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INCONVENIENTLY ENTWINED

Stargazing is a fancy habit of the gem-rich and noble-born. First-born heirs playing at being scholars. As one of the Neathering, I thought stars to be a mere handful of lights. A rare treat of the night sky. Let me tell you friends, that there are more stars in the gods' skies than there are leaves upon trees. What does that make of us?

FROM "MUSINGS FROM THE MULCH", AUTHOR UNKNOWN

The Six Heavens were not what I imagined. They were dark and dusty, and stank of dust. Through the blurred crack of my eyelid, I could see a wall of stone, not the golden meadows and open fields the godseers and their holy songs promised us. The reek of ash pervaded my senses, not the foretold perfume of the gods' gardens.

Despite my valiant – if not last minute – efforts, the Six Hells had claimed me after all. My fogged mind was filled with curses. I had heard of plenty songs of the netherworlds, of stone lands trapped in constant lastlight and populated by shadows with insatiable appetites for lost souls.

I blinked again at the stone, finding it cracked and blackened. It was rubble, to be precise. I had never been in a cave, but this matched most of the descriptions I'd heard. As I stared, a thin thread of light pierced a crack in the tumbled stone. I gasped only to choke on dust. The rubble shifted to widen the fissure, and sunlight speared me.

I was not dead. Against all odds, I had survived the white fire and the demon's grip. In what state I had survived in, I didn't know. Panic struck me as I realised I hadn't much sensation beyond what I could see and think.

It was in dire situations like this that the gift of imagination is nought but an evil. For a terrible moment, I thought myself to be no more than a head. Thankfully, the anxious thudding in my head saved me from passing out. It was a heartbeat, and thankfully mine.

It took me a dozen tries to clench my toes and fingers. I could have yelled in relief, but the moment I tested my limbs, the numbness gave way to pain. I seethed as each beat of my heart brought a stab of a knife into my skull. I distracted myself with the fact I couldn't discern my right arm. I could feel a heat with my left. Something hurt in my side when I breathed.

Forcing my eyes open, I gasped at what polluted air I could and began to attempt moving. The rubble had fallen so as to leave a small cave-like space, like a grave for somebody much bigger than me. Sunlight was a thin and precarious roof of rubble and wood away. After some careful and difficult

wiggling, I found my left leg and right arm were pinned by thick blocks of stone and a fallen beam. My leg certainly hurt enough to be broken, but I managed to pull it free regardless. Thankfully it was bruised, sprained at the worst, but good enough for me to push against the rubble's grip and pull my numb right arm free. A pile of wooden slats lay across me. They clattered and shed dust as I extricated myself inch by inch. The rubble above me flinched and grated. Another part of my tiny cave buckled.

I clutched my right forearm to me and felt my bones. They seemed whole, still numb, but unbroken. My skin was black with ash and char, and black dried blood ran in stripes down my arm. My hand, however, was sorely wounded. Sandglass shards protruded from deep wounds from my fingers to wrist. Thick splinters of it, deep between the bones. The pain swelled as soon as I saw them. Traces of silver had been melted into the cracks of my palm. Blue crystals like dyed salt ran between the shards. I poked at them gingerly, baring my teeth at the torture. In the gloom, I saw the veins beneath my skin glow a faint cobalt before blood oozed afresh.

Recollection of the fight with the demon rushed back to me. I remembered the vial crushing in my hand. The stare of death from a demon twice my size. The blinding of a white light I didn't understand.

In what little space I had, I pushed myself up to run my hand up my arm, and felt something solid protruding from my shoulder. Pain shocked me. I blinked, trying to make out what it was. I set my hands to it and the agony struck again. It seemed to be a shard of obsidian, but it had none of the smoothness. It was rough as stone, twisted like a quillhog's tusk. As I felt the torn, sharp edges to it, I realised it was a claw.

My heart pounded, making me feel sick. I swore the sound of its fearful beat filled my makeshift grave. I looked around, expecting to see the warped horns of the hulking creature poking from the stone next to me. All I saw was dust and dark.

I began to push at the rocks, not caring if I was buried again. I dug frantically with my left hand until a weak and orange sunlight warmed my face. I drank in the charred air in gulps and ragged chokes. When it hurt to breathe any more, I cleared my eyes of filth and looked out of the small window I'd made between the rocks. Firstglow had broken. I saw nothing of the inferno. The burned Swathe beyond the ruined walls still smouldered and smoked, but the flames had either been vanquished or had moved on. Sheertown had been left in a halo of ash and dust. The dead competed with the flagstones to pave the town. Fallen warriors littered the rubble and broken plaza in their thousands. Crows and huge ravens had already arrived. They roamed in swarms to pick at the dead and bicker over choicer scraps.

I saw not one demon corpse lay amongst Shal Gara's dead. And it seemed I hadn't won my valiant fight after all, but instead had been beaten and left for dead. As mad as it sounded, I was happy enough with that.

The crunch of rubble caused me to tense. I peered until I spotted a hulking figure halfway across the plaza. A lone demon stalked between the dead, scattering the carrion birds. A long, flowing cloak of smoke and ash trailed behind it. Spines ran from its horns down to its lower back. In its claws lay a long spear with a jagged iron blade that looked fit for sawing saplings.

Pounding about on its goatish legs of gnarled charcoal and bone, the demon poked at body after body. What it was looking for became apparent when one of the fallen moaned and raised clasped hands. I heard the cry for mercy, but the creature didn't know the meaning of the word. It shook its horns, making iron pendants and jewellery rattle along to its cackle. The demon brought its spear down in a cold stab, and another of Shal Gara's perished.

All that held me back was the thick beam of narin wood. Fortunately for me, the reason the carpenters liked to use narin to build houses was because of how light it was, without being weak.

Still, much to my anguish, it took both hands to push the beam off me. I used the back of my right hand, but I still had to bite my tongue to keep from roaring with pain. My upper arm was aflame with agony. I threw all the strength I felt I had in me, but the rubble refused to budge. The panic returned swiftly.

‘Please,’ I muttered. I was pretty sure the Three Gods had taken a disliking to me, considering all they’d put me through, but some spirit had seen fit to keep me alive, and I prayed to that.

Still, nothing moved except dust and clattering pebbles. I shut my eyes and tensed.

RELEASE ME!

I didn’t know what shocked me more: the deafening yell between my ears, the fact I bellowed the same words without thinking, or that the beam finally shifted. Rubble fell inwards, and I had to scramble to avoid being buried again. Breathless, I burst into the open and into a hobbling, clambering run, somewhat reminiscent of a drunk spider missing half its legs.

Release me, I command you!

The voice stopped me dead. I crouched and looked about frantically, expecting a demon to loom over me at any moment, spear raised. But there was nothing around me but cowed and crumbled buildings, irreparable, and an eerie silence broken only by birds arguing.

So it was that my panicked breathing and scrambling over loud rubble had attracted the demon’s attention. My first clue was the giant spear whooshing over my head and piercing the ruined wall to my left.

