leiron begged and the prophet turned, seeing the young girl’s fear. He watched as her eyes darted back the way they had come, her imagination promising that their enemy would come pouring down the corridor and cut them down where they stood, so close to their sanctuary.

Daen stared at her, realizing for the first time how

young she was, that regardless of her knowledge, that despite the teachings her mentor had imparted to her, Leiron was only a child. A frightened child. A little girl that was at the mercy of his fears, who would be forced to follow him whatever choice he made.

“What do you see?” the mer asked, his voice shaking the prophet from his thoughts. “Can we make it through the garden?”

The one-time monk licked his lips, appraising the mixture of hope and fear in the young girl’s eyes as she hung on his response.

Daen swallowed, his eyes beginning to fill with tears. “We’ll be fine,” he said at last, praying that the trembling in his voice didn’t betray him, and that the smile he tried to offer his companions wasn’t as twisted with fear as he felt it was. He turned his eyes to the path before them, swallowing hard. “I don’t see anything but the cathedral, our friends and the defenders of Raven’s Roost,” he lied as he stepped through the doorway, his head spinning, his step unsteady. He turned to Leiron, beckoning for the child to follow, the prophet holding onto her offered hand as if it were his lifeline, as if it would lead him through his fear and to the sanctuary he could see in her eyes. “We’ll be fine,” he said again, the deception coming easier the second time he tried it on, a distant part of his mind wondering if it would hurt or if his death would be quick and clean.



Traela hurried now, picking her way among the piled bodies, breaking into a determined jog when the corpses thinned enough that she could see the carpeted floor. The carnage that lay around her spoke of a battle in which no quarter had been given, the attackers seeking only death, the defenders fighting to protect their home, the physical representation of their spiritual beliefs. Tapestries were torn

and battered, spattered with blood; Traela tried to ignore the moist sounds her feet made as she hurried down the corridor. The sounds of battle began to grow as she drew nearer their source. It was only a matter of time before the teen would be asked to prove herself as a warrior worthy to bear that name and walk the path with those who stood against death to protect those who could not protect themselves.



“Kill them!” the tall warrior screamed, Nollon wiping the sheen of sweat and blood from his forehead with the back of his hand. His scrying pool had not hinted that the defenders of Raven’s Roost would be so willing to die, that to the man they fought like demons, demanding that each inch of corridor be bought with their blood.

“Kill them!” he goaded the scarred men around him. The warriors had pledged their flesh to his cause, their souls to the man who would reshape reality. When the time came, when the boy Rann was safe in their stronghold and convinced to join their cause, Nollon would insure that the weak were never oppressed by those that ruled, that change would be a constant force in the new world, not a redemption that the trampled masses prayed for.

Nollon smiled, the gesture twisting into an ironic sneer. He wondered if the knights and monks that opposed him realized how righteous the cause was they stood against. He wondered if those who called Raven’s Roost home knew that if Wittia returned to their world, she would be appalled at what her teachings had become.



Daen hurried into the garden, Leiron tightly clutching his hand, the mer and the old librarian following closely behind. The prophet was drenched with sweat, fighting for

each step as visions came alive around him. Warriors screamed and died, or worse, lay writhing on the earth as men fought around them, as boots ground their wounds into the flagstone path. Daen watched the defenders of Raven's Roost fall beneath the superior force, the knights, dressed in white, cut down, their uniforms stained with the crimson river of their fading lives. He stared, unable to move as the scarred warriors turned toward him and his companions, seeing parts of the vision that had never appeared in his dreams, watching in cold terror as he pushed the young girl behind him, as he stood, weaponless, shielding Leiron with his own life.

Shaking his head, Daen swallowed hard, the visions disappearing into the mid-afternoon sunlight. He turned back toward Beltross, trying to find reassurance in the mer's eyes, but the fae was tending the old man, not watching the prophet's back as he'd promised.

As they neared the center of the cross-shaped path, Daen spun toward the door that flew open, staring in horror as white-clad knights fought a brutal retreat, as a sea of dark warriors spilled out into the monastery's garden, the guard falling before the superior force.

The prophet stopped, staring as his visions came to life, horrified as a cold acceptance crept over him. Beltross rushed to his side, his thin lips urgently mouthing their message, but Daen's world was silent. His eyes were fixed on the tendrils of scarred men that pulled away from the main force, their weapons raised as they rushed toward the companions. He watched as Beltross raced to meet them, his maul gathering momentum as the powerful mer swung it above his head, ready to lay down his life to protect his friends. At the sight of the fae's sacrifice, the sound flooded back into Daen's world, the prophet staring in horror at the first man that was crushed beneath the maul's merciless weight. Leiron let go of his hand, slipping behind Daen as the prophet swept his arms back, protecting her like a mother bird sheltering her young with her wings.

A sinister hope began to grow within Daen as Beltross felled one warrior after another. The scarred mortals collapsed, writhing amidst the flowers, drowning in their pain. Their world was smothered under the weight of broken bones and internal injuries, the battle that waged around them forgotten. The prophet was vaguely aware of Leiron weeping behind him, of the old librarian huddling in a corner of the garden, peering out from behind a tree thick with fruit. Daen's entire existence hung on each vicious swing of the mer's massive hammer, the prophet finding a sick joy growing within him each time another human being was crushed beneath the heavy maul, as they fell among the white flagstones of the garden path, staining the stones' perfection with mortal blood.



Traela broke into a run at the sight of the dark warriors, images of the monastery's garden peeking through the moving wall of their bodies. Screams of defiance and pain filled her ears, war cries that bellowed, "In Wittia's name!" ripped through the early autumn air. As she picked up speed, as she moved to grasp the sword's hilt with both hands, Beltross cried out in his mother's tongue, but the words were lost to her, the sound echoing without meaning even as they reverberated through her soul. The teen couldn't tell if he'd been wounded or if it was a scream filled with rage. All she knew was that her friends were in harm's way, that the innocents Kai told her a true warrior must protect were even now being threatened by the evil of the invaders.

She wasn't afraid. Traela was angry. It wasn't a cold hatred that settled in the pit of her stomach, that festered there, giving her an icy strength. The anger was a burning inferno, a rage that roared through her veins like that which had first erupted into the night air at Cathedral, ripping warrior and steed apart from within. But Traela's thoughts weren't on the enemy that loomed before her, that drew nearer as she

raced down the corridor. A primal roar exploded from her open mouth, twisting her gentle features as her scream echoed through the halls. Her thoughts were on her sword and how she would cut down those who threatened her friends. She would protect the mer who had held her when she felt so lonely she thought she would die, who had comforted her when she awoke, weeping under the memory of her dreams, of visions of how her teachers had forced her to feel. As Traela raced toward the battle, gathering speed as she roared her war cry once more, the rage that burned within her grew to an inferno, into hot flames that spilled out of her hands, dancing along the edge of her blade, creeping up her arms until Traela was shrouded in a mantle of living fire.



Beltross looked up as the battle suddenly surged forward, the defenders pushed a step backward, the attackers spinning, trying to fight a battle on two fronts. The two men he faced paused, their conflict with the fae reaching an unspoken impasse as the three combatants turned, trying to understand the screams of terror that came from both forces.

The battle spilled out into the garden, the warriors fleeing the corridor. Beltross stared, transfixed, as an elemental appeared in the monastery's doorway. It was a creature of flame, born from the fires of the earth. The mer's eyes were locked on the creature's gaze, the being's face obscured with tongues of fire, its strangely familiar eyes burning with a berserker's fury.

The fae spoke, using the words of his mother's tongue, a language that was born amidst the roar of the crashing surf and the silence of the deep sea. There were places where the sea floor cracked open, where magma burst forth in an explosion of underwater steam that grew new islands where before they were none. His mother's people interacted with the spirits that had come from the earth, beings of flame that were

lost in a strange, aquatic world. It was this bond that he called upon, the remembrance both races held deep in their blood of the moments when fire and water looked upon each other as kin.

With an unholy speed, like a wildfire racing before a strong wind, the creature snapped its eyes toward him. “Beltross,” it whispered, not in the language of flame, but in the common tongue that all mortals spoke.

“Traela?” he stammered, his face a confused mask, unable to understand her transformation. The mer watched as she turned away from him. Traela exploded from where she had stood, footprints of fire burning in her wake. His young friend raced toward the battle, terrified warriors suddenly scattering. Swords were raised in the ensuing chaos. Men were cut-down who were fixated on the creature in their midst, not the enemy behind them. And as Beltross raised his maul in a desperate attempt to deflect a scarred warrior’s attack, he was horribly aware that the battle had slipped between him and the prophet, that Daen was alone, clenched tightly in the grip of prophecies the mer had sworn he would die to prevent.



“Stop!” Nollon roared, his gaze burning with fury. “She’s mortal! Can’t you see?”

Infuriated, he grabbed the closest of his warriors, Nollon’s hand an iron vice that wrapped around the back of the man’s neck. With a violent grimace, the massive mortal pulled his sword across the warrior’s throat, the scarred man’s eyes growing wide with disbelief and betrayal as his life was brought to an end. Dropping the blade, Nollon cupped his free hand, watching as it filled with the man’s lifeblood. Claiming all he needed, he released the warrior to collapse in a forgotten heap, lying silently among the wounded and slain.

Nollon dipped his finger in the lifeblood he held, drawing a circle in the air before him. The mortal’s mouth

whispered dark and arcane words; his face clenched in a determined mask. The circle he drew hung transfixed in the air, slowly filling with crimson matter until it formed a humanoid head. A horizontal line spilled from the mortal's fingertip and grew into broad shoulders. A final handful of blood slowly described a body, a scarlet horror taking shape on the garden path.

“Kill her,” Nollon growled, pointing toward the woman of flame who routed his troops, who was quickly destroying his carefully laid plans.

The being didn't speak. It had no mouth to form words, no eyes with which to see. It could only obey. Moving with a merciless, inhuman gait, it crushed those that stood in its way with an unholy power, with fists formed from a dead man's blood.



Kai and Ko'laru raced toward the doorway that led out onto the garden, drawn toward the sounds of battle. They stopped in unison, staring out at the slaughter that scarred the natural beauty, at the wounded and slain that had fallen among wrecked flowerbeds and trampled herb gardens. The open spaces were a sea of chaos. There were no lines to the battle, only rage and fear, violence and fury as men cut down all who opposed them as they fled from some unseen force.

And then the wall of conflict parted and Kai's gaze found his student, her sword held confidently in an untrained hand. Traela's fury began to still, the flames that had fueled her rage beginning to die in the constant face of death and destruction. Her back was to Kai and beyond her he could see a creature of blood that only the most devoted students were ever taught to summon by their mentors, a being they were told could only be invoked when their was no other hope, and even then, there would be a terrible price to pay for its calling.

Kai began to run, each stride seeming to take a lifetime,

his footsteps falling in a world devoid of sound. He knew that his student had no hope to stand before the beast, that she didn't know the secrets of its creation or the dark price that would dispel it. Emotions surged through him, burying his training beneath the weight of his fear. With a detached horror, he felt his lips part, he stood helpless, nothing more than an observer as he roared his warning with silent words, knowing the moment that he spoke, that his student would turn toward the sound of his voice. And Traela did. She was a warrior only in spirit. She hadn't been trained how to wield the sword she held; she didn't understand that balance was as imperative in battle as it was in life.

That you never take your eyes off your enemy.

Kai fell to his knees, screaming in horror and despair as the creature struck with its crimson fists. His sword clattered silently to the ground, his hands grasping handfuls of his hair, as if their grip could pull him back in time, as if they would allow him to redeem his mistake. Instead, he watched as Traela fell, the rage that had sustained her changing to a gasp of shock and disbelief. It was as if the strings of a marionette had been cut in the middle of their performance. The young woman's limbs no longer worked; her arms could no longer hold her sword; her legs refused to support her weight. As she collapsed heavily to the earth, she couldn't understand that her spine was shattered, that she was confined to a prison of flesh and blood in which she would never again run and play with Leiron, in which she would never take a man into her arms and discover the joy that the older women blushed of when they spoke.

With a horrible, sudden clarity, Kai's world burst back to life. There was no redemption for him, only the eyes of his student that began to well with tears as the terrible understanding took root. With an anguished cry of rage and despair, Kai snatched his sword from the ground and sprinted toward the battle, his teeth clenched with fury. His training was forgotten. All that was left was a horrible emptiness and a black scar upon his soul that he could never redeem. He

welcomed death, dared it to take him as he rushed into battle. Even though his mind had forgotten his mentor's teachings, his body had not. Although Kai prayed for the cold release of death to free him from his pain and guilt, the enemy fell before his blade like candle flames extinguished before the gust of a strong wind.



The prophet backpedaled, his arms swept behind him, protecting Leiron with his body as the scarred warrior before him cruelly sneered.

“Run,” Daen growled, his teeth clenched, cursing silently to himself as Leiron pressed herself tightly into his body. As the enemy raised his sword, the one-time monk lunged, pushing the man backward, distancing himself from the young girl. Daen was a prophet, not a warrior, and he lacked the grace, the coordination of one trained for battle. Slipping on the blood-slickened stones, he lost his footing, falling heavily into their opponent as Daen crashed clumsily to the ground. The warrior stumbled, but kept standing, and as the man grinned coldly, his sword cocked back for the final strike, the prophet raised his hands to ward off the attack, as if mortal flesh could stand against a weapon of steel.

“Kill me,” he heard himself say, the disembodied voice seeming as if it echoed from a dream. “But don’t harm the girl.”

As the words reached his ears, Daen’s fear faded away. It wasn’t just the visions of his death that had haunted him, but the way he had died. In the silence of his dreamscape, he had always assumed he was a coward, that he lay on the cold earth, begging for mercy when the end finally came. But the prophet was filled with a strange sense of pride as he realized that it wasn’t his life he pleaded for, but the life of helpless child.

The warrior’s muscles tensed and Daen instinctively closed his eyes. He didn’t seek his gods. He didn’t wonder

what death would be like. It would come soon enough. He just prayed that it wouldn't hurt as he steeled himself the way he did when a healer had to remove a deep sliver that he'd tried to ignore.

Daen felt movement from behind him and heard Leiron's words. They quivered with terror as they were thrust into the sunlight of the battlefield, not only terror for the threat that stood before them, but an implied horror for what her words would become.

"May the child you once were see the man you have become."

Daen knew that Leiron could speak directly to a being's spirit, that she could communicate to the soul of the earth and stone. But the prophet had never considered that her power extended to the mortal race as well.

A scream of innocent terror ripped through the air, the sound of a metal blade clattering to the flagstone path filled the prophet's ears. Daen cringed as he opened his eyes, turning his gaze toward the sound of a child weeping, wrapped in a man's voice, an innocent drowning in the memories of a killer. The warrior they had faced lay on the garden path, his arms wrapped around his legs, his knees pulled tight against his chest. He buried his scarred face in his arms as if he tried to hide from the world around him, his body wracked with his horrified tears.

Daen watched as Leiron approached the man, reaching a tentative hand toward his huddled form.

"It's okay," she offered, her voice shaking as she reached out to comfort him. "You don't have to see it any more."

At the feel of her touch, the man exploded in panic and terror, grabbing the girl's arm in an iron grip. Leiron screamed as he lifted her from the ground, shaking her violently.

"Make it stop!" he cried.

"Let her go!" the prophet bellowed, snatching the man's forgotten sword.

“Pleaseletmego,” Leiron wept, her eyes wide with fear as the man’s hot breath caressed her face, his eyes staring into her own. “Pleaseletmego! Pleaseletmego! Pleaseletmego!”

“Make it stop!” he screamed, shaking her with a growing fury, Leiron’s head snapped viciously back and forth, her limbs flailing in the face of the warrior’s strength.

“Let her go!” the prophet growled. “Now!”

But that man just shook the young girl, his teeth clenched into a horrible grimace as he fought against the truth of what he had become. He couldn’t hear Daen beneath the roar of his own voice, his entire world focused on the girl who had brought his nightmares to life.

Daen swung the sword clumsily, hacking at the man’s arms, the scarred warrior screaming in pain as the blade cut deep, as he dropped Leiron to the ground. The one-time monk cringed at the sound of the man’s babbling, the words half-formed as they tried to escape through lips twisted with pain and terror, freeing themselves in the afternoon air. Clenching his eyes tightly closed, the prophet turned his head away as he swung again, feeling the sword sinking deep into soft flesh, the man’s incoherent growls ended, the sword wrenched from Daen’s hands as a new corpse fell to the garden path.

Daen opened his eyes once more, expecting to see Leiron and take the girl into his arms, holding her in a comforting embrace that he needed as much as he hoped she would. But he gasped, the sound that of a condemned man who had just received his sentence, as he found Nollon standing before them, two of his warriors at the massive mortal’s side. The battle still raged behind them, but the garden was silent where they stood, three armed warriors against a prophet and a young girl.

“You’ve completed your training, spirit-talker,” Nollon offered in a cold, calm voice, his words shaped like the smooth coat of ice covering a mountain lake. “And you, prophet, you’ll be useful as well.” He paused, offering his audience a dark smile, devoid of warmth or emotion. “I have the boy.

You will come with me.”

Daen pulled Leiron close, holding her against him. “Never,” he countered, wishing that his words didn’t tremble, that his voice held the confidence he wished he somehow could feel.

“You will come with me,” Nollon said evenly, “or more will die.” He turned, nodding to the old librarian that still cowered behind the fruit tree. “Beginning with him.”

The prophet swallowed, trying to summon a response, to find words that would somehow earn them their freedom. But Daen’s mind was blank, his eyes locked on the grim confidence that burned in their captor’s gaze.

Daen dropped his arms, Leiron stepping forward, her stride hesitant and unsure. He turned to see that the battle had not yet ended, but that a handful of the defender’s of Raven’s Roost surged toward them. The defenders had Nollon and his guard out-numbered; there was no way the leader of the dark force could escape them.

But the prophet could do more than read the timelines. With his life as an intimate thread in the weave of cause and effect, Daen had learned to read a man’s eyes, to know the intent behind them. And he shuddered at what he saw in Nollon’s gaze. The man behind the cold, grey eyes demanded obedience. He always won, perhaps not the first battle, or the tenth, but he would forever marshal his strength and study the pieces on his mental chessboard, until he found the single move that would capture the king.

The prophet turned, the weave of reality suddenly clear. The defenders of Raven’s Roost would reach them in time for he and Leiron to slip from the prophet’s grasp. But as the tall man left, he would kill the girl, cutting her down with his own blade, denying the world her gifts if he could not possess them for his own use. And Daen knew that he would never sleep again, that new dreams would eject him from his sleep; he’d bolt upright in bed, his mouth screaming in defiance at a future that would inevitably come. One night, as his screams

echoed through his small room, he would realize he wasn't alone. Nollon would step from the shadows, a delighted smile cold against his lips, framed beneath his lifeless eyes, and Daen would learn the true meaning of terror.

Daen nodded, moving to Nollon's side.

"Good," his new master smiled, the gesture instantly fading. He turned to one of his guards. "Kill him," he ordered calmly, nodding once more toward the librarian.

The prophet screamed in horror and defiance as the second guard seized his arms, pulling Daen after them as Nollon scooped the girl into his embrace and hurried into the monastery. With a wave of his hand and a single word, Nollon ordered the double doors to close, the portal slamming shut, limbs and twigs sprouting from the wooden surface and weaving themselves into an unbreakable lock.

Daen was pulled behind the men as they fled down empty corridors, the guard who had been sent to kill Tremaine left behind.

"Why?" the prophet asked, his voice heavy with defeat.

Nollon didn't pause as they hurried down the hallways, racing toward the front gate. "You hesitated," he said evenly. "When I give an order, there is no discussion. Not even with yourself. You will obey. Instantly. Or you will reap the consequences."

They turned a corner and were met by more of their new companions, a young monk held in their midst.

"You couldn't take Raven's Roost," Daen tried to boast, his bravado lost beneath the weight of his uncertainty and fear.

"It was never about conquest," Nollon said simply as they hurried through the open gates and approached the mounted steeds that were guarded by more of the tall warrior's men. "I came for the boy. You and the spirit-talker were simply a bonus."

Daen pressed his lips tightly together as he took the reins, knowing he had no choice but to follow Nollon where he led. The prophet didn't need to scan the timelines to know

what would happen if he defied his new master.



The creature waded into the defenders of Raven's Roost, men falling like wheat before the farmer's scythe, bones crushed with each swing of the beast's crimson fists. The abomination was impervious to mortal weapons. Those few brave men who stood and fought the creature watched as its wounds close behind their blades. Strikes that would have meant the loss of a mortal limb closed as quickly as they were made.

Kai crouched, his eyes wild with rage, his lips pulled back in a feral snarl, his sword more than a tool he held; it had become an extension of his being and of his will. He growled, a low rumble in his throat that grew in power as he tilted his head back and roared. The creature paused, turning to face him, and Kai sprang to life with a startling power, with an unearthly agility. His feet seemed to barely touch the ground, as if unseen wings kept him aloft. He darted in, leaping back out like a wolf fighting for dominance of the pack, his sword more a sound than a physical presence, the blade a transparent blur that hummed through the afternoon air.

As Kai's heart expanded, pulling in oxygen rich blood, the mortal warrior struck, his blade entering the horror at the creature's hip, cutting diagonally through its body, emerging with brutal speed between its neck and shoulder. His heart contracted, pushing the blood toward limbs that would ache come sunrise, but now moved like liquid fire. He spun, his back to the creature for less than an instant, the blade slipping free of the creature as Kai changed feet, leapt and twisted, rotating his blade above his head. The warrior put his entire weight behind the strike that entered the creature's shoulder, its neck between the new cut and the original exit wound. Kai landed gracefully in a balanced crouch, pulling the weapon through the horror's body, the blade emerging just below where

the beast's rib cage would have been.

Kai nimbly leapt away, a single heartbeat having passed, the creature cleaved through, not once, but twice. It stopped, its crimson body ripping as if it were made of water, and then instantly grew solid once more.

The mortal warrior's steely eyes and hard grimace were too intent to curse. Backpedaling, Kai retreated as the creature began to move toward him, the monstrosity picking up speed with each unholy stride.

Kai scrambled away, staying just outside of the reach of the beast. "Who will pledge their blade to me?" he roared, his eyes fixed on the creature, darting underneath the merciless swing he couldn't out-distance, slipping behind the creature and skipping away. "Who will die for me?" he growled, spinning to face the beast once more, Kai sparing a glance toward the surviving knights.

There was a moment of hesitation before a young warrior hurried forward, his eyes filled with an anxious fear that was tempered only by his determination to earn a name for himself.

"Will you die for me?" Kai asked.

The young man nodded, hurrying to keep at the older warrior's side as the beast hurried toward them.

"Then say it," Kai demanded.



Ko'laru shuddered, her heart breaking, knowing the price her lover had to pay to end the horror's stay in their world.



The young man swallowed deeply. "I'll die for you," he said, his voice filled with determination and pride, his fingers white where they gripped the hilt of his sword.

“I’m sorry,” Kai whispered as he swung, separating the knight’s head from his shoulders with a single strike.

The corpse collapsed to the path, spurting blood from its wound, but Kai was at its side, kneeling almost before the body had settled to the earth. Setting his sword beside the corpse, Kai filled his cupped hands with the blood that poured from the dead warrior.

“Damn you, Nollon,” he cursed as the creature closed in.

Dark words slipped from Kai’s lips, the blood he held coming to life, swirling in a dark maelstrom of life in the basin of his cupped hands.

The creature rushed in, its mighty fist beginning its strike.

“Be gone,” Kai commanded, hurling the blood toward the racing hulk.

The monster tilted its head back in a silent scream, the knight’s blood burning dark holes in its form. Its body began to waver as the new blood burned its flesh away, the murder of one sworn to die for a mortal man needed to cancel out the power found in the murder of the same.

The creature’s legs buckled, its flesh bubbled, as it began to dissolve, crashing to the garden path. Kai didn’t watch. He’d seen it before. Claiming his sword, he stood, knowing that the only men that lived were those who called Raven’s Roost home.

But he was wrong. Beltross herded a scarred warrior before him, his webbed fingers tangled in the man’s hair as the taller mer pulled his captive toward the survivors.

“He killed the old man,” the mer growled as he approached. “An unarmed, blind old man.”

Beltross hurled the man forward, the scarred warrior stumbling, gaining his balance amidst the remaining knights of Raven’s Roost.

“What should we do with him?” the mer asked coldly.

Kai’s response was lifeless, devoid of emotion. “Leave

him to the guard.”

“Mourn him then?” Beltross asked, his voice hard and angry.

The mortal warrior was silent, his eyes turned toward the cathedral, toward the only arm of the garden path that wasn't marred by conflict and death.

The mer grunted, turning away instinctively to find Leiron, only to remember that she was gone, carried away by a man he couldn't stop, the mer separated from the child and the prophet by the chaos of battle. Beltross knew they still lived, but he wondered if, by allowing their capture, by letting the prophet slip into Nollon's hands, if he had broken his promise to his friend. Daen still drew breath, but the mer knew it was only by his enemy's will.



Kai knelt beside his student, his eyes heavy with guilt and concern. The knights tended to the wounded, both their brethren and those that had assaulted their holy halls. The women of Raven's Roost moved among the casualties, giving care where there was still hope, administering herbs that would ease the pain for those that would not live to see another sunrise.

“Kai?” Traela whispered, her voice uncertain, her cheeks streaked with tears, “I can't move.”

“I know,” he said, swallowing hard. “You've been hurt.”

“Will I get better?”

The words were phrased with a child's innocence, formed by a young woman's lips. “Yes,” he promised, trying to look brave as he mouthed the response. “You'll get better.”

He met Ko'laru's eyes where she crouched opposite him, their paralyzed companion between them. For the first time since he had met his lover, when their gaze had locked during a competition and she had bested him with the staff

while his heart pounded in his chest, she glared at him. At times, they were so close that thoughts passed between them, but Kai didn't need to read her mind to know the fae demanded he tell his student the truth.

"You've been badly hurt," he began, searching for the words. "Your spine is broken. But I know someone who can fix it."

The warrior felt his lover's glare turn to a look of warning and fear, Ko'laru shocked by the path she hadn't dared to consider, at the sacrifice his words held.

"We're going to Node," he continued, the words holding a curious weight as they hung in the garden air. The warrior felt his heart began to beat again as his student smiled.

"I've only heard of it," Traela admitted with a childlike wonder gleaming in her eye. "Is the city as big as they say?"

Kai smiled, the gesture feeling true in the light of the hope he found in the young woman's words. "Bigger."

"Get some rest," Ko'laru added, her eyes beckoning Kai aside as she stood. "It's a long journey."

The lovers walked away, stopping in a silent part of the garden as the survivors of the attack carefully sorted through the corpses, preparing them for burial.

"What are you thinking?" she snapped. "The girl can't be healed."

"Not by human hands," Kai agreed.

"Or fae," Ko'laru added.

"But there are those that can heal her wounds."

The fae shook her head in defiance and disbelief. "You can't be serious."

Kai nodded.

"Their medicine isn't from this world. Kai," she insisted seriously. "They're from beyond the Gates."

The warrior met her gaze with an icy calm. "And they're the only ones that can help Traela."

"But what will they want in return?" she demanded.

Kai shook his head, as if to say it didn't matter.

“There will be a price,” she insisted. “But what if,” she began, only to be interrupted by the man she loved.

“Whatever the price is,” Kai countered, “I’ll pay.”

Ko’laru knew she couldn’t argue with him, so she took him in her arms, holding her close.

“What if they want you?” she asked, her voice little more than a terrified whisper that fought to reach his ears.

“What if they want your life, your blood in return?”

He ran his fingers through her hair, feeling her heart beat against his chest, his own pounding in his ears. “I could have died today,” he said quietly, unsure if the words were for her benefit or his own. “I forgot my training. First I put my student’s life at risk; then I tried to throw away my own.” He stopped, closing his eyes as he silently chastised himself. He was the senior warrior in the northwest province; he was supposed to be a leader that the other warriors would look up to. Kai swallowed and pressed his lips tightly together, angry and ashamed. “If I can give her another chance at life,” he began, his voice trailing off.

“*That’s why I love you,*” Ko’laru thought to herself, finishing his sentence in her mind, her lips silent as the first of her tears began to fall. She wanted to be selfish, to say, “What about our life together?” but they had both pledged themselves to the sword. Some battles were fought with flesh and steel; others under a surgeon’s knife. The fae chastised herself, reminding herself not to feel defeat when the battle had not yet been fought. But she had waited so long for a chance to simply be with the man she loved, knowing that Kai longed for the same. It seemed as if they would never be truly together and every obstacle that loomed before them held the promise to be the pivotal event that forever kept them apart.

CHAPTER TWELVE: IN THE CARE OF THE ENEMY

Sovay carefully closed the door to her patient's room, the portal shutting with a soft click that she was sure wouldn't wake the wounded man within. Letting out the breath she had held, she shifted the strap of the satchel that held her medical supplies, moving it higher up her shoulder. It had been only days since Kai had led the companions away from Cathedral, but already the healer felt as if she had spent a lifetime with the people who lived within the forest's embrace. It seemed as if the small sylvan village was where she had always been meant to be.

The late afternoon sun had already slipped behind the trees, darkness coming to the forest while sunlight still lit the autumn sky. Deep shadows covered the forest floor. It had been a long day. There were a number of the scarred attackers held under guard in the warehouse where the warriors had once stayed, and almost a dozen of the men had wounds that needed tending. Fifteen of the villagers had been injured in the raid; two were serious, the others she checked on for the feeling of warmth their gratitude gave her. She had been alone for as long as she could remember; even in her earliest memories, there was only Tymurran, her faerie mentor. Sovay felt a self-satisfied smile raise her freckled cheeks. Tymurran had always denied her this world, the vast expanse of life that lay beyond the borders of the tiny sphere she had been confined to. A part of her wondered if her mentor believed it was the

only way he could keep her, if the fae somehow knew that if she was allowed to slip beyond his reach, she would never return. Shaking her head, she dismissed the thought, trying to recapture the smile that had faded in the face of her previous captivity. Sovay wondered where the point lay when the line was crossed; was she Tymurran's student or had she become his prisoner?

She was tempted to return to the small cottage that the townsfolk had given her, to curl up before the fire with a warm cup of tea and watch the flames dance as the last of the evening slipped away. But there were herbs that she would need tomorrow and a long day awaiting the sunrise. With a soft sigh, she turned away from the settlement, finding a game trail that led through the ferns and mosses of the old growth forest, leading her toward the clearing where she knew the herbs grew.

The soft fabric of her high boots slowly darkened with dew as the trail disappeared beneath a shroud of meadow grass. Quickly scanning the open space, she spied a splash of color amidst the sea of green, the blossoms of one of the herbs she needed peeking above the grass at the far edge of the clearing. Hurrying toward the plant, she stopped, staring at the trail that had left the tall grass in a wide matted path, as if something heavy had been dragged through the meadow. Curious, Sovay turned, the herb forgotten, wondering if an animal had been injured and if so, if there was something she could do to help.

Moving quietly down the new path, the only sound that of her soft boots stirring the grasses, Sovay suddenly stopped in her tracks, staring in shock and surprise at the scarred warrior that gazed up at her with a look of panic from where he lay on the earth. With a desperate grunt, he tried to reach the sword that lay just out of reach. As he moved, his face twisted in pain, his hands grasping at his right thigh, his face growing pale as he fought to maintain consciousness.

Sovay hurried and picked up the blade with trembling hands, pointing the quivering tip of the weapon toward the warrior. She was scared, remembering what the warriors had

done to the village, what the man before her was capable of doing to her.

“D-don’t move,” she ordered, her words coming in a panicked burst. “W-what are you doing here?”

The man closed his eyes and rolled onto his back.

“W-what are you doing here?” she demanded, her voice rising in volume and fury.

“Are you going to kill me?” the warrior asked, his voice soft and calm, his eyes still closed.

Sovay glanced down at the blade she held, lowering the sword as if she couldn’t believe she had threatened him with it. “No,” she said at last.

“Are you going to take me captive?”

The young woman nervously licked her lips, one hand straying from the hilt of the blade to run its fingers absentmindedly through her tangle of blonde hair.

“I don’t know,” she answered honestly.

The warrior opened his eyes.

“Why are you here?” she asked again, the last traces of her nervousness and anxiety fading from her voice.

“I’m Detta,” he said, trying to smile, the gesture looking strange amidst the patchwork of his facial scars.