I turned to find the demon already sprinting for me, jaws wide and claws grasping just like before. ‘Come meet your end, worm!’ it roared. The fact the beasts could speak, never mind speak Swathe tongue, was horrifying to me. I ran all the faster on my numb legs. I heard more yelling behind me. It felt so close by that I couldn’t look back. I had the trees of the Swathe fixed in my smoke-raw eyes and I wasn’t going to stop. I dodged and weaved between rubble and ruin. An arrow as long as my leg slammed into the gate as I ducked through what was left of it.

‘Six Hells!’ I hissed, finding more dead warriors and lancers on the scorched road. I glanced around for Pel and the others, but there was no sign of them, dead or alive.

The trees around Sheertown and beyond the road had begun to smoulder. They were not yet swallowed by, but the fire was moving inexorably on. I ran straight beneath one tree whose branches were aflame. The cinders scorched me. Bushes scratched at me. Flames seemed to nip at my heels. I heard more deep roars chasing me, and yet they only spurred me on. All I could hear was my pounding heart and ragged, hoarse breath.

Once I had escaped beyond the line of burning forest, I did what came naturally to a bloodwood citizen like me, and climbed straight up a tree.

Ironpith trees might have been tall and unwaveringly straight, with branches only sprouting way above the ground, but their gnarled bark was full of natural handholds. Every child of the Swathe can climb before they can run. My dread drove me up the trunk of that tree faster than a shrewbat. Misfit would have been proud.

Climbing with just the trembling fingertips of my right hand, I soon made it to a branch and slumped on it belly-first to catch my breath. I didn’t dare let go. The branch was barely wide enough for me. This was no bloodwood, merely a puny Loamsedge tree.

Below me, in the haze of the smoke, I saw scrawny figures close on my trail. Not demons, nor humans. They looked like the tortured spawn of both. I didn't see their faces, but their charcoal skin and iron bows suggested strongly to me they weren't friendly. The creatures snarled and chattered at each other, pointing this way and that with their elongated arms. Some I swore had four arms, each holding an iron knife. I thanked the Three Gods and all their spirits that none of the creatures thought to look up as they charged on into the forest.

You scurrilous whelp! Explain yourself and this foul magic!

The insult boomed through the forest, making me clutch the branch. I peered down, looking for the fire of demons but seeing none.

With care, I pushed myself up so my back was to the bark and my legs gripping the branch. Once again the hoarse and booming voice came, and with it a sharp headache.

What have you done to me? What is this abominable spell of yours, wizard? I demand an answer, you worm!

Wherever the demon was, I hoped it was far below. I had no idea if demons could climb trees. That prospect was far too bothersome to deal with now.

My mother was not a drinker since my father's death, but she had, on occasion, mistakenly or otherwise, gotten drunk. She was the pleasant kind of drunkard. You hopefully know the type: the ones that are content to sit and let the words flow as much as the wine. The kind that finish the night singing harmless old songs and clutching friends and telling them they're the finest bastards in the Swathe. Or, as mother was oft to do, tell stories filled with tangential lectures full of boastful yet questionable advice. It was advice I never thought I'd needed, and yet one nugget of mother's wisdom came to me then: that in dark and hopeless situations, one should take a knee, take a breath, and take stock. I wasn't about to kneel on this branch, but I did breathe deeply through my nose and hold it.

I had escaped Sheertown and the demons, even though it seemed few from Shal Gara had done the same. But escaped to what? I was now alone in the loam, injured, quite lost, and being hunted by wildfire and demons.

'But I am alive,' I told myself aloud with a shuddering exhale.

There it was: the simple beauty of my mother's wisdom. As depressing and fearful as my situation was, being able to take a moment of breath meant you were alive, still beating, and still fighting.

I held my right hand in front of me. It was dark under the sky of smoke and the needle leaves of the ironpith, and once more I could see the faint glow of blue in the vile wounds. I gritted my teeth and reached for the largest chunk of glass. Merely touching it sent agony shooting up my arm to the base of my skull.

I twitched, accidentally pulling the piece of glass free. Black blood pooled in my palm as I seethed and strained to keep quiet through the hurt. My entire arm throbbed. The veins of my wrist shone a brighter blue as if a flickering storm hid beneath my skin.

Stop that!

I froze. All the heat of running and climbing drained from my face. The sweat on my brow turned cold. Nothing moved in the loam and bushes beneath the tree. There was no tremor or shake in the tree, no scrabble of claws scaling bark to reach me. I reached for a second shard. Eyes shut, I wrenched it free, and once again inexplicable pain lanced through my body.

Stop it, I say!

It took an age for me to summon the courage to speak aloud. My worst fears ran rampant once again.

‘Stop what?’ I dared to whisper.

For a moment, the voice did not speak again. I was on the cusp of cursing my imagination, when to my deep, cold dread, it answered me.

Fool! It pains me!

Both of us. I pawed at my skull with my good hand as if that would offer an explanation why there was a voice in my head. I knew it wasn’t my own thoughts. It couldn’t have been. They did not speak with such a scraping, oily voice. A voice that was undeniably female. I tensed my jaw and slapped myself in the face, praying it was a dream. Much to my dismay, I opened my eyes to a stinging cheek and the same forest.

You are pathetic. Release me this instant!

‘You’re not real. I’m still under the rubble.’ My breath came short and fast. I had seen Tesq have these sorts of attacks of fear, all wide-eyed and hands shaking, impossible to talk sense to. ‘No. No, I’ve hit my head and you’re my imagination making a voice for itself, no doubt.’

I am no such thing! How dare you dismiss me, you repulsive trickster. I shall reap my vengeance on you, worm, mark my words—

‘Stop calling me worm!’ I snapped, louder than I would have liked. I hugged the tree. ‘And shut up. I don’t want to hear you any more. You’re a figment, that’s what you are. A figment of nonsense.’

The voice sounded shocked. It spent a few moments seething. I could even hear its fuming gasps while it gathered its words. *I will peel the skin from you while you still take breath! I will boil you in oil—*

I scrunched my face, trying to block out her threats, useless as they seemed. ‘I hit my head. I hit my head. This is all temporary,’ I uttered over and over. ‘Magic of the demons, I’ll bet. That makes far more sense.’

The ensuing silence was full of hope.

Are you done, worm?

‘Gah!’ I could bear it no longer. I decided the best way of ridding myself of the haunting voice, barring knocking myself out once again, was to keep moving. I heard it muttering threats to skin, skewer, roast, and otherwise devour me, but I refused to dwell on such demon magic. Gritting my teeth, I yanked the final shards of glass from my hand. It echoed my taxed grunt with a pained cry, and that seemed to shut it up just fine.

With care and much scrabbling with my injured hand, I made it down the trunk almost all the way before falling into a berry bush. Naturally, thanks to my kind of luck, it was covered in spines. Hissing and cursing, I extricated myself, thankful to be wearing most of my stolen armour still, even though the breastplate was cracked in two.

I picked up the first fallen branch I could find that was remotely stout, tucked one end under a knotted root of a pine I snapped it into a sharper point. Holding it like Atalawe’s staff, I hunkered down and set out into the forest.

How formidable you are.