Sovay shook her head as if she didn’t understand. “Is that what your people call themselves?”

Detta laughed, the sound instantly lost beneath a sharp intake of breath as the humor he found in her question jarred his wound.

“No,” he said, his face pale, his voice weak. “It’s the name my mother gave me.”

“You’re wounded,” she pointed out.

The warrior swallowed, slowly nodding. “My horse was cut from beneath me,” he said, watching her face darken as his words reminded her of the raid on the tiny village. “Someone’s blade hacked my thigh. I crawled out of the chaos of the battle, just trying to stay alive. There were people screaming as the horses trampled them. I guess I was afraid.”

He stopped, surprised at how quickly the words flowed.

“And then you crawled here?”

Detta nodded.

As she listened to his story, Sovay realized that she had expected something else from him. His scarred face marked him as belonging to the hunters that had tried to kill her in the borderlands; he admitted to attacking Cathedral with his companions. But as she watched him talk, as she listened to the youthful tenor of his voice, Sovay had difficulty picturing him as the killer she knew he was.

“How old are you?” she asked with a detached voice.

“I was born in the winter,” he told her, his eyes determined and hard, holding her gaze as if the answer were in response to a challenge. “This was my seventeenth summer.”

Sovay raised her eyebrows in response. “And how long have you been,” she began only to realize that she didn’t have the words to phrase the question.

“One of the chosen?” he asked, his reply filled with a strange sense of pride that left Sovay feeling appalled. They had murdered innocent villagers; they had tried to kill her and Kai in the darkness of the otherworld. And yet this boy was proud of what he had done.

“Yes,” she said with an ill-hidden disgust. “How long?”

“Three turns of the wheel of the year.”

Sovay pressed her lips together in what surprised her as motherly disapproval. Shaking her head, she asked, “Since you were fourteen.”

Detta nodded.

“How many people have you killed?” she demanded coldly, her mood suddenly darkening at the thought of a boy being taught to kill.

The warrior looked away, as if the thought tortured him, and Sovay realized that his eyes were closed, that his chin was tightly clenched.

“How many mothers have you left without sons?”

she continued, her anger growing, all of the memories of his people threatening her pouring out into the fading light of the late afternoon. “How many children have you left without fathers?”

“It’s not like that!” he spit, turning to face her, wincing as he moved. His pain stilled his tongue and he simply glared at Sovay, his words held in check. “Are you going to kill me or take me captive?”

The woman shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“So you might kill me? Here? In cold blood?” He shook his head, appalled at her apparent hypocrisy. “And you call me a murderer.”

Sovay vigorously shook her head. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“If you leave to get help taking me back, I swear I won’t be here when you return.”

The healer was taken aback at the passion and determination that burned in the young warrior’s eyes.

“You’re wounded,” she said with a measure of disbelief. “You wouldn’t make it far.”

“These,” he said, his eyes focused in a hard glare as he pointed to his mask of scars, “were carved with a blade and burned with an iron. If I have to crawl home, I will. The pain of my wound is nothing compared to what I’ve already survived.”

Sovay knelt, her eyes on the young warrior as she pulled away the tattered cloth that surrounded the wound. She watched as he stifled a scream at her touch, as he clenched his eyes closed in agony, turning away from his leg as if he could escape the pain.

“Yeah,” she said, shocked by the cold mockery in her voice, “you’ll do just fine.” She stopped as he turned to glare at her, his face white with pain, his breath coming in shallow gasps.

“I crawled this far,” he growled between clenched teeth.

“This leg is infected,” she offered evenly. “Badly

infected. There's still hope that I can save it. If I don't treat it, it will need to come off or you will die."

The young man dropped his eyes and then suddenly raised them, a youthful hope lighting his gaze. "You're not going to take me in, are you?" he said aloud. "You're going to help me."

Sovay shook her head. "I haven't decided what to do with you. But I don't want you to lose your leg." She grew angry at the compassion she felt toward him, at the fact he was rapidly becoming another patient to her, a young man that needed help instead of the killer she knew he was. "If they hang you for your crimes, I want you to stand on the gallows with both legs," she replied coldly, ashamed at the hatred that so quickly filled her voice, at the way Detta tried not to wince at her words. "I don't want an innocent man to have to support you, just so you can die."



The day had dawned overcast and gray. Sovay had tended to her patients that morning, strangely distracted as her thoughts kept returning to Detta, trying to reconcile the whispers of the boyhood he'd just outgrown with the man he was becoming. She expected him to be hard and cold like the captives Cathedral held in her warehouse. The scarred warriors only grunted when she spoke to them, or worse, stared straight ahead, refusing to acknowledge her as she tended their wounds. But Detta was different. She couldn't understand what he would have to do with the other warriors, what would drive him to mutilate himself with a path that horrified her with its darkness.

Mid-day had come and she found herself hurrying back to her cottage, adding a carefully wrapped meal to her satchel while the poultice she would apply to Detta's wounds finished brewing over a low fire. Hurrying through the forest, a thick rag wrapped around the handle of the small iron cooking pot,

she followed the trail of matted grass, only to find that Detta was gone. Sovay stopped, her eyes searching the meadow, a strange sense of disappointment and betrayal seeping into her soul.

“Over here,” the familiar tenor called, and Sovay followed the sound where it led her. The young woman ducked as she stepped under the canopy of a tall cedar tree, the boughs sweeping low to the earth.

Detta smiled at her as she stepped into his hiding place. “I figured if you could find me, then anyone could.”

“This is cedar,” she said, gazing around uneasily. The boughs nearly touched the ground, enclosing an open space around the trunk, the ground carpeted with fallen needles.

“I know,” he said, a touch of boyish pride twinkling in his eyes. “Safe, hidden and dry.”

“My mentor called cedar ‘portal wood.’ He said that the space beneath its boughs is set between the worlds, that it can be used to reach other realms.”

Detta looked uneasy, his eyes darting around the sylvan enclosure, as if he expected the space around them to come alive. “What if I don’t do anything? What if I just sleep here?”

Sovay shook her head. “I don’t know.”

There was a long silence. Detta worried about the possibility of being propelled into a horrible dimension like those the older warriors told stories about around the campfire; Sovay wondered why she cared what happened to the young man who had brought death to the village. “Let the forest take him,” she scowled silently, immediately chastising herself for letting the thought drift through her mind.

“Is that lunch?”

Sovay was startled by the words, shaken from her thoughts. Following Detta’s eyes to the pot, the healer shook her head. “This,” she said, setting the cooking pot on the carpet of needles, “is for your leg. This,” she added, pulling the wrapped bundle from her bag and handing it to him, “is lunch.”

Detta began to unwrap the food with desperate fingers.

“You may want to wait a moment,” she warned as she knelt beside his leg. “This is going to hurt.”

“Sorry,” he grinned sheepishly. “I haven’t eaten for a couple of days.”

She began to add that she’d brought the food for them to share, but thought better of it. Sovay had more in her pantry; Detta had nothing.

Reaching into her bag, she pulled out a long wooden spoon. “This is going to hurt,” she warned again. “First of all, it’s hot. Not hot enough to damage healthy skin, but hot enough to make this wound feel like it’s on fire.”

Detta swallowed and nodded, his eyes filled with apprehension.

“The herbs in this poultice are very effective for drawing out infection. But they hurt. Badly. I’ve watched grown men with a cut on their finger dance around and curse when this is applied. But there is no better treatment for your wound. As infected as your leg is, it’s the only way I can be sure I can save it.”

The young man closed his eyes and nodded once more, signaling that he was ready.

Sovay gently grasped the edges of his torn trousers, tenderly pulling the fabric away from the wound. Even with her care she felt Detta wince. She forced herself not to look at him as she took the lid off the pot, the scent of the aromatic herbs filling the enclosure. Scooping a spoonful onto her wooden utensil, she held it aloft, watching the steam rise, waiting for it to cool. Letting out a long breath, she spooned the mixture onto the wound. Detta immediately went rigid, his back arching, his teeth grinding audibly together. She forced herself not to look at him as he began to whimper between his clenched teeth, as his fingers dug into the soft earth, trying to find purchase. Sovay focused her entire being on treating the wound, trying to block out the pain she brought to the young man; making sure the mixture was evenly spread, that she had

applied enough to begin to treat the infection.

Setting the spoon down in the pot, she moved to his side, taking her hand in his, wincing at the power in his grip. Detta opened eyes filled with tears, his features creased with pain, his jaw taut as he fought the urge to scream.

“It hurts,” he said, his voice sounding so terribly young.

“I know,” she replied, trying to comfort him. “Just a little bit longer.”

Detta clenched his eyes closed, his lips tightly pressed together. With his eyes closed, Sovay studied his features. Without the scars, Detta would have been a handsome young man. She watched as he fought against the pain, as the wounded teen struggled to remain silent against an agony that hardened warriors had wept under. Where they had received only a dab of the mixture, Sovay had slathered Detta’s wound with the poultice. A part of her was amazed at his inner strength; a part of her was terribly afraid.

At last, his body began to relax and Detta opened his eyes, releasing her hand.

“Thank you,” he offered, his voice tired and weak.

Sovay smiled, the gesture open and honest. “You’re welcome.”

They were silent for a long moment, Detta beginning to slowly eat, his pace increasing as the last of the herbal fire began to fade.

“Why?”

The young man turned to her, chewing with his mouth closed, his eyebrows raised as if to say, “Why what?”

“Why did you choose this path?” she asked, suddenly embarrassed, as if the question were too intimate to be posed.

Sovay was surprised as he sat the sandwich down, the memory of his fingers imprinted in the thick slices of homemade bread.

“I was a slave,” he said at last. “My mother was beautiful, purchased at an auction or captured in some raid. I don’t know. I was never told. She was the pleasure woman

of our master, there to please him and his guests, to fulfill any desires they had, whether she shared them or not. One night, she forgot to take the herbs that would silence her womb and a man's seed took hold in her belly. No one really knew who." He stopped, looking down at his hands, as if the lines of his palms held the words he searched to share.

"I guess she was lucky," he continued, his voice far away. "Our master was very fond of her. Pleasure slaves have been killed for less. When I was born, they took me away and gave me to another woman to nurse. She was the one who told me who my mother was. I even saw my mother once, through a window in the master's house. But we were never in the same room. She was trained to give pleasure; I was raised to be a scellorn."

Sovay shook her head, indicating that she didn't understand. "What's that?"

"Scellorn means "shadow" in our master's native tongue. I was assigned to his youngest son. I was the boy's servant, his sparring partner; I existed only to make sure the boy grew and thrived. I ate only when the boy slept. If the boy flew into a rage and wanted to release it, I stood silently and allowed myself to be beaten. If he wanted someone to humiliate with his friends, I was humiliated."

Detta let out a long sigh, raising his eyes to Sovay as if to say the worst was over. "One day, a weapons master came to our master's house to train the boy. I trained too, so the boy would have someone of his own skill to hone his abilities against. As I slept in my quarters one night, the weapons master slipped in and awoke me with a gentle tap on my cheek. He told me of an ancient prophesy that would reshape the world. He promised that if I would join him, we could make a new world of constant change, a place where the laws that allowed my mother and me to be slaves could not exist. Not because men said they were wrong, but because the very weave of reality would expel that possibility from existence."

Sovay swallowed, unsure of how to respond.

“I saw good men die because a rich man wanted to watch someone bleed. I watched young girls be made women by men old enough to be their grandfathers, just because some law said it was the right of the old men to do so. When Nollon came to me that night and offered me the chance to be free, when he offered me the opportunity to make every slave free, I leapt at the chance.”

“And the scars?” she asked, not knowing how they fit into the tale.

“We trained for months. After my master’s son was asleep, Nollon would train me hard, pushing me until I was exhausted. I soon became better than the boy, almost as good as Nollon himself. Three moons passed. One night, instead of training me, he handed me a sword, a real sword, balanced for my hand. I still remember his words,” he said, pausing as if they were his mantra, the inspiration for each breath he drew. “Tonight is the night you are free.”

“We slew every member of my master’s household. They were soft and died much too easily. I killed my master’s son myself and freed the slaves. I went up to my mother and told her that I was her son, that it was I that had earned her her freedom. She wept with joy.”

He swallowed. “That night, Nollon gave me this,” he said, pointing to a circular scar in the center of his forehead, hidden amidst a cluster of other scars. He carved it with a long knife and rubbed in a handful of grit that burned like fire. He said it was a mark of honor, of glory, and that each great deed that I would do, I would earn another.”

“Does Nollon have many scars?”

Detta shook his head. “Not one. He says that he is only our servant, that he is not worthy of such honor.”

“You respect him a great deal, don’t you?”

The young man’s response came instantly, powered by a terrible conviction. “I would die for him.”

Sovay swallowed, unsure of what to say. What Detta had escaped from was intolerable, but their raid on the village

was wrong. Innocent people had died. She wondered how many in his master's household had put up a fight; how many were simply murdered in cold blood.

"I need to go," she said at last, replacing the lid on the cooking pot and gathering her supplies. As she crouched low, ready to push herself under the cedar's boughs, she was stopped by Detta's voice.

"Thank you," he said again.

"You're welcome."

"I don't even know your name."

The healer turned, finding a boyish grin amidst the scars, a smile below strangely innocent eyes.

"I'm Sovay."

"Thank you, Sovay."

And without another word, she slipped through the boughs and out into the meadow air.



Detta healed quickly. Two days after she had begun to administer the poultice, he met Sovay at the edge of the clearing, hobbling on his bad leg as he escorted her to his sanctuary to endure another treatment. The wound wasn't as deep as the healer originally feared and the poultice acted quickly, pulling the infection from his leg. Detta's refusal to lay prone still found him with fresh blood seeping into his bandages when Sovay arrived to treat his wound, but he was filled with the energy of youth and the healer could tell he was bored.

They spoke of their two worlds, Sovay sharing tales of a life in a world with constricting borders, a realm in which she wasn't allowed to leave or explore. She began to tell Detta that she had been a slave in her own way, but as she thought of what the teen had been through, she realized just how hollow those words would sound.

Another day passed and she stopped, staring in fear as

she entered the clearing, as she stood silently and watched him with his sword, Detta practicing his forms. The young man had stripped to his waist, his lean torso covered with a dark weave of scars. Raised spirals encased each shoulder; his back was covered with a stylized bird of prey. Here and there, Sovay could pick out a specific design, but the artwork was quickly lost in the kaleidoscope of scar tissue that had been deliberately engraved in the young man's flesh. As Sovay stood silently at the edge of the meadow, her eyes were not locked on Detta's body, but his sword. She was afraid that he would kill her, that the young man would slay her in cold blood the way that his brethren had cut down the villagers that called Cathedral home. But as Detta caught glimpse of her out of the corner of his eye, a wide smile broke the tapestry of scars that masked his face and his sword immediately found its scabbard so he could wave his greeting.



Sovay was torn, unsure of what to do. One part of her wanted to go to the captain of the citizen's militia, to inform him that there was another enemy within their midst, but she couldn't bring herself to turn in Detta. Every time the thought crossed her mind, she thought of the young warrior's life as a slave and imagined him held captive, his freedom claimed by another once more.

Just as often, she thought of telling Detta that he needed to leave, that he needed to take himself from the outskirts of their village, to go back to wherever the young man had come. But the thought always left her feeling empty and alone and Sovay realized that, against her better judgement, she was growing fond of the young man and didn't want him to go.

She wasn't sure how to tell him of her feelings, so she decided to do something special for Detta, knowing that the teenage warrior would appreciate it. Sovay carefully asked the townswomen she passed for their favorite recipes, settling

on Jolaine's apple pie, a dish that brought words of praise whenever it was mentioned. The dessert was fresh from the oven when Sovay carried it into the clearing, the steam still rising from the vents in the flaky crust. She began to announce her surprise as she ducked under the cedar's boughs, but her voice froze in her throat. Detta was gone. There was no sign that he had ever been there. The carpet of cedar needles had been swept even; the holes that he had clawed into the earth when she had applied the poultice were smoothed over and filled.

Sovay turned to go, her disappointment echoing in the sad frown she wore. She looked at the dessert she held in her hands and then turned back to the tree, setting it down where Detta had once lain. Without a backwards glance, she slipped out into the clearing and began to make her way back to the village. The gift left behind, Sovay felt like a piece of her heart was left with it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: CHOICES

Cathedral's famous hard cider began to numb her brain, Sovay finding unsteady smiles blossoming upon her lips as she appraised the revelry that filled the village's largest inn. The townsfolk had gathered to celebrate their victory against the invaders and the night was filled to overflowing with the sounds of their festivities. Mugs of cider and ale were raised in toast and gratitude, one warrior after another standing to tell the tale of how he single-handedly turned back the tide of darkness. Laughter filled the air as the boasts grew more and more outrageous. The alcohol blurring her senses, Sovay wasn't sure when the boasting stopped and a band began to play, the music flowing from simple stringed instruments and hand-made percussion. A woman's voice joined the song, giving life to the folktales of their village, of the land around them, and the mythology that filled the world of Tapestry.

Sovay laughed as she slipped from partner to partner, her numb feet stumbling as she tried to learn new dances, her laughter flowing freely in the face of her own lack of coordination. At last, she slumped onto a bar stool, leaning heavily against the wooden bar that lined one edge of the inn, watching and laughing as a new round of toasts were raised. A fresh mug of cider found her hand and Sovay drank deeply, trying to cool a body hot from dancing and wet her parched throat.

"Here's to those dark bastards!" a man shouted above

the fray, raising a mug heaving with foam. “And here’s to their place in the icy fields of the outer afterlife!”

Cheers went up; laughter filled the air. The villagers were as drunk on their own words and bravado as they were on the cider and ale.

“Here’s to the barbarians!” another man cheered. “May all our enemies die so easily!”

Another wave of laughter and cheers swept over the inn. Mugs were raised to lips and drained; new rounds were called for. A man wearing a wide grin, motioned for the crowd to silence, his gestures as thick and slow as the scent of his ale-filled voice.

“Quiet! Quiet!” he ordered, a mischievous light dancing in his eyes. “My boy has something he wants to say.”

The man raised a young child to his shoulders, the boy thrusting his fist into the air as he’d seen the adults do.

“Here’s to my pa!” he shouted in his high-pitched voice. “He killed more than anyone!”

Laughter and cheers rocked the inn; the man was buried under an avalanche of friendly blows from the men that had fought beside him.

Sovay clapped her hands together, laughing at the scene before her. Only then did she realize that she must have set down her mug to clap. “I must be drunk,” she thought, adding silently, “or why else would I set down good cider?” She laughed at herself, finding her own words incredibly funny. Casting her eyes about, she searched for her mug, but instead, her glance found a hooded figure in the back of the room. Even through her drunken haze, Sovay could sense his anger as he stood to his feet, as his determined stride carried him to the door. It was only when he glanced back at the villagers, as her eyes caught sight of his face swaddled in old bandages, that Sovay’s drunkenness faded like fog burned away by the morning sun.

“Detta,” she mouthed as his eyes met her own. She could see his disgust and rage burning in his gaze; she could

feel his anger as he coldly turned away and slipped through the doors.

Sovay instantly found her heavy feet, weaving uneasily toward the door, crashing into other villages in her haste. She didn't hear their good-natured responses as she hurried on. All she could think of was Detta, how he hadn't left at all, and how she needed to reach him, not quite understanding why.



“Detta!” she called, hurrying into the dark night, into the maze of trees that suddenly seemed unfamiliar to her. “Detta!” she called again, her senses still numb, her mind struggling to keep pace with her stumbling feet.

Suddenly he was before her, his eyes glaring through a slit in his mask of bandages.

Sovay collapsed against him, wrapping her arms around his motionless torso, not understanding why the young man didn't return her embrace.

“I'm so glad to see you,” she confided with drunken confidence. “I thought you'd gone.”

The warrior was quiet for a long moment. “I should have gone,” he said softly, his words hushed and cold.

Sovay stepped away from him, reeling as if she'd been struck.

“But,” she protested, trying to sift through her mind to find the words. “But,” she began again, stopping, meeting his gaze, her eyes filled with a strange hurt. “You would just leave me?”

Detta's voice was filled with ice, his words carefully measured. “If I'd left without coming here,” he began, his scowl deepening as he continued, “then I would still think that you were my friend, that you cared for me.” He paused, his lips pressed tightly together as he glared at her, the warrior suddenly seeming very young. “Instead, I've seen that you're no different from the rest. You are such a hypocrite.”

“How dare you!” Sovay screeched in drunken righteousness. “I baked you a pie!”

The young man stared, his lips parted as if they were confused, unsure if they should respond or simply laugh. Instead, they closed in a deep, disappointed frown.

“I thought you were different,” he said, his voice soft as his anger faded into a quiet resignation. “But everyone is the same.”

“What do you mean?” she glared, wishing that it wasn’t so hard to stand, distracted by the trees around her, the shadows they cast, her mind struggling to stay focused on the man before her.

“Which would you consider more worthy of your praise?” he asked quietly. “A warrior that killed for something he believes in, or a warrior that mocks his enemy’s death?”

Sovay swallowed. “The first one?” she asked, as if she faced one of Tymurran’s tests.

“Which do you think the riders were?”

The young woman’s face was filled with a horrible understanding that left her instantly sober, her entire world narrowing until all that filled it was the hurt in Detta’s eyes.

“Which do you think your townspeople are?”

“You attacked us!” she responded, feeling lost, as if she were adrift in a turbulent sea.

“Because we believe in our cause,” he said evenly, his words filled with passion as if he struggled to let her see into his heart. He paused, the power of his beliefs crackling in his gaze. “Do you know why we bear these scars? Do you know what else Nollon told me when he gave me my first mark?”

Sovay felt her heart sink, lost under the weight of Detta’s conviction.

“He told us the pain we feel when our flesh is carved and branded is the pain we leave behind. That it isn’t an enemy we kill; that the death we bring is given to someone’s father; someone’s son; someone’s lover. Each death we bring is like a fire lit in a dry field. A single spark can destroy so much.”

Detta reached up, tangling his fingers in his bandages, slowly tearing the mask from his scarred face. “Do you think that I want to look like this? Do you think I never cry myself to sleep, knowing that no one will ever be able to love the hideous creature I’ve become?”

Detta stopped; his lips pressed together; his chin clenched. “I do this so I will never forget a single life I’ve taken. I bear the price every time I draw my sword. I know what it means every time my blade tastes blood.” His anger had returned, carried into the cold fire of his eyes by his words, borne in the tight set of his jaw. “And hearing your people mock the pain they have caused sickens me.”

Sovay began to speak, her repentance overflowing in her gaze, but was stopped by Detta’s words.

“And there you were with them,” he said softly, his voice so quiet Sovay could scarcely hear the words above the gentle wind that whispered through the trees. “There you were, laughing, raising your mug with them as they mocked the death of my brothers.”

She wanted to call out to him, to stop him as he walked away, Detta disappearing into the shadows of the trees that filled the night. But Sovay couldn’t speak, she couldn’t stand. Instead, she fell to her knees, her face buried in her hands as she began to weep.



The first caress of dawn found Detta walking slowly through the trees, his shoulders slumped beneath the heavy weight of his thoughts. He had wandered through the forest, his anger fading in the cold embrace of the night air. All that was left was a gentle sadness and a deep, empty ache that had been born in his heart and had slowly settled into the pit of his stomach. With a quiet frown he knelt and slipped under the boughs of the cedar. He hadn’t planned to return, but he knew that he needed to put the miles between himself and Cathedral

when the sun had slipped from the sky, not under the full light of day.

He was startled by the familiar voice that softly offered, "You came back."

Detta's eyes found Sovay. She sat cross-legged in his sanctuary, wearing a tired frown that seemed almost cheerful compared to the dejection and grief that filled her gaze. Her eyes were swollen and red; her cheeks tattooed with lines of salt that testified to the memory of her tears.

Detta nodded, swallowing uncomfortably. "It's probably not the best idea for me to leave during daylight."

"So you are going to go then?" she offered quietly.

The young man cleared his throat. "I can't stay here."

Sovay was quiet for a long moment, hating how the tension and distance grew in the silence that loomed between them. At last she spoke, her words summoned from somewhere deep inside her.

"What is it that you believe in so strongly?"

Detta met her eyes. She expected him to be surprised at the query or angry that she would dare to ask him so intimate a question. Sovay had come upon the words as she had sat in the darkness within the cedar's boughs, terrified that a doorway would open to whisk her off to another world; even more afraid that if she gave in to her fears and left, Detta would return and she wouldn't be there to meet him. But the warrior's gaze held a strange acceptance, as if he had secretly hoped that she would ask him, as if he had longed to explain his actions, the attack against her village, but had never known how to begin.

"Freedom," he said softly. "I believe in freedom."

Sovay laughed in disbelief, wishing that she could pull the sound back within her as soon as it had slipped into the early morning air. She swallowed, knowing that she couldn't leave the sound as her only response. "But Cathedral is free. We owe allegiance to no one but ourselves."

"Every man is a slave," Detta explained. "There is always some lord that dictates how you may live, who takes

your wages for himself and refers to his theft simply as taxes. There are men who make laws that keep other men in chains. Which is stronger?" he asked. "The iron of a prison's bars or the weight of knowing you can never escape your station in life because another man grows rich on your labor, because another man takes your sweat and blood to fill his own pockets? Why should one man be born free and another a slave? Neither infant has done anything but breathe. And yet one is lifted into a life of privilege; the other is condemned from birth."

Sovay shook her head, immediately wishing that she hadn't. The cider from the previous night's festivities laughed at her now; the sound of the music and laughter that had roared in her ears had taken its toll. She felt sick; her head ached; her mouth was as dry as if she had filled it with Detta's cotton bandages.

"It's the truth," he insisted. "Look around you, Sovay. What if you wanted to build a home, right here? Could you?"

"I would have to ask the council," she began, only to be interrupted by Detta's enthusiasm.

"Exactly!" he exclaimed, the sound of his passion a searing wave that swept through Sovay's skull. "What gives them the right to say you can live one place and not another?"

She began to shake her head, but caught herself. "We elect our council," she countered. "They maintain our way of life."

"Whether you elect them or not, they're the masters; you're the slave."

"It's not like that at all," Sovay insisted. She stopped, licking her dry lips, searching for the words to continue.

"What if I wanted to cut down the forest?" she asked. "Not just a tree or two to build with, but everything for as far as I could see?"

"You couldn't use all that wood," Detta argued.

"I couldn't," Sovay agreed, "but I could sell it to those that could."

The young warrior was silent.

“Our council makes the rules that ensure our way of life. If someone wants to log, they first need permission.”

“You don’t need the laws,” Detta responded angrily. “Your militia could enforce the decision to keep the trees.”

“What if they outnumbered us?”

“Then you find allies.”

Sovay closed her eyes, trying to find her thoughts through the pounding of her pulse that echoed painfully through her forehead.

She licked her lips. “You’re a warrior?” she asked quietly.

Detta nodded.

“Did someone teach you to fight?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

“Nollon did. I told you that.”

“How did he teach you?” she asked, leading him with her words. “Did he hand you a sword and just let you go?”

“No,” Detta smiled. “You don’t train that way. There are rules to combat; there are certain ways that a blade must be wielded; certain positions for your body; certain principles to hold in your mind.”

“What about when you fight beside your brothers? Do you just go where the flow of battle takes you?”

Detta’s smile grew with a quiet pride. “We train constantly. Horses must be used one way; foot soldiers another.”

“How do you know where to go?” she asked.

“Our captains tell us.”

“And who tells them.”

“Nollon.”

Sovay swallowed, daring herself to step across the line that she had drawn with her words. “And what happens if you disobey?”

Detta began to speak, but his words froze on his tongue. His lips parted and closed again, opening once more like a fish gasping for air. Detta opened his mouth once again, trying to

speak, but the words were lost in the horrible realization that slipped into his gaze. His legs suddenly grew weak and the warrior slumped heavily to the ground, his eyes wide with disbelief as they filled with tears.

Sovay didn't move. She wanted to take the young man in her arms, to hold him close, but she knew that she couldn't. She knew that she had to let him bear the full blow of the realization that loomed before him. The truth had to hurt, it had to hurt so badly that he would be forced to move beyond it or retreat back into the lie he lived.

She wanted to console him, to offer him words of comfort, but instead, she pushed once more.

"Why did you attack Cathedral?"

Detta looked so young, so lost as he turned his gaze to her. "We were ordered to attack, to kill the warriors that gathered here. Nollon told us that one of the warriors was important, that he would be the difference between whether our quest succeeded or failed."

"Kai," Sovay said aloud, not meaning to.

Detta shook his head; his voice was unsteady as he spoke. "I don't know his name."

"What is your quest?" she asked.

"Nollon promised us that he could change reality," the young man began. "That he could make it so that no law could hold us; that no one could imprison us; that no one could make us a slave. He told us that it wouldn't be just for us, but for everyone. That everyone would be free."

Sovay was quiet, unsure of how to proceed.

"But you know," Detta offered, tears beginning to stream down his cheeks as he offered her a wane smile, "if there were no laws, that logger would simply take what he wanted. And if you had enough men to stop him, he'd come back with more."

She reached out, laying a comforting hand on Detta's arm. But the young man didn't notice.

"The world would still have laws," he continued,

closing his eyes tightly against his tears, his voice strangely calm. “The strong would rule. And Nollon and his army would be the strongest.”

He began to weep openly.

“By the gods,” he exclaimed, the words thrust out into the shadows of the cedar’s shelter. “I’m enslaving everyone.”

Sovay leapt to his side, taking him in her arms. She held the young man as he began to sob. Detta’s wails cut through the morning air as he remembered what it was like to wear another’s chains, as he thought of the terrible price he had paid to condemn others to the same fate.



Sovay woke in Detta’s arms, not realizing that she had laid down and surprised that she had fallen asleep. The young man’s chest rose and fell with a rhythmic ease, his eyes closed against the light of mid-morning that filtered through the cedar’s boughs. As she gazed down upon him, Sovay’s heart leapt into her throat and she swallowed hard, her eyes suddenly moist with tears. Even Detta’s eyelids bore scars. He had told her that each one was earned, that they were for an honor or for a life he had taken. Sovay leaned closer, a horrible fascination locking her gaze on the intricate design of mangled flesh. As she carefully studied his features, she realized that the pattern wasn’t entirely made of scar tissue; much of the design was drawn on with ink or soot, the weave worn in places and needing to be retouched. While the observation reassured her, Sovay realized that she felt strangely cheated, as if she was denied the full weight of her compassion for the young man. She shook her head, suddenly angry with herself, her distaste quickly shifting to Tymurran, her mentor. She had spent too many years alone to understand how to deal with the maelstrom of emotions that constantly assaulted her new world.

Sovay turned away, knowing that her duties waited for her, that she needed to make her rounds. The wounded

and sick of Cathedral needed her care. She needed to tend to Detta's wounded brethren, even though they would soon be punished for their crimes. It was a strange paradox, healing men who would soon be executed for their role in the attack on the village. The irony wasn't lost on Sovay and it left a bitter aftertaste in her mouth.

But as Sovay pushed away the boughs of the cedar, she suddenly gasped for air, her mind reeling, all else forgotten. The world she had come to call home was gone. She was on the edge of a tiny grove of trees, not in the midst of the vast forest that surrounded Cathedral. Before her lay a meadow filled with wildflowers, but it wasn't the meadow that lay near the sylvan village. A narrow stream sang merrily nearby, its sound fading into the distance. And the meadow stretched into a wide landscape, blanketing the foothills before her that descended into an endless grassy plain. "Portal wood," she whispered. Sovay thought of turning back to the cedar, of waking Detta, but her eyes were fixed on the small settlement that lay in the midst of the grassland, her gaze suddenly drawn to the sound of footsteps that worked their way up the hill before her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE ROAD TO HEALING

Traela lay in the small cart, pulled behind the horse the monks of Raven's Roost had given them in thanks for raising arms in defense of the monastery. Caraine knelt next to the young woman, seeing to her needs. The teen was in good spirits, each of her friends drifting back to walk beside the wagon, telling her stories of their past, of the years that had slipped by before they came into her company. But it was Caraine who had begun to find a special place in Traela's heart.

As the horror of being held motionless by the weight of her body slowly faded, the teen discovered that she had no control over her bodily functions. The first time her bladder had released, Traela wept. She still had some sensation in her limbs and as she felt the warm wetness spill over her, she had suddenly been lost in a sea of shame. The teen had lashed out with her voice as Caraine gently began to clean her, but the older woman continued with a care and understanding that Traela immediately cherished.

"Please don't tell Kai," the young warrior begged, her voice a harsh whisper.

Caraine had offered her a single nod in response, her eyes promising that Traela's secret was safe in the older woman's care.

Traela hadn't realized that she wouldn't be able to feed herself; that she would have to be carefully turned by hand to avoid developing sores where she lay. Caraine cared for

her, bathing the teen when the time came; brushing the young woman's hair each morning; never leaving her side.



The narrow path slipped from between the high places that surrounded Raven's Roost and descended into a forest of trees. Their trunks were smaller than the massive giants that grew near Cathedral and every open space was crowded with life. Ferns jostled hedges and brambles for their place in the scattered beams of sunlight; birch saplings stood like white spears thrust into the earth. The road the companions followed was worn and overgrown, the cobblestones nearly hidden beneath a carpet of mosses and pine needles.

"Why is the road so bumpy?" Traela asked, the cart struggling behind the single steed. "Doesn't this lead to Node?"

Caraine nodded. "It's just overgrown."

"But Node is a major city," the teen continued. "Shouldn't this road be worn? I mean, you'd think there would be more traffic."

The woman shook her head. "I don't know. I've never been to Node before."

"But I'm right."

Caraine shrugged. "I've only been out of my sphere for three cycles of the moon," she admitted. "Almost everything is new to me."

Traela just stared.

"All of us except for Beltross were kept hidden away," she explained. "And he was sheltered by his mother's people."

"So Beltross would know?" the teen asked.

"I don't know. He grew up near the sea. I don't think his people go to Node. Kai would know."

"How long has Kai been free?"

"Years," she answered, her eyes looking toward the man who led their procession, Ko'laru at his side. "He escaped

when he was only a child.”

“But his training,” Traela protested, not understanding the anger that began to creep in around the edges of her thoughts. “He’s a warrior. His mentor trained him, right?”

Caraine shook her head. “No. The fae did. When he slipped from his sphere, he didn’t emerge in human lands.”

“Wow,” Traela said, her anger fading, replaced by a childlike wonder as she imagined what it would be like to be raised in a land of myth and magic.

“I don’t think it was like that,” Caraine cautioned her. “The fae don’t take kindly to those who intrude on their lands. Kai had to earn his freedom. I don’t know how. Maybe he will tell you. Whatever he did, I think he earned Ko’laru’s love at the same time.”



The campfire burned brightly, the firelight sending shadows dancing through the surrounding trees. With a cup of hot cider held in both hands, Kai sat on a large stone, staring into the flames; Ko’laru perched beside him, her head on his shoulder, gazing deep into the hot embers of the fire. Beltross had wandered down to the nearby stream shortly after dinner and had yet to return. The wounded teen, Traela, lay on her back, watching the stars. Caraine was at her side, telling her stories of the gods, using the constellations to illustrate the tales, the younger woman enraptured in the weave of the myths.

The mer stepped into the circle of firelight, soaking wet, a relaxed smile stretching his thin lips. “I needed that,” he said to no one in particular, lowering himself to the earth next to Traela, his thin hair moistened into slick strands that were plastered to his skull.

“Needed what?” the teen asked.

Beltross held up a webbed hand, moving it to where the young woman could see. “My father was a man of the

earth,” he said, spreading his fingers and stretching the thick membrane that connected them. “My mother was a woman of the sea. I am both. Too much time in either environment leaves me longing for the world of the other parent.”

“You can breathe underwater?” she asked, her voice filled with a wondrous disbelief.

Beltross nodded, forgetting that she couldn’t see him from where she lay. “I spent a good deal of my life beneath the waves.”

“What’s it like?”

“Very different,” he answered simply. Traela could hear the mer’s smile in the sound of his voice. “On land, you can only move side-to-side, following the shape of the earth. But in the sea, you can go anywhere your fins take you. As you begin to descend deeper, the world changes; life changes. The shallows, especially in warm climates, are filled with life and color. But the depths are a strange dark world where ancient gods still dwell, where even their heralds, the whales, only venture with their songs.”

“You’ve seen gods?” Traela asked, her voice barely audible beneath her wonder.

“Only one,” Beltross answered, his voice suddenly somber and serious, “and then, only from a distance.”

“What was he like?”

The mer was quiet for a long moment as he summoned the memories to the forefront of his mind. “He was a god of darkness; not spiritual darkness and evil, but one who dwells in a world that the sun never touches. His body was long and powerful; you could tell that he had given birth to the deep whales, those with teeth that hunt the giant squid in the depths of the sea. His skin was darker than the deepest shadow; the cold of the abyss followed in his wake, a chill so deep that even ice is afraid to form in its presence.” Beltross stared up at the sky. “He was colder than even the emptiness between the stars.” The mer slowly turned to face Traela, meeting her wide eyes, the teen completely submerged in his tale. “I was

deep, far beneath the sounds of life that fill warmer waters. In his wake I could hear the wind, the cold wind of the north. I wanted to swim away as fast as my fins could take me, but I knew that I didn't dare to move. I don't think he saw me. If he did, I was beneath his notice."

"Wow," the young woman said at last.

The companions were silent.

"You said you had fins?" she asked.

Beltross nodded. "All fae can take other forms."

"Like what?"

"It depends on where their life-force dwells. I can take on the forms that please the sea. Ko'laru can become the things that bring harmony to the earth."

"And to the waters of the earth," the warrior fae added from beside the campfire.

Traela wished she could rise, to turn and meet her companions as they spoke. The young woman frowned deeply at her immobility, her eyes filled with self-pity and anger. "Like what?" she asked, a hard edge to her voice that she didn't notice, her companions' spirits falling at the sound.

Suddenly, Ko'laru stood above her, blocking out the stars. The fae knelt, holding her hand above the young woman's eyes. With an effortless smile, Ko'laru closed her eyes and her skin began to waver. The pale solidity of her flesh began to fade, replaced by transparent water that was somehow held into the form of her fingers and palm. Her liquid hand mixed with the colors of her wrist and arm until the hues began to fade and run.

Opening her eyes, Ko'laru's hand turned back to its normal form. "I am a creature of the earth," she reminded the young woman. "My spirit and the spirits of my kin call the trees at the edge of clear running waters home. I can become water," she said, closing her eyes once more. As she did, the skin that graced her delicate features began to darken and grow hard, her complexion taking on the grain of wood. "Or I can call upon my link to the earth." Ko'laru opened her eyes and

returned to her normal form. “There are other forms I can choose, such as this one, that are a combination of my lineage and the song of my soul.”

“But at Raven’s Roost, you looked mortal,” Traela began, only to be stopped by the deep warmth that illuminated the fae’s smile.

“As you change, so the song your soul sings changes. Mine is a duet sung with the man I love,” she answered softly. “What Kai and I share has given me a new form, a new life.”

“How long have you known each other?”

Ko’laru blushed, the teen finding a gentle joy in the gesture. “Since Kai was a child.”

“Have you always loved him?”

The fae’s smile faded into a gentle grin, rich with contemplation and laced with memories. “That’s a hard question to answer, young one,” she said softly. “My people don’t perceive time as yours do. Did I love him at first? I would have to say, no.” She smiled, and Traela could sense there was laughter hidden behind the gesture. “I thought he was arrogant and ill-mannered, a barbaric human.” She paused, holding the young woman with her gaze, the fae’s eyes twinkling with a good-natured conspiracy. “Have I always loved him?” She stopped, her smile fading into a gentle silence. “Since the moment I was born. There is a part of me that could never be brought alive by anyone else, a part that that was lost even to me, until he came into my life. Even for the fae, it’s sometimes a difficult thing to reconcile what you see with what you know to be true.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Traela admitted.

Ko’laru reached out and brushed a strand of wind-blown hair from the teen’s forehead. “You will one day. I know it’s not the answer you’d like, but the truth is something that words are ill-equipped to explain.”

The young woman pressed her lips tightly together, not liking the answer, but knowing that she would not be getting another. “How did you meet?”

The fae glanced toward her lover who still sat next to the fire, staring deep into the flames. “I think that’s a tale best told by Kai. It cost him more than anyone. He’s earned the right to be the one to tell it.”



Kai slipped away from the fire, melding into the shadowy trees that ringed the encampment. His unbelted sword was held in his left hand, the blade still sheathed, his sword belt left behind. The warrior allowed the sound of running water to lead him and, as he reached the stream’s edge, he shrugged out of his tunic, shivering in the cold night air. Slipping his boots from his feet and unsheathing his sword, leaving the scabbard next to his footwear, Kai waded into the icy stream. Waves of cold plucked at his flesh as the chill of the water coursed through his body. There was no stone in the center of the river to sit on, so Kai stood, braced against the current as he closed his eyes and raised palms to the sky, the naked blade laying across his hands.

With each breath, the world around him faded. The cold became less intense, the numbness fading from his feet and toes until there was no sensation at all, just a blank emptiness. Silence slipped in around the edges of the gurgling stream, the sound of the water muted at first, before slowly fading to nothingness.

A tunnel formed in Kai’s mind, the cobblestones of the floor arcing overhead, forming the material of the walls and ceiling as well. Each stone was in the form of a human face, their eyes closed, their features quiet and still. At the end of the hall waited a group of men, all but one dressed in the black of the raiders that had attacked Raven’s Roost. The last was dressed in white; the brother who had given his life to stop the beast of blood looked uneasy amidst his new companions. Where they stood, the cobblestones were bare, as if the men waited in a sanctuary beyond the perception of the cold stone

eyes.

“You can’t stay here,” Kai said simply, a cold resignation filling his words. “This is my mind, not the afterlife. You may leave,” he offered, a door forming before the men as the warrior gestured, “or you may challenge me for the right to my life.”

With a growl, one of the dark men leapt forward, rushing toward Kai with his hands extended, lusting to feel the warrior in his grasp, to throw Kai to the floor and strangle the breath from his lungs. But with a sickening gurgle and a splash of blood, a brilliant arc cut through the air, Kai’s sword returning to his side an instant after it struck. The man took another step forward, his lifeless legs collapsing beneath him, his severed head falling to the side. The other men watched as the corpse’s body turned to mist, slowly fading away. They stared as his head gazed up with lifeless eyes, slowly merging with the floor until his features filled one of the cobblestones that had previously been bare.

“You may leave,” he offered once more, “or you may challenge me for the right to my life.”

Exchanging glances, the dark warriors stepped through the portal. The man in white remained behind.

“You need to go,” Kai told him.

The young monk was silent.

“You can’t stay here.”

“My name is Thomas,” the young man said, his eyes locked with Kai’s.

The warrior stood motionlessly, as if he hadn’t heard.

“I said,” Thomas began, only to be interrupted by the abrupt coldness of Kai’s bark.

“I heard you,” he snapped.

The young man was silent once more.

“You can’t stay here.”

“Why did you murder me?”

Kai’s lips pressed tightly together as he closed his eyes. “There was no other way.”

“I don’t think you’ll kill me again.”

The warrior opened his eyes, his gaze tempered into a hard glare. “What I did, I had to do. The creature that Nollon summoned could not be dispelled in any other way. Would you have given your life to save your friends?”

Thomas didn’t speak.

“That’s what you did. It may not have been gallant, but it was necessary.”

“I challenge you,” the young man growled.

Kai sighed. “Then here,” he said, tossing the young man his blade. “I won’t cut you down twice.”

Thomas tested the weight of the sword in his hand, a cold smile twisting his features. “When I kill you, do I take over your life? Your body? Or do I get my own back?”

Kai shook his head. “It would be better if you left now.”

The man rushed forward, the blade already beginning its strike. With a speed so fast that he was little more than a flicker of light, Kai stepped aside, punching the young warrior in the jaw. There was an inhuman power behind the strike, bone shattering beneath the blow, the young man’s neck snapping as his head was viciously twisted by the force. The brother fell, the sword slipping from his grasp, Kai snatching the blade from the air before Thomas collapsed against the cobblestones of the floor.

Kai knelt beside the young man. “I’m sorry,” he said softly.

“How?” his victim asked, his face twisted with a look of betrayal, his final breath slipping from between his lips.

“We’re not in the mortal realm,” the warrior whispered, reaching to close the young man’s eyes. “And I was raised by the fae.”

Kai stood as the man’s body began to fade, as his face assumed its place among the stones. Turning away, the warrior began to walk back the way he had come, a deep sorrow melting his features. With each step back down the tunnel,

the mortal world began to return, the cold embrace of the water filling Kai's legs; the chill caress of the wind running its fingertips over his naked torso. But it was a long walk among the stones, and the tunnel grew longer with each battle Kai faced.

The human warrior opened his eyes to find himself standing knee deep in the stream. His demons had been purged; the faces of the men he had slain would no longer haunt the corridors of his mind. But peace was bought at a terrible price, and Kai felt another piece of his soul carved away each time another man's face merged with the stones.

He turned toward the shore, only to find Ko'laru waiting for him, a deep sympathy held quietly in her gaze. With a discipline that wracked his body and mind, Kai forced himself not to run to her, marshalling his will as he slowly emerged from the water to stand before the woman he loved.

"I can't distance myself from them," he offered quietly. "I can lay their ghosts to rest, but I can't forget that they were someone's son."

"You were never meant for this," the fae said softly.

Kai was silent for a long moment, his whispered voice scarcely audible when he spoke. "It's my duty," he offered, tears glimmering in his eyes. "If I don't do it someone else will have to."

As she raised her hand to caress his face, Kai's tears began to fall, the mortal warrior slumping into the arms of the woman he loved, allowing the fae to hold him close.

"You feel too deeply for this life," she whispered into his hair as the man who had brought her soul to life wept silently in her arms. "You were never meant to be a warrior."

"But I am," he said softly, swallowing deeply, wishing with all his might that he could simply put his sword away and disappear with the woman he loved.



Sunlight crept through an overcast sky as the wheeled cart slowly rocked along the overgrown path, the single horse pulling its jarring load behind it. Caraine knelt beside Traela, one of the woman's hands tightly clutching the side rail that hemmed in the wagon's bed, the other bracing the teen, doing her best to hold the young woman in place.

"It's not much farther now."

Traela turned her eyes to the side, just able to make out Kai walking beside the cart.

"We're almost to Node?" she asked.

The warrior nodded. "The sun hasn't quite reached its peak. When it begins its descent, we should enter the main road."

"The main road?" Traela's words mirrored her surprise. "Where does it go?"

"This road leads to Node," he explained. "If you were to take it from Node to Cathedral, and then kept going, you'd reach the limits of human lands. There is a small settlement in the mountains called Coldwinter Pass and beyond that, an outpost called Promise. No human lives beyond that." He paused, grasping the top bar of the cart's railing and vaulting nimbly over it to kneel at Traela's side. "Most of the humans live in the valley that stretches south of Node. Orchard Hold is in the midst of farm land so rich it's said you can plant stones instead of seeds and still reap a full harvest. Scarlet's Hollow is the last major settlement before the valley broadens into grasslands. Where the valley ends and the grasslands begin, you'll find Eversky, the last human habitation to the south."

Kai paused, moistening his lips. "Once you're healed, you'll have to make sure to explore the settlements in the valley. Orchard Hold Black Cider is legendary, even among the fae."

Traela met his eyes, her gaze trembling with a hope she couldn't bring herself to believe, but was afraid to surrender. "I will walk again?"

The warrior nodded, the light fading from his eyes.

“You have my word as a warrior.”

“How?”

There was a long silence as Kai searched for the words to begin. “There is a race that comes here from time to time,” he offered, his words uncertain and unsteady. “Some say that they created the Gates; others believe that they only guard them.”

“The Gates?”

Kai swallowed. “They are doorways to other worlds,” he answered, his words uneasy.

“Like to the lands of the fae?”

The warrior shook his head. “No. Not like that at all. They open onto worlds that are nothing like our own.”

“Then why do these people guard them? Are they afraid that we’ll want to go there?”

Kai moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue. “We are told the maat guard them against what may come from there to here.”

Traela was silent as the implication sunk in. “But they can heal me?” she asked at last.

“They can,” the warrior answered, the weight of history and knowledge crackling through the quiet tone of his words. “And they will.”

“What is it?”

He shook his head. “The maat aren’t like us,” he began, only to pause uncomfortably. “They’re nothing like us,” he added with an uneasy smile, realizing the extent of the understatement. “When we meet with them, it may seem like they won’t help us, but that is simply their way. It may seem like the price we pay is too high,” he paused, warning with his eyes not to challenge the statement, “but it is not. I know what your life is worth. That is what we will pay.”

“And they’re in Node?” the teen asked, not sure why Kai slowly stood, his gaze locked on the landscape ahead. Traela darted her eyes toward Caraine, finding her staring in awe.

“What is it?” Traela asked.

“It’s,” Caraine began, only to realize that she didn’t have the words. She stopped, the spell broken as she turned, first to Traela, then to Kai. “Kai,” she gently commanded, the strength of her voice pulling the warrior away from the scene before them. “Help me lift her.”

Kai did as he was told, the two adults carefully lifting the teen, making sure that her spine was kept straight, that they did no further damage.

Traela gasped at what she saw before her. “Is that Node?”

The cart rested on the top of a small rise that opened onto the mouth of a wide valley bordering the Firedrake River. Pressed against the river’s banks was a city unlike anything the young woman had ever seen. Massive buildings dominated the center of the metropolis, the smallest three stories tall, the largest seeming as if it peered above small mountains. A sprawl of smaller structures spread out from them, forming a sea of businesses and dwellings that stretched more than a half-day’s march in any direction. But it wasn’t the size of the city that filled the companions with awe; it wasn’t the thought of so many humans settling in one place when they lived in a world where their kind was a minority.

What caught Traela’s eye and took her breath away were the Gates.

From the center of Node rose a single tower that stretched impossibly high, its heights lost in the gray ceiling of the overcast sky. It’s base widened and spread out into long, evenly-spaced tendrils, like the roots of a symmetrical oak tree. Each cylindrical spoke stretched a league from the base of the tower, thick enough that it towered above four story structures. Each tendril ended in a large knob, around which a wide space existed, as if the builders of Node were too afraid to encroach upon the end of the tendril. As Traela watched, light began to glow in one of the knobs, slipping through vents in the structure, the illumination building to a brilliance that forced

her to squint even at a distance.

“The Gates,” Traela said softly, her voice trembling with awe. The structures could be nothing else.

“If the maat can maintain those,” Kai assured her, his own voice hushed, “then it will be a simple matter for them to heal you.”

“You said there would be a cost?” Traela began, only to have Kai finish her thought.

“It will be paid,” he promised.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: NODE

The sun had slipped from the sky as the companions reached the outskirts of Node. The only light was that which spilled from the doorways of the makeshift shacks and tiny huts that surrounded the city, the illumination slipping around ill-fitted doors or peering through thin blankets that had been hung over the open portals. A chaos of sounds assaulted the travelers. Children cried and were scolded or comforted by their parents. Arguments in languages that were foreign to Traela's ears filled the night. Somewhere in the distance, an old woman began to sing, the strange words filled with the sorrow of one who had seen her friends pass on before her, the aching loss held in each note that echoed through the night. In another direction, a stringed instrument began to play, the sound lively and jovial, and the teen could easily imagine the dancing that must have accompanied the music.

As the companions traveled deeper into the city, the dwellings grew in size, their spacing carefully ordered by regulations and city planners. The roadway was now lit with oil lamps that hung from high poles that flanked the flagstone avenue. The foot traffic on the thoroughfare thickened; men and women with large packs were interspersed with those wearing festive clothing, as if a caravan and a commoners' ball had somehow become intermixed. It seemed as if everyone was heading in the same direction, moving deeper into the city, and the companions found a space in the thick traffic, nestled

behind a massive, four-legged reptilian beast that carried a merchant's wares strapped on its back.

The roadway opened into a wide square still a vast distance from Node's central tower. Row after row of booths and tables, their merchants offering inventories both exotic and mundane, filled the open spaces. In the center of the square, an area had been cleared where a band of musicians played stringed instruments and percussion, a young woman singing a lively tune that drew from human folklore as those who were dressed in festive colors joined the dancing.

Traela turned her eyes toward a musical voice, the alien words echoing in her mind as much as they filled her ears. The young woman was surprised to see Ko'laru answer as a fae passed them in the crowd; the stranger's fine dark features seemed as if they were carved from wood. Traela wished she could sit up, that she could drink in the sights they passed, and she felt her anger grow once more as she lay trapped within the prison of her motionless body.

"The inn we want is just a little further," she heard Kai say. "Once we're settled in, I'll begin making preparations to meet with the maat."

Caraine asked the question before Traela could.

"When will we meet with them?"

"Tonight," Kai began, the words more a question than a confident statement, "if all goes well. If not, tomorrow; or as soon as we can find one that will speak to us."

A roar of joyful surprise and wonder erupted from the marketplace around them, the music stumbling to a halt at the sound, the dancers turning toward the commotion. A merchant ran wildly back and forth through the stalls, frantically swinging a long-handled net as he tried to snare luminescent butterflies that had escaped from a wooden cage. The tiny creatures darted gracefully away from the net, slowly climbing into the night sky. Their wings glowed from within, casting a kaleidoscope of colors over the crowd, each wing-beat sounding a fragile, musical tone, as if crystalline bells danced

in the darkness.

Traela turned her eyes toward Ko'laru as the fae began to softly hum, the noise almost lost beneath the sound of the crowd, ignored by those that stood near enough to hear. As if in response to her melody, a single winged creature made its way toward her, gliding down on gossamer wings to perch on the fae's offered finger. Continuing her hushed melody, Ko'laru carefully walked closer to Traela, moving until her hand hovered before the teen's eyes. The young woman stared in wonder and awe at the tiny creature. Its body was almost humanoid, but the arms and legs that it crouched on seemed too thin and frail to support even its weightless physique. Tissue paper wings grew out of its shoulder blades, connected by tiny fibers that stretched from its spine. The creature turned its face to Traela, its features dominated by large dark eyes that swallowed the space where its cheeks would have been, its pale visage broken only by a tiny slit of a mouth.

With a gentle breath of air, Ko'laru blew the creature off her finger, watching as it took flight and slowly began to wing its way toward the stars.

"What was it?" Traela asked, her eyes wide, her voice hushed with wonder. "Was it fae, like you?"

Ko'laru shook her head. "Not quite," she smiled knowingly, as if she realized the extent of the wonder that awaited the young woman. "There's an entire world to explore out there," she whispered, laying a gentle hand on the mortal's arm. "Two worlds, if you count the veil that separates the human realm from the lands of the fae. Just focus on getting better," she insisted tenderly, "on recovering once the maat have made you whole. I promise that there are wonders to be seen that will make even your dreams pale in comparison."



Kai raised his hand, signaling for them to pause before a two-story wooden structure. The building's door stood open,

muted voices spilling out into the night. A single sign waited out front, its pole entwined with ivy. A raised wooden flute emerged from a shingle that was suspended by an arm jutting out from the post.

“This is it,” he said, his voice filled with a strange finality. “The Wooden Flute. An old friend of mine owns this place. We’ll stay here while we’re in Node.”

Beltross and Caraine moved to lift Traela out of the cart. The teen gazed back into the distance, her eyes drawn to the sound of music and the noise that came from the bazaar and the open square. The gathering was three streets away, the sound muted by curving avenues and squat buildings. Traela could only wonder if she would truly be healed, or if she would only be able to watch in envy as the dancers moved in time to the music.



“Kai!”

The matronly voice filled the dining area of the establishment, the handful of guests that gathered around the circular tables or sat near the fire, talking in low voices, turned toward the exclamation. A gray-haired woman wiped her hands on her apron and threw her arms wide, embracing the warrior in a vicious bear-hug. There was a strange strength to her step that belied her age, her wrinkled face testifying that she was almost eighty; her quick step swearing she was decades younger.

Kai returned the hug and then stepped back, gesturing toward his companion. “Mallia,” he offered, “these are my friends.”

The old woman stepped forward, taking both of Ko’laru’s hands in her own, a broad smile mirrored on both of the women’s faces. “It is lovely to see you again, my dear,” Mallia beamed. “Have you made an honest man of this oaf yet?” she grinned, eyes clouded with cataracts glimmering

mischievously.

“Not yet, I’m afraid,” Ko’laru laughed. “I have him agreed to the concept, it’s just the timing we need to settle on.”

Mallia shook her head good-naturedly, releasing the fae’s hands. “Well, if he won’t settle down when he should know he has a good thing,” she grinned, “perhaps this gentleman will do,” she suggested, moving to stand before Beltross. “You are mer,” she commented evenly.

“On my mother’s side,” the fae agreed.

“May you find fresh wind and clean water within my walls, *laeasha*,” she offered humbly, slowly bowing her head as she addressed the fae by the sea-word referring to friends who share a common hearth.

“You honor me, *ro-loash*,” Beltross answered, bowing in return, referring to Mallia as a friend and scholar, the syllables slow and drawn out, like the surf rolling up onto the sand. “It’s rare to find one among your kind that has taken the time to learn our tongue.”

Kai moved to stand next to the old woman, draping a friendly arm across her shoulders. “Mallia has been places and seen things that few mortals even believe to be true,” he beamed. “She was once known as the keenest blade this side of the endless plains.”

“That was a long time ago,” Mallia chuckled, her rosy cheeks deepening in color.

“She knows more than most about the fae,” Ko’laru interjected. “And more than any I know about the maat.”

The companions’ smiles faded at the mention of the alien race.

“Are you going to help us talk to them?” Traela asked from where she lay in Caraine’s arms.

“You’re looking for the maat?” the old woman asked, her gaze hardening, the warrior she once was suddenly remembered by the strength in her eyes and the iron in her jaw.

Kai nodded.

“To heal the girl?”

Kai closed his eyes, nodding once more.

“What is your sacrifice?” she asked, the words hushed and hard.

“I am,” Kai answered quietly, Ko’laru instinctively reaching out to intertwine her fingers with those of her lover.

“No!” Traela began to protest, but the young woman was immediately silenced by the strength in Mallia’s stare.

“It is not your choice to make,” Kai replied quietly.

“I won’t be healed then!” the girl protested, her jaw clenched in anger, tears welling in her eyes. “I’ll refuse.”

Mallia turned away from the young woman without answering, moving to gaze deep into Kai’s eyes. “You’re sure about this?”

The warrior nodded.

The old woman raised her eyebrows and let out a long slow breath. “Then come in,” she said, her voice suddenly sounding weak and tired. “You’ll need something to eat.”

“I won’t do it!” Traela exclaimed, her voice trembling. “I’m not going to let Kai die for me.”

Mallia turned toward the young woman, offering her a soft, tired smile. “He won’t have to. Not if we find the right kind of maat. They aren’t like us.” She shook her head, and then slowly turned to Kai once more. “You’re sure?”

Kai nodded, moving to take his student’s limp hand in his own as he met her unsteady gaze. “I told you the price would seem high, but that I had already measured it and am willing to pay.”

“But,” Traela began, only to be silenced as Kai gently laid a single finger across her lips.

“A warrior is always ready to die,” he offered softly, his eyes tinged with a faint sheen of guilt, the image of Traela turning toward his cry echoing in his mind. “It doesn’t matter if the battle is to save an entire village,” he paused, “or a single student. But if I have my way,” he smiled, his eyes filled with a depth of emotion the young woman couldn’t quite read, “I’d like to see a few more years, to settle down with Ko’laru and

put away my blade. Don't worry, I'm not quite ready to give up on that dream yet."

"I'll have someone collect your gear and stable your steed," Mallia offered, her lips pressed tightly together, her eyes analyzing the threads of fate that spooled out before her friends. "You'll have dinner with me tonight," she ordered. "We'll talk. We've faced worse than this in our time," she promised Traela. "The three of us; Ko'laru, Kai and myself; we've earned a tale or two that are worth spinning next to a warm fire and over a hot meal."

Traela still looked ill at ease, a single tear escaping to draw a wet trail down her dusty face.

"We go back a long way," she said softly, a conspiratorial tone slipping into her voice as they made their way through the inn, the old woman moving to walk beside the young girl as Traela was carried within. "I'm not about to let harm befall a true friend. A warrior once, a warrior always," she smiled. "I'll protect my friends to the last."



The companions sat around a large, circular table in a room that was normally reserved for private banquets and parties. A feast had been laid before them and the worth of the meal was displayed in the nearly empty platters and the scarcity of debris that filled the scattered plates. Caraine was the only one that still ate, having first fed Traela before seeing to her own hunger.

Two members of Mallia's staff appeared to clear away the empty plates and serving vessels, returning with bottles of wine and simple, sturdy goblets. Without a word, the old woman began to pour, filling the glasses one-by-one before handing them to each of the companions in turn.

"To the song of the blade and the dance of battle," she offered, raising her cup in toast. "May they sing loudly enough that fear is but a whisper, but not so loud we are unable to hear

our hearts.”

The companions drank deeply, Kai lowering his goblet to stare introspectively into the crimson liquid it held.

“I haven’t heard that in an age,” he said, raising his eyes to fix Mallia with a far away, melancholy smile.

“Since Lo’claera ‘no Wae,” Ko’laru agreed quietly.

“What is that?” Caraine asked, her curiosity mirrored in Traela’s eyes.

“The Battle of the Wildlands,” Mallia answered, slowly shaking her head as she lowered her cup and set it on the table. She laughed, quietly and to herself, raising eyes tinged with embarrassment as she realized she had an audience, as if the old woman had grown accustomed to entertaining her memories in solitary seclusion.

“It was a long time ago,” she continued, knowing that the words meant nothing to all but herself, Ko’laru and Kai. “Kai was little more than a child,” she added, sparing the warrior a gentle glance, “and although I was old enough to know better than to get involved in such things, I found reason to unsheathe a blade that had long been laid to rest.

“As you know, this city is built in mortal lands,” she said, standing as she spoke, gesturing with both hands to the room around them as if it encompassed the entire world. “And beyond the Firedrake River, if you know where to find them, lay the lands of the fae.”

“What do you mean?” Caraine asked, “If you know where to find them?”

“The land beyond the river is a haunted place,” Mallia answered. “Spirits roam the forests; creatures unlike anything found in the mortal realm prowl the landscape. But the world you can see with the naked eye is only a boundary, a wide border where two worlds overlap. It’s as if you stood on the shore of a vast sea and believed the world of the fae was composed of the waves that lap at the sand and the surface of the water that plays with the wind.”

The old woman smiled, pausing to take another sip of

her wine. “But the land of the fae isn’t the surface; it’s the world beneath the waves; the deep. The lands beyond the river are like that. We only see the surface when we cross the Firedrake. Unless you know where to look, unless you can find the portals, you will never be able to find the world beneath the waves. Or, in the case of the fae, the world beneath our world.”

“It’s underground?” Traela asked from where she lay atop a nearby table, her face turned toward the companions.

Mallia shook her head. “No. It’s as if the landscape were blanketed in a thick fog. The shapes we make out in the mist are the lands of the fae. But without access to a portal, we can not see beyond the fog. And once you cross over, it is our world that is hidden away. Such is the way that it was from the beginning of time.”

“Was?” Caraine asked.

The old woman paused, waiting to see if either the mer or the fae would choose to elaborate, but they deferred to their hostess.

“Our realm is bound by certain laws and prejudices, just as the land of the fae is bound by the same. Our two peoples are not encouraged to intermingle; we’re taught to shun and fear each other. But as you can clearly see,” she added, gesturing to the lovers with a nod and a knowing smile, “not everyone is willing to surrender to hate and fear.

“Someone, no one knows who and no one knows when, came upon a novel idea. If our two worlds could be separated by a veil that obscured one realm from the other, why should reality be limited to only two choices? So a third world was made, a world where the prejudices of man and fae would hold no power and where you could live free, by your own will, following your own heart.

“So the Wildlands came to be. It was a land unlike any other. It seemed as magical to the fae as their world seems to us. Old stories hint that the artists and dreamers of both peoples aided in its crafting. That their creation so inspired

the gods that they gave gifts to the new land that were unlike anything seen in any realm before or since.

“But dreams, sadly, are often feared more than reality.”

Mallia took her seat, raising her cup to her lips, taking a shallow sip, her memories swirling in her eyes.