I was not mad. It was demon magic, plain and simple. A dark spell of confusion and madness or so I assumed. Ignoring the voice, I thought only of Shal Gara as I ran towards what I hoped was west. I knew enough of the patterns of moss on trees to know a rough direction. The winds had only blown in one direction since the day of the black sun, so I let it push at my back.

I demand you release me this instant! I cannot bear to be trapped in this loathsome cage a moment longer!

The voice had been silent so long it shocked me into stubbing my foot on a root. I stared around as I ran, keeping an eye peeled for the creatures that had chased me.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re the one with a spell on me,’ I scoffed.

Lies! If you believe you can make me doubt myself, you are sorely mistaken. My mind is far superior to yours.

‘You’re annoying, is what you are.’ The voice was definitely female, and far from human.

I swear upon the Iron Icon of the Starless Plains—

‘You’ll skin me. Or gut me. Or eat me. I get it. Is this what your demon magic does: drive me insane through repeating yourself over and over?’ I didn’t want to admit it was starting to work.

Free me, I command you!

I clenched my hand, hoping that would shut her up, but this time it did not work. Although I could hear her seething, she did not fall silent.

I refuse to be imprisoned in this puny body any longer! Free me from this spell and your putrid sack of meat, and perhaps I will let you live. There, worm, does that entice you?

My tired feet staggered to a halt. Sweat ran into my eye. ‘What do you mean... stuck?’ The description of stuck was never positive.

Play your games, wizard. They will not work. It was you and your precious nectra magic who did this to me. Your magic that bound me here within your mind. Now release me!

‘That’s not possible,’ I snapped, so certain despite having close to zero understanding of magic or demons. I still wasn’t sure if I wasn’t actually in some death-dream beneath a pile of rubble. ‘And how do you know of nectra?’

The voice laughed coldly, a sound more fitting to a serpent’s slither.

I know much that you do not.

I held up my right hand, staring at the wounds scarring my palm, at the blue light shining in my skin. Every time I stared, the light seemed brighter. The veins beyond the wound had turned a darker shade around my wrist, like the blackened stalks of burning trees.

I shuddered then at the memories of the Loamsedge. If I closed my eyes, I could see the grinning demon, wreathed in fire, swinging claws at me with burning eyes fixed on the blue vial. I remembered being wreathed in its smoke, and the howl as the white light blinded us both. I felt for the demon claw lodged deep in my arm and shuddered. The glass I had managed, but this hooked claw barely allowed me to touch it without becoming breathless through pain.

‘No...’

Yes, you dimwitted worm!

‘You’re lying. This is nothing but your spell at work. And stop calling me worm!’

Yet your kind suits it so well.

A distant crash of stone or fallen tree spurred me to run on.

In the silence, I battled with the preposterous idea of a demon stuck within me. ‘How is that even possible? You’re a whole demon, and I’m...’

You tell me.

‘It can’t be!’ I protested. I don’t trust you.’

The demon simply growled at me.

I wiped the nervous sweat from my face. ‘Let’s believe you for a moment and say you are... trapped in my mind and this is no trick, what’s to say this isn’t your fault?’ It was just like me to argue the minutiae of blame with a demon who was apparently stuck in my head. ‘That sounds far more believable. I’m no sorcer.’

Your insolent lies grate on me. Why would I wish to succumb to this curse? Your form is weak, disgusting. And the stench—

‘You’re one to talk.’ I hissed, pausing for a moment behind a huge tree stump to relieve my nervous and inconveniently timed bladder. ‘Who are you, exactly?’ I asked after a while. ‘Do you have a name?’

You wish to know my name, worm? Very well, I am Serisianathiel of the Voidborn, blessed in angel-blood, spawn of the mighty Faraganthar, King of the Last Clan. I have know five hundred ages and I will know a hundred more after my father conquers your world. I have watched suns die and stars born. I have seen gods bleed and worlds eaten. You should be bowing before me, wretch, with your nose to the ground. And you shall, for what you’ve dared to do to me.

I tutted. ‘That’s quite the mouthful. I should just call you demon. Or murderer. That would be fitting, after what your kind did to mine in Sheertown.’

For a being of fire and charcoal, the demon’s voice was as ice. *I think you mean to call us victors. Your frail forces were no match for our might. Your confidence was your downfall.*

‘Some of those people were my friends, demon,’ I growled, thinking of Pel, Atalawe, even Redeye. ‘You didn’t fight with honour but with deception.’

The demon’s voice turned vicious again. *Honour, it spat. A practice of the dead and defeated. Enough talk! Release me, or—*

‘Shut up, demon,’ I said, unable to take any more.

Something lay ahead. I saw the shaking of a giant lusifer fern. I ducked to the left and ran a curving path between a grove of white pines. They looked quite at home coated in ash, standing like stately warders refusing to leave their posts.

And what name did your mewling mother give you, worm?

I didn’t know what a demon would do with my name. Perhaps there was some curse she could whisper to stop my heart dead.

‘Nothing.’

Nothing. A fine name for a guttersnipe and trickster.

‘Shut it, unless you want some more pain. That seemed to keep you quiet before.’

The threat also seemed to work. I was left to scarp through the forest in relative peace, though albeit with a storm of a thousand questions churning through my head. First and foremost, how in the Six Hells, I had wound up with a demon inside me.

It seemed resoundingly impossible to me, and yet just one day ago, so had the very notion of a demon. I wondered who or what had forged the spell that had done this. It couldn’t have been me. The only comfort was that I had ended up as the jailer. The demon was trapped within me, and I thanked the gods not the other way around. The only choice I had was to find help. For me, for Shal Gara, and it seemed like the whole Swathe.

Where are you taking me?

'I am going west deeper into the Swathe and away from Loamsedge and your fires. Hopefully I can find another person to talk to but you. Hopefully somebody who can explain how to get rid of you,' I said, clenching my good hand in desperate hope.

I will be no prisoner! Release me, I say again!

'Trust me, if I could rid myself of you right now, I would. I don't want a prisoner. I want to go home.' A meagre pain lanced across my head. It made me wince, but that was all. 'Is that all you can do to me, demon?' I challenged, silently hoping it was.

If you will not free me, then I will soon learn how to free myself. I will break your skull open if I have to. And should I fail, my father Faraganthar will come searching for me. He will grind you to dust with his bare claws.

That threat was the first one to chill me. More laughter echoed between my ears, loud as my own voice. 'Be quiet, curse you,' I told her in a weakened voice.

Between the white pines, I saw a faint flame burning. It wasn't a torch; it didn't seem to be moving. It looked more like a campfire, or some small blaze caused by an errant and far-flung spark. Or worse, a demon patrolling.

Alongside my sharp stick, I ripped a length of cloth from my armour and fashioned it into a makeshift sling. I almost passed out tying it around my right hand, but I was useless with my left. There were few rocks about, either boulders or chunks of bark that crumbled between my fingers. I found two suitable slingstones: one too big, one too small. I clutched the cloth around the former and put the latter in my pocket. The familiar feel of a sling in my hand, even though my wounds throbbed beneath it, fortified me.