Kai stood, his eyes staring beyond the far wall of the banquet room, his lips tightly pressed together. “No one knew how, or why, but both mortal and fae sat their prejudice aside for a single moment,” he said at last, his voice low, drawn taut with the tension of his memories. “The mortal army was led by a holy warrior mounted upon a white steed; the fae were led by a woman as cold as ice who had somehow lost all of the joy that her kind is welcomed into the world with. The attack came without warning. The Wildlanders were ambushed in the midst of a wondrous celebration, a rite filled with dancing and music amidst rough-hewn standing stones. Unarmed innocents were cut down in cold blood.” Kai paused, struggling as if he fought to continue. With a long soft sigh, he surrendered to the weight of his memories, lowering his eyes to the table, and then slowly taking his seat, unable to continue.

Ko’laru stood, the eyes of her fellow warriors watching her as she rose to her feet, standing tall. “We weren’t with the Wildlanders,” she said softly, each syllable spoken with the utmost care. “The three of us were counted among the invaders. We were manipulated; lied to; led to believe that the Wildlands were a threat that would destroy both our peoples. We charged from the darkness, spilling from beyond the boundary of their world, only to watch the enemy turn and run, to fall to their knees and beg for mercy. Men fought armored warriors with wooden staves; they tried to repel us with hunting bows and the stones of the field.”

Mallia cleared her throat, the sound unsure if it was holding back tears or preparing her voice to speak. “I was in charge of a platoon of the finest warriors ever to draw mortal breath.”

Ko’laru turned her eyes toward her lover. “I was

among the *Klaetos*, the Falcon's Strike, of my people. Kai was my parents' household slave; my father a great warrior among my people."

"There's a time," Kai began, his voice hushed, "when your path becomes clear. When what seems like a noble cause simply fades away and leaves you with a cold, hard truth."

"He convinced me," Ko'laru smiled, her eyes filled with a melancholy pride, "that we were wrong. I could see it with my own eyes. I just couldn't believe it until he bared his throat to me and told me that if I were going to continue to fight, I would have to kill him first."

Mallia coughed and wiped clumsily at her eyes. "When you watch fellow warriors so lost in their bloodlust that they cut down an innocent," she began, her voice wavering as she clenched her eyes tightly closed, a single tear escaping to slip down her wrinkled cheek. "There was this woman," she began again, raising her face toward the ceiling and opening her eyes, the tears streaming down her face as the memory rushed into her mind. "She was kneeling in the dirt; weeping; holding a dead child to her breast; screaming inconsolably. She was a threat to no one. I can still hear the horrible silence as a knight I had known for more than two decades cut her down. There are nights when I'll awaken in a cold sweat, when I know, beyond any doubt that it isn't sweat at all, but the woman's blood that splattered across my cheeks and forehead as I watched her die."

Ko'laru took Mallia's hand in her own, the fae continuing the tale. "To this day, no one knows exactly how it happened, or when, but we turned on our own kind. There were a handful of us," she paused, shaking her head, "by the gods, we were few. But we knew that life would not be worth living if we let these people die. Friend turned against friend; brother against brother."

"It was a massacre." Kai's voice was crisp and clear, the emotional armor he wore into battle slipped firmly in place. "We were cut down as quickly as those we chose to protect."

“What was so astonishing,” Mallia continued, “was that the armies wouldn’t stop. They refused to leave the field of battle. When we escaped, they pursued us for weeks, always nipping at our heels. We kept telling the Wildlanders, ‘Just a little farther. They can’t keep following,’ but they did.”

“There was a final battle,” Kai told the companions, his voice emotionless, as if he were simply reciting history.

“The old people were dying,” Ko’laru explained. “There was no food for the children. There were so many that were sick.”

“We found a place at the foothills of a steep mountain range,” Mallia continued. “We gathered our arrows and waited among the boulders. The enemy came in wave after wave. When we ran out of arrows, we threw rocks.” The old woman shook her head, stifling a chuckle at the absurdity of her words. “And when we ran out of rocks, a boy saved us.”

Ko’laru stood once more, her eyes filled with pride as she looked down upon her lover who remained seated at the table, staring into his wine. “He was a skinny, unkempt boy; fourteen years old, as best as anyone could remember. Bare-chested in a biting wind that swept down from the peaks, he took a sword that he could barely wield and challenged an entire army.”

“It wasn’t like that,” Kai whispered.

Mallia’s eyes gleamed. “He had given his coat and shirt to an even smaller boy. Some say that he had even given away his rations so that others could eat.” A mischievous grin turned up the corners of her mouth. “I even heard one storyteller swear that he was so weak from hunger that he could barely stand.”

Kai was silent, his eyes cast down on the table before him.

“So he challenged them,” Ko’laru continued, smiling broadly as she laid a hand on Kai’s shoulder. “He stood in front of the gathered armies and called them cowards. He dared them to cut him down. He put a face on who we were.

One warrior stepped forward, but he was so ashamed to kill a mere wisp of a boy," she prodded, "in front of his peers that he stepped back into their ranks."

"Do you remember what he said next?" the old woman beamed.

"I remember he stood tall, as tall as he could," Ko'laru answered, her pride overflowing her eyes. "By the gods, he was so skinny. He stood there, shivering in the wind," she began, only to have Mallia cut in.

"If your hearts won't let you kill a boy, then ask them why they would let you would kill his mother. His father. Ask your hearts why you would drive them from their homes. Why you would starve them. Why you come against them with sword and with shield when they don't even have rocks to throw at you."

"By the gods," Ko'laru laughed, "was it quiet."

"They tried to sign a treaty with the Wildlanders," Kai added, "but all of the dreamers' leaders had been killed. Those that had defected from the armies refused to aid the invaders and refused to return to their ranks. In the end, the armies just left. If they ever knew the real reason why they wanted to kill those who called the Wildlands home, they forgot it in the foothills of those mountains."

"And now," Mallia added, a strange seriousness filling her voice, "that boy wants to sacrifice himself once more."

The companions were silent for a long moment. It was Caraine who finally spoke.

"What do the maat require in exchange for their services?"

Mallia shook her head. "It depends on which one you ask. And you may only ask one. Somehow, they know. Some say the maat can read minds; others say they have many bodies, but one mind. Regardless of what the truth may be, you are only allowed to ask once. And while the price may be different with each individual, the first price you are offered is the one you must accept."

“In the past,” Kai added quietly, “they have asked for blood in exchange for healing. The right to inflict a serious wound for their study exchanged for the closing of the same.”

“No!” Traela shouted, her teeth gritted in determination. “I won’t let you! You can’t make me!”

“I have a good deal of coin set aside,” Mallia offered, doing her best to ignore the young woman’s protests while offering another option. “And a small fortune in stones. They aren’t doing anything for me but gathering dust. I’d be honored to lend them to your cause.”

“Thank you,” Kai said simply. “But not all of the maat have use for wealth.”

“Some do,” Mallia reminded him. “We’ll have to hope that the one we speak to is one of those that does.”



Traela lay atop the narrow bed, trying to feel the firm mattress beneath her motionless body. The blankets were soft where they whispered against her cheek, the mattress giving just enough that she could sense it supporting her head. But as she traced her body with her mind, the feeling became indistinct the farther she went. By the time she had reached her shoulders, it was merely a whisper that faded long before it reached her waist. She could feel certain sensations; wetness; warmth; but the weight of her body was lost to her, as if by finding it, she would discover the key which would free her from her immobile prison of flesh and bone.

The teen turned her attention to the moonlight that spilled in the open window, the dark curtains stirring gently in the faint breeze. She could hear the sound of music from the square and it seemed as if the curtains danced in time with the ethereal tune.

As Traela focused her attention on the distant sound, it seemed as if she could hear voices. Wrinkling her brow with the effort, she listened with her entire being, trying to pluck

words from the joyful chaos. She thought she could sense a conversation at the edge of her hearing, a whispered exchange that frustrated her with its nearness as she fought to understand the dialogue.

“Traela.”

There was no doubt that one of the voices had spoken her name. The young woman held her breath, afraid to breathe, as if the sound of the air moving in and out of her lungs would drown out the voices.

“You’re Traela, the fiery one.”

The teen remembered the battle for Raven’s Roost, the flames that had burst from her hands, spilling down her arms. She was sure that no one had seen the inferno, no one but the dark warriors that had fallen beneath her merciless blade.

“Who are you?” she asked, her voice so hushed it was barely audible.

“You’re the one,” the voice whispered again, the sound flavored with anticipation and an expectant joy.

“Who are you?” she asked again, an angry strength slipping into her words.

The curtains stirred as the wind grew, parting as if an unseen spirit had stepped through the portal and into the room. Traela followed the sound of ghostly footsteps that approached her bed, watched with wide eyes as the air beside her began to move, bending to form a transparent silhouette that peered down onto her motionless body.

“Who are you?” she demanded, the strength fading from her tone, the words quivering with fear as the being loomed above her.

“Don’t be afraid,” it smiled with its voice. “I’m a friend.”

“I don’t know any friends like you,” she whispered, her voice struggling to surface through her growing terror.

“Here,” he offered, the wind reaching for a basin of water that rested next to her bed. As it dipped its fingers into the bowl, the water was sucked up into the air, filling the body

with a slowly turning cyclone of liquid, giving a semblance of solidity to the figure that stood before her. A boy her own age gazed back at her, the water parting into a friendly grin. The fluid danced around a wild mane of hair, described elongated and gracefully pointed ears that peered from the tangle. “My name is Domen.”

“Why are you here?” she demanded, ashamed at the way her voice trembled in the stranger’s presence.

“I wanted to see you,” he answered simply, his smile growing as he suddenly looked embarrassed.

“Why?”

The watery boy turned toward the sound of the turning doorknob. In an instant, the water gave up its form, splashing to the floor, the wind racing through the open window, the curtains carried in its wake, tearing from the curtain rod to slowly flutter to the street below.

Beltross stepped through the portal, stopping, tilting his head to the side as if he heard distant voices. Hurrying to the window, he looked out onto the night, before shutting the panes and locking them with their latch.

“What was it?” Traela asked, suddenly relieved that her friend was at her side.

“Nothing to be afraid of,” the mer assured her, his attention still on the window. “I don’t sense any animosity. Whatever it was, it wasn’t here to harm you.”

Running a friendly hand through her hair, Beltross bent down and kissed her forehead with his thin lips. Standing, he offered her a soothing smile. “I just came to see if you needed anything. Do you?”

Traela shook her head.

Beltross raised his faint eyebrows, a delighted smile gracing his features. “You’re getting a little more movement back.”

“What do you mean?”

“You just shook your head.”

Traela’s eyes drowned in her hope. “Does that mean

I'm getting better on my own?"

"Maybe," Kai answered from where he stood in the open doorway, neither of his companions hearing his approaching footsteps. "Maybe not. Either way, we'll need the maat to determine the extent of your injuries and decide if you can heal on your own or if we need their aid."

Traela began to protest, but stopped as Kai turned to the mer.

"Beltross, do you smell that?"

"The honey scent?"

Kai nodded. "It's wildborne. Only those born in the Wildlands, the offspring of mortal and fae carry that scent."

"Is something wrong?" Traela asked.

Kai shook his head. "It's a good omen," he offered her with a half-smile. "It just means you've done something to attract their attention. The wilders never bring harm, but they may offer something to you. Weigh the exchange carefully; while they won't harm you, the terms of their deals are often left open to interpretation. Theirs, not ours."



The five companions paused before the open doorway that spilled out onto the lamp-lit street. There was no sign to inform them what lay within, but each of them could sense the energy that filled the building, the air pregnant with power like the promise of lightning before a gathering storm.

Mallia looked toward the two lovers who stood hand-in-hand before the portal. "Are you certain you want to go through with this?"

Ko'laru studied Kai's face, as if she clung to his response like a climber dangling from an alpine ledge.

The mortal warrior nodded; the fae closed her eyes, not realizing that she turned her face away from the man she loved.

Beltross stepped forward, Traela strapped to his back. "What kind of maat awaits us within?" he asked. "Is it the type

that will take coin in exchange for healing?”

Mallia was silent for a long moment. “There is no way to tell, *laeosha*,” she answered quietly. “The only way to know is to ask.”



The outer room was completely bare. There were no furnishings; no decorations hung from the walls. Only the flaking plaster that clung to the perimeter of the tiny chamber welcomed them. The stone floor had been scoured, swept so clean that not even the tiniest stone marred its pock-marked surface. The single interior doorway was covered with a heavy curtain that overlapped the portal so that no light escaped from within.

“We wait here,” Mallia offered. No one dared to question why.

Silently, the curtain parted and a solitary, hooded figure quickly glided through, gracefully closing the curtain behind it with such speed that the companions were left without even the faintest impression of what lay beyond. It turned toward them, regarding them from within the shadows of its hooded robe. Kai could feel its gaze sweeping over him, touching him, analyzing not just his features, but the structures within his body. Each organ was quickly isolated. He became sick to his stomach and an instant later, the sensation was gone. His lungs burned for air and before he could gasp for breath, they were fine. Each terrible feeling was synchronized with the being’s gaze and Kai’s only consolation was watching each of his companions go through the same discomfort in turn.

“The girl can be healed.”

The sound of the words was so alien that Kai wasn’t certain if he heard them with his ears or if they simply echoed in his mind. It was as if each of the tones echoed in fluid, not air. There was a strange, far away quality to each syllable, a soft reverberation that made it seem as if the speaker offered

the words not once, but several times, each recitation slightly out of synch with the one before. While the words could be understood, there was no doubt that the speaker was neither mortal nor fae, but something which had born in neither of their realms.

“I will require three *nosht*'s of the mer's blood,” the being continued. “And the male warrior will become a *trok*. This is the price to heal the girl.”

Mallia's lips parted as if to present a counter offer, but the being interrupted before she could speak.

“That is what I require.”

The old woman let out a deep sigh and turned to her friends. She suddenly appeared as if she would collapse under the weight of her years, as if she would soon be leaving the mortal plane to feast with the warriors that had died before.

“Beltross,” she began, the words tired and hesitant, “the maat has asked for about a tankard of your blood.”

“Which I freely give,” the mer replied with a shallow nod.

She turned to Kai, swallowing deeply as she struggled to meet his eyes. “And you, my dear friend,” she began, reaching out to touch his arm as she pressed her lips tightly together. “If you agree to the maat's price, you will never leave this place.”

Kai nodded, his face grim and resigned.

“No!” Traela screamed, her face twisted with anger. “I won't do it! You can't force me to do it!”

Ko'laru turned toward the maat. “Will she heal on her own?” she asked.

The girl grew quiet, waiting for the answer to the fae's question.

But the being was silent.

“Will she heal on her own?” she demanded, suddenly angry. “If we give her time,” she began, only to watch her words falter as the maat turned to leave.

“Wait.”

It was Kai's voice that stopped the maat.

"I need a moment," he said, turning toward Ko'laru.

"You can't force me to, Kai," Traela growled.

The mortal warrior turned toward the mer, Beltross nodding as he stepped outside, carrying the protesting young woman with him, Mallia following in their wake.

Kai tried to smile as he held Ko'laru's hands, but the gesture was lost under the weight of his pending sacrifice.

"Your people believe that mortals live more than one lifetime," he began, watching as his lover's eyes began to fill with tears. "And you, you will never age." He stopped, struggling to find the words to continue. "I can't go with the hope that Traela will heal on her own, only to watch as she never does."

"You don't know if," the fae began, but stopped at the sound of her own words. "If you risked her life on a hope for yourself," she smiled sadly, "you wouldn't be the man that I love."

"Wait for me?" he asked, his eyes brimming with tears.

"Even if it takes forever," she promised.

Kai let go of her hands, knowing if he kissed her that his strength would fail, that he would run and hide from his own fear in the sanctuary of their love and, by doing so, he would condemn Traela to live forever in the prison of her immobile flesh.

Fixing his eyes on the darkness within the maat's hood, Kai nodded once.

The creature moved across the floor, its feet making no sound. Clutching Kai's sword arm in a pliable, unbreakable grasp, it led him toward the curtained doorway. The mortal warrior looked down at the being's fingers. They were indistinct digits whose color shifted as if the maat's mottled flesh was filled with an ever-moving, smoky fluid. The being pushed him through the doorway and turned back to face Ko'laru.

"Bring the girl," it commanded in its alien voice.

Ko'laru called for Beltross and the mer stepped through

the doorway, Traela screaming with defiance and rage. Flames danced along her cheek bones, spreading outward from her eyes as her anger grew. The maat stepped forward and spoke a single word, laying his index finger along the bridge of the girl's nose. The flames instantly faded and the young woman grew still, falling limp as she tumbled into a shallow, uneasy sleep. Unstrapping Traela's unconscious body from the mer's back and taking the girl from the fae, the being turned to face Beltross.

“Return after sunrise,” it ordered simply. “I'll draw your blood at that time.”

Without another word, the being slipped through the curtain, leaving the companions alone in the outer chamber.

Ko'laru turned to meet Mallia's eyes, neither woman saying a word. The fae stood tall, trying to fight against the quivering of her lower lip, but as she lost the fight, she fell into the old woman's arms, sobbing as the mer embraced them both, Beltross whispering words of comfort in his mother's tongue, knowing they wouldn't touch the depth of Ko'laru's sorrow, but needing them to hold his own tears at bay.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: THE MAAT

Kai stopped just inside the curtained doorway, staring dumbstruck at the alien world that confronted him. The shape of the walls was obscured beneath a thick honeycomb of dark, crystalline material that formed an intricate dome overhead. Spider-like creatures scurried in and out of the octagonal cells, feeding bits of flesh to fat, ravenous worms that grew within the structure. Thick strings of mucus dripped here and there, pooling on the floor, the secretions gathered by emaciated humanoid creatures with thin, elongated limbs, the entities hurrying about on all fours. Kai watched, horrified as one of the beings filled its mouth with the honey-like substance before it skittered over to the wall. There, a mortal male waited, tendrils sprouting from his naked flesh, the shoots merging back into the honeycomb structure. Kai stepped back in revulsion and terror as the man docilely opened his mouth, allowing himself to be fed from the creature's lips. It was then that Kai realized that the man had no limbs, that his arms and legs had been carefully and cleanly severed close to his torso.

"Trok," the hooded maat explained, his heavy robes moving silently across the floor. "You will soon join him. But first we must prepare you."

The being gently laid Traela down on a narrow slab.

"Come," it ordered simply, gesturing the warrior toward an empty stone table.

Kai knew the girl's life depended on his will to obey.

He breathed deeply, thinking of Ko'laru, praying that her people were right and that he would be reborn to be with her again.

The mortal stopped next to the maat, watching as the creature unwrapped a rolled leather package, displaying an assortment of crystalline blades.

“Remove your shirt.”

Kai summoned his courage, doing as he was told.

The maat picked up one of the instruments and blew across its surface, the blade beginning to softly hum as it vibrated.

“This will hurt,” the hooded creature offered evenly.

Kai gritted his teeth as the maat cut deeply into the mortal's shoulder, continuing to power the scalpel with his breath, the vibrating blade slicing easily through muscle and tissue. Tears streamed down the warrior's face as the incision moved from his shoulder to his upper back. Through the pain, Kai somehow realized that the maat wasn't dissecting him; the maat was drawing, carving patterns deep into the warrior's flesh.

With a suddenness that took his breath away, Kai gasped as the scalpel was withdrawn, the human collapsing against the table he stood before. He panted heavily, unable to catch his breath, his back drenched with the warm wetness of his own blood. He watched as the maat moved to the rotting carcass of a huge predatory cat, reaching within its decaying torso to retrieve a handful of transparent maggots, each the length of Kai's index finger.

“These will make you strong,” the maat explained, guiding the grubs into Kai's wounds, their entry into his body releasing wave after wave of fiery agony, the warrior screaming as his flesh burned. He arched his back, grinding his teeth together as the creatures burrowed deeper into his wounds, Kai growling unintelligibly, fighting against the pain that overwhelmed his senses.

He raised his head, gazing through teary eyes as the

maat approached him with a glass vile of thick green liquid.

“And this will complete the transformation.”

Kai clawed at the stone table as he screamed. It felt as if the flesh was being burned from his naked back, as if muscle and skin had liquefied and spilled down his torso. He roared as the maat pushed more of the grubs into Kai’s wounds, the mortal’s voice changing, deepening in pitch, until it shifted to a magnificent bellow that echoed through the alien room.

“You are strong,” the maat offered, the words buried beneath Kai’s screams, but echoing within the mortal’s mind. “The worms will make you stronger. They will give you the strength of the great cat. They will knit you together with its soul. Then you will be a harvest worth the effort to claim.”



Ko’laru growled, her eyes flashing as her gaze burned through the curtained portal. Beltross stood in her way; Mallia restrained her with both hands, trying to hold the fae back.

“This isn’t worth it,” Ko’laru growled. “Traela will find another way to be healed.”



Kai felt the maat’s hands leave him, the mortal warrior slumping exhausted against the table. His legs refused to hold him upright and Kai slipped to the floor, laying amidst crusted flakes of drying blood and the skittering, alien insects that slowly collected the bits of decaying flesh to feed to their young. The maat stood above him, its hood cocked to the side as if the creature within listened to a distant voice.

“No,” he heard it whisper in his mind. “I did nothing wrong.”



“You have to listen to me.” Mallia’s words were strong and insistent, her lips next to Ko’laru’s ear as she fought to restrain the fae. “The maat are a match for twenty mortal warriors. We will rescue Kai, but to rush in their without a plan is suicide.”

Ko’laru’s body grew slack, her strength fading as the last echo of her lover’s screams faded from her hearing.

“Promise me,” she said, her voice cold and remorseless, her eyes filled with the promise of death as she raised her gaze from the floor, “that I will be the one to slay the maat. That I will be the one to claim his life,” Ko’laru demanded. “That I will kill him as I see fit.”



Before Mallia could answer, a figure stepped through the doorway that led from the street into the small shop. The silhouette was tall and powerful and as it moved so that the light from the city outside played across its figures, Ko’laru felt her heart stop in her chest. The fae instantly understood that, despite Mallia’s warning, the maat within was not a warrior, but the creature that stood before her was.

His flesh was covered with a patchwork of mismatched leather pieces; a mask of tanned hides was molded to its face, the maat’s features defined by an overlay of skin from a dozen races. It appeared as if the maat was crafted from paper mache, as if the flesh of the slain had been moistened and pressed against the frame of a humanoid face. Its clothing was fashioned the same way, as if fragments from hundreds of slain had been tanned and sewn together to form his tunic; the dark, chaotic trousers; even its high boots. In its hand it held a crystalline blade, the hilt wrapped with leather drawn from a dozen species. With an unholy speed it spun its head toward the companions, holding them with featureless pale gray eyes in which dark clouds slowly drifted.

Without a word the maat was gone, a blur streaking

from the outer room into the inner sanctuary, the fluttering curtain the only testimony that it had ever stood before them.

“Don’t move,” Mallia whispered. “Its blade was drawn. Whatever it came to do is already done.”

“Kai?” Ko’laru asked.

Mallia shook her head. “The minds of that maat are linked, but I don’t think this one has come for Kai. If he has come for your love, it’s already too late.” The old woman paused, her eyes filled with dread and sorrow. “I’m sorry, but you’ll have to await him in the next life.”



Jheton Ghat slipped through the curtained doorway, the world slowing as he called upon the speed of his ancestors, the power of those he had slain to earn his skin. The maat had carved a trophy from each of the fallen, allowing the tiny symbiotes that lived within him to tan the flesh to leather, to merge the tokens of battle with his form, slowly forming a hard, flexible carapace of the dead. The maat had no skeleton to restrict them, no muscles to limit their mobility or speed, only a membrane which contained their essence, that moved according to their will. Pierce it and they would die. But earn a skin and a warrior that could move like the wind would become unstoppable, capable of besting any foe locked in a prison of flesh and blood. The maat’s deadly speed was protected within armor earned one battle at a time. It was the way of his people; a path they had followed since before the beginning of their history. A path of honor, it was a path that Jheton Ghat had devoted his life to embody.

He moved again as his prey turned toward the door, the warrior a blur as he slipped amidst the stone tables and cadavers, Jheton’s distaste for the blasphemer tainting the fluids that filled the warrior’s form. The *troetah* wore a hooded skin woven by mortal hands, formed of fibers taken from plants and died by berries that had grown in the light of the sun. There

was no honor in the fabric that clothed the blasphemer, no tale to be told in its weave.

Jheton slid around the table, his movements a blur, the motion completed while the sound of his passing still hung in the air. He could sense the confusion in his prey, the blasphemer not understanding how a movement could be handed to the weave of fate before the sound had reached its ears. Dropping into a silent crouch, Jheton knelt over the mortal, watching as Kai turned his eyes toward the warrior maat, the human instinctively knowing not to move, not to so much as breathe.

“He is the one spoken of in *castatt*, in the water of life,” Jheton warned, referring to the sacred prophesy. The maat’s blade was held suspended above the floor, resting easily in the warrior’s hand. “He will continue our way. He will bring honor to our path.”

“The mortal is the price I claimed,” the hooded maat protested. “Imagine what I will harvest from him when his transformation is complete.”

Jheton exploded from the floor with such speed that the strike could not be seen, the attack completed with such swiftness that he once again crouched motionless above the mortal warrior when the sound of his crystalline blade split the air. There was a sickening gurgle as the blasphemer tried to protest, but his membrane had been breached from groin to throat. The fibers of his tunic surrendered easily to Jheton’s blade, the blasphemer’s fluid splashing to his feet as the hooded maat collapsed to the floor.

“Dead things do not speak,” Jheton said aloud, reciting the fourth precept of the warrior caste. Stepping forward, he claimed the scalpel from where it lay in the dead maat’s deflated hand, its body laying like a discarded wine skin, empty and forgotten. Carving a section of membrane away from the corpse, Jheton raised it to his lips and spit into his palm, tiny parasites falling from his mouth, the thin, white worms swimming in the pool of saliva. He watched as they

began to go to work, attacking the flesh Jheton had carved from the blasphemer. He watched as the trophy changed at the molecular level, the dead maat's fragile membrane growing pliable and hard. Without ceremony, the warrior pressed the newest trophy against the underside of his heel, feeling it merge with the dead flesh that formed the sole of his boot.

"You had no honor," he said to the dead maat.

Standing, the maat sheathed his blade and turned to face Kai.

"You are free of any obligation," the maat offered with a subtle bow, his words reverberating as they filled the air.

"I gave of myself freely," Kai replied softly, not moving from where he lay, "so that the girl could be healed."

Jheton stood to his full height and turned to face Traela. Appraising her for a long moment, he turned back to Kai, fixing the mortal warrior with his pale, cloudy eyes.

"She is also spoken of in the castatt," he said simply. "She will be healed." Jheton turned toward Ko'laru who waited just inside the curtain. "Your wounds will heal on their own," he said to Kai. "But you are not the same man who entered this place. Go. Go to the one who loves you. I will bring the girl to you when she is ready."

Kai slowly stood and began to speak, but was silenced by a glance from Mallia, the old woman watching over Ko'laru's shoulder, the fae standing in the doorway to the room.

"I will find you when she is healed," Jheton said, his voice filled with a strange finality. "Do not think that I will not."



Kai had taken a single step toward the woman he loved when his legs gave way, toppling him to the floor. He gritted his teeth in agony as the impact of the fall jarred his wounds, his face turning pale as his vision swam, the world before him

collapsing into a dark, narrow tunnel.

Hands lifted him; someone carried him. Kai could remember voices, the sounds of the street, the blur of light that poured down from the streetlamps, but he couldn't think, his mind lost in a sea of pain. The grubs that had burrowed into the incisions the maat had made still moved, transforming his flesh, working their way deeper into his body. Kai tried to speak, but wasn't sure that his lips had made words. He couldn't hear. He couldn't think. Every noise was deafening; scents overpowered his nose. Kai growled in discomfort, wanting to lick his wounds, somehow knowing they were in a place where his tongue wouldn't reach.



“We need to hurry.”

Ko'laru pleaded with her eyes, begging Beltross to move faster, the mer carrying Kai slung over his shoulder.

“We need to look at those wounds. I don't know what they did to him in there.” The fae's eyes were wide with panic and concern, the warrior within her itching to respond to the threat that assaulted the man she loved, knowing that she was helpless to aid him until they were safe with Mallia's inn.

Beltross grimaced, his eyes flashing, his patience growing thin. “We'll get there, Ko'laru,” he answered, his voice steady, but strained. “I'm going as fast as I can.”

The companions turned their eyes toward their wounded friend as a low growl rumbled in Kai's throat.

“That sound wasn't human,” Ko'laru exclaimed, worried and afraid. “What did they do to him in there?”

“The maat change things,” Mallia replied, opening the door to her inn and holding it wide as the companions rushed Kai within. “Where we build things with wood and stone, where we craft tools of iron and steel, they craft with living things. Their culture is composed of creatures that live on other creatures, that change other creatures, a thousand tiny

beings that the maat have trained to alter the world according to their will.”

“What did they do to Kai?” Ko’laru asked again, her eyes growing wide with fear as the growl reverberated deep within her lover’s throat once more.

“I don’t know. Take him into the banquet room.”

Mallia turned to one of her staff. “Bring me hot water and clean towels.” The young woman immediately leapt to obey. The old warrior shifted her attention back to the fae. “I know a thing or two about healing. I’ll look at the wound and see what can be done.”



Traela looked up from the table she lay on. She had regained awareness just before the hooded maat was cut down, but the young woman had been too terrified to speak.

Jheton knelt next to the blasphemer’s skin, dropping out of Traela’s sight. The young woman could only imagine what the maat was doing, a part of her hoping that it would simply go away, that it would leave her alone and that her friends would return for her. But as the maat stood once more, moving toward her with a scalpel in one hand and a long, writhing creature in the other, she knew that the worst was still to come.



Jheton knelt next to the blasphemer’s skin, the scalpel held in the warrior’s hand. Through the tiny slit that served as a mouth in his patchwork leather mask, Jheton blew across the crystalline blade, smiling as the instrument began to vibrate and hum. His own sword was grown in the same caverns where the scalpel was born and the blade he wore at his hip could slice through stone once a breath of air powered its edge.

Cutting away the moist tunic that hid the deflated membrane, Jheton shifted his awareness inward, the murky

pools of his eyes solidifying and growing pitch black. In the depths of his mind he could hear the minds of his kin, just as his own presence echoed in the thoughts of his brethren. Forever linked by the symbiotes that each of them was given at birth, they could hear each other's minds, see through each other's eyes, and share each other's knowledge across vast distances.

It was knowledge that he sought and Jheton listened carefully to the minds of the maat, trying to discern the sound of a single raindrop in the midst of a downpour. As he intently focused, not striving to seek a single voice, but slowly blocking out those that were not what he sought, the metropolis in Jheton's mind began to thin, until only a single presence awaited him within.

"A stilled voice must sing," Jheton said, knowing that the maat whose mind he touched could see through his own eyes, could read the warrior's thoughts in the same way Jheton found the healer. He didn't need to explain Traela's wounds; the healer could see them in the warrior's memories. All Jheton needed to do was tell the healer his intent.

The warrior's membrane rippled as he allowed the distant healer's presence to join his own. Another's will guided the rapidly vibrating scalpel; expert hands guided the blade as it opened the dead maat's membrane. With quick, efficient motions, symbiotes were moved away, the collection of multi-colored worms and gossamer threads were carefully set aside. From the center of the membrane, Jheton watched as his hands extracted a long, centipede-like creature, its legs were long and slender tentacles that waved frantically as the healer used the warrior's hands to pull it free.



"What is that?" Traela asked, her voice quivering, her eyes wide with fright.

Jheton's layered voice echoed in her mind. "The cord

that allows your mind to speak to your body has become frayed. This will bridge the gaps.”

Traela swallowed. “Will it hurt?”

The healer within the warrior’s mind nodded. Reaching out with a single hand, he firmly pressed two fingers against the base of Traela’s skull, watching as the girl quickly lost consciousness. “But you will not feel the pain. Not even when you awake.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: CHANGES

“I can’t be the one that does this.”

Ko’laru held the knife in trembling hands, turning to meet the eyes of her companions. “I know those things need to come out, but I can’t be the one to do it.”

Mallia moved to stand beside the fae. “You’ve used a knife to heal those wounded in battle. This is the same thing. Just think of Kai as another warrior.”

“I can’t,” she admitted honestly, slowly shaking her head, her eyes torn between helping and hurting the man she loved. “He’s not just another warrior to me.”

“I would volunteer,” Beltross reminded her, holding up his webbed hands, “but these weren’t made for delicate work.”

“And age has robbed me of a steady hand,” Mallia said softly, compassion echoing in her eyes. “I would try, but I’m afraid I would do more harm than good.”

“I’ll do it,” Caraine said at last, reluctantly taking the blade from Ko’laru’s hand. “I’ve seen inside his soul when he allows the warrior within to manifest. This can’t be any worse.

“Are you sure you can do this?” the old woman asked.

Caraine nodded with a shudder of poorly concealed revulsion. “It’s just that I really hate bugs.”

Kai lay face down on the banquet table, stripped to the waist. Already his wounds had begun to heal, the swelling dissipating as the grubs moved deeper within his body.

The companions had no idea what the creatures had been

engineered to do, but their handiwork was evident. An intricate network of delicate blue lines lay just beneath the surface of Kai's skin, extending from the wounds the maat had made to traverse the length of the warrior's body. With each passing moment, the threads grew in number. A new line would appear, rapidly stretching from the wound, speeding down an arm as it worked its way toward his fingertips, or racing down his torso as it stretched toward his toes. At first, the color would be brilliant, a cobalt thread snaking beneath the mortal's flesh. But as soon as the line reached its destination, the color would begin to fade, until it was lost beneath the blush of Kai's skin.

"What are they?" Ko'laru asked again.

Mallia could only shake her head. "I don't know."

"What was the maat trying to do to him?"

"I don't know," the old woman answered. "I just don't know."

The fae swallowed deeply, her eyes fixed on Kai's wounds. The flesh had almost healed; even the scars from the incisions were beginning to fade. "We can't leave those things in him."

No one spoke.

Caraine took a deep breath, summoning her will. "Hold him," she ordered, her voice both tense and resigned.

Beltross and Mallia took hold of the mortal's arms. Ko'laru stepped away, covering her mouth with her hands, her worried gaze peering above her anxious fingers.

"Forgive me," Caraine whispered softly, touching the blade to Kai's naked flesh.

Instantly, the warrior sprang to life, arching his back as a ferocious roar bellowed from deep within his chest. Beltross wrapped both of his arms around the mortal's appendage, the powerful fae struggling to hold Kai in place. Mallia fared worse, her face turning white with effort, her teeth audibly grinding as she fought to keep her friend pinned to the table.

"I can't hold him!" the old woman warned.

Caraine backed away, watching as Kai grew still, the warrior lying on his stomach where they had placed him on the table, his torso rising and falling with each powerful breath.

Mallia stepped away, gingerly rubbing a wrenched forearm. "By the gods he's gotten strong."

"Should we try again?" the mer asked.

The old woman shook her head. "I can't hold him down. He's grown too strong for me."

Ko'laru met her elderly friend's gaze. "Can you hold the blade? Caraine and I can help hold him in place."

"Not steadily," Mallia admitted seriously, as if she were appraising the ability of troops to survive an up-coming battle. "Especially if he's going to fight us like that."

"He's not conscious," Beltross offered, crouching next to Kai's head.

"Nor was he the first time we began," Mallia reminded the mer.

"What did they do to you?" Ko'laru asked softly, her words so hushed they were lost to all but the mer's sensitive ears. "What did we do to you when we agreed to let you sacrifice yourself?"

"Beltross," Mallia began, "if you brace yourself, can you hold both his arms?"

The mer moved to grasp one of Kai's wrists in each hand, planting his feet against the legs of the banquet table and leaned back, watching as the mortal began to slide slowly forward on the table.

"I can try."

Mallia stepped away, nodding to Caraine to begin. The instant that the blade touched Kai's flesh, the warrior began to fight, Beltross grimacing with the effort to hold his friend in place.

"You'd better hurry," he warned with a strained growl. "I can't hold him long."

Caraine swallowed and cut deeply, wincing as her friend's scream rent the air. She knew that it couldn't hurt as

badly as he let on, but Kai fought them with his entire being, deep, primal roars ripping the air, bellowing from deep within his chest.

The woman stepped back, cursing as she gazed within the wound.

Mallia hurried forward to look; Ko'laru took a step away. The incision was filled with a web of blue spider thread, the network so dense that it hid Kai's inner flesh. There was no blood, the mortal's exposed bodily fluids being instantly absorbed by the fibers so that he didn't lose even a drop of liquid. The companions watched as the wound began to close, as Kai's flesh knit itself whole before their eyes, the cobalt threads bridging the incision and pulling it closed.

"By the gods," Mallia cursed.

"What have you become?" the fae asked softly as she watched her lover heal, as he grew still once more.



"Are you ready to stand, sister?"

Traela opened her eyes, recognizing Jheton Ghat, a warrior of the Bloodwind Brood, standing before her. The young warrior willed her fluid to shift, to lift her membrane upright, surprised that the command was lost within her being.

"You are not fully one of us," Jheton explained, his voice clear and precise within her mind. "Your body is still partly one of the rigid folk."

Traela sat up, moving with such speed that she began to fall off the table, her reflexes reacting instantly to catch her.

"It will take some time to adjust," the maat told her.

"I can hear the others," Traela informed him, her lips motionless, her words sent through the link that connected all of her newfound kin. "Our voices are hushed, but they are here."

Jheton nodded. "There will be many things for you to adapt to."

Traela slipped from the table, landing gracefully on her feet. “I am of two minds,” she offered simply, her brow furrowing with curiosity. “I remember being a young female of the rigid folk,” she began, the words spoken into the air, the sound of her voice slowly fading as she puzzled over her fate. “This body was broken,” she told the maat with her mind, running her hands down the sides of her torso as if she were a tailor appraising the weave of a bolt of fabric. “You repaired it,” she added simply, stating a fact, not offering thanks.

Jheton nodded once.

“I also remember being another,” she began, stopping as a look of detached understanding filled her eyes. “I abandoned the path set by my brood.” The young woman knelt amidst the debris, both of her knees on the floor, sitting on her heels. Traela bowed her head to the maat as if awaiting execution, her palms resting on her thighs. “Release me from my shame,” she said to the floor, the voice of her mind steady as it spoke. “And purify the fluid that I inherited from my hive-mates.”

The warrior maat drew his sword. The weapon was long and slender, the crystalline blade graced with sigils and runes, drawn by a destiny worm as the insect’s acidic flesh leaked from a mortal wound. Its death taught the sword to kill, its writhing patterns engineered to speak the language of the maat, to burn the words of fate into the blade with its blood. His sword had chosen him, calling out to his mind as he walked amidst the cavern of living blades, the carefully shepherded crystals growing from the stone around him. Together, they would fight for the honor of the maat, a holy warrior wielding a sacred blade. Such were the words etched with the worm’s blood. Such was the path Jheton Ghat had been called to.

Jheton blew along the edge of the blade, the room filled with a melodic hum as the weapon sprang to life, the vibrating crystal able to slice through steel with ease. With a lightning quick strike, he cut a deep incision along the girl’s cheek beneath her eye. Traela knelt motionlessly as the blood began

to flow down her face, the white of her cheek bone peering through the deep, clean wound.

Slowly, the teen raised her eyes. “You didn’t kill me,” she offered softly.

“You have honor,” the maat offered with a shallow nod. “The scar you will bear will remind you of that.”

Traela remained kneeling on the floor, watching as Jheton raised the sword to his mouth of his leather mask once more, the hum growing in volume as he blew along the edge of the blade. Moving it to his off-hand, he made a shallow incision from the tip of the middle finger of his sword arm, tracing the wound down the center of his palm, continuing down his limb until he reached the middle of his forearm. Sheathing his weapon, the maat carefully peeled back a layer of his patchwork armor, working it away from the layers underneath until he held a strange, leather glove away from his body.

“Wear this with pride,” he said, giving the glove to Traela. He could feel the girl’s understanding of its significance, that she now bore the honor he had earned, that the blasphemer’s shame was washed away in the face of Jheton’s deeds. The teen slipped her hand into the sheath, standing as Jheton spit along the seam, the symbiotes in his saliva closing the glove around Traela’s hand and arm. “Our brood will see the flesh you wear and know that you have honor, that you are one of those that hear the call of battle and answer with your own song.”

Traela bowed her head in thanks, flexing her gloved fingers, marveling at the fit. Raising her gaze to Jheton, she met the warrior with eyes that swirled, not with the smoky hues of the maat, but with the crimson colors of the fire she carried within.



Kai sat cross-legged at the foot of the bed that he and

Ko'laru shared, his eyes closed as he listened to the world around him. He could smell the meal that was being cooked in the inn's kitchen on the floor below. At first, the scents surprised him, waking him from his deep sleep, and the warrior had caught himself glancing around the guest room, searching for the tray of food he was sure was present. The mortal was filled with confusion as he gazed about the familiar room, recognizing Mallia's inn but not understanding how he had escaped the maat. Traela's immobility instantly sprang to mind, a sense of failure sweeping over Kai as he realized that he had gone free, that the price for her healing had not been paid. But his remorse was lost beneath an overwhelming hunger that blotted out everything else. As he began to make sense of the world that reached his senses each time he inhaled, he realized that the scent was distant and quickly deduced its source. Summoning the training that had earned him the right to be called a warrior, Kai fought to control his desires, breathing deep and slow as he pushed the growling of his stomach beneath the clarity of a structured mind.

Closing his eyes, Kai had raised his nose to the wind that gently wafted through the open window, marveling at the scents he could now pick from the air. Spices from the distant market spoke to him of a merchant's booth; flowers drifted up from a far-off garden. Kai began to smile as he explored the new reach of his senses, but was suddenly distracted by the whispered sound of footsteps approaching the stairs. He listened as the stair steps shifted beneath the pedestrian's weight, the sound so light that it could not be described as a creak, but as a gentle stretching of the wood's grain.

The footsteps approached and Kai opened his eyes as the doorknob to the room softly turned and the woman he loved stepped through the doorway.

"I could hear you coming," he smiled in greeting, his heart leaping in his chest as he saw how beautiful she was, as if he were but a young boy seeing her for the first time.

Ko'laru met his gaze. "I didn't think I would ever see

you again,” she softly answered.

Kai’s smile faded as her melancholy reflected in his eyes.

The fae moved to sit beside him, taking her lover’s hands in her own.

“Come with me,” she asked with a desperate smile that somehow dared to hope he would agree. “We’ve fought for our convictions long enough.” She paused, moistening her lips with the tip of her tongue. “Come and live with me. Join your life with mine.” The pace of her words stumbled, lost beneath the flood of emotion that suddenly brought tears to her eyes. “I love you, Kai. I don’t know how I could survive if I lost you. I almost did once. I don’t want to risk that again.”

The mortal warrior closed his eyes and slowly bowed his head.

Ko’laru wiped her tears away with the back of her hand. “I know,” she said, her voice sad and resigned. “Duty.”

The word floated between them, the air heavy with its weight.

Kai opened his eyes, raising them to meet the gaze of the woman he loved.

“We rescue Rann,” he began, “and our old companions and get them somewhere safe.” He paused, his own smile growing as the joy was rekindled in Ko’laru’s eyes. “And then you allow me the honor of asking you.”

Ko’laru laughed out loud, unable to hold her delight within.

“There are a lot of things that could happen along the way,” he warned, watching as his lover gently nodded.

“But we’re close to the end,” she added softly.

Kai reached up and tenderly wiped away the tear that slipped down her cheek.

“And when we reach it,” the fae began, only to have Kai finish her thought.

“Then it’s time for us to have a new beginning.”



“Look who’s up.”

Kai smiled a greeting to the mer, entering the banquet hall hand-in-hand with the fae he loved.

“How are you feeling?” Mallia asked, Caraine closing her open mouth as if she were about to ask the same thing.

“I feel fine,” Kai said, slowly shaking his head with a self-conscious grin. “To be honest, I feel better than fine.”

The companions looked uneasy.

“There are creatures inside of you,” Mallia began. “I don’t know what they were designed to do, but we couldn’t remove them.”

Kai felt his smile fade. “The maat said they would make me strong. If we can’t change the fact that they’re in me,” he asked with a hint of mischievousness, “What does it gain us to worry about them?”

Two of Mallia’s servers began to bring in trays of food, setting them on the large, wooden table.

“Besides,” he added, eyeing the meal. “I’m starving.”



As they ate, Kai told them all that he had learned of the maat. The procedures were a world even Mallia had never witnessed, and the old woman had no insight to add. Much to his relief, the companions informed him that Traela was being tended by a different member of the maat, that she would be healed and returned to them as soon as she was able.

“So what is your plan?” Mallia asked. “What’s your next step?”

“We wait for the maat to return Traela,” he offered, taking a long sip of cold cider from a large, stoneware mug. “Then we track down Nollon.”

“We’re going after him?” Caraine asked uneasily. “I though the idea was to avoid a conflict, that we were trying to stay out of the prophesy, rather than jumping into the middle of

it.”

“He has Rann,” the warrior answered evenly, “and from what we learned at Raven’s Roost, the boy may be the key to the entire prophesy. What’s more, he’s kidnapped Daen and Leiron. I’m not going to leave any of them in his hands.”

Caraine lowered her eyes to her plate.

“This isn’t an attack, Caraine. It’s a rescue mission. We’re going to need to be silent and unnoticable on the way in and may need to run and fight every step of the way when we have our friends. You don’t have to go with us,” Kai offered. “I told you from the first that I would keep you from this struggle. If you’d like, Beltross will take you and give you shelter among his people.”

“No,” the mer answered, slowly and defiantly shaking his head, “I won’t. I’m going with you.”

“I appreciate the offer,” Kai replied honestly, “but you have the heart of a philosopher, not of a warrior.”

“Nollon has my friend,” the mer answered simply. “I won’t abandon Leiron.”

Kai had seen the look in other warriors, in other battles, and he knew that it was useless to argue.

Mallia began to speak, but Kai interrupted with a good-natured smile.

“Don’t tell me you’re coming too.”

The old woman laughed, shaking her head. “I wouldn’t be of any use to anyone. Battle for me is rolling out of bed in the morning,” she grinned. “Too many conflicts have taken their toll. I ache even when I’m warm. I have no desire to spend my nights on the cold ground when I have a warm bed here. But I was going to offer to take Caraine in.” Mallia turned to the younger woman. “If you’d like, you may call this place home until your friends return.”

Caraine reached out and squeezed the old woman’s hand in her own. “I may take you up on that.” She paused, fixing Kai with her gaze. “I’m not abandoning you. But we both know that for this sort of thing, I would only be in the

way.”

“Before you decide,” Kai interjected, “I need you to do something for me.”

Caraine answered with a curious glance.

“You know how to scry. You can see things that others cannot. I need you to find Nollon for me. All I ask is that you find him. I’ll take care of the rest.”

Caraine nodded. “When would you like me to begin?”

“As soon as possible.” The warrior glanced around the table, meeting the eyes of his companions and finding no dissent in their gaze. “Tonight, if you can.”

“I can do it here,” she began, “but it would be easier if I was somewhere that was designed for divination or magic.”

“It would be easier in the tower,” the tone of his voice agreeing to her request. “I’ll accompany you, if you’d like.”

The woman nodded, turning her thoughts inward as she tried to see the path ahead of her. Caraine wondered where she should go, wondered if she should abandon her friends for the safety of Mallia’s inn.



The companions raised their eyes toward the door as the air in the room shifted, Kai and Ko’laru turning first, both able to sense the presence that entered the room. Jheton Ghat stood with Traela, the two newcomers completely silent in their approach.

Kai stood, moving to stand before them. “It’s good to see you upright,” he said to his student.

Traela met his gaze with eyes that swirled with the colors of a smoldering flame. “You are Kai,” she said simply. “You agreed to teach the rigid folk that wore this body.”

“She is of two minds,” Jheton explained, reading the question in Kai’s gaze even before the maat felt it phrased in the mortal’s mind. “That will change. But it was necessary for her healing.”

“You have a claim to this body,” Traela continued, as if Jheton had never spoken. “I must relinquish that claim by defeating you in combat, as is the way of the brood, of the warrior caste. It is my desire to complete my training with Jheton Ghat, as it was he who released me from my shame.”

Kai began to speak, but stopped as the maat turned to the young mortal, Jheton speaking to Traela with his mind.

“That is not possible,” he said evenly.

“It is because I am of two worlds.” Traela held his gaze for a long moment, staring deep into the smoky pools that peered from behind the patchwork leather mask. “I will deny my humanity, ritually sever my connection to the rigid folk. I will move naked through my destiny until I earn a skin worthy to be worn by our kind. Then I will be free to pursue the ways of our ancestors.”

“No,” the maat answered aloud, the word carrying the strange weight of an apology. “You will not.”

Jheton reached out, taking Traela’s skull in his hands, pulling her close so that they gazed deeply into each other’s eyes. The young mortal could feel his presence in her thoughts, not speaking to her, but searching, delving deep into her unconscious as he sought the threads that he would use to weave the teen’s consciousness whole.

Traela’s eyes grew wide as Jheton began his work. Her body began to tremble as he reached deep inside her, searching for the mind of the blasphemer, for the consciousness that remained with the symbiote he had used to bridge her injuries. The blasphemer fought him, but the heretic’s hold was already loosening, weakened under the strength of Traela’s persona.

Trembling, a low moan slipped between Traela’s lips as the maat held her tight, the sound growing in volume as Jheton delved deeper. It began as a detached, emotionless groan, flavored with the life of the maat. But as Jheton continued his work, as Traela’s personality began to assert its dominance, a terrible emotion filled the sound, even as the moan grew from a low murmur to a tortured scream. The maat held her tightly,

digging ever deeper as the teenager fought him, as she clawed against his grip, screaming, unable to look away from the deep pools of his eyes. But Jheton ignored her in the unfeeling ways of the maat, delving deeper as he reconnected the portions of her mind that were submerged beneath the consciousness of the heretic, digging deeper than even Traela's mentors had dared to go.

"Enough!"

The fury in the voice surprised even the maat, who turned to meet the steel in Caraine's eyes.

"Back off or you will answer to me," the mortal woman growled, raising to her full height, standing so close to Jheton as she glared into the maat's eyes that the warrior could feel her breath on the patchwork carapace he wore.

Jheton released Traela, the teen slumping to her knees, catching herself with one hand, bracing herself on the inn's hardwood floor. Caraine was instantly at her side, kneeling in front of the girl. Lifting the teen's eyes to her own with a gentle touch on Traela's chin, Caraine met the girl's gaze. Unlike the maat, the mortal was filled with compassion and understanding. She had looked inside Kai to find his warrior spirit. She knew she could resurrect Traela's humanity.

"Breathe slowly," Caraine whispered, the teen holding onto the words as if they were her lifeline. "Breathe slowly and try to relax your mind."

Traela did as she was told, closing her eyes as she fought to focus.

"I need you to look at me," the older woman told her, Traela opening her eyes once more, struggling to focus on the older woman's gaze.

"Just try," Caraine smiled. "I'll do the rest."

The older woman let herself fall into Traela's gaze. As her mind reached into the teen's thoughts, Caraine didn't allow herself to completely submerge into her friend's mind, but rather to simply brush the surface of her essence. It wasn't a demand that the woman presented, but an offer. Traela would

have to reach toward it herself. She couldn't be forced to reassert her will. The girl would have to want it.

Caraine began to smile as she felt the familiarity begin to grow, the young woman she knew flooding the teen's mind. As Traela recaptured her thoughts, as she felt herself reawaken into a healed body, she threw herself forward, wrapping her arms around Caraine as the younger woman wept, both from the tragedy of her journey and the relief that she had arrived.

"She'll be alright," Caraine promised, turning her eyes toward her companions as she held the girl close. "It will take time before she is whole and healed, but she'll be alright."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: PREPARATION

Traela slowly awoke, blinking against the flickering glow of a single candle flame. She was exhausted, strange thoughts drifting through the shadows of her mind as if they were but the whispers of dreams that hadn't quite faded in the light of day. Rolling onto her side, she pulled the covers of the bed up to her chin, curling up in the embrace of the soft, warm blankets. She wasn't cold; the teen was simply enjoying the feel of the mattress and the cocoon of bedding, safe in the sanctuary of their gentle weave.

Suddenly, she bolted upright, the realization that she could move flooding through her mind. She laughed out loud, leaping out of bed with a speed and grace which didn't surprise her, but which caused the two mortals waiting in the shadows of the room to exchange glances. Traela threw her arms out, spinning in circles, laughing like a little girl.

"I've got to let Kai know," she suddenly blurted out, reaching for the door of her room, only to be stopped by the warrior's voice.

"I'm here," he said softly as he stepped out of the shadows. "Caraine is too," he smiled. "We wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Look at me!" she exclaimed in an explosion of utter joy. "I'm healed!" She spun another circle and then leapt into his arms. "Kai! I'm okay!"

"I can see that," the warrior laughed, his eyes sparking

with both the happiness of her recover and the release from his own guilt. "I can see that."

"Oh Caraine," the girl continued, moving to embrace the woman that stood quietly beside the warrior. "Thank you," she said softly. "Thank you for everything."

The woman didn't respond, but simply held the teen in a soft embrace, gently stroking her hair. "You're welcome," she whispered at last.

Traela pulled away, her forehead wrinkled in a deep confusion that slowly smothered her joy. "I," she began, only to pause as if the words faded away before she could speak them. "I," she tried once more, "I remember," she stopped.

"It's okay," Kai offered, extending a hand to steady her.

The teen shrugged away from the warrior's touch, angry at the uncertainty that filled her mind.

"I remember something, but then again I don't," she tried once more. "It's as if I were someone else," she paused, her mouth twisting into a hesitant grimace as she searched for the right words. "It's as if I watched someone else being me. It's like a dream you know you should remember, but can't."

Kai began to speak, but was silenced by the look in Traela's eyes.

"I remember feeling things; knowing things," the teen continued unsteadily. "And even though I try to tell myself they can't be real, I can still feel parts of the dream. There are voices, not quite a whisper, that speak in my mind. And I have memories of places I've never been, places unlike anything I've ever seen."

"You were healed by the maat," Kai began, only to have Traela interrupt him.

"I know what that means. I know that they're some mysterious people that you were going to sacrifice yourself to in order to heal me." Traela paused, her eyes filled with panic, her muscles tense, as if she was ready to flee, but didn't know where she should run. "But part of me knows more than that. Part of me knows that they are *maat'le'socla* and that it means,

tendrils of the water of life. How do I know this, Kai? No one told me that. I just know it. And I know a lot more than just that.”

“It was the maat who healed you,” Caraine began. “When they returned you to us, you weren’t yourself. You thought you were one of them.”

“But how?” Traela started to ask, only to be interrupted by Kai.

“Look at your hand,” he offered simply.

Traela stared in horror at the patchwork leather gauntlet that had molded itself to her hand and forearm. She began to remove it only to find that the glove had become a part of her flesh, the teen’s impotent motions growing frantic before she finally stopped, her eyes filled with panic as she turned them to Kai, pleading for his help.

“It won’t come off,” she whispered, her voice lost beneath the weight of her growing terror. “It’s a part of me.”

“It’s okay,” Kai said softly, looking deep into her eyes, turning her gaze back to his own with a gentle touch when Traela’s eyes darted back toward the glove. “You wanted to be a warrior.”

Traela stared at him.

“Do you still want that?”

The teen slowly nodded.

“The glove was a gift from another warrior. It doesn’t matter if that warrior was human or fae or something else altogether. I’m sure it means something to him and that the giving meant something too.”

“He gave me his honor,” the young woman whispered, not sure how she knew, only that it was true.

“Then honor his gift. Whatever they did to heal you, they also made you a part of what they are. They did the same to me,” he added quickly as he saw her fear begin to grow, relieved as it faded in the face of their common bond. “All that means is that we have been linked to a warrior tradition unlike anything in the mortal realm. It’s something we don’t have to

share with anyone, a fact they don't need to know. But it's also something we can take pride in."

Traela was silent, her gaze coming to rest on the floor.

Kai let the silence stretch out, watching his student, trying to read the way she held her body for insight into her mind. But Traela was motionless, simply staring at the floor.

"How do you feel?" he asked at last.

"I'm hungry," she said softly, raising a mischievous grin to meet the gaze of her mentor.

Kai laughed. "So was I when I awoke. We'll get you something to eat." He laid a gentle hand on her shoulder, guiding her toward the door.

"I think I'm going to be okay," she offered.

Kai offered her a smile. "I knew you would be. You're strong."

They headed down the narrow staircase, Caraine leading, Kai taking the rear.

"Caraine and I have a long night ahead of us," the warrior informed his student. "You're welcome to come with us if you'd like."

"What are you doing?"

"The question should probably be, where are we going?"

Traela turned to meet her mentor's eyes with an expectant gaze.

"The tower," he answered simply.

The teen looked at him with a mixture of disbelief and excitement. "The big one? The one we saw from the road? In the center of Node?"

Kai nodded. "Would you like to come?"

Traela laughed, nodding, her eyes filled with anticipation. "Oh, yeah."

Kai laughed in response, mussing her hair as he guided her toward the dining hall with the same hand. "Then let's get you something to eat."



The tower slowly rose out of the darkness, as if the companions had stumbled upon one of the pillars that supported the sky, the massive column looming in the shadows of the night. There was no way to describe the immensity of the structure. From the distant rise that the road had spilled out on, they had stood in astonished awe before the single ebony finger whose height had been lost in the clouds. But as Kai, Caraine and Traela slowly approached it, the tower became a presence they could feel as they wound their way through the maze of busy nocturnal streets. The companions could sense the tower waiting for them and it was all the women could do to keep moving toward the monstrous obelisk, its other-worldly size subconsciously intimidating.

“Nothing should be that big,” Caraine whispered to herself, not realizing that she spoke at all. “Only the gods should have something that big.”

Kai swallowed, aware that Traela took shelter behind him. He’d been here before; the mortal warrior had entered the tower on two other occasions, but he couldn’t tell them the worst was still to come.

“Did the maat build it?” Traela asked, not realizing that with her link to her adopted species she also had access to their history.

Kai slowly shook his head, his eyes fixed on the structure that blotted out the sky, that filled the entire span of his vision. The two and three story buildings around him seemed to cower in the tower’s presence as if they were nothing more than pebbles before a giant.

“No one knows who built it,” he said, running a nervous tongue over his dry lips. “Not even the maat. Some say it was built by the gods themselves, but the maat operate it now.”

“Operate it?” Caraine asked, her unease quickly turning to fear. “What do you mean, operate it?”

“It’s not only a building,” he said at last, an unsteady tremor quivering in his voice. “It’s a machine. It operates the gates. If one activates when we’re this close to it, you’ll know.”

Caraine’s eyes were wide with a fear that threatened to bolt into complete terror. “What do you mean by that,” she spat, the words bursting from her lips as if they tried to flee even though the speaker chose to stay.

Kai began to speak, but then cocked his ear to the wind. As a desperation filled his eyes, he quickly threw his glance around the narrow street as if searching for a place to hide.

“It’s starting,” he shouted, not meaning to raise his voice, but unable to master his nerves.

“What do you mean?” Caraine demanded.

“Hear that hum?” he asked, raising his voice as the sound grew in volume. What had begun as a noise more sensed than felt, began to grow, trembling with power as if once released, the volume would respect no limits.

Kai crouched down in the street, covering his ears with the palms of his hands. “Face away from the tower,” he ordered. “You don’t want to be looking into the blast.” As the hum grew into a muffled roar, the mortal warrior raised his voice to a shout to be heard over the sound. “Cover your ears and open your mouth just slightly. And close your eyes!”

Kai was screaming to be heard over the noise that grew until it was a physical force that assaulted their senses, the sound developing a throbbing cadence as the pulse rose and faded, each crescendo louder than the one before. Electricity began to crackle through the air, casting a strange wavering glow across the street like the lights that filled the northern skies. Kai nodded to his left and Caraine turned, spotting one of the massive arms that radiated out from the tower only blocks away, the buildings that flanked it dwarfed by the tendril’s size. Pulses of electricity coursed down the structure, racing from the tower toward the enormous knob at the spoke’s end. With each pulse, debris filled the air, the bursts

of energy acting like a gusting wind; unseen hands plucked at the companions' clothing, as if the electricity sought to include them in its journey.

"Here it comes!" Kai bellowed, his voice lost beneath the deafening roar.

He began to brace himself, having weathered the pulse before, but as Kai began to crush closed his eyes, his gaze found Traela, the teacher's face twisting in desperate confusion as his student stood to face the tower, tilting back her head and stretching her arms wide, as if she sought to embrace the wave.

Kai roared a warning, but his words was lost beneath the power of the tower's throbbing force. Knowing he couldn't reach Traela in time, he crouched low, closing his eyes as he covered his ears and buried his head between his drawn up knees.

The blast ripped through each of Kai's senses at once. His eyes were blinded with a brilliant light that ignored his clenched eyelids. His ears were deafened by the roar of an army of voices, bellowing a single note, the tone slightly out of tune. A brutal wind assaulted him, hurling pebbles and dirt that had lined the crevices of the cobblestone road against his sheltered body. The hair on his head stood away from his skin as the surge of electricity thundered passed, his flesh caressed by a corona of light; his nostrils were stung by an alien burning scent.

As quickly as it had begun, the roar began to fade. There was no accompanying decrescendo of pulses; the silence rushed in to fill the void that had been left, but the memory of the roar did not immediately flee. Kai could feel it echoing in his mind, filling his senses.

At last, he stood, uncovering his ears and opening his eyes. Shutters slowly reopened on the buildings around him; doors were opened once more as the people who had taken shelter within the structures began to resume their daily lives.

Kai turned to face Traela, finding her standing as he had left her, the teen facing away from him, her gaze to the sky, her

arms spread wide. A corona of flame danced across her flesh, gradually fading as it was pulled back within, her arms slowly lowering as the inferno died.

Traela turned to face him, her eyes filled with drifting clouds of fire, the mortal's ecstatic grin turning up the corners of her mouth.

"Wow," she said, her smile growing wide, her voice carrying the echo of another, slightly offset from her own. "I think I'm going to like this."

"Like what?" Caraine asked cautiously, unsteadily gaining her feet, brushing the dirt from her garments.

"Knowing things," Traela offered with a conspiratorial glance. "I somehow knew I was supposed to embrace that pulse. That it would integrate my symbiote to me."

"Is that what they did to you?" the older woman asked, her voice flavored with uncertainty and a hint of fear.

"Just an unforeseen side effect," the teen answered with a subtly layered voice, the echoes a hushed whisper that could barely be heard. "You see," she continued, her voice suddenly clear and precise, "I am very much Traela," she stated, holding up her bare hand. "But I am also *maat'le'socla*," she added, raising up the arm encased in the glove Jheton had given her, her voice once more overlaid with another as she spoke, her eyes once more filling with clouds. "It's not as strong as it was before; I don't have to fight it. But it's there."

She paused for a long moment before slowly lowering her gloved hand. "The only thing I'm not," she added with a smile, "is confused. Everything I am suddenly makes sense."



The tower's door was insignificantly small, barely a pockmark in the massive ebony wall that seemed to stretch from horizon to horizon. A soft illumination crept out from within the structure, spilling its glow across the earth as the

light mimicked the shape of the doorway. There was no guard, no sign informing the traveler what they would find once they stepped inside the tower. The portal stood alone and unadorned, waiting for the unsuspecting to step through it and enter the world that waited within.



Caraine felt a gentle shiver run through her body as she stepped through the doorway, trailing behind Traela and Kai. Raising her eyes to the inside of the doorjamb, she expected to find the glow of electricity, the sensations similar to what she had felt when the gate had been activated. But where the gate had been a deafening roar, the doorway was a barely perceptible whisper and her eyes found only the dark material the tower was constructed from.

She lowered her gaze in time to keep from running into Traela's back, the teen standing motionless, staring at the scene before her. As Caraine raised her eyes, she gasped, her hands instinctively raising to cover her mouth, her gaze wide with an awe so powerful it filled her eyes with tears.

Before them stood the night sky. A vast expanse of stars engulfed them, stretching in every direction, suspending them above the expanse of eternity. Planets spun slowly around a sun to their left; a blue-green sphere orbited into the pattern from their right, its single moon slowly revolving around the parent.

"Where are we?" she whispered, not sure if she spoke aloud, not sure if her lips had even moved.

"Join hands," Kai offered softly, his voice quivering with anticipation. "And hold on tightly." The warrior felt Traela's fingers entwine with his own as he turned to watch Caraine take the teen's other hand. The door behind them had already disappeared into the endless expanse of the universe. "Whatever you do," he ordered quietly, his words filled with a grim finality, "don't let go."