As I peered between the undergrowth, trying my best to ignore a caterpillar the size of my forearm inching across the log I hid behind, I recognised the boxy shapes and bright paint of Shal Gara wagons. While I didn't see any movement, I saw plenty of figures strewn about, propped up by the fire or asleep curled up.

'Thank the Three Gods,' I whispered. The wagons had stayed put. I began to jog towards them, still with my spear clutched in both hands and ready to be used.

It couldn't have been that long after firstglow, I told myself quietly, in case the demon had any more wisecracks or tidbits of lies for me. The porters were likely seizing a fine opportunity for a long sleep without officers or nobles belting in their faces. I was jealous. Hindsight was a prickly fruit, impossible to crack open without sticking yourself first. Hence why I grumbled at the regret of not staying with the wagons in the first place.

I put a cautious foot to the road. Nothing moved in the trees. I peered at the wagons, and realised all the orokan were gone. None of the warriors were present either. Unless they were hidden in the smoke and watching me, but no shouts came as I scurried to the ring of wagons. The hundred or so porters made not a sound.

'Oi,' I hissed to one of the men on the outskirts of the ring. He was curled away from me on his bedroll, and tucked beneath the nose of his wagon. After poking him with my stick didn't work, I shook him by the arm. 'Wake up, man.'

It took me rolling him over to see why he slept so soundly.

Death was the deepest sleep of all. His face was a greenish hue, with eyes bulging and lips purple. A ragged wound had been cut across his throat. Dried vomit lay on his chin.

The demon chuckled softly in my head. *Were these your friends, too?*

I ignored her. I felt eyes on the back of my head. I shuffled deeper under the shadow of a wagon, breath held and eyes roaming from one body to the next. I scuttled to five more bodies before I decided all of the porters and warriors had to be dead. Not a single arrow protruded from any of them. No signs of fire. Most were still slumbering under their cloaks, half-buried in ash. Their discoloured faces made it clear poison had taken them all.

‘I didn’t think,’ I said, my voice catching in my throat, ‘that your kind would skulk and murder like assassins with poisons.’

She scoffed. *We do not. We have no need of such things.*

My instinct – mainly driven by the rising need to throw up – was to flee the circle of death. The pragmatic side of me looked for a better weapon, food and water, and perhaps a poultice or bandage for my hand. Nothing festered like a wound in a forest. That was just good, immortal sense.

Timorously, I creeped between the dead, whispering what little I knew of the funeral rites. To leave them unsaid was a fine recipe for wraiths and other jilted ghosts.

The warriors had taken all of the weapons, and I could only stomach searching so many bodies. I stopped once I’d found an ironpith dagger and an obsidian hatchet. Both were as blunt as my fingertips, but I thrust them through my belt and cast the stick aside. Atop one wagon somebody had left a satchel of dark ticabo berries, half a ūlana fruit, and some dried meat that I guessed could have been frog or loamtoad. I snatched up all I saw. The clay vats of drinking water were covered but still tasted faintly of ash. I cupped a few handfuls to my mouth, eager to move on.

As I drank, I was amused to hear the demon hissing. No laughter this time. It was highly curious, and I was about to when I caught sight of a nightmare in my peripheral vision.

A figure, hooded and cloaked, was rising from the carpet of dead. I caught the glint of something metal in its black-gloved hand as it slowly straightened to standing. My hand hovered in front of my mouth. I slurped as I picked my way silently through the bodies. I let the makeshift sling dangle from my other hand, heavy with the stone.

No sooner had I swivelled and raised my sling around did the figure rush at me. The stone missed, snapping against the wood of a wagon. I saw a bright copper knife flash in the firelight. The figure made no war cry, no threat, it just wanted me dead as soon as possible. I dodged at the last moment while I fumbled for my dagger and hatchet. The knife stabbed the clay vat behind me instead. Water spewed at our feet as it was drawn free.

The hooded figure had no face, only a lizard mask made of jade, and he hissed as he approached. He was theatrical, I gave him that, and had this been any other day, I might have been cowering in confusion and fear.

At last drawing my weapons, I skipped backwards to avoid a swipe of his metal blade, but as usual, my clumsy feet saw me tumble backwards over a body. The killer took his chance and pounced on me like a jāgu, blade-first. I threw out my hands in wild hope and panic.

When no pain came besides that of my existing injuries, I looked up to see wild and white eyes staring at me through the mask. Blood was trickling down my arm. My blunt dagger had ended up in the man’s chest before his could reach my throat. The copper blade still hovered inches close, and I was painfully aware it could have been soaked in poison. He tried to stab me one last time as he collapsed on top of me. The blade sliced open my cheek, opposite my sorcer’s mark. I heard the snarl of the demon in my head.

With a panicked cry, I shoved the dead man off me and crawled upright. I fully expected at any moment to drop wheezing and spitting to the ground, but no pain came beside the sharp sting in my

cheek. My gaze shifted to the clay vat, still dribbling a slow stream of water that must have washed the poison from the blade. And here I was, all my life thinking luck was against me. This last day had made me doubt my stars.

‘You felt that cut, didn’t you?’ I asked the silence.

And you are no warrior, are you, Nothing?

‘Far from it.’

I stared into the dwindling fire-pit in the centre of the wagons. Somehow, I saw a face in the dark red tongues of the last flames. Eyes and a snarling mouth, at least. They were etched in my memory.

‘Is that... you?’

I am trapped in your squishy, useless body. This is your spell. Your magic.

The longer I stared, the more the flames took shape. Smoke swirled in the shape of jagged horns and sharp jaws. A faint face hovered in front of me, eyes aglow with embers. Sparks popped as the fire took a breath with me.

‘Look, Sarsi... Serath...’

‘Serisianathiel,’ the fire spoke. At my furrowed brow, Serisianathiel tutted with a spark of a coal. ‘But as that is too difficult for your worm tongue, you may refer to me as Serisi.’

I crouched down, staring at the face of the demon. I could feel her frustration in those narrowed, burning eyes. I felt the same. I touched my face, smearing blood across my cheek, and sighed.

‘Look, Serisi, much as I have been trying desperately to deny this situation, I can’t. As ludicrous as this is, I can’t figure any other explanation. So as you and I seem to be unfortunately and inconveniently stuck together, you should know my name is Tarko. Call this an accident. Call it a pain in the backside. Call it a cruel trick of the gods. I’m beyond caring now. It has happened, and whether we wanted this or not, it appears like neither of us know how to reverse it. So how about we don’t try to insult each other to death until we can figure this horrible mess out, and find a way to separate ourselves without either of us dying?’

The fiery visage scowled. ‘A truce? I would rather die before trusting a mortal worm like you,’ she said, ‘Tarko of the Swathe.’

‘Well then,’ I tutted, but I had another verbal blade to menace the demon with. ‘Like you said, I am no warrior. I almost died fighting one person, and let me tell you, there’s plenty more that wants to kill me out here in the forest besides your demon king father and the rest of your fiery kin. More like this man, for example. Whoever he is.’ I said, as I dragged the copper knife from his dead hands. I spoke with a bravado I didn’t feel, and hoped the demon couldn’t tell. I tapped at the wound on my cheek. ‘And if you feel my slightest pain, then imagine what happens to you if I wind up dead? That could be the end of both of us. Do you want that, Serisi?’