Kai waited until the older woman met his gaze before he closed his eyes and concentrated with a single deep breath. Caraine was instantly gripped with vertigo as the universe around them blurred into a blinding burst of light, as the illumination of a thousand stars roared past, the three mortals thrown through space at indescribable speeds. She watched as the shadows of the maat slowly formed behind the curtain of light. Something told her that each of the alien creatures was a proven warrior, that the crystalline blades they wore sheathed in scabbards of patchwork flesh could be bared in an instant. Their penetrating gaze swept over her, analyzing not only the structures of her body, but the clothes she wore, the scrying implements she carried in the satchel she had slung over her shoulder. She turned her face toward Kai to ask him why the maat watched them, her movement slow and drawn out. Her words seemed strangely stretched, as if time flowed differently in the tunnel of light that surrounded them as it hurled them toward the distance reaches of the galaxy.

With an abruptness that left her stunned, that threw her forward with its suddenness, the journey ended, Caraine stumbling as she fought to catch herself, never releasing Traela's hand as she struggled to regain her balance. They stood in a small circle of paving stones, the circumference enclosed by a low wall of the same, each stone of the perimeter engraved with a glyph or rune symbolizing the power of divination. Caraine's mind raced back to her studies with her mentor, finding each symbol he had taught her carved on the stones around her, each large pictograph engraved upon the center of a single stone. The circle was illuminated by the glow from a single source somewhere behind them; the remainder of the landscape shrouded in a darkness so complete that Caraine could not discern a single image or shape in the inky night.

"Where are we?" she asked at last, still holding onto Traela's hand, even though she watched Kai release his grip on the teen.

“I don’t know,” he said honestly, “but I’ve been here before.” The warrior paused, turning to point back the way they had come. Caraine pivoted, looking over her shoulders, her eyes finding the doorway to a gate lurking in the shadows behind them, providing them with a soft illumination. The gate appeared identical to those that perched at the end of the tower’s tendrils, radiating out through Node like the spokes of a giant wheel.

“Don’t worry,” he said with a friendly reassurance, trying to ease the panic he could see growing in her gaze. “We can go back the same way.”

Caraine swallowed, nodding that she understood.

“I have other work to do,” he offered steadily, “and Traela will want to come with me. Can I leave you alone here? We’ll come back for you after you’ve finished scrying.”

Caraine’s eyes were swallowed with terror; she looked as if she would scream. “Alone?” she mouthed silently, her throat clenched with the horror of being abandoned.

“You’re safe here,” Kai assured her. “Traela and I will only be in the way.”

The older woman was silent, trembling where she stood.

“If you don’t think you can,” the warrior began, only to be silenced as Caraine vigorously shook her head, the diviner knowing that Kai needed her to be strong and complete her task.

“You’re going to be okay?” he asked.

Caraine nodded, a little too desperately for Kai.

“You’re sure?”

She closed her eyes, nodding once more, her control over her fear growing by the moment.

“Do you have everything you need?”

Caraine patted the satchel at her side. “Yes,” she whispered, the sound a strangled croak as she slowly nodded.

“We can wait for you,” Kai offered. “It will just take us longer to finish everything we need to do, but we can wait.”

Caraine shook her head. "I'll be okay," she whispered.

"You're sure?" the warrior asked once more.

The older woman closed her eyes and nodded.

"It will be fine," Traela assured her.

"Is that you or the maat speaking?" Caraine asked with a whisper.

The teen suddenly looked embarrassed. "Just me."

"Go," she ordered, turning to meet Kai's eyes with an uneasy smile. "I'll be fine."

Kai nodded, taking Traela's hand as he led the teen toward the open portal of the gate.

"Just hurry," Caraine whispered, but her companions were already gone, leaving her alone in the grip of the unknown. She didn't know what might lurk beyond the boundaries of the circle. She didn't know what might come through the gate to find her waiting. But what scared Caraine the most was that she didn't know how Kai had led her to this place and she had no idea how she would return to her world if the warrior didn't come back. The gates were a mystery to her. And Caraine wasn't sure if they would take her where she desired or if she would find herself delivered to an alien world she would never be able to escape.



Their journey abruptly ended, the blur of stars held behind the open portal of the gate as the two companions spilled out into another world. Traela released Kai's hand, slowly turning in circles as she drank in the scenery around them. They stood in a wide bazaar, shops of every kind stretching as far as the eye could see. Strange beings walked up and down the narrow aisles; a tall gray mantis nodded toward her with its insectoid head, its emaciated body perched on impossibly thin limbs; a massive giant of a man walked by, Kai coming up only to the stranger's waist, every inch of the being's nearly naked body covered with brilliant tattoos and

vibrant inks. Everywhere she looked, Traela was awed by the diversity of life, of the endless variety of goods, of people, of sounds and smells she encountered.

“Come,” Kai motioned, guiding the teen with a firm, insistent hand on her shoulder.

Jarred from her thoughts, from where she had simply reveled in the images that filled the streets around her, Traela hurried to keep up, scrambling to walk at Kai’s side.

“Where are we?” she asked.

Kai stopped, turning to look at her. “You said that the energy of the gates integrated you with your symbiote,” he began.

Traela nodded.

“Then I want you to tell me where we are,” he said seriously. “I need to know to what extent you’re connected to the maat.”

“Why?” Traela asked with an innocent curiosity.

“Because we’re going into battle and I need to know if I can count on you or if I need to leave you behind.”

The teen’s eyes grew wide in the face of her teacher’s honesty, her lips slightly parting in shock from his words. “Here?” she asked, her shoulders suddenly tensed as her eyes darted around the booths, searching for the threat Kai referred to.

The warrior shook his head. “No. But we’re going to go and rescue Leiron and Daen; Rann too, if he’ll come with us.”

Traela shook her head. “But we don’t even know where they are.”

“That’s why Caraine is scrying,” he informed her, the pieces of the puzzle beginning to fall into place in the teen’s mind. “She’ll find their location and the best approach to take.”

“Then why are we here?” she asked.

Kai was silent for a long moment as he held her gaze with his own. “You tell me,” he ordered at last.

Traela wrinkled up her face as she reached within, feeling for the presence of the maat. It was there, waiting just behind the curtain of her consciousness, but the young woman didn't realize how hard it would be to give up her sense of self, to allow another to share her thoughts, her body, her very soul.

She swallowed hard and took a deep breath, the slow exhale a reluctant sigh. Running a nervous tongue over her lips, Traela closed her eyes and followed the first breath with a second. Instantly, her eyes sprang open, her pupils lost behind drifting clouds of crimson fire that washed across her gaze.

"We are in The Well," she said, her voice layered, but this time it was another's presence that dominated the sound, Traela's own becoming the echo, the teen hidden behind the sound of an alien male. "This place is a low point in the network of gates," she continued, standing erect and completely motionless, her body a rigid post. "The rigid folk gather in places that take no skill to reach. Water flows to its lowest point; so it is with the gates."

With a startling suddenness, Traela's body shuddered, the young woman collapsing, Kai catching her just before the teen struck the pavement. Vigorously shaking her head, as if she tried to clear it of a lingering thought, Traela slowly regained her feet, using her teacher's arm as a support.

"That wasn't any fun," she admitted with a weary, suspicious smile.

"It's okay," Kai reassured her, laying a comforting hand on her shoulder, smiling as her apprehension fled from her features. "I just needed to know what to expect from you and your new abilities."

"It's very much a part of me," Traela told him, "and I can actually understand it a little without letting it take control."

"Good," Kai agreed. "We need to hurry," he shared, resuming their path deeper into the bazaar. "I don't want to leave Caraine alone any longer than we have to."

"Is she safe?"

The warrior nodded. “But she’s afraid. And that’s not any fun either.”

“Where are we going?”

“I need to pick up some things.”

Traela stopped dead in her tracks. “You have something?” she asked, her voice barely a whisper, the tone drenched with superstition and awe.

Kai turned to face her. “What do you mean?” he asked, wanting to know how much knowledge she could access from her symbiote.

“You have an artifact,” she whispered, her eyes wide. “By law, you must keep it with you or leave it with the maat for safekeeping. I can sense that much without giving up control.”

The warrior slowly nodded.

“What is it?” Traela wondered aloud. “Armor? A tool?”

“A weapon,” Kai answered softly.

Traela swallowed. “That’s almost unheard of,” she whispered.

The warrior simply nodded.

“Can I see it?” the young woman asked with a childish anticipation.

Kai nodded, surprised to feel a smile grow.

“How did you come by it?” she asked, matching his stride as she fell in beside her teacher.

“An enemy of mine possessed it. He tried to kill me with it. Now it’s mine.”

“What is it?” Traela asked, her voice an excited whisper.

“I’ll show you,” Kai promised.



The two companions walked deeper into the bazaar, the streets filled with alien architecture and even stranger beings. A massive stone entity slowly strode toward them; although

he was a handbreadth shorter than Kai, his shoulders were four times the width of the human warrior. The being's body was nearly smooth, the surface of its skin broken only by the natural weathering of stone. Its fingers were broad and thick; its face smooth; its features defined by veins of ore that formed its eyes and mouth, the colors slowly shifting in response to its movements.

The creature sidestepped to cut off the two companions. "You are Kai Oakman," it said as it stood before Traela's teacher.

The mortal warrior nodded. "I am he."

"You will need my aid in the days to come. Nollon's death held unforeseen circumstances. After you slew him..."

"We have yet to engage him," Kai interrupted the being of stone.

"My apologies," it offered, bowing deeply as it took a step backward. "Time does not always flow smoothly when one uses the gates. I will await you here until the appropriate time." The being slowly crouched, folding into a ball where it stood, the veins of ore slowly fading into a featureless mask, its limbs losing their definition, molding into its body until it was a featureless boulder, sitting motionless in the center of the avenue.

Kai stepped forward, kneeling before the creature.

"Excuse me," he called, but there was no answer from the beast.

He turned to face his student, shrugging his shoulders as he stood.

"What do you think about that?" he asked.

Traela slowly shook her head, as if she didn't have an answer.

"I'll take it as a good omen," Kai offered with a wry smile.

"How?" the teen began to ask, moving to stand before the living statue, softly wrapping on its motionless form with her knuckles, amazed that it didn't respond to their voices or

even to her knock.

Kai motioned for her to follow him as the warrior resumed their journey. “He said he was supposed to aid us after we completed our battle with Nollon,” he explained. “That means that we survive the conflict.”

Traela shook her head, stifling a grin. “After all I’ve been through, just since I’ve known you, could you really have a doubt?” the teen asked. “He said that you were the one to cut him down.”

Kai didn’t meet her eyes as he answered. “Nollon isn’t acting alone. He has an entire army beside him. If I wasn’t worried,” he explained uneasily, “I wouldn’t be here. I wouldn’t be collecting the weapon.”



Caraine stood, carefully holding the wooden bowl filled with water that she had used to see the days ahead. She shook her head, stifling a yawn as she sorted through the images that came to her. There was darkness and battle, visions of horrible creatures that were turned against them, but a common thread was woven through each image. The Wildlands. Nollon had retreated to the world that was both mortal and fae, a world of magic and enchantment so intense that there were rumors that the gods themselves had aided in crafting the realm.

“Why there?” she had wondered, finding no answers within the bowl. Scrying was like that. Sometimes the answers you found asked more questions than they answered.

Carefully pouring the water around the circumference of the circle of stones, moving counterclockwise until she once more reached the beginning, Caraine emptied the shallow basin, shaking out the last few drops. Slipping the bowl back in her satchel, Caraine returned to the center of the circle, sitting down and facing the gate. She had no other choice but to wait for Kai. As her feeling of unease began to grow once more, as the sensation that someone watched her from

the darkness began to unsettle her, Caraine found herself continually glancing over her shoulder, her eyes searching the shadows as she prayed that Kai would hurry.



“Your hand,” the maat spoke in Kai’s mind. “We must verify that the item is your own.”

Kai turned back to his student, spying the short line of individuals that stretched behind them. They stood before a low table, an open doorway behind it. Kai didn’t know what lay beyond the portal, but he imagined that the room contained other items similar to his own.

He extended his palm, watching as the maat placed a thick grub in the mortal’s hand, the parasite’s mouth instantly latching onto Kai’s flesh, its body rhythmically pulsing as it drew in his blood. The worm’s body turned a brilliant red as Kai’s life-force filled its transparent flesh; it slowly began to change colors, the transformation ending as milky white.

The grub grew still, disengaging its mouth and the maat plucked it from Kai’s hand, setting it in a small basket filled with similar creatures.

“What was that?” Traela asked.

Kai turned to his student, fixing her with a glance that silently asked, “Don’t you know?”

Traela shook her head. “Not without giving up control,” she replied.

“When I came into possession of the weapon,” he began to explain, “I had to register it with the maat. That was the first time I used the gates. They took some of my blood and bred a worm that would only reach maturity by feeding on my essence. It drank enough and will now go on to the next step in its lifecycle.”

“What if it wasn’t you that tried to claim your artifact?” the teen asked.

“Then the worm would never stop feeding,” Kai

replied, his eyes dark, his voice filled with the weight of a horrible memory. “I saw it happen once, as I was leaving here for the first time. The man that had tried to deceive the maat couldn’t separate the worm from his flesh. The more blood it drank, the larger and more powerful it grew. I watched as he slammed his hand against the table again and again; as he tried to tear it free. But in the end, the worm claimed his life. I didn’t stay to watch it, but I could see it in his eyes as he fell to his knees. That’s enough of a deterrent to keep people honest, I would think.”

Traela was silent for a long moment. “What if you didn’t register at all?”

Kai shook his head. “Somehow, the maat know. They watch for such things. Any items that are transferred through the gates are examined by the maat. I’m sure you sensed their presence when we were in transit.”

His student nodded, indicating that she had.

“If I understand the lore correctly, we would have been pulled aside and asked to register anything the maat felt it was necessary to register.”

“And if you refuse?” Traela asked.

“You die.”

The teen swallowed. “Why do the maat care at all?”

Kai slowly shook his head. “I’m not sure. They don’t prosper from the trade in merchandise. I think it’s that they don’t want to upset the balance of our world.”

“Because they use it to earn their skin,” Traela finished, the pieces suddenly falling into place. “No warrior can defeat them, but someone might bring in weapons that could.”

“One weapon is inconsequential, as long as they can monitor its use,” Kai agreed. “But equip an army-”

“-and the maat are defeated,” Traela finished. “Wow,” she said, the word trailing off into a sea of possibilities.

Kai turned as a maat approached with a long canvas tube, the package standing to Kai’s shoulder and as big around as his thigh. The cylinder was tied shut with strings of leather

and a long canvas strap stretched from one end of the container to the other.

The mortal warrior slung it over his shoulder, aware of his student's quizzical glance. "I would also like to have the original owner's essence," Kai said with a strange finality. "I will be destroying the weapon in a few days."

The maat nodded, handing Kai a small crystal vial, its cap sealed with wax.

"Do not fail to destroy it completely," the maat warned, its voice echoing in Kai's mind.

The mortal warrior nodded and turned away, Traela hurrying to keep pace as they headed toward the nearest gate.

"What is it?" she asked anxiously, her eyes drifting to the canvas tube.

Kai shook his head. "I don't know what it's called," her mentor admitted.

"What does it do?"

"I'll show you when the time is right," he promised.

"And then we'll make sure it never falls into another's hands."

CHAPTER NINETEEN: BEYOND THE PORTAL

Sovay felt her heart thundering in her ears, the sound threatening to drown out the approaching footsteps. Terror tensed every muscle in her lean frame. She wanted to run; she wanted to scream, to bring Detta to her side, his blade drawn. But her wide eyes simply stared toward the sound that drew nearer with every step, Sovay unable to move, her feet taking root where she stood.

“Good morning,” a cheerful voice called out, the greeting accompanied by a warm smile and a friendly wave. Sovay began to breathe once more as her eyes found the old man who walked hand-in-hand with a young girl. He was clearly human; the weight of the years drawn in the creases in his face, in the wild tangle of white hair that sprouted from his head like an unpruned hedge. But the girl was something more. There was a strange gracefulness to the way she moved, as if she would suddenly burst from his grasp and race across the plain like a bird on wing, gravity having no hold on the child.

Sovay’s breath caught in surprise as the child smiled, the girl’s thin lips stretching until they were barely perceptible, an inner eyelid blinking from side to side.

“My name is Tobias,” the old man smiled warmly. “This is my granddaughter, Sophia.”

The girl blushed.

“She can’t speak,” the grandfather continued. “Her

father is mer; her grandmother as well. Me?" he added with a friendly shrug. "I'm just an old-fashioned mortal, like yourself."

"W-where are we?" Sovay managed to stutter, still unsure of her surroundings.

"You're in the Wildlands," Tobias answered. "I was a much younger man when we created this world."

"Created?"

The grandfather nodded, his smile flavored with a distant embarrassment. "When properly coached, mortals can wield magic like no other race; we're even more proficient than the fae." He knelt beside his granddaughter, plucking a daisy from amidst the wildflowers, rolling the stem in his fingers so the flower spun like a woman's parasol. "The talent is held in our ability to dream," he continued, closing his eyes, his voice growing hushed as he concentrated, his granddaughter's attention completely focused on the flower he held. Each petal began to glow as if illuminated from within, the brilliance growing until the flower itself was obscured through a haze of light. One by one, the petals began to tremble, separating themselves from the flower, slowly taking flight. As they neared the edge of the gentle explosion of light, they began to change shape, becoming gossamer balloons of rainbow light, each bubble drifting on the breeze, slowly floating toward the sky.

The young girl, scarcely more than a toddler, clapped her hands in delight.

Sovay swallowed hard, her eyes filled with wonder and awe.

"I didn't know we could do that," she whispered.

"The fae are only craftsmen," the old man explained, wincing as he stood, carefully stifling a groan. "They can coax the spirits of the land alive; they can change what already exists into something beautiful," his eyes continued the sentence, his lips silent as his gaze added, "or something terrible." He paused, waiting to make sure that the woman before him

understood the meaning of his glance. “This,” he said with a broad sweep of his hand, “is the best that humankind can imagine. Marry that to the finest that the fae can bring to life and you have something wondrous.”

Sovay turned, following the old man’s eyes toward the rustle of cedar branches, her gaze finding Detta emerging from the tree.

She smiled as he moved to stand beside her, his fingers intertwining with her own.

“Welcome to The Wildlands,” Tobias smiled grandly. “Come,” he offered, nodding in the direction he had come as he took Sophia’s hand. “We have a settlement not far from here. You’re welcome to stay awhile. At least we can give you a soft bed and a warm meal before you decide where you’re off to next. And who knows?” he added with a wink and a knowing smile, “you may just decide that you’d like to stay.”



Nollon stood before the wall of stone; the mouth of the deep canyon they had entered was lost beyond the gentle curve of the Firedrake River, the land of mortals across the wide body of water.

Closing his eyes, his dark mane of hair blowing in the breeze, Nollon pressed his palms flat against the stone, whispering arcane words that teased Daen’s ears with sounds he had never heard and a meaning he could only sense.

The stone began to waver, like water stirred by a stiff breeze, the warrior’s lips twisting into a cold grin.

“Where are you taking us?” Daen asked from the back of his steed, his hands tied together, their bonds tethered to the saddle horn before him.

“You tell me, prophet,” Nollon laughed as he leapt easily onto his mount.

Daen glared, pressing his lips closely together.

Nollon simply laughed louder, his eyes sparkling with

a tormenting joy as he guided his frightened mount into the canyon wall, rider and steed passing through the stone and stepping into another world.

“But why this way?” the prophet asked under his breath, his horse ushered forward by one of Nollon’s men, the main portion of their army behind them. “Why through the lands of the fae?” He closed his eyes, trying to push back the visions that raced into his mind, unsure if the images of ambushing fae, of a vicious attack that cut down Nollon’s forces were simply his own fears or whispers of events to come.



“There,” Tobias pointed, gesturing toward a tiny cluster of buildings bordering a broad harbor, the waters gently lapping against the shore, the expanse of the ocean waiting patiently beyond a broad curve of land. A handful of small sailing vessels were beached on the broad strip of sand that framed the bay.

“Look at all the water,” Sovay whispered in awe. “There’s so much.”

“It was the one thing every mortal could agree on,” the old man smiled. “Everyone of us longed for the majesty of the sea.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” she admitted. “It’s beautiful.”

Tobias simply smiled proudly in response.

Detta’s eyes swept across the wide stretch of water, his gaze drifting over the small village before coming to rest on their guide’s face.

“That’s not a very large settlement,” he commented, trying to make the words sound casual and off-hand.

The old man nodded. “We have an unusual mix here,” he began, turning his back to Detta and Sovay as Tobias looked to the village. “There are so few that believe that we should

set aside our differences, that mortal and fae should live in harmony. Of that minority, only a handful will ever find their way to our land. While the sea is beautiful, not everyone wants to live on its shore. There are settlements there,” Tobias added, pointing toward a distant stretch of trees that grew into a vast forest, “and there,” he concluded, gesturing toward a distant range of rugged mountains that seemed to touch the sky.

“How many of you are there?”

The old man wrinkled his mouth as he pressed his lips together, his eyes searching his memories for a count. “Maybe ten score mortals. Maybe a few more; a few less. We gather together once or twice a year, but not everyone comes.”

“Only two-hundred,” Detta offered with mild surprise. “That’s not many.”

“There were more of us once,” Tobias murmured quietly, his words not meant for his guests. His granddaughter squeezed his hand reassuringly, the lineage of the mer able to sense the depths of human emotion unlike any other. “But that was a long time ago,” he continued at last, searching for his smile, squeezing the child’s webbed hand in response. “There are fae here too, but you never know how many. Sometimes they’re right beside you; the next moment, they’ve retreated into whatever element they call home.”

“You’d think with so few of you, you’d want to gather together,” Sovay remarked.

“Maybe somewhere else,” Tobias grinned, gesturing for Detta and Sovay to follow him as he resumed his journey toward the settlement and the sea, “but not here. First of all, it’s not our way. It takes a certain kind of soul to want to be near the fae and they typically aren’t the type that want to be in big cities or surrounded by large numbers of their own kind.”

Detta shrugged; Sovay nodded as if she understood.

“And the plains behind us,” Tobias added without turning from his course, “well, let’s just say they were never finished.”

“What do you mean?” Sovay asked innocently.

“The creative energy is there, but it was never put to use. Things got interrupted; we ran out of time. It’s not a place you want to be caught in a storm.”

Sovay’s eyes were filled with an honest curiosity.

“Why not?”

“You take an empty pot and drop in your ingredients and all you have is a pot filled with nicely sorted layers of vegetables and spices and meat.” He paused, stopping to turn and face them, fixing them with a knowing look. “You add some water and give it a good stir,” he said seriously, “and you begin creating something. With magic, you don’t want someone that isn’t trained to do the creating. And when you let a storm front do the creating for you,” he paused, “let’s just say it’s best if you stay out of the way.”



Caraine stood to her feet as the gate before her began to glow with light, the illumination glowing to a brilliance so intense she was forced to avert her eyes, shielding them with a raised hand. Abruptly, the light faded, and it took a long moment for her eyes to adjust to the dimness of the scrying circle.

But when she turned her eyes toward the gate, there was no one there. All that waited for her was a simple parchment scroll, tied with black ribbon.

Carefully untying the band of cloth, Caraine quickly read the two sentences that the parchment held. Her eyes grew wide as she stared at the signature, her gaze fixed on the single character. The note was a plea to disregard what she had seen in her scrying bowl, to go, not to The Wildlands, but to the lands of the fae. What shocked her wasn’t the method of delivery, but the name by which the scroll had been signed.

“Leiron,” she whispered, raising her eyes to the gate as if she would find the girl there.

But Caraine only found an empty portal.



Leiron held her breath as the tiny spirit returned to where the young girl crouched, just inside the circle of firelight from the slowly dying campfire. The few remaining sheets of parchment Brother Tremaine had given her were carefully tucked back inside her bag, along with the quill and small pot of ink that had accompanied the gift. She had been so enamored with the books in his library that the monk had suggested she try her hand at illuminating a text of her own. Her enthusiasm had delighted the old man, even though she had to describe the things she drew while seated at the tiny desk. He had clasped his hands together and smiled in joy as she wrote a few words of her own, the text flowing boldly from her quill, the words timid and trembling as she read them aloud.

The young girl's eyes filled with tears as she thought about the old monk, but her sorrow turned to a deep, cold anger that clenched her jaw and brow as she thought about those responsible for cutting him down. Leiron had completed her training, learning everything her mentor could teach. She could speak with spirits and to her the entire world was alive. Whenever she felt alone, Leiron only had to concentrate and something would come alive around her. Where other children played with dolls, she carried a small pine cone, the spirit that had been born from a massive forest giant quickly became her friend, an interactive playmate where other girls had imaginary companions.

But she could do more than simply speak to spirits. She could coax them to do her bidding. She'd brought the herbs Sovay had used to cleanse the poison to life with a whisper. The very earth had opened to shelter them when she had asked. It was a simple thing to ask the wind to deliver a message for her, even when she didn't know how to find Caraine.

It was Daen's idea. The prophet knew things,

sometimes even things that Leiron couldn't learn from the spirits around her. He could see things that had yet to happen and, sometimes, things that never would. But as their ride had continued, he somehow discovered that he could whisper into the air and that the wind would carry his words to her ears. The prophet couldn't hear what she said in response, but he could sense the changes in the world around them, the way that her response altered the potential in the weave of fate. That was enough for a mind that was used to searching timelines and the two companions began their silent communication. They had become conspirators in the midst of Nollon's army, working out strategies in the heart of the enemy's strength.

It was there that Daen had found the path he asked her to follow. Nollon was headed to The Wildlands but the dark warrior was forced to first travel through the lands of the fae. It was the only route that he knew. But as Daen sat tied to his horse, his mind had searched timeline after timeline, discovering that the pivotal moment wasn't at the end of the journey, but that the weakness lay when Nollon was most at ease.

Leiron had tried not to smile when the wind had carried his promise to her.

"Kai will take care of everything."

And so Leiron had asked the night to wake her when the camp was asleep, to lull the guards into a deep slumber so they wouldn't spy her writing the quick note. Even so, her hand trembled as she held the quill; she had glanced over her shoulder at the conclusion of each and every word, sure to find Nollon behind her. In her haste, she had quickly signed her letter with only her first initial.

But just as she had asked, the camp remained asleep.

The gentle breeze whispered that the letter had been delivered, that it had been given to Caraine.

Thanking the spirit for its aid, Leiron settled back into her blankets, wishing she could tell Daen of their success. But the prophet was separated from her by the sleeping forms

of Nollon's soldiers. As the young girl closed her eyes, as her hand closed around her pine cone friend, a soft smile illuminated her face.

Kai would come for them and they would be safe. Daen said so. Daen knew things. Lot's of things.



The prophet breathed a quiet sigh of relief from where he lay in his bedroll. Daen could feel that the weave of fate had been changed. It was still uncertain if they could stop Nollon. The dark warrior had too many pieces to the puzzle; he wielded too much power and while Kai was still searching for the place to begin, Nollon was well on his way to the conclusion.

But Leiron would be saved. Daen knew that now. There were no other possibilities as he scanned the timelines. Kai would arrive and Leiron would be saved. He had spent the entire day searching for the future that would rescue the girl he had protected on the garden path, the girl that had shown him he wasn't a coward, but that somewhere deep inside him, there was a hero struggling to emerge.

Daen just wished he didn't have to die to save her.

He wiped away a tear as he closed his eyes. There was no other way, no path he could navigate them down that would see both of them to safety.

And though it made him feel weak, though it made him feel like a coward even though he chose to face his fate and save Leiron, he cried for himself.

He didn't want to die.

But there wasn't any other way.



Caraine gave Kai the letter as the warrior strode through the portal, his canvas cylinder slung over his shoulder,

Traela close behind. Shaking his head, indicating that he didn't understand the words, he handed the parchment back to her.

"It's from Leiron," Caraine announced excitedly, her voice filled with nervousness and anticipation.

Kai's eyes sprang to life, reflecting the warrior's interest in the words the scroll held, even though his lips remained silent.

"She wants us to go to the realm of the fae."

Kai began to pace, his fingers interlaced behind his head. He stopped abruptly. "Daen must have seen something," he announced, immediately resuming his anxious march. He paused again. "Only Daen would know where to strike."

"What are we going to do?" Caraine asked, the paper trembling in her hands.

"We'll go back to the inn and let Ko'laru and Beltross know what we've discovered. The four of us will go after Nollon. I really don't see another choice."

"Four?" Caraine asked.

Kai nodded. "You'll stay with Mallia."

Caraine shook her head, her gaze resolute. "I'm going too."

Before Kai could speak, the woman continued. "What happens if Leiron sends another message? She sent this one to me. It won't do you any good if I stay behind and she sends me another."

"Daen will know-"

"No he won't. Not if he's thinking about every other possibility. Where I am in relation to you is going to be the last thing on his mind."

"I'm not sure I agree with-"

"It doesn't matter if you agree or not, Kai," Caraine said evenly, her strength rallying in her voice. "I want to go."

The warrior knew the battle had already been lost and he nodded his consent.

"Good," Caraine said, her protective nature boiling to the surface as it did whenever one of the younger members of

their party was threatened. “When do we leave?”
Kai’s answer was simple and surprising.
“Tonight.”

CHAPTER TWENTY: IN THE LANDS OF THE FAE

Daen drifted in the grip of a dark mood, ignoring Leiron's attempts to communicate with him. The beauty of the landscape around him was lost to his eyes, his gaze focused on the earth beneath his mount's hooves, the prophet's head bowed under the weight of his gloom.

Around him, the land was an exaggeration of its counterpart in the human realm. The Firedrake River carved an impossibly deep canyon somewhere to their left, the river's course lost in the shadows of the rocky walls; the sound of the slow moving waterway was the thunder of rushing water here beyond the mortal realm.

Massive trees towered around him, as if he were tiny enough to be riding a squirrel through the depths of a vibrant forest. Nollon's army maneuvered through a maze of trunks so thick that each would cover a city block. They would pass mushrooms that loomed overhead, blocking out the sunlight with their wide caps, or trample through patches that were so tiny they were but specks of color on the forest floor. Meadows were filled with kaleidoscopes of wildflowers, the colors changing with each touch of the breeze, as if the wind were somehow an artist's brush and the painter couldn't decide on their choice of hues.

Nollon's voice stirred Daen from his thoughts, the prophet turning a disgruntled gaze toward his captor.

"We're almost there," Nollon prodded his prisoner.

“The portal we seek is just beyond that rise.”

Daen didn't need to look. He'd seen their destination in the weave of fate. The forest opened up onto what the prophet couldn't decide he should call a wide field or a small plain. In its center lay an enormous mound of weathered stone formed of slabs of granite larger than the steed Daen rode. He knew the doorway Nollon sought lay past the grassland, that a stream leapt from a tall embankment and formed a majestic waterfall only a half-day's ride beyond the cairn. It was behind the waterfall they would find The Wildlands. Daen didn't have the heart to tell Nollon that less than half the army would live to see it.

“You're in a foul mood this morning,” the dark-maned warrior prodded again.

“I'd go around the grasslands if I were you,” Daen offered, choosing the words carefully as if he had considered saying them a thousand times but had held his tongue until now.

Nollon laughed. “You don't see anything, prophet. You just want to delay me.”

Daen lowered his head once more. He didn't know why he even tried. There were no timelines where the arrogant man would listen, only those where his men would die.



Kai turned to face his four companions as he stood poised before the same canyon wall Nollon had used to enter the world of the fae.

“Ready?” he asked.

Caraine swallowed and nodded, her eyes filled with anxiety and fear, her jaw set and determined. Ko'laru seemed relaxed and ready; Kai never considered she would be anything less. Beltross was an enigma; the gentle mer had traded the maul he had wielded at Raven's Roost for a pair of war hammers, the barely-restrained viciousness looming behind his

eyes. Traela looked both excited and afraid. The teen finally felt as if she belonged.

Kai turned back to the stone and gently pushed, his hands disappearing into the canyon wall, rings of waves spiraling out as his hands slipped through the rock.

“Here we go,” he said softly as he stepped into another world.



The maat raised its head, feeling the disturbance. An outside tool had moved from one realm to another. Turning his focus inward, he searched the minds of his brethren, seeking one who could taste the violation in its memory. None had seen the act, but a *slaact* in The Well knew that the mortal had promised to destroy the weapon, as was The Law.

The Law also forbade the transfer of outside tools from one realm to the land of another. Such a violation was punishable by death. Each mortal who registered their artifact was taught The Law and each gave its blood to the integrity worm to verify ownership and their understanding of the rules they would need to adhere to.

“The mortal life must be extinguished,” he sent to the fluid that united each of their minds. “The Law has been violated. The outside tool must be destroyed.”

The maat felt one of his kind, a respected member of the warrior caste, accept the task.

“May you claim honor, Jheton Ghat,” the maat thought into the fluid, then returned to his task, letting his attention expand until he could once more feel the flow of reality and could pinpoint each artifact that had been brought into the caretaking of the maat.



Nollon reined his horse to a halt beside the massive

cairn, waiting for Daen's mount to approach. The warrior wore a comfortable grin, his mockery of the prophet held as much in his gaze as it was in the sound of his voice.

"We're here, prophet," he goaded. "Everything is fine."
Daen didn't raise his eyes.

"You lied to me," Nollon announced coldly. "Do you know what the punishment is for someone who lies to me?"

The prophet was silent, a nefarious glimmer beginning to spark in his eyes, as if he had watched the events before him play out before.

"Do you?" the warrior roared angrily, his voice bellowing through the meadow, seeming to echo off the stones of the cairn.

"I didn't lie," Daen countered, his head still lowered in a feeble attempt to hide his malicious grin. "And you just woke them up."



Nollon's anger and arrogance faded into a shocked disbelief as the prophet raised his head, fixing the warrior with a vicious smile.

Sensing movement at the cairn behind him, Nollon grabbed the reins of his horse and spun his mount, his sword clearing its scabbard with frightening ease. His steed screamed, pawing the air in horror as the stones came alive, otherworldly fae emerging from each of the massive granite slabs. They were huge, fleshy things, layers of rock hard muscle slapped on a skeleton made from the bones of the earth, as if a sculptor had added chunks of clay with a trowel. The creatures had no eyes; their sockets were a broad smooth stroke, as if they had been left unformed, their brows jutting above a smooth indentation that should have held a dark gaze. No other feature disturbed the rough smoothness of their faces; they lacked a nose; there were no cheekbones; only a wide mouth broke the monotony as they screamed in rage.

No mortal sound erupted from the spirits of the cairn. Their war cries were the sound of grinding stone, as if their gullets churned old bones and crushed the skulls of their prey.

Nollon bellowed for his men to rally, but his command was lost beneath the screams of the horses and the terrified shouts of his men. The fae moved impossibly fast and struck with the power of an avalanche. Each blow from their hammer-like fists shattered bone and crushed internal organs. Neither man nor steed rose again after being struck a single time; those that survived lay screaming and broken in the grass of the field.

He roared for them to retreat, but his commands couldn't be heard over the sound of the battle. Spurring on his mount, charging into the thick of the slaughter, Nollon bellowed a primal cry of defiance and rage, his sword raised, slashing into the first of the fae. The creature screamed, the sound a horrible cry like metal being dragged over metal. Steel was the bane of the fae, and the shallow wound that should have bled turned black, the decay racing from where Nollon's blade had entered the creature's shoulder, eating away its arm and half its torso with unholy speed. The fae fell to the ground, still screaming, writhing in pain until the sound abruptly stopped, the creature's skin turning as gray as the stone it had been born from, both the fae and the rock simultaneously crumbling and turning to dust.

"They can be killed!" Nollon's eyes flashed, catching the gaze of his horrified men, the soldiers on foot, their steeds lost or dead. They nodded at his unspoken command, drawing weapons that had remained sheathed in their terror, suddenly ready to die for the man that had freed them from the horror of their former lives.

Nollon spurred his horse again, running down the beasts, listening to them scream as they were trampled under the iron of his horse's shoes. He cut them down from behind, his rage burning in his eyes as he hunted them, as he watched his army whittled down like leaves falling before the

irresistible hand of winter.



“Wait here.”

Kai’s companions nodded. Caraine had confirmed that the location was only a short distance away, but the sound of battle had forced Kai to take a circuitous route to the top of the waterfall that marked the doorway into The Wildlands. The portal lay below them, but the perch Kai slowly moved toward overlooked the only approach from the lands of the fae.

Traela took a step forward, Kai stopping as he sensed the movement.

“I want to come,” she pleaded simply, a childish excitement in the teen’s eyes. “You’re going to use it, aren’t you?”

Kai’s thoughts turned to the weapon, strapped to his back in its canvas cylinder.

“I want to see it.”

He nodded, motioning for her to follow. “We can’t be seen,” he informed her over his shoulder. “We won’t have a second chance.”

Traela swallowed in excitement, following behind her mentor, amazed at how silently she could now move. The changes that that maat had made to her body had given her additional strength and grace. As she followed behind the warrior she admired, she smiled as she realized she could now move as quietly as Kai.



Nollon stood among the corpses of his men, fixing the last of the fae with a deadly glare as he watched the blackness devour its flesh, as it turned to dust and crumbled before his eyes.

His eyes swept the carnage. Less than a dozen of his

men had survived. An army that had taken years to build had been destroyed in moments by a handful of otherworldly creatures. He threw back his head, bellowing in rage, looking for someone to pay for his arrogance, his men fighting to stand their ground in the face of their leader's fury.

But the dark-maned warrior's eyes found Daen. And as he glared at the prophet who had tried to warn him of this course of action, Nollon's anger only grew at the reminder of his mistake.



Traela turned to Kai as Nollon's roar echoed through the valley below.

"It's him," Kai offered grimly, the humor lost beneath the weight of the task before him.

The warrior set the thick canvas tube on the earth before him, carefully untying the strings that had held it closed. The sturdy cloth unrolled to reveal a long sleek creation from another world, the artifact more a machine than a weapon.

"What is it?" the teen asked, her voice hushed with awe, her eyes sweeping over the tool Kai had claimed from the maat.

But her mentor ignored her, his eyes on the crystal vial he held. Closing his eyes as if steeling himself, Kai took a deep breath and broke the seal, removing the stopper. A horde of tiny red mites instantly swarmed out of the open bottle, racing toward the warmth of flesh and burrowing under the warrior's skin. Kai dropped the empty container; his breath came in rapid gasps as the creatures entered his blood, releasing the memories that the weapon's owner once held as his own.

His breathing abruptly returned to normal and Kai opened his eyes, faint blue clouds drifting across his vision, much like the crimson smoke that filled Traela's eyes when she allowed the maat personality within her to assert its control.

“Are you okay?” she asked, the concern in her voice tinged with fear. She respected not only the man her teacher was, but his abilities as a warrior. Traela knew if he lost control and turned on her, that she didn’t have the skill necessary to defend herself.

Kai was silent for a long moment. “I’m fine,” he said at last, his voice not quite his own as he turned back to the weapon before him. “The memory mites won’t live long. Let’s hope Nollon shows soon.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

Kai nodded. “I’m fine,” he said his voice rapidly returning to normal, the echo barely a faint whisper. His hands moved over the weapon with a desperate speed, lifting it from its canvas bed and setting it so one end rested on the earth, the weapon standing upright like a narrow obelisk of wood and steel.

“What is it?”

“It’s called a rifle,” Kai said softly, his voice once more his own. “And this,” he said, holding a narrow brass cylinder between his thumb and forefinger, “is the arrow it shoots.”

“You’re going to kill Nollon?”

Kai nodded, slipping the bullet into the rifle and chambering the round.

“You can hit him from here?”

The warrior set the rifle on its bipod and fitted the stock into his shoulder as he stretched out behind it. Flipping the cap up on either end of the weapon’s scope, he shifted the rifle so that it was aimed at the path below.

“I don’t know,” he admitted honestly. “I’d hoped the mites would last longer. I didn’t realize they would die so quickly. They weren’t supposed to.”

“Maybe it’s because of what the maat did to you when you were with them,” Traela offered.

Kai nodded, silently cursing. He chastised himself for not taking that into account.

“So this is like a crossbow?”

The warrior nodded.

“And you can shoot Nollon’s men from here?”

Kai shook his head. “Just Nollon. We only have one shot.”

“Have you ever used this before?”

Kai shook his head once more.

“Do you know how?”

The warrior took a deep breath. “I did a moment ago, but it’s fading fast.”

Traela bit her lower lip with concern. “Are we still going to go through with it?”

“We don’t have another choice,” her mentor answered quietly as he peered through the scope. “Daen and Leiron are counting on us.”



The prophet stood his ground. He knew Nollon wouldn’t kill him. Daen had seen his own death. He knew how he would die and it was not at his captor’s hands.

“You,” the massive warrior growled.

Daen was silent.

“You did this.”

“Actually,” the smaller man glared into Nollon’s eyes, “I warned you not to come this way.”

Nollon’s backhand caught Daen in the side of his jaw, sending the prophet sprawling to the ground, his lip split, blood welling from his nose.

The dark-haired man stared at the prophet in fury, but his anger slowly twisted into a wry grin as he glared at the helpless captive at his feet. “I’ll bet you didn’t see my hand coming,” the warrior laughed, turning away to find his mount, finished with the smaller man.

“Actually, I did,” Daen whispered as he struggled to his feet, his wrists still bound together, the cord that had tied him to his saddlehorn having been broken as he was thrown

from his horse when the fae had attacked. He wiped his bloody lip on his sleeve as he waited for the soldiers he knew would come. “You should have seen how you would have beaten me if I hadn’t defied you.”



“Cross-hairs on the man, pull the trigger. Cross-hairs on the man, pull the trigger.”

Kai quietly whispered the chant under his breath.

“What?” Traela asked, not quite able to hear.

The warrior closed his eyes, desperately trying to retain the memory of how to operate the weapon.

“I’m trying to remember how to use this thing.”

“Can’t you just tell me?” the teen asked. “Then you would remember the telling or else I could remind you.”

Kai shook his head and then settled against the weapon once more. “Then they would just be words. I would lose all the skill the owner of this weapon once had.”

“Is it hard to use?”

Kai didn’t answer for a long moment. “Have you ever used a bow?”

Traela nodded. “Only once. I wasn’t very good.”

“Imagine trying to hit a target from this distance with your first shot.”

The teen pressed her lips together. “I’ll be quiet,” she said guiltily.

But Kai was silent, his lips repeating his mantra again and again as he watched the path through the scope.



Daen had held Leiron close, his arms wrapped around the young girl as Nollon’s men had quickly executed the wounded. The prophet cried freely, his face buried in Leiron’s hair as she wept. It was the curse of being able to see the

future, but never knowing when you had seen enough. Daen knew that Nollon's men would die, but he hadn't cared to learn how. Now he regretted the decision. His ears screamed as he listened to yet another man beg his brethren for mercy. The prophet winced at each word, the voices burning with desperation and fear, only to be sickly silenced as throats were cut and helpless men drowned in their own blood. Cries of those too wounded to move filled the air, bemoaning their fate, cursing those they had been ready to die for. Rage and terror filled the meadow and Daen held the young girl close, unsure if he was her refuge or if it was he who hid in her arms.

At last the meadow was silent except for the sound of wandering horses and the men who reloaded their gear. No one spoke. Daen couldn't imagine how you would find words when those you had murdered stared up at you, unable to speak.

"Get on your horses."

The prophet turned his eyes toward the man he hated, Nollon standing before him. His arms and torso were covered in the blood of his men, his face speckled with their crimson heat that rapidly cooled in the gentle breeze.

"Get on your horses," he said again. His voice was quiet and lifeless, but his eyes burned with an icy rage that lusted to kill again.

Daen simply held the girl close, glaring at their captor.

"I know you would kill me if you could," Nollon offered.

"But I can't," Daen admitted.

One side of Nollon's mouth threatened a smile, but it faded in the midst of the carnage. "I'm not as cold as you might think."

Daen didn't answer.

"You think I enjoy this?"

The prophet was silent.

Nollon stood regarding the small angry man that sheltered the girl.

“I can’t see into your soul,” Daen growled, “but she can.”

The warrior scowled. “You can see the future.”

The prophet nodded.

“Then you know what I will do to you if you don’t get in the saddle now,” Nollon offered simply and turned to walk back to his men.

Daen reeled as the event slipped into the weave of reality, the image of Leiron being repeatedly raped by Nollon’s men hitting him like a blow to the stomach. He tried to block the sound of her screams, the images of her naked body, bruised and broken, used like a rag to wipe up the desire of angry men. Daen crushed closed his eyes, burying his face in Leiron’s hair as he saw the tendons in her legs severed, as he watched himself scream while he was helplessly restrained, as he was pulled along with Nollon’s men and the young girl was left to die, naked and alone, surrounded by the dead.

He looked up as Nollon stopped, the warrior turning back to meet him with a gaze that glimmered with an icy delight.

“Don’t ever cross me,” the warrior whispered.

Daen shepherded the girl with his arms, walking her to the horses. His only delight was in knowing that they would soon be free, that Kai would come for them and that Leiron would be safe. As the thoughts of the phantom rape echoed through his mind, the prophet focused on the future he was bringing to life, no longer caring if he died, only that Leiron would be free of the man who could do something so horrible to a child.



The main portion of scarred soldiers rode with their leader, Nollon unwilling to walk into another ambush. Daen and Leiron rode near the end of the short column; two mounted warriors drifted behind them, making sure they didn’t escape.

The prophet's heart leapt in his chest as a familiar landscape began to form around them. They rode along a narrow stream that dropped from the heights ahead. Behind the waterfall's curtain of water lay a shallow cave that led to The Wildlands, in the same way the canyon wall near The Firedrake River led to the lands of the fae. The Firedrake was behind them, the stream pointing like a finger toward the body of water that was calm and deep when viewed from mortal lands and a wild stretch of untamed river when viewed from this side of the veil.

Daen raised his head, his lip swollen and his broken nose three times its normal size. His face and clothing were covered with a crust of dried blood and he still ached from the blow. It hurt, but Daen couldn't suppress the smile that appeared as a hideous sneer beneath his wounds.

"Leiron," he whispered imperceptibly into the air around them. "Kai is here. Get ready."

He didn't need to look to the girl to see that the spirits carried the message to her. The threads that led to the future became a single choice and Daen's mind was filled with the images of their freedom, of Nollon's men in pursuit. It was only when the prophet once more saw his death that his smile faded, the closeness of his end tingeing his joy with sorrow. As his eyes once more filled with tears, he tried to bolster his spirits with the thought of Leiron's freedom, with the knowledge that the girl would not be hurt by Nollon's men.

But even so, the tears began to fall.



"Kai!"

Traela's voice was an excited whisper.

"I've got them," he murmured, his voice hushed as he centered the cross-hairs on Nollon's head and slowly tightened his grip on the trigger. Their enemy rode directly toward them, the mount's head and neck covering much of Nollon's body.

Somewhere, in the fading shadows of the memories the mites had retained, Kai knew he should wait for a clean shot. But Kai knew this was the only chance they would have and he only had one opportunity to make it happen.



Nollon was turning to issue a command to the soldier who rode next to him when the world came undone. The dark warrior was struck in the upper chest, just inside his left shoulder, the blow spinning him out of the saddle. From the corner of his eye, he had seen his mount's head explode in a shower of blood, an instant before the blow came. Confused, he fell to the earth, as a gunshot echoed over the hills.

His men surged forward, surrounding their leader, leaping from their horses to help him to his feet.

Nollon winced in pain, his left arm hanging limply. Turning his eyes to the path before them, he saw nothing, only the waterfall that waited a distance ahead.

“Check it out,” he ordered two of his men, watching as they ran forward, their swords drawn.

Nollon slumped against one of his soldiers, waiting passively as another stripped away the leader's tunic and tended to his wounds. A bottle was handed to him, but Nollon pushed it aside, shaking his head. He didn't need his head clouded with alcohol, not when they were this close to their goal. He needed to think. He needed to know if someone was trying to stop them, or if this was what he could expect from the world of the fae.



The rifle bucked in Kai's hands and the warrior immediately fought to recover his target with the scope, cursing as he watched Nollon climb to his feet.

Motioning for Traela to stay low, he began to crawl

backward until they were clear of the ledge. Only then did he gesture for her to stand.

“What do we do now?” she asked as they worked their way back toward their companions.

Kai hurried to return the rifle to its canvas casing.

“The only thing we can do,” he said, searching for Ko’laru through the trees ahead as he threw the useless weapon into some brush. “We follow them.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: FREEDOM AND CAPTURE

Daen held his breath as the gunshot filled the air, as the soldiers that rode behind them raced forward to see to their wounded leader. He dared himself to wait for one heartbeat, then two, before slipping from his horse and motioning for Leiron to do the same, lifting his hands impotently to help her from her steed. The girl's wrists were still tied and she fell hard against him, knocking them both to the wet stone path that bordered the stream, Leiron's elbow striking Daen's broken nose.

The prophet ground his teeth together to keep from crying out in pain. Forcing himself to stand, he waited for Leiron to gain her feet and then hurried off into the forest, moving at an angle away from the stream. Horses would be faster, but he didn't know if the girl knew how to ride without someone leading her steed and every timeline he could find where they remained mounted led to their recapture.

Leiron was slow, having twisted her ankle in the fall. Daen turned again and again, watching her struggle, her limp turning to a pained shuffle and then an anguished hop, her ankle unable to support her weight. Finally she fell. Although he begged her with his eyes to run, Leiron began to sob, violently shaking her head.

Daen cursed, dropping to the earth in front of her, exposing her ankle. It was swollen, horribly so, and the prophet felt his anger turn to regret and admiration, amazed

that the girl had made it as far as she had.

He turned away from her, squatting, offering Leiron his back.

“You can’t carry me,” she whispered.

“We have no other choice.”

Daen gasped as he felt her climb on his back, as she threw her tied wrists over his head. He managed to slip her good leg around his waist and through his arms, but her injured ankle was too painful to complete the same maneuver. Groaning, he somehow made it to his feet, hurrying off into the forest with Leiron awkwardly perched on his back. Daen had never been fond of physical labor; it was the reason why he had originally joined the monastery. There he could spend his days reading books and praying rather than working the fields. Unused to carrying any kind of load, he was sweating within a few steps and was soon gasping for air, certain that he would collapse at any moment, that the next step he took would be his last.



Nollon turned once more toward his captives, spotting their horses out of the corner of his eye and then quickly turning back to his men who searched the path ahead. He was certain that his wound was the result of some sort of trap that had been sprung. There was no arrow or stone involved. It had to be either magic or a trap of some type. There was simply no other explanation.

Unable to shake his unease, Nollon turned once more toward Daen and Leiron. He couldn’t see them directly, only spot the shape of their steeds out of the corner of his eye. Even so, the man who tended to his wounds with herbs and enchanted potions urged him once more to be still, pushing him back into a position where he couldn’t see the captives at all. The dark warrior growled, staring coldly at the healer. The boy, Rann, was clutched possessively in Nollon’s unyielding

grasp. Rann was the key to everything; the other two captives were merely tools that Nollon would use, not only to initiate the change in the flow of reality, but to navigate the days that followed.

But something tugged at Nollon's senses. He had always trusted his instincts and they told him that something was amiss. Pushing the soldier away with his good hand, Nollon stood and turned, instantly cursing. The steeds were there but the riders were gone.

"After them," he growled, cursing once more at the man who continued to try and stop the flow of blood from Nollon's wound. Rann winced as Nollon's fist tightened around the young boy's arm. But he was silenced by a cold scowl from the older man.



Daen heard the shouts, the sound of hooves as Nollon's men easily found their trail. Leiron's shuffling gait had pointed the way and the path had been clearly outlined where Daen picked her up and began to struggle under his load. He hurried now, his desperation giving his legs a second life, an anguished strength flooding into limbs.

Ducking his head, he pushed through a wall of brush and stopped in his tracks. Daen had emerged onto a semi-circular ledge, the open space narrow and short. Beyond it lay only the sky and a drop down to The Firedrake River far below. On the mortal side of the veil, a fall from the canyon walls would be suicidal. Here, in the land of the fae, where the heights were exaggerated even more, the mere thought was impossible. Clouds drifted far below them, obscuring the torrent that raced over massive boulders, the river a raging flood that would claim the life of anyone who somehow survived the fall.

"Not anyone," Daen reminded himself, wondering if he spoke aloud or merely thought the words. "Only me."

The visions still drifted through his mind. There was nothing beyond the images of what was to come, only a dark finality that terrified the prophet.

He sat down, awkwardly helping Leiron dismount from his back, Daen wincing as he bumped her ankle, as she cried out in pain. Nollon's men were only moments away. He had hoped to buy them time as he sought another path for himself, but he knew Leiron's cry would draw the pursuit to their meager sanctuary.

Helping her stand, the girl leaning heavily on his shoulder, he waited before the abyss, desperately searching for another future. In his mind, he watched as his lifeblood spilled out beneath Nollon's blade. He saw himself cut down again and again. The only thing that was worse than the promise of his own death was watching Nollon's threat come to life, a scarred warrior holding Daen's head tightly so he couldn't look away as Leiron suffered at the hands of men too old to know the touch of her flesh.

He was torn from his thoughts as the sound of horses approached. In the echoes of the thread before them, he could see the warriors dismount; the prophet watched as swords were drawn and scarred men approached their sanctuary.

The world seemed to slow as he turned toward Leiron, as he knelt low and threw her over his shoulder. A strange alien strength filled his legs as he lifted her, as he leapt, launching them both into space. He didn't hear her scream in terror as they toppled from the ledge. He didn't hear the gasp of shock and surprise from the warriors that emerged from the brush only to see their quarry choose death over captivity. It was only as they fell, when Leiron came free of his grasp and Daen began to speed toward his death that the world resumed its pace. All possibilities narrowed to a single path. He had always known he would die one day. For years, he had been haunted by visions of his end, watching himself beg for mercy on the garden path. But now, there was no uncertainty. The end wouldn't come in a garden, but against a wall of water he

would hit at a speed that would make liquid seem like stone.



“No!”

Leiron screamed, falling through space, never imagining she would be heard.

But hers was a world formed as much from spirits as it was from flesh and blood. The winds heard her cry, racing to her aid. They couldn't lift her, couldn't make her fly, but they could slow her. She didn't realize the difference, didn't know that she wouldn't die from the wall until her world was swallowed by the cold embrace of the Firedrake.

Spirits surged around her; hands of water lifted her until her face broke free of the river, her open mouth gasping for air. Leiron didn't realize that the same hadn't been true for Daen. Even as she swam toward where he lay motionless on the embankment, her movements aided by the spirits of water and air, she didn't question why his limbs were twisted unnaturally, why his chest didn't rise and fall.

She made land and lay against the stone, the water tugging at her feet, other spirits inviting her to return to the embrace of the river, to swim with them in the depths where mortals had never been.

But Leiron was tired. Her ankle ached and the cold water soothed her. All she wanted to do was sleep until Daen woke her, and she knew that the prophet would do that sooner than she hoped, that they would need to run once more. He would protect her, he would carry her to safety and everything would be okay. She could see it in his eyes when he looked at her. He had saved her life in the garden at Raven's Roost and Leiron knew Daen would never allow her to be hurt.

Not while he still lived.



Daen lay against the stone. His body no longer hurt, even the numbness that had replaced the agony had faded. He sat up, feeling that something was amiss as he did so. Turning, he looked down at his broken body, understanding that he was dead, never having imagined that his afterlife would be like this.

Unsure of where to go, he walked over to where Leiron slept and knelt next to her, running his fingers through her hair. He watched as they passed through her, his ghostly body unable to interact with physical flesh and blood. But Leiron could sense spirits, she could speak with them and as he tried to touch her, the girl stirred lazily, as if she wasn't ready to awake.

"Leiron?" he whispered.

The girl stretched wearily and Daen realized, in contrast, how refreshed he felt.

"Leiron?"

She stirred, opening her eyes and blinked sleepily. Slowly sitting up, she winced at the pain in her ankle.

"I don't think I can walk at all," she apologized, too exhausted to realize that the man before her had changed, that his wounds were gone, that his broken nose was set and completely healed.

Daen was at a loss for words.

"If you can carry me again," she began, slowly turning as she sat upright, her eyes drifting over the embankment. She stopped, Leiron's gaze fixed on Daen's broken body, the words tumbling from her lips as if once started, they couldn't stop. "If we just go a little bit at a time you won't get too tired," she began; her words stumbled; her eyes darting from her friend to his broken corpse and back again.

"You're safe," Daen whispered, as if that was the only thing that mattered.

"Oh, Daen," she cried, the tears welling in her eyes, streaming down her face as her shoulders began to shake, the young girl's chin wrinkling as her lower lip quivered.

“It’s okay,” he offered softly.

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not,” he smiled. “You’re safe. This was the only way.”

“But you’re,” she began, her lower lip quivering, her chin clenched.

He nodded. “I’ve heard stories about this,” he smiled, his eyes filled with both the joy of her freedom and the sorrow of his captivity. “Of lovers that leap to their deaths and forever haunt the landscape. I should have known.”

Leiron wept into her hands, her wrists still bound together.

“No,” she murmured, raising tear-swollen eyes. “I don’t want you to be dead. I don’t want this for you.”

“It’s okay,” he tried to smile, the gesture failing. He suddenly felt guilty. With Leiron safe, her freedom didn’t seem so precious, as if once purchased, he realized the cost was too high. Daen shook his head. He would do the same thing again if forced with the same choice. Looking around the rocky embankment he tried to avoid his corpse. “I was a monk once,” he said, trying to sound jovial, unsure if he succeeded. “These are much more spacious accommodations.”

Leiron looked away, her eyes finding Daen’s body once more.

“I don’t know how far I can go,” he offered, “but I’ll walk with you if you’d like.”

The girl stared silently at the corpse, her mind drifting back in time.

“Leiron?”

Back to when she first met Sovay, when they had knelt together in the field of the slain and had released the spirits of the dead to a better place.

Unable to stand, Leiron crawled across the stones, banging her knees, wincing as she bumped her broken ankle. New bruises began to form across her knees and shins; the scarlet caress of blood peered through scrapes and fresh

lacerations. Beaten and bloody, she reached his side and knelt before her friend, laying her bound hands in the center of his chest.

Closing her eyes, she pressed her palms against the corpse's heart, remembering the man he used to be. She could feel him so clearly. He was her hero, the one who had saved her life not once, but twice.

Daen felt his new body begin to change. Light flooded into him, expanding him, erasing all sense of solidity and weight. He began to feel warmth surge through him, the world around him blotted out with a soft, endless illumination.

"Go somewhere where even the heroes will honor you," Leiron whispered, lifting her hands from her friend's chest and raising them to the sky.

Daen was gone. She could feel it. And although she knew it was for the best, Leiron buried her face in her dead friend's chest, sobbing uncontrollably, already realizing how much she missed him.



"You missed," Traela remarked, her voice heavy and shocked, as if she had never considered that her mentor could fail.

"I know I missed!" Kai snapped, immediately wishing that he hadn't. It was an impossible shot. He didn't know why Daen would want him to try it, especially since the prophet would be able to see Kai's failure.

The warrior hurried through the underbrush, realizing that speed could be more of an ally than stealth. Nollon's army had been reduced to only a handful of soldiers and Kai felt that he and Ko'laru were no more than equally matched. He was reluctant to throw either Beltross or Traela into the fray, but he knew that they could tip the balance of the conflict in their favor.

Breaking into a full sprint, he burst into the clearing

where he left his companions, ready to bark orders and race toward their destination, knowing that they would follow on his heels, that Ko'laru would soon catch up and match his pace. But Kai pulled up short, stopping as he entered the meadow, the heavy weight of defeat draping itself over his shoulders, the warrior staring in disbelief.

His companions sat on the earth, one of the maat standing in their midst, the alien warrior's crystalline blade ready in its hand. Kai knew the law. He knew that there would be consequences, but Daen's promise of stopping Nollon's threat was enough for the Kai to take the risk.

"You're here for the weapon," Kai said evenly, trying not to curse. Nollon waited before the portal to The Wildlands. If they didn't strike immediately, it would be a race to beat the dark warrior to his destination.

"That is the law," Jheton Ghat agreed, his strangely layered voice echoing in the companions' minds.

"And you will punish me for my offense."

"The law states that I am to decide what your punishment will be."

Kai stood motionless. "And that will be?"

"You will give me the weapon."

The mortal warrior sat the canvas tube at the maat's feet and stepped back. "What else?"

Jheton moved forward, standing before Kai, staring down into the mortal's gaze with eyes that held the swirling clouds of a cyclone. The being's patchwork armor suddenly seemed the perfect camouflage, the brown hues of the tanned flesh merging with the backdrop of tree trunks and soil.

"My people hold two sets of laws holy. One is written by our people. It governs what may move from one world to another, it keeps the realms we choose to visit pure and untainted by outside tools and ideas. But there is another law, one which supersedes even the precepts of the warrior caste."

The maat stretched out a gloved hand, laying it on Kai's shoulder.

“It is the water of life, our sacred prophecies. In its eddies, your life is shown to me. My ruling is that you will allow me to accompany you, that you will allow me to fight at your side to bring the prophecies of my people to life.”

Kai couldn't hide his smile.

“The honor you will earn will erase any debt you owe to my people.”

Kai nodded. “We have to hurry. We need to stop Nollon and his men before they travel between the worlds.

Jheton shook his head. “No. My people were born in the conduits that separate one world from another.” The warrior paused and Kai wondered if the being could smile beneath his leather mask. “We must only be ready to meet them when they arrive.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: THE WILDLANDS

Sovay stretched before the warm fire, a mug of hot cider cradled in her hands. Detta paced near one of the small cottage's windows, his eyes on the gathering storm clouds, his hand nervously fingering the pommel of his sword.

"Come," she smiled, gesturing for her friend to sit on the broad pillow next to her. "Tobias is going to come back soon with the rest of the settlement. You're going to have to meet everyone," she teased with a grin. "You might as well relax."

"I can't!" he snapped, his eyes agitated, darting from her to the window.

Sovay caught the angry response before it left her lips. Swallowing, she regarded her companion for a long moment. When they had been in the meadow together, outside of Cathedral, he had seemed so young, the strength of his beliefs adding a strange nobility to his features. But since they had arrived in The Wildlands, Detta had become sullen and irritable, responding angrily without warning or provocation.

"Is it this place?" she wondered to herself. "Or is it because of the things that I said when he found me waiting for him in the cedar tree?"

Sovay licked her lips, preparing her words carefully. "What's bothering you, Detta?" she asked, choosing to take the most direct approach.

"Nothing!" he spit.

“What do you mean, nothing?” she growled, leaping to her feet. “What’s wrong with you? Have I done something to you?”

Detta’s eyes flashed with rage and for the briefest instant, Sovay was certain he was going to attack her. But as quickly as it flared, the anger dissipated, leaving only an anxious unease it is wake.

Leaving his sword, his hand began to unbutton his tunic, stopping halfway down his torso. Pulling open his shirt, he gestured to an intricate, spiraling tattoo that covered his heart and stretched across his chest toward both shoulders.

“This,” he said, gritting his teeth with the effort, “this was given me by Nollon.”

“Weren’t all your tattoos?” she asked, not understanding where he was leading her.

Detta clenched his eyes shut, obviously straining even to speak. “Yes,” he grunted, his shoulders beginning to shake, beads of sweat beginning for form on his brow. “But we all received this one.”

“I don’t understand,” she admitted. “What does it mean?”

“It’s a magical sigil,” he growled, his breath coming in ragged gasps as if he were in horrible pain. “It binds me to Nollon.”

Sovay was silent.

“He said it was a sign of loyalty,” he panted, falling weakly to his knees, striking the floor with a single, tortured blow from his fists. “He said it was a sign of his loyalty to us. But it just insures our loyalty to him.”

“How do you know?” she asked innocently.

“Because it burns!” he roared, every muscle in his body tensing, his eyes burning with terror, pain and rage. “I can feel it pulling me toward him,” he growled, his teeth audibly grinding with the strain. “I can feel it demanding that I go to him, that I serve him. That I do his bidding.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, her words stammering

uneasily, her terror slowly growing in the pit of her stomach as she watched the transformation of the man she had begun to develop feelings for.

“He’s here,” Detta panted, his voice low and coarse, his clothing drenched with sweat. “He’s out there, on the plains.”

Sovay turned her eyes to the window, toward the gathering storm clouds that loomed above the grasslands. “He wants you to go to him?” she asked, dreading the response.

“Yes,” he winced, his face pale beneath his tattoos. “But I want to stay with you.”