Her grumbling silence told me everything I needed to know.

‘I thought not. There must be somebody in my city who knows more about this strange magic. And then you and I can come to another arrangement about who kills who.’ I cleared my dry throat. ‘What do you say, demon?’

Serisi said nothing. I discerned a faint nod before the face faded from the smoke, leaving the fire to die in peace.

‘Then we have an agreement,’ I muttered. ‘We go back to Shal Gara and find answers there.’

I had no clue whether pacts meant anything to demon kind. Only the road could tell, and I had to survive it first. All I wanted was to return to my city and rid myself of this demon. And of course

to warn Shal Gara as Pel had intended. I owed him and the others that much. They had been right, after all, and perished for it. That was one truth Serisi didn't need to know.

Taking a sharp breath, I seized the demon claw in my arm and pulled. Serisi yowled with me until I managed to wrap a strip of cloth around my arm. I held the shard of claw in my hand. Warm to the touch, its bloody point was devilishly needle sharp. Part of me considered throwing it deep into the darkness, but something held me back, I instead pocketed it into my warrior's treads and did not ask myself why.

Gripping my new metal knife as if it was a throat to be strangled, I set foot to the road. At least I now had a path to follow.

10

THE LEAFROAD

Any hunter or sixth-born worth their moss knows that a leafroad's protection only last so long. Night and his creatures treat the Swathe's roads like any other branch.

FROM AN ANONYMOUS LEAFLET ENTITLED "TO THOSE WHO WANDER BEYOND THE BLOODWOODS"

It took me barely an afternoon to realise that having a demon in your head was nothing short of tiresome.

It was the silence. The grumbling, tutting, critical silence. Every time I slowed to check our surroundings or flinched at a noise, there came scorn and a sigh from *her*.

The problem for the demon was that Serisi had no idea the level of scorn and criticism a worker of Shal Gara – especially one like me – could be subjected to on a regular basis. I could have gone days of this before breaking. I had half a mind to introduce her to Karonak and see how quickly she tired of him.

After dashing through the clearing of the standing stones at firstglow, I had yelled aloud with joy put feet to the roots of the Emerald Causeway and leave the loam behind me. At a gradual slope, pace by pace, the leafroad climbed back into the branches where it was safer. Still only a spear or two from the loam, but that was a mile as far as I was concerned.

The leafroad now meandered between the trunks and canopies of squat trees. It had been much less tiring travelling east along it than west, thanks to the slope. I would have given my sore feet for a wagon, but it didn't slow me.

There was a tense mood to the Swathe I had not experienced before. Birds sang in hushed tones. Waifs scattered picked at the fallen seeds and morsels on the road in quiet chirps. They scattered in tight flocks at every scuff of my feet. Crows seemed to gather in great numbers in the treetops as if expecting another feast of corpses. I was beginning to believe that they followed me, chattering to each other as they waited patiently for my inevitable demise. Their voices were strange, so uncannily human. I swear I heard mimicked shouts of the war-party echoing through the treetops.

More than anything, I kept my eyes open for survivors. Not a soul trod the Causeway besides me. Had I not spent the journey wearing an ache into my neck from constant vigilance, it would have been peaceful with the amber light breaking through the spacious canopy, and the thick smoke beginning to lessen.

I had outrun the ash, it seemed, yet I knew it was close behind. The clouds and canopies still coveted the sun but here and there I spotted a fat curve of pale light. The darkness had encroached further across her face. The birdsong, though muted, was enough to distract me. I found myself shutting my eyes to feel the sunlight, or the breeze, as I had often done in blessed moments in the city. I felt the muck shed from my soul, felt a calm break through the mess that was my mind and body since Pel had plucked me from my branch.

How long?

Serisi's voice broke expertly through my concentration like a rock through sandglass. Whatever semblance of rest I was enjoying, she had shattered it.

'How long what?' I said aloud to the forest, and felt quite the idiot. I thought of all the times I'd rolled my eyes at Pel for muttering away to himself. Maybe he'd had a demon in his head all this time.

How long until I will be released? How much more must I endure this prison of your mind?

'At least a little longer. It took three days for the war-party to reach Firstwatch.'

A long way, just to walk to your death.

'Do demons die?'

Trying to figure out if you can kill me, are you?

Quite honestly, yes, I was. It was certainly an area of interest. I shrugged nonchalantly.

My kin cannot be killed.

'We'll see about that,' I muttered.

What did you say?

'Nothing.'

I had hoped that was the end of it. I had my questions, but conversing with the creature was a pain. I had never met somebody who hated me so completely and without hesitation, purely for who or what I was. For my form and circumstances. Even Haidak Baran had a reason for his hatred, no matter how petty it was.

How can you stand to live in this land? So green. So enclosed and airless. So far from the light of your sky—

'Then why did you come to the Swathe at all? Why attack us?'

Serisi spurned me with a growl. *We do what we must.*

'You must? Then there must be a reason.'

Your puny mind would call it conquest. Those who are weak are defeated and consumed by the strong. It is how all worlds have existed since the beginning of the ages.

'What do you mean, *all* worlds? I thought you came from the Scorch beyond the Loamsedge.'

Laughter, now. *You know so little, mortal worm.*

I clenched my wounded hand in punishment. I apparently caught her off her guard. Serisi hissed deep between my ears.

When I get out of your mind I—

‘I know, I know. Carve, kill, eat, peel my skin off, blah blah.’

I grow tired of waiting.

‘Then you can wait a little longer. I’m travelling as fast as I can manage.’

Those of the Last Clan never tire. Distance means nothing to us. We have walked the endless plains of the Starless Plains for millennia, we have—

‘Apparently not learned what boasting is,’ I chided, deciding I could at least try to have some fun with the cantankerous creature. If I was going to be cleaved and devoured, or Shal Gara would greet me as a traitor, I might as well grasp at some last enjoyment. ‘It seems you don’t know everything.’

My laugh landed on silence.

Teach me then, worm, Serisi scoffed.

‘Only if you stop calling me worm.’

Tell me then, Tarko of the Swathe. Tell me all I do not know.

My name sounded strange in a demon’s voice. I didn’t like it. ‘I’m not telling you anything. You’re my enemy. Anything I tell you, you could use against us. You’ll go running back to your father with all our secrets when I’m free of you.’

Again, the demon laughed. Not mocking this time, but telling. *Perhaps.*

‘I’ve been told of you demons. The Swathe has stood up to you before and won.’

A thousand ages have passed since then. Your world has changed for the weaker. We are stronger.

‘Hardly,’ I said again with false confidence. ‘We defeated you once and we can defeat you again.’

Can you indeed? We will see, won’t we?

‘I’m not telling you anything. You’re my enemy. Anything I tell you, you could use against us. Go running back to your father with all our secrets when I’m free of you.’