She stared, unbelieving, uncertain if she should allow the joy that threatened to flood her soul seep into her world. But her elation was short-lived as Detta collapsed fully; landing hard; unable to break his fall. His jaw tightly clenched as his entire body began to convulse.

“Help me,” he whispered, his eyes wide with terror.

Sovay stared, watching as the tattoos that covered his face and his body began to come alive, as the ink took form and started to encase Detta’s body in a cocoon of ebony liquid.

“Help me!” he pleaded, his body shaking with an unholy ferocity, the sound of his voice strangely displaced as the convulsions increased speed, as Detta’s features began to blur from the velocity of his tremors. He was thrown onto his back, his body violently thrashing against the hardwood floor with a horrible cadence.

“Help me!” he screamed, his eyes wide with terror as the tattoos stretched in narrow bands across his mouth, as they gagged him with the designs he had willingly accepted.

Sovay leapt to his side, pulling at the resilient black bands that stretched like a bowstring, that refused to break, even though they were slowly strangling the man she had just begun to love.



Nollon’s mount shifted uneasily, its hooves stomping

the grass beneath them. The cave behind the waterfall had somehow transported them into the heart of a vast grassland, the open plains whipped by harsh winds and shrouded by dark clouds that threatened to unleash their fury. The steed whinnied, spinning beneath the rider as Nollon fought to control his mount. As the horse reared up, pawing the air, the dark warrior vaulted from the saddle, landing in an easy crouch a safe distance behind the terrified animal, the steed bolting into the night.

“Dismount!” he roared, bellowing to be heard over the sound of the angry wind.

His men did as ordered; the steeds fled into the darkness.

The tall grass danced ferociously, whipped into a frenzy by the storm winds. Black clouds blotted out the stars, hiding the moon behind their ominous shroud.

“Where are we?” one of his men yelled, fighting to thrust his voice above the roar of the tempest. “Where do we go from here?”

Nollon glared at him, fixing the soldier with a deadly glance. In an instant, the dark leader’s blade left its sheath, severing the man’s arm at the elbow.

“You tell me,” Nollon growled.

As if in response to his words, the twitching arm rolled onto its palm, ignoring its screaming owner, its fingers digging into the earth like unholy insectoid legs. Crawling in a wide circle, it stopped facing the east, a single finger extending to point into the distance.

“Let’s go,” Nollon bellowed, sheathing his sword in the wounded man’s chest, withdrawing the weapon, the blade naked and bloody, the final reminder of the dead man’s life falling to the Wildland soil like drops of crimson rain.



The wind blew over the still-warm corpse, the storm

awakening the magic of the unfinished land. Stalks of prairie grass began to entangle the dead man in a living cocoon, pulling the body into the embrace of the earth. The soil swallowed him, welcoming him into a dark womb where the enchantment could take root and weave the chaos that echoed in the storm front's song.



Sovay's carving knife was in her hands and she frantically slashed at the bands that engulfed Detta's body. The inky strands parted before her blade, only to reform like a pool of liquid she couldn't mar. Ripples spread through the form-fitting sheath as she thrust her hands into the midnight shroud, trying to open an airway for the convulsing warrior.

With a suddenness that terrified her, Detta suddenly stopped thrashing, his body laying before her deathly still.

Sovay renewed her assault, only to find that the cocoon had grown as hard as steel, that her fingers couldn't penetrate the midnight armor. Whispering an impulsive prayer, she grasped her blade in both hands and thrust downward, hoping to penetrate the sheath, horrified as her blade simply skipped off the inky material that had once been Detta's tattoos.

And then she screamed as the dark being before her stood to its feet.

Every trace of Detta was gone. Hidden beneath a black sheath that shifted like liquid, distorting her friend's form, the young soldier was propelled across the cottage's floor, moving with rough, aborted motions like a marionette in the hands of an unskilled puppeteer. There were no features on the being's face; no eyes with which to see; no mouth to speak or breathe.

"Detta?"

She'd intended the sound to be commanding, to stop the creature in its tracks. And it was a creature. Sovay could somehow tell that the sheath was alive, that it responded to a logic all its own, to a calling that her friend couldn't resist.

It was in the midst of this terror that her voice lost its force, that her intended roar became a choked whisper that faded to silence as the entity slipped through the open doorway and out into the stormy night.



Rann struggled against his captor, the young boy bound at the ankles and wrists and thrown over Nollon's shoulder as if he were nothing more than a sack of flour. He kicked ineffectively at the warrior, trying to free himself, somehow understanding that he was near the end of his journey, that whatever horrible purpose Nollon had in mind for the young monk would soon come to its fruition.

But as he struggled, as the wind continued to pick up force and the dark clouds descended from the night, Rann thought he saw shapes in the shadows. Horrible things from nightmares began to come alive in the night around them, pacing them as Nollon's men ran toward their destination, led by the gestures of a dead man's severed hand. As the young boy watched the shadows solidify, as they began to slowly drift closer, he felt the cold grip of terror wrap its fingers tightly around his heart, his breath coming in ragged gasps as he watched first one soldier disappear silently into the blackness, quickly followed by another.

He stopped thrashing as one man after another disappeared, replaced by dark horrors until only Nollon and the boy were left, running toward their destination, flanked by demons that threatened to consume them as well. Whatever Nollon had in mind couldn't compare to the threatening shadows around them and Rann cowered, huddling against Nollon for protection as the darkness slowly drifted closer, enclosing them on every side.



“This is where he will come.”

Kai turned to look at Jheton Ghat, the maat’s expressionless mask staring out into the stormy night. They stood on a wide disk of flagstones held in the midst of a stormy grassland. A hurricane raged around them, the winds screaming as they raced past, the fury of the storm taking on physical form. Traela instinctively crowded Kai, pressing into the mortal’s embrace as the winds came alive, as terrible creatures were whipped past their sanctuary, their tortured wails disappearing into the night. Within the circular embrace of stone, the night was calm, as if a mason had somehow built a permanent eye in the hurricane. Around them, the world came undone, continually recreated by the hands of chaos. Misshapen beasts emerged from the earth only to be torn apart at the whim of the storm. Unholy nightmares raced the wind, laughing maliciously with the thrill of the hunt, as if they hurried to find some poor lost soul to torment.

“I don’t like this place,” Traela whispered, but her words were lost beneath the raging force of the elements around her.

Caraine touched Kai’s shoulder, pointing into the distance. Guided by her gesture, the warrior looked out into the night, not daring to believe what he saw could be real. A young man, no older than Traela, slowly walked toward them holding a lantern before him as if to light his way. Within the embrace of light, the storm instantly died, as if the raging hurricane was formed not of wind but of shadows that couldn’t bear the touch of illumination. Monstrous apparitions came undone as they brushed against the circle of light; unholy demons dissipated, crumbling into the night, returning to the place they called home.

Stopping outside the perimeter of the circle, the boy greeted them with a warm smile, the gesture horribly out of place amidst the chaos of the night. He was slight of build, a mortal’s smile between elongated ears. Deep blue eyes that

whispered of the fae peered beneath a tangle of blonde hair, but they blinked like a human's above the smattering of freckles that stretched across his cheeks.

"I'm Domen," he said merrily, his gaze on the teen that lurked behind her mentor. "And you're Traela, the fiery one."

The companions turned as one to regard the young woman. Only Jheton stared out into the night, as if his eyes were fixed on a distant threat.

"Hounds," he said evenly. "Warp hounds."

The mortals didn't understand the implication of the words, but the terror that filled Domen's eyes interpreted for them.

"Form a circle," the maat growled. "Back to back."

"Caraine," Kai barked. "You're in the center."

"What about me?" Traela asked, her eyes on her mentor, her hand on the pommel of her sword.

"You fight to my right. Ko'laru, you're at my left."

"What are they?" the fae asked, looking to Beltross for guidance but seeing that he had no answers.

"They're our death," the maat said silently. "The end of honor."



As the wind continued to roar across the plains, the darkness grew deeper, blotting out the world with its inky touch. Nollon ran blind toward their destination, goaded on by the dead soldier's hand, the young boy thrown over his shoulder. His men raced beside him, their forms obscured by the darkness. Something teased his senses, warning him that something was amiss. Nollon shook his head as if to clear it of the thought, his tireless stride carrying him deeper into the pit of the night. He trusted the men he had gathered to fight at his side. Each one would die for him without question; each one was sworn to the cause. But as the shadows around him began to draw weapons, as the hunters began to fit the enchanted

arrows to their bows, Nollon realized his mistake. He realized that he had underestimated the enchantment that filled the land around him. The warrior had grown secure in his own knowledge of the arcane arts, not imagining what the power of an unchained storm could wreak when handed the reins of magic.

He cursed, picking up his pace, his powerful chest heaving with effort, his magically healed wound a dull ache. Desperate, he dropped the severed limb, drawing his sword to fill the emptiness of his vacated hand. Defiant, he gritted his teeth, running harder, swearing that he would reach his destination or die trying. If Nollon fell, he would take The Wildlands with him; he would cut down the very night and curse the land with his dying breath.

And then, the full fury of the storm was unleashed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: THE STORM

The hounds emerged from the darkness on spindly legs, the snarling dogs perched like spiders on limbs that seemed too long and slender to support their muscular shoulders and snarling jaws. A demonic intelligence burned in their eyes, the creatures exchanging glances, changing their positions as if by an unspoken command, spreading out to approach the companions in a wide semi-circle of snarling teeth.

Without warning, a screaming apparition bellowed out of the night, slamming into the flank of the lead hound. The pack-mate shivered as it absorbed the phantom, as the ghost was drawn within the solidity of the canine's body. A quick convulsion wracked its form and the hound grew larger before their eyes. Muscle was added to its frame; its jaws widened from a slender maw that could slash and tear to a massive force that could crush bone.

The wind continued to increase its fury, the pack pummeled by the night, changing shape with each phantom that slammed into the beasts that prowled closer to the circle of stone. The hounds grew before the companion's eyes, swelling from the size of dogs to pack animals; wolves becoming snarling draft horses bent on slaughter.

"Don't touch them," Jheton warned.

Kai cursed beneath his breath, testing the balance of a sword he intimately knew.

Domen leaned toward Traela.

“It’s an honor to fight at your side,” he whispered with a smile, a delighted gleam in his eye.

Traela scowled. “We’re going to die,” she growled, the flames beginning to dance in her gaze, her jaw clenched with determination.

“Not tonight,” the wilder promised, his smile growing as he watched her transformation begin. “Not while we stand in a focus circle.”

“A focus circle?” she asked.

“This circle of stones,” Domen explained. “It was used by the creators of this world to wield their magic. We’re protected here.”

The teen ignored the stranger at her side, her terror growing as the snarling creatures prowled closer. With each slaving step, she began to grow more afraid, until her fear reached a line it couldn’t cross. It was a place that Traela had reserved for herself, a secret room in her heart that she had kept locked even against the mentors that had forced her to feel every emotion so deeply that it seemed her very soul would crumble beneath the onslaught. As the horror of the night clawed against the door to her heart, the teen felt her fury grow. The anger behind everything that had been done to her by her teachers grew into an uncontainable rage. Her knuckles grew tight around her balled fist, clenching the hilt of her sword, her teeth grinding together as she began to growl. The sound rumbled deep in her chest, rolling like thunder. The flames began to lick at her flesh, the living fire erupting from her hands, creeping up her limbs until she was an inferno, until Traela tilted back her head and roared, the magnificent bellow tearing through the night.

As she screamed in rage and defiance the flames that filled her body exploded in a flash of light, the conflagration pulled into the stones at her feet even as her companions cowered from the heat. The stones glowed white hot, transferring the wildfire to their perimeter before erupting into a wall of flame that roared into the night, burning away the

night as the blast wave raced across the grasslands. Wherever the flames touched, the power of the unholy storm was stilled; shadows exploded; sunlight raced in to fill the void. For a league in every direction, night turned to day, the violence of the storm transmuted into the peacefulness of a perfect spring morning.

The pack of warp hounds was instantly consumed.

Traela collapsed, unable to stand, her head rolling to the side, her eyes closed as she slumped unconscious into Domen's arms.

Kai's began to leap to his student's aid, but the maat brought him up short, Jheton pointing into the distance.

"Our prey," he offered simply.

The mortal warrior turned his gaze to where the maat pointed. There, at the edge of the wide circle of sunlight stood Nollon, sword in hand, Rann thrown over his shoulder. The dark warrior stared back at them, his expression of shock and disbelief turning to a knowing rage as he turned and raced into the curtain of darkness, entering the storm once more.

Kai turned back to Traela, torn between aiding his student and stopping the man that would change reality. The warrior's decision was made by Domen's promise.

"I'll take care of her." The young man's smile was gone, replaced by a seriousness that swore he would die before he allowed harm come to the girl he referred to as "the fiery one."

Without another word, Kai leapt from the stones, racing across the grasslands toward the wall of darkness that slowly pressed in against the sunlight, the storm regaining its strength, recovering from the force of Traela's outburst. In an instant Ko'laru was at his side, the fingers of her hand intertwining with his own for the briefest instant, her gentle squeeze reminding him that she loved him. The maat passed them and slowly pulled away, but Kai pushed harder, fighting to pace the alien warrior. They began to pass the bodies of Nollon's men, the faces of the dead men bloated with strange patterns as if

massive worms had burrowed beneath their skin, following the lines of the tattoos they wore. Kai paused only long enough to sheath his sword and claim a bow and quiver of enchanted arrows, knowing if he couldn't catch Nollon before the dark warrior reached his destination, that Kai would only have one chance to stop him. Once more, it would depend on a single shot. As the winds began to pick up and the darkness slowly descended, Kai felt his tension begin to grow. He was familiar with a bow, as good with it as any mortal archer, but his previous failure lurked in the back of his mind and the warrior wondered if he could hit anything in the midst of a raging storm.



“Did you see them?” Nollon panted, trying to throw his voice above the fury of the wind. “Did you see the ones that created this storm?”

Rann was confused. Nollon could feel it. He knew the dogma that the monks would have instilled in the young boy. He knew that Rann would have been indoctrinated into a system of belief that saw the fae as demons bent on destroying a man's soul; as creatures that possessed unholy powers, that could bend the dark things of the world to their will.

“They're the ones we're running from,” the dark warrior goaded. “It's bad enough that the mortals consort with demons, but they have called the devil himself to their aid.” Nollon gasped, speaking between breaths, his voice hard with fury. “The Lord of Darkness sent his champion to aid them in their quest. You saw him, boy, dressed in the skins of the dead. He'll add you to his armor if he catches you.”

Nollon forced himself not to look over his shoulder. He could feel the pursuit. His instincts were honed too sharply not to sense that he was being followed. Although his mind screamed at him to keep the blade ready, the warrior slipped his sword in his scabbard and knelt on the earth, turning Rann to

face him.

Holding both of the boy's shoulders in his massive hands, Nollon stared deeply into young man's eyes. "I'm not asking you to do this for me," he assured the boy. "I'm asking you to do it for the light; for everything that's good in this world. If you don't, every day will be like this storm. No one will ever be happy again."

Rann swallowed, trembling in fear. Dark things screamed in the air around them. He remembered the demons that had taken over the bodies of Nollon's men, that had pressed in on them until the light had burned away the night. Rann had prayed, prayed that something could save them, that a god, any god, would have pity on his plight and save him from the endless storm.

"But I saw you kill your own men," Rann stammered, his body shaking in Nollon's iron grip, the boy's face wracked with fear. "You can't be on the side of good and do that."

"They were possessed by demons," Nollon assured him, his voice dripping with innocence and sincerity. "I had to do it. The only way to save them was to end their lives, to set their souls free."

"But..."

"I can't tell you what to do," Nollon interrupted gently, gazing deeply into Rann's eyes. "I can't tell you what to say or what to think. I can't even tell you what to expect when the time comes. It's all up to you, Rann. It's your choice."

"But..."

"All I can ask is that you trust me. That you think of me protecting the weak, that you imagine that I'm strong enough to save everyone that has ever been hurt by someone stronger than them. If you imagine me stronger than anyone, if you imagine me as someone that can never be stopped, then I can protect everyone."

Rann swallowed. "You would do that?" he asked, wanting to believe it was true, wanting to believe that Nollon was the instrument the gods had sent to rescue him from the

storm.

As if in answer to his prayers, the muscular warrior nodded. “The first thing I’ll do is make the storm go away and take you somewhere where you will be safe.”

Rann nearly wept with relief. “What do I need to do?”

“Go there,” Nollon said, his voice flavored with anticipation. The boy turned, following the sweep of the older man’s hand with his eyes. In the shadows of the storm loomed a circle of uneven standing stones, each ragged obelisk jutting from the earth like a single ancient finger pointing to the sky.

“What is it?” the boy asked, his voice trembling, his eyes wide with fear.

“It’s a place where things are changed.”

“Will I be changed?”

“No,” Nollon lied. “You’ll be fine.”

Rann turned as his captor released him, the boy staring at the stones for a long moment before turning back to the older man.

“Will you come with me?” he asked, his voice so filled with fear that it seemed as if he begged Nollon to accompany him.

The dark-maned warrior slowly shook his head. “I can’t, Rann. It’s something you have to do alone.”

The boy nodded and took a single step toward the shadows of the stones, his eyes fixed on his destination as he tried to ignore the unholy creatures that rode screaming on the wind.



“By the gods!”

Kai cursed, dropping to a knee and drawing the bow. In a single heartbeat he judged the strength and direction of the wind and let the arrow fly.

The arrow’s head struck Nollon in the center of the back, the shaft shattering, each splinter forming a spiked tendril

that wrapped around his torso and sunk its poison deep into the warrior's skin. The wounded man roared in agony as his life was sucked from his body, as his veins turned black and his skin grew hard and ridged. He toppled forward, gasping for breath, his body on fire.

As he began to rapidly die, Nollon spied Rann before him, the boy having stopped, staring in horror at the warrior's transformation.

"They're demons," Nollon croaked, the sound lost beneath the roar of the wind. "Imagine me your savior and I'll deliver you from their grasp."

His face struck the earth, his eyes fixed on the boy, knowing that Rann couldn't have heard him above the maelstrom.

But the boy nodded and hurried toward the stones.



"I'll stop him."

It was Jheton's voice that echoed in their minds and the maat surged forward, rapidly closing the distance between himself and the boy.

But before he could reach their quarry, the night awoke and a midnight warrior stepped out of the shadows. His face was featureless, his body moving with a speed that belied the jerky suddenness of each movement. Bound to his leader's will, even after the man was dead, Detta had no choice but to offer his own life to carry out Nollon's final wish.



Jheton Ghat drew his sword the same instant that the full fury of the storm was unleashed. The earth around them heaved like the waves of the sea, the ground suddenly losing its stability. Reeling, the maat stumbled, unprepared for the sudden change.

Detta's strange, staccato gate was perfectly suited for his new environment. The earth beneath him would surge upward or suddenly drop low, seeming to throw him off balance, but with a sudden jerk, the dark sheath Detta wore would compensate, as if the unseen puppeteer that commanded his movements also guided the surging earth.

Jheton cursed, throwing up a desperate block as Detta's first slash came perilously close to penetrating his armor and the membrane beneath. The maat knew if his membrane was pierced, he would die. With their innate speed and a culture that taught warfare from the moment a new voice entered the water of life, the maat were warriors who could stand before impossible odds, who could defeat any opponent they faced. But their achilles' heel was their fragility, the knowledge that a single wound would end their life, that the smallest puncture in the membrane that contained their essence would cause them to bleed out onto the earth.

The maat rolled aside, the level ground that promised his escape suddenly rising upward, stopping him short. Blocking with both hands, Jheton stopped Detta's powerful overhand strike and kicked the faceless warrior, sending the demonic puppet staggering, the maat gaining his feet. Jheton's crystalline blade screamed in the raging storm winds, powered almost beyond his ability to control the vibrating weapon.

Detta waded in, his jerking cadence impossible to anticipate, each pause capable of completely changing the shrouded warrior's direction, allowing him to compensate for the unpredictable movement of the storm-tossed earth. Jheton fought to keep his feet, his attention divided between the warrior that assaulted him and the waves that threatened to topple him from his feet, robbing him of his speed and agility, leaving him helpless before his opponent.



Kai stood, his feet planted firmly on the earth, his

knees bent to ride out the waves that tossed the soil beneath him. His bow was drawn, an arrow knocked, every fiber in the mortal warrior's body fighting to track the target that bobbed before him. As the earth surged and the battle flowed, the dark creature disappeared behind the maat and Kai was denied a clean shot at Detta's sheathed form.

With a single deep breath, Kai cleared his mind, willing his heart to slow, his perception of the world around him to narrow until only Detta existed. The roar of the storm slowly faded from his ears; his vision narrowed into a dark tunnel connecting him and his target.

Trusting each instinct he had honed through countless battles, Kai let the arrow fly.

It struck Detta in the throat, the shaft shattering, the tendrils wrapping themselves around the target's neck. But instead of strangling the life from their victim, the tentacles simply disappeared, pulled within the inky sheath.

Kai growled, dropping the bow and drawing his sword.

"Get the boy," he cursed, rushing forward into battle.

Kai prayed that Ko'laru could reach Rann before the child completed whatever task Nollon had set before him.



Jheton hesitated for the briefest instant as the arrow struck, expecting his opponent to react to the wound, to leave the maat an opening which would spell Detta's death. But instead, Detta surged forward, just as the earth beneath Jheton moved. The maat was thrown off balance, tossed forward into Detta's sword, the steel blade carving through the maat's armor, slicing through the vulnerable membrane underneath.

The alien warrior fell to his knees, dropping the crystalline blade he had claimed, that a destiny worm had inscribed with a prophesy steeped with honor, a path that would become a legend to his people. But instead of fulfilling the promise that had been set before him the day his voice had

joined with the chorus of his people, Jheton would die in a strange land, defeated by a warrior who moved like a mortal child's toy.



Kai rushed forward, striking Detta from behind with a two-handed blow that was turned away by the dark sheath that encased Sovay's friend. Detta stumbled, staggering beneath the force of the strike and Kai dropped and rolled, stopping in a crouch above Jheton's forgotten blade. The mortal warrior claimed the weapon with his free hand, paired blades ready to fend off Detta's advance.

The demonic puppet staggered forward, lurching in time with the surging of the waves. Kai crouched, his knees bent, letting the earth move beneath him, his body rising and falling with the storm-tossed soil. Detta struck and Kai parried with his own blade, blocking his opponent's sword high, leaving the torso of the dark sheath exposed for a second strike. Jheton's crystalline sword screamed through the air as Kai struck, the blade carving through the carapace Detta wore, cleaving the man beneath it in half.

Kai was a blur, moving even before Detta's corpse struck the ground. In an instant he crouched above Jheton's dying body, the maat holding his wound closed, his life-force seeping out between his fingers.

"He's dead," Kai growled, the song of battle still roaring in his veins.

"You have honor," the maat replied, his normally layered voiced weak and clear.

The mortal placed the alien warrior's blade next to the fallen man, Jheton glancing at the weapon with the cloudy pools that served as his eyes.

"It is my people's tradition that a sword is to be destroyed when it's wielder dies," the maat offered simply. "A heavy stone or blacksmith's hammer will shatter it if the blade

is silent. I would be grateful if you would complete this task for me.”

Kai shook his head. “You’re not going to die.”

Jheton stared as the mortal clenched his fist around his naked blade, as Kai’s crimson blood began to fall, spattering across the maat’s open wound. The alien warrior stared with a disbelief that slowly changed to an awed understanding as the mortal warrior released his grip on his sword and wiped his bloody palm along the tear in Jheton’s membrane. Thin blue threads began to form from the grubs that had spawned in Kai’s bloodstream, the creatures sensing that their new host was dying, their desperate drive for self-preservation weaving a lattice that pulled Jheton’s wound closed.

The maat stared. His people had no knowledge of medicine, no concept that a wounded warrior could be healed. The mortal had done more than save Jheton; he had changed the way the maat approached life. Instantly the knowledge to heal their wounds was held, not only in the warrior maat’s mind, but in every mind he was linked to, the concept passed on to his entire race.

“You saved me once,” Kai offered, clenching the hilt of his sword in his rapidly healing hand. “And you healed my student. We are now even.”

Without another word, Kai rose to his feet and began to carefully hurry toward the standing stones that waited motionlessly in a heaving sea, as if the circle of weathered obelisks were a safe harbor in the midst of a tempest.

Jheton watched him go, the cloudy pools that served as eyes fixed on the mortal until Kai disappeared into the darkness. Slowly standing to his feet, the maat knelt and retrieved his blade, returning it to its place in his sheath.

“No, mortal,” he thought into the fluidity that bound he and his brethren as one mind. “We are now in your debt.”



Rann stood amidst the standing stones, the ancient pillars holding the storm winds at bay. He slowly turned, expecting something mystical; a portal that would open to another world; an altar on which he would have to sacrifice himself. Instead, he was left alone in a wide, empty circle, abandoned except for a single shaft of sunlight that pierced the clouds, creating a column of light in the center of the circle of stones.

“Rann?” a voice behind him called and the boy turned to see the fae entering the sacred space.

“Get back!” he screamed in challenge. “This is holy ground, demon!”

Ko’laru slowly shook her head. “I’m not a demon, Rann. I’m a person, like you.”

“No you’re not!” he cried, his eyes wide with fear. “The brothers despised you! Nollon said you would lie to me! That you would deceive me!”

“It was Nollon that tricked you, Rann,” Ko’laru began, carefully stepping toward the boy.

“Get back!” he screamed again, his body trembling. “Get away from me!”

“Rann,” the fae soothed.

“Get back, demon!”

“I’m not,” she began again, only to be interrupted once more by the boy’s desperate roar.

“Get away from me!”

Ko’laru closed her eyes, wishing there was another way. Her kind could speak to the mortal soul in much the same way Leiron could speak to the spirits around her. She knew that she could charm Rann, that she could enchant him so that he would obey her every command. If she did, Rann would follow her from this place and allow himself to be led to whatever sanctuary Kai could find for them. They would wait out the prophecy together, the fae and the enchanted boy. But Rann’s soul would forever be tainted. He would fall into a mystical adoration for the fae that nothing would ever break. He would

be desperately in love with Ko'laru and the knowledge that he could never possess the creature he desired would destroy him more horribly than any death she could imagine.

But the fate of reality hung in the balance. It was an impossible sacrifice to weigh, the destruction of an innocent boy against the fabric of the only world she knew. It wasn't a decision that Ko'laru could make. It wasn't something that she could bring herself to do.

She opened her eyes, only to find that Rann had moved, the boy a step away from the column of light.

"Rann!" she called, surprised that the boy paused and turned toward her voice.

Ko'laru swallowed, praying that her hunch was the correct one, that Rann would understand her plea and heed her words.

"Don't think of vengeance," she begged him. "Think of something beautiful."

For the briefest of moments Rann's fear left him. He forgot about the storm that raged outside of the circle of stones, he forgot that the fae was a demon that would trick him, who would lead his soul into damnation.

And then he stepped into the column of light and Ko'laru wasn't sure if it was a look of anger and fear that filled his gaze or determination and sacrifice that glimmered in the young boy's eyes.



She remained where she knelt, only turning when Kai laid a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"He's gone," she whispered. "I don't know if I reached him. I don't know what he chose to do."

"Then it's out of our hands," her love offered gently, helping her to her feet. "There's nothing more we can do."

Ko'laru stood, burying her face in his chest, wrapping her arms around his waist. "Then we failed."

Kai held her close, kissing her hair before laying his cheek against her thick curls. “If we can’t predict the days ahead, then we can only live them the best we can.”

Ko’laru was silent as she listened to his heartbeat, wondering how it could be so steady when the world around her was in chaos. She stepped back as her love gently pushed her away, as he took her hands in his and knelt before her in the ancient circle of stones.

“The world could end tomorrow,” he said softly, “and my only regret would be that I never asked you to join your life with mine.”

Ko’laru felt the smile burst across her face, even as her tears began to fall.

“We’ve done our part. Will you be my lifemate? Will you give me the honor of loving you for as long as this world of ours lasts?”

The fae began to sob with joy, sinking to her knees to take her lover in her arms. She wept, both in mourning for the world she knew would surely die as well as for her dearest dream that suddenly came to life before her eyes.

“Yes,” she whispered, “even if we never see morning. Yes.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: EPILOGUE

Rann stepped into the column of light, gasping as an infinite and gentle warmth flooded through his body. His breath caught in his throat in sheer joy at the beauty of the sensation, Rann wishing that laughter wasn't already lost to him. In its place, an understanding of reality expanded until he was aware of every moment of the realm around him and each world it connected to, an infinite tapestry of lives and experiences.

The storm raged around the circle of standing stones, the dark winds roaring with fury. Where once the tempest had frightened him he was now left with an innocent curiosity, wondering how the winds came to be, why they were so angry, so bent on destruction.

As his awareness expanded further, he found Nollon's body, the dark warrior's spirit still connected to the corpse. The dead man's soul left Rann with a bitter taste as the boy brushed past it, his former captor filled to overflowing with ambition, arrogance and hate. Confused, Rann thought of the monastery, of Raven's Roost, and instantly he was within its walls. There was so much pain within the corridors he once called home, the battle with Nollon's men still fresh in the thoughts of the monks. Within the brotherhood there were those that truly held to Wittia's teachings, but there were even more that used them to promote their own agendas or to prove their own righteousness.

He turned away from the richly ornamented halls and sought out new answers, wondering if the demon that had confronted him within the stones had also lied. Rann wondered if there was any reason to let the world live, or if he should simply erase the realm he once called his own. Something told him that Ko'laru would also be filled with deceit and malice, but as he brushed through her thoughts, he was shocked by the depth of love she held for a simple mortal, by the dreams she was willing to sacrifice simply to protect a principle she believed in. Her joy swept through him and the young boy's senses reeled, amazed that anything could be so beautiful, so pure as the fae's passion for Kai.

He thought once more of Nollon, of the dark warrior begging Rann to make the older man invincible so that he could protect everyone.

"Not everyone deserves to be protected," Rann whispered. "Some should simply be stopped."

At last, he decided that the sacrifice wasn't worth the cost, that there was no clear-cut path before him, no decision that would be right for everyone. Rann simply wished that he would return to his body, that he would have the chance to apologize to Ko'laru and tell her that he hoped she and Kai would be happy.

But Rann's body was gone. It has already dissipated into the weave of reality. The boy began to panic, realizing that he was losing his sense of self, that he was forgetting who he used to be. Already his name was lost to him. His memories were only a smattering of rapidly fading images.

"I want to live," he whispered, desperation in his voice. He knew that when his last thought faded, whatever he felt would remake reality, that it would be the change that came into the world.

"Beauty," he whispered once more, remembering Ko'laru's words. "Just think of beauty."

And then Rann was gone, his essence a part of everything and nothing.



Kai and Ko'laru turned as the column of light suddenly faded, the storm winds subsiding at the same moment, the demonic fury of the maelstrom transmuted to a gentle rain that fell across the grasslands.

The lovers held each other close, excited and afraid, unsure of what tomorrow would bring, if it came at all.



The sunrise found them walking hand-in-hand toward the disk of stone where they had left Traela, Beltross and Caraine. Kai's student sat upright, still weak, but under Domen's watchful eye.

"What happened?" the mer asked, stepping forward to greet his friends.

It was Ko'laru who answered. "I'm not sure."

"She said yes," Kai beamed.

His friends laughed and smiled, congratulating the couple.

"What about Rann?" Caraine asked at last.

"He's gone," the fae answered. "I don't know how and I'm not sure where, but he began the change."



Within the embrace of the earth, the dead soldier stirred, not quite remade. The darkness had begun to craft him, only to be replaced by the hand of light and the will of a young boy to live once more. There wasn't a firm consciousness within the being that slowly awoke beneath the soil, Rann's memories already dissipating before the boy chose to live. The creature was less than mortal, but more than a spirit, connected to both the earth and sky. It began to awake, but the embrace

of the sun-kissed earth was warm and comfortable, the creature choosing to sleep a little longer. As it tumbled into the weave of dreams, slipping between the worlds, it tasted the rumors of the war that would come, of a change that it had somehow begun. But for now, it would simply sleep, knowing that the seasons would slowly change as they always did. The cold breath of winter would cover it with a blanket of snow before the warmth of spring awoke it. It would be asked to protect a world that would slowly come undone, the fabric of Tapestry unraveling as sacrifices were demanded, a horrible price needed to change hatred and warfare to joy.