Again, the demon laughed. Not mocking this time, but telling. *Perhaps.*

I resorted to silence, much happier with the birdsong and the sound of the wind in the countless branches. The forest had its own whispers. The godseers and spiritcallers of the healer tribe said if one listened closely enough, the ancient forces and ancestors would speak to you. I tried to listen, tried to find some answers to this patchwork plan of mine, but all I heard was the demon sighing.

‘What is it now?’ I demanded.

Where is this home of yours? This Shal Gara.

‘This way,’ I said, pointing along the leafroad proudly. ‘You’ll see it soon enough above the canopy. Bloodwood’s grow more than a mile high.’

A what?

‘A bloodwood. A colossal tree.’

How odd for a worm to live in a tree, she hissed. And you think you can make it there alive?

‘If I don’t, you’ll die as well.’ I had no clue of the matters of our magic, of course. For all I knew, it might take my death to free the demon. But I wasn’t about to tell Serisi that.

You do not know for sure. Perhaps I’m willing to take that chance.

‘Then at least we’ll be rid of each other.’

What are you then, if not a warrior? You must be a wizard, to cast such a spell on me.

‘What in the Six Hells is this wizard you keep calling me?’ I asked.

A mortal that wields the lesser magics.

‘A sorcer, I think you mean. And our magic is not lesser, thank you very much.’

It did not save your kind in the stone town. Therefore it is lesser.

‘Because of your dastardly tactics. And I am no sorcer.’

You have the same symbol on your face as the other wizards.

I instinctively touched my crossed-out mark before squinting at the worker’s nails on my hands. ‘I am a worker.’

What is a worker?

‘A third-born. One who works for the good of the bloodwood and its citizens,’ I found myself repeating the rules of the Bloodlaws without thinking. Even then I heard their fallacy; their absence of meaning except for nothing but tradition.

I am the first and only of my father’s spawn, Serisi said.

‘Good for you. You would do well as a human.’

Disgusting. Serisi took a moment to think. I didn’t know if she was intrigued, trying to antagonise me, or drive me mad. *What does that mean, to work?*

‘It means...’ The question foxed me for a moment. What was the point of it all? I had wondered the same to myself many times. ‘To keep the city working how it should. To provide for others who cannot provide. Workers build, repair, grow food, weave fabric, make weapons. Others heal, or learn, or fight. We work.’

I should like to see your tree city, Serisi said. See how it will burn when my horde reaches it.

‘Charming. You will see soon enough. Then I will be rid of you.’

I held my breath to hide my doubt. I knew the gaping holes in my plan: I was taking a demon deep into Swathe territory. Escorting one back to a bloodwood, for Three Gods’ sake. Never mind the fact that if any survivors had escaped before me, I may be returning as a traitor to the Swathe. I also had no idea if the magic of the sorcers could free me. It was a gamble of giant proportions, and I could feel that Serisi sensed it. And yet it had to work, because I had no idea what do if it didn’t.

The forest revolved around us, shifting with the breezes. The birds remained subdued, but not silent. I remained careful, watching every dappled shadow for dangers. I didn’t know how the sixth-born constantly roamed the Swathe, and I wished I understood.

Are you scared, worm?

‘What did I tell you about that name?’

Answer me.

‘Of course I am. The forest is a dangerous place. Anywhere but a bloodwood is dangerous.’

It is not dangerous as my kin. It does not scare me.

Fists clenched at my side. I couldn’t stand her any more. ‘It should,’ I told her.

If you are a worker, why do you fight in your pitiful horde? Serisi asked.

I don’t know why I answered, but the question hung in my mind. ‘Because I was forced into it.’

Why?

‘Why do you care?’

I wish to know.

‘I was taken against my will by people who knew your kind were coming. They wanted to save the war-party from your trap.’

And they failed.

‘Stop talking.’

Grown tired of me already, have you?

‘More than you can imagine.’

I pushed my tired legs to walk a fraction faster. The sun was shifting through the branches, telling me I had already spent an afternoon walking along the Emerald Causeway. Still, nothing stirred along the path of hewn wood.

It felt strange to be so alone after travelling the leafroad in such numbers. I say alone, but I knew the demon was staring at whatever I turned my eyes to, always watching, always judging. In some weird way I tried to show her the majesty of the Swathe, only looking at the finest parts I could find, yet for some reason she still grumbled at every little detail. I tried to ignore the creature, but she grated on me in every dozen steps. Over and over I tensed every tired muscle, and dug nails into my wounds to see if I could cause her pain. She winced and she seethed, but every time I did it, the demon seemed to get wiser to my ploy. I didn’t dare think what she could do to my mind or body if I lost control.

Steeling myself, I moved to the edge of the leafroad to make sure nothing stalked beneath us. To my concern, the birds had stopped twittering. Only the crows still cawed. With the Causeway now fifty feet up in the foliage, the undergrowth and loam beneath me was thick and hazed with the drifting smoke. The breeze was constant but gentle, which was why a shivering patch of orange ferns put a knot in my guts. I clutched my copper knife as I crouched down so as not to be seen.

What are you doing?

I shushed her irritably. My mind was running wild, expecting a barkwolf or jāgu to burst into the undergrowth and come charging up one of the leafroad struts. Or worse.

A fearful mind will always tend to the worst, and my greatest fear – and that of any right-minded human or beast in the Swathe – was a tharantos. Of all the Swathe's monsters, they were the most feared. Not least because of their huge size, but for the insects' mad ferocity and ravenous hunger for flesh. I had thankfully only seen them as deceased, or in carvings and murals. When I was but eight seasons, hunters had paraded a giant dead male through the Neathering and Midern streets. It had taken six orokan and four wagons back to back to carry it and all its spiny legs. Men and women had stood within the stretch of its jaws and laughed.

I blew a sigh of relief as a shape at last emerged from the ferns. There was no thick leg of black carapace, jointed and spiked, but a paw with the three long claws of an orokan. They dug a lazy furrow in the dirt, and a face of white fur appeared in the half-light of the forest floor. Its snuffling was loud and constant as it gobbled the sprouted seeds and tubers it had dug up. A pair of ponderous quillhogs potted around the orokan, snuffling up whatever the larger beast dropped. Their snouts were like shovels, and their pink bellies fat and swollen with their easy feast.

While I watched the animals, feeling like a spy but also charmed by how they went about their business utterly absent of humans, one of the quillhogs snorted at the air. The thick spines running along its hairless back quivered momentarily. It seemed to be looking straight up at me. I recoiled slightly, not wanting to disturb them.

With a squeal, the quillhogs disappeared into the undergrowth in a blur of pink trotters and dead leaves. The bumbling orokan grunted, waving its head back and forth. A single crow's caw drew my eyes upwards, and there, I saw it.

The shape clung like a tumour to one of the higher branches of a ūlana tree, level with the leafroad. In the dappled sunlight, it was almost invisible, shown by shape and size only. It was as thick as the branch. The segmented body bristled with thorn-like spines. Its bulbous head and arm-like front claws hung down, almost bent back on itself to stare down at the orokan below it. My eyes hurt as they stretched wider and wider.

What is that creature?

I flinched as Serisi's question boomed through my skull.

Before I could answer, the monster released itself from the branch. It plummeted through the air, sharp legs extended and jaws wide. I glimpsed its red and black colours as it fell through the shafts of sunlight.

The orokan realised all too late. The poor beast managed to let out a single wail before the predator landed upon it with a roar and a crash of foliage. Blood and fur splattered the ferns as the two beasts fought. The victory was swift and decisive. The orokan fell limp. As insectoid jaws began to drag it under the ferns, and I heard the crunching of bones, I withdrew from the leafroad's edge. I had seen more than I wanted to. My shoes made not a sound on the worn wood as I started to run.

'That,' I breathed as loudly as I dared, 'was a tharantos.'

Serisi stayed quiet. I hoped it was because she was scared. It felt satisfying to imagine the demon was capable of fear. It made her more human. More mortal.

Are there more of them in your land?

‘Many more,’ I taunted her, and myself at the same time. I didn’t tell her they were far more common in the deep west, in the thickest Swathe around Dorla Sel.

‘Still sure you’re not scared?’ I asked her with a smirk. The demon threatened all kinds of violence in a muttering voice.

I ran on in as much silence as I could muster. My watchful gaze didn’t just extend to behind and around me, but now to above. Every branch I saw I expected a tharantos to be hanging from it. I found myself walking faster up the Causeway’s tiring slope, just to be further away from the loam and higher in the canopy, where a tasty morsel like me belonged.



Thankfully, Serisi stayed quiet until the first signs of lastlight. As the east burned with wildfires, the west burned with the lastlight of a defiant sun, like a beacon for me to follow. A beacon that half-blinded me every time a rare spear of light pierced the green and flaxen leaves of the forest. They glowed russet in the waning light. Eager fruit bats and flocks of waifs duelled back and forth between the high branches. The air was filled with a muted chorus of birds, lizards, and frogs. I heard the arguing chatter of a kanalat snake wrapped around a tree somewhere. Between the undergrowth, I saw the red glow of the lucifer ferns Atalawe had pointed out. For a while, I could forget the fires chasing me, the fact that I had a demon in my head, and even the encroaching threat of night.

Night’s coming.

The silence was shattered.

‘Well observed, genius’ I muttered. ‘And you better hope I make it through to firstglow, for both our sakes.’

The Voidborn know nothing but night.

‘And you know nothing of night in the Swathe, so pipe down for once.’

I tried to ignore her, but it seemed curiosity was another thing we shared besides a mind. I noticed a curtain of candlevines draped over the edge of the Emerald Causeway and set to cutting a few strands from them. They had only just begun to flicker. I ran my hands over the frail bulbs, hiding them from the sunlight to make them shine brighter. ‘What does that mean, Voidborn? You said that before.’

If you must know, all demonkind are Voidborn. Born in the Starless Plains that lie between all worlds and lands. It has been our home for countless centuries.

‘Then why don’t you go back to it?’

That is not for you to know, said Serisi, sounding more irritable than usual.

I would have pressed her, but part of me did not care for the life story of an immortal demon and her kin. That story sounded far too long for my liking. The other part was distracted by the

slight hump in the leafroad I had begun to climb. A rift in the canopy lay beyond, caused by some stunted or fallen tree. Through it, though still painfully distant, I saw my home.

Framed by the leaves, the towering bloodwood of Shal Gara was a crimson mountain peak amongst the undulating slopes of the Swathe. Even wreathed in a faint haze of smoke, with the sun drooped behind it, the bloodwood's gigantic leaves glowed as if they were made of molten copper.

I took a moment to absorb the view, finding myself not only in awe but proud and relieved to have seen it again. I still couldn't rid the sight of Firstwatch burning from my mind. I didn't dare try to imagine Shal Gara in the same state. I shook my head, covering up the traitorous thought with others. For all the city's misgivings, and no matter how it had treated me, it was still my home.

By your still feet and the beat of your heart, I would guess that is your home. Your rancid tree city? she asked.

'That it is,' I said with pride. 'Shal Gara. One of the mightiest bloodwoods in all the Swathe. And it is far from rancid, demon. It is a marvel of nature. A city that's stood for a thousand seasons and the bloodwood for a thousand more longer. You thought Firstwatch was impressive? That was a child to a giant.'

Serisi chuckled. I could imagine her smile, splitting her face from ear to ear. Once again, my agitation played tricks on me. I swore the dust and leaves on the leafroad stirred then. There wasn't enough force in the breeze to cause the shapes the dust made, and yet something whipped them up into a faint cloud that hovered by my side. In the long rays of light, I saw a ghostly form of a demon: horns, claws, and all. I didn't have to imagine Serisi's smile, I could see it. She even tried to swipe her claws at me, but she was no deadlier than a gust of wind. I heard her voice in the rustle of dust as well as my head.

'And in your city, do workers rule? Are you celebrated? Rich? Adored?' the demon asked me.

I wrinkled my nose, still trying to question how in the Six Hells Serisi had appeared. I could make out the finer details: such as how her horns looked to be the gnarled ends of a dead tree, and how the roots of her skull spread around a skin. Serisi was currently the colour of dust, smoke and scarlet sunlight, but I could still remember the fire burning through her veins and charcoal skin.

'Not quite. They tell us we are just as important as all the tribes of the Bloodlaws. Perhaps more important, some say,' I replied. 'But we aren't treated like it. Even the lower-born scholars and healers look down on us. To be rich and adored in Shal Gara, you need the luck to be born first, or to a noble family. Or both.'

'What does these words mean, these Bloodlaws and nobles?'

I stare at Serisi sidelong, to see if she were joking. From what I could tell from her faint form, there was no mockery in her eyes. Without the fire, they were black specks of dirt. 'The Bloodlaws are order. They govern the whole Swathe. Everyone has their place and birthright, or a calling. They say it's the secret behind peace and prosperity.'

‘As for a noble, they are rich, or powerful, important, or usually all three. Half of them don’t deserve their nobility. Most are members of older bloodlines and families that existed before the Swathe was unified by the matriarchs. You can tell a noble by their red eyes. The oldest keep their bloodlines pure as they can, and so they keep to themselves and their ranks tight. Now and again, some of us lucky workers, or warriors, or heirs become noble. Like my family did once, long ago.’

Serisi was not impressed. Leaves scattered as the dust cloud drifted with me up the slope. ‘We respect blood spilled not blood born. Demons rule through might and age.’

‘Not through wisdom and order, then? You’re no better than beasts.’

Her laughter echoed softly around me. ‘Pah. You are weak and your eyes blind.’

I was cresting the rise in the road, still staring forlornly at faraway Shal Gara when Serisi abruptly disappeared. Her voice boomed in my head seconds later.

You have company, Tarko of the Swathe. Ahead of you.

I threw myself flat. Ahead of us, a gaggle of scrawny figures stood on the Causeway. I recognised them. They were the same creatures that had chased me from Sheertown and into the forest. With less smoke and without panic pounding in my ears, I could make out every repulsive inch of them. And smell them, too. They were impressively pungent, reeking of sour ash and rot.

From their mouths that looked stolen from a spider, to the fact that some sported three or four arms, they were far from human, and therefore far from friendly. Their dun, stone-grey skins were covered in welts and ridges and scars. Some sections of their bodies were swollen into what looked like a carapace armour. Bat ears stuck out from their bald heads, along with knuckle-like horns. Even though they were scrawny, easily a head shorter than me, and half of them bent almost double in hunches, I still didn’t fancy taking on a dozen of them. They poked at each other with their iron weapons and jabbered in a harsh-sounding language, something that made Serisi laugh coldly.

‘What are those things?’ I breathed.

Navik. Footsoldiers of our horde. They are simple beings from a plain of madness and darkness. We enslaved them, gave them a mindless purpose. Gave them meat to eat and blood to spill. Perhaps yours, if you are not lucky. Serisi cleared her throat. *You need a bow.*

I nodded. Mother’s curved bow and a quiver of arrows would have been perfect. She used to bring it home. That was, until I decided to try and use it in the house. I had not only nearly shot Tesq through the calf – she still like to show me the scar at times as leverage – but smashed a vase that was pretty much all of the Terelta family’s wealth at the time. It was the reason I had taken up slinging. I unfolded my makeshift sling and loaded it with my remaining excuse for a pebble.

‘If *we* are not lucky, as I keep reminding you.’

Mmhm, Serisi growled as though she didn’t believe me.

‘Believe me or not, I’m not taking the chance,’ I told her as I took out my hatchet. There came further growling, but for once, she obeyed me. It was quite the nervous rush to tell a demon off. Whether I would pay for it later, I would bloody enjoy it while I could. ‘Instead, you can tell me what to do about these navik.’

How many enemies have you been victorious against?

‘What?’ I hissed. The navik were roaming closer down the leafroad, arguing on the move. One of them was pointing madly in the direction of Shal Gara.

How many lives have you taken?’

‘One.’

I could feel Serisi judging me. She clacked her teeth together in irritation. *One. In addition to the worm with the knife?*

‘No. The worm with the knife was the one.’

By the Iron Icon, the demon sounded exasperated. I could feel her growing increasingly frustrated. Insulted, almost. I have slain countless in my ages. Spilled enough blood to paint this forest red, and yet here I am, a great warrior stuck within a useless wretch. This becomes too much!

A slight pain crept beneath my skull.

‘Stop it.’ I winced as the pain stabbed me again. ‘Calm down, curse you!’

I refuse to be at your mercy any longer! I am the daughter of the King of the Last Clan! Ruler of the Starless Plains! I demand to be free!

The dust swirled around me once more. No demon appeared this time, yet it seemed to ebb and flow with my hurrying breathing.

Iron Icon strike this worm down, and I shall take a thousand heads in your glory!

‘Are you... praying? Don’t tell me you demons pray to gods.’

One god, you worm. A god of chaos and blood, of constant night and cleansing fire. A god that will smite you down, Tarko of the Swathe!

Even with the navik creeping closer, I had the gall to wait for this god to appear. I even looked around to make my point. ‘It looks like your god isn’t here, Serisi,’ I said. While the demon stewed in violent anger and tried her hardest to give me a headache, I shuffled back down the slope and out of sight.

The problem with a leafroad was that it offered almost nothing in the way of hiding places. My choices were retreat the way I had come or fight. Or, as I realised when a triangular leaf landed on the back of my head, climb down into the forest just as the sun died. I looked at the candlevine bulbs wrapped around my shoulder. They were shining much brighter than before. Like Atalawe had said, the forest always knew best. Lastlight was approaching fast.

‘Curse it all to the loam,’ I muttered, and promptly scuttled to the edge of the leafroad.

Run then, coward.

I ignored her.

To stay aloft, most of the Swathe’s roads used a combination of branches and struts from beneath and stout ropes or ironpith chains from above. The tallest ones balance upon the very tips of trees. We weren’t yet high enough that struts weren’t impossible, but the branches were easier to climb onto seeing as they weren’t vertical pillars.

I hid the candlevine in my breastplate and hoped its light wouldn't show. Swinging my legs over the lip of the leafroad, I aimed for the thick branch below me that the road used for support. It was double my height down, and draped in shadow, but already I could hear the snuffling of the navik creatures coming over the rise. One even shouted something, louder than they had argued before.

I jumped without a thought. My landing wasn't pretty by a long shot: my ankle crunched and nearly caused me to curse in pain. Serisi cursed for both of us. I almost slid from the branch's slope, but managed to cling on with my fingernails.

There was a small space between where the road and the branch had been connected, a slight dip under the edge of the leafroad where I wouldn't be seen. As I shuffled on my backside beneath the road, I saw the navik's drawn-out shadows flicker over the edge of the branch. Their chattering was rife and loud. I let my sling hang loose and raised the hatchet.

It seemed to me these navik were not the smartest. For example, one jumped straight from the leafroad, missed the branch, and crashed into a bush beneath me. That sent the rest hissing and cackling in their strange tongue. By the way it thrashed about, it seemed to be alive, but not for much longer, I imagined. It made an ungodly screeching noise that caused me to peer down to see what in the Six Heavens was going on. I heard voices, not from above and certainly far more human than the navik.

'Kill it! Kill the bastard!' came the roar. I saw a group of figures in the undergrowth, racing between trees and bushes. Several held flaming torches that streaked across the dark. I saw glimpses of Shal Gara armour and the glint of blades. A heavysset man came into view, and with a bone-splitting whump of his axe, he practically beheaded the fallen navik, much to the screeching of those above me. I tensed as they swarmed over the edge of the leafroad. The navik crawled like spiders, digging their swords and knives into the wood like claws. Almost all of them flooded straight past me, jaws wide and baying loudly.

Almost all of them.

One landed on the branch close to my huddled feet. It unleashed a splitting cry before sniffing at the air. Gradually, it turned to face me, and bared its horrid mouth in a squeal. Its black eyes held no life in them. I froze, horrified.

Fight, worm!

I lunged, mainly through fright and impulse thanks to a demon screaming in my head. My frantically aimed slingstone only clipped the navik as it dodged to the side. Unfortunately for the navik, it dodged right into my blunt hatchet blade. It recoiled, more stunned than wounded, but it gave me enough time to seize my stolen copper knife and slash at my foe. I caught it across its flailing arms, causing it enough pain to make it topple from the branch. The navik windmilled as it dropped into the gloom.

'Bleeding trees!' I heard more voices below. Two more torches dashed through the foliage, one moving slightly slower. 'Come on, Nod! Curse your short legs!'

I looked so far over I almost fell also. I knew that voice. It was Atalawe, not dead after all. Behind her came Nod the orokan, who was determined to gallop after the wrangler even though he had something on his back. It looked like a stretcher.

My heart soared, and not least to know they were alive, but because it meant I was not alone.

I was about to yell after her when I heard the snarling from behind me. More navik were taking up the chase. Half a dozen clattered onto the branch and sprinted down its trunk with wild abandon. I had no choice but to hunker into my hiding place, knife and hatchet poised, and wait. I did so with clenched teeth as I watched the torches recede into the darkness, leaving me inexorably behind.