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F A R A G A N T H A R ' S F L A M E S

*We are nothing but ash. We are nothing but cinders on the wind. This battle is already lost.
FOUND CARVED INTO BARK NEAR THE CRIMSON CROWN, 2310*

My shoulders and wrists popped in pain as I came to a merciful yet painful stop. For a moment I thought I might tear free, plummet after all and leave my arms dangling from the chain. The agony was intense enough to make Serisi snarl over my cries of outrage.

In juddering fashion, the hook ran down the sharply angled chains with me chasing it, my teeth chattering from the vibration and eyes feeling abruptly loose in their sockets.

I fell so fast I might as well have ridden a lancewing to the loam. The colossal churn of roots below me came perilously close at one point. I didn't dare struggle too much unless I fell the rest of the way. When I could catch a breath, I shouted at the top of my lungs for help. The lights of Shal Gara were a blaze behind me. I heard no replies. No horns. No drums, only the clatter of the chain as it whisked me away from my home. Twice now I had left the bloodwood, and both times had been against my will. There was no freedom after all.

As the chain swung low across the loam, my feet dragged so much I almost flipped over myself. For a moment, the hook left the chain, but as it rejoined solid ironpith, I slammed against the bucket at the end of the line.

Dirt showered me, trapping me against the edge of the bucket. Though I had a very high chance of being smothered, I refused to let go of the last handhold I had on Shal Gara.

The Fireborn had other ideas.

The traitors had followed me down, far more controlled and in less of a rage than I. All except for one fellow. His knots failed him and he fell squealing to his death amidst the roots. 'Good,' I hissed to myself.

Boots dislodged me. Before I could so much as think about magic, I was lying in the churned earth, my vision spinning. I seized one handful of dirt for a spell before two blades were tucked under the soft parts of my jaw. Juraxi warned me with a third, holding it an inch from my eyeball.

'As much as I'd like you to witness the speechless glory that is the king of chaos,' warned Juraxi. 'I will have no qualms about blinding you for your remainin' hours. Understand me?'

The trenches left by the roots were deep crevices of milled earth. The kind that was soft underfoot and tried its best to hold onto you with each step. The vibration of Shal Gara made the dirt flow like grain from a vat. Worms thick as my legs wriggled between our steps. Crows harassed us with sharp insults. It was tough going, and excruciating to have such earth so close to me but have knives hovering even closer. Juraxi's hand lay on my shoulder as others drove me ahead. Every look back to Shal Gara was met with a shove. I was forced to stare ahead at the wildfire while my home outran me. My eyes grew hot and itchy, and I blinked profusely in the light. The heat grew with every shaky footfall.

The pace slowed from a scrabble to a plodding across firmer earth. Nobody seemed to inform my heartbeat. I was too fixated on my terror over the prospect of the demon king.

When impending doom seemed likely, you tend to rebel in any way you can. With my hands bound and blades itching to stab me, all I was left with was my mouth.

'I thought you said the demons killed your parents, Juraxi?' I asked. 'How could you possibly worship and follow the ones that committed such murder against you? It makes absolutely no sense.'

Juraxi shook his head. His eyes were wide, unblinking mirrors for the firelight. 'They were purified, just like everyone and everything that the demonfire touches.'

'Did it feel like purification when the demons melted your face? Made you so ugly?'

'The demons saw fit to spare me. They marked me as theirs and I'm honoured by it.'

'If it were my parents that my masters burned alive, it would torture me being able to imagine just how much they must have suffered.'

Juraxi curled his good lip and shoved me. 'Goad me all you like. That sharp tongue of yours will burn with the rest of you. The demons are unstoppable, Tarko, and you'll come to understand that soon enough. It's useless to deny chaos.'

'History proves you wrong already. Kī Raxa beat them before and we can do it again. But I see what motivates you. You switched sides without a fight, lay down with your belly up at the first spark of flame just to save your skins. That proves, quite frankly, that you are nothing but a collection of cowardly worms.'

The Fireborn did not hiss or curse, but chuckled amongst themselves. I scowled at them, trying to make out the other traitors, but their hoods and masks were too obscuring.

'Oh, Tarko. This is all so futile. We're the only minds in this Swathe that see sense.'

'You've been lying since the loam, I take it?'

'That I have, and you sucked down every lie I fed you, didn't you? When the demons spared me, anointed me with their demonfire, I was given the task of taking their commands to Shal Gara and to find the loyal disciples lying in wait like seeds waiting for the one true god to arrive. You survivors led me every step of the way, and when you freed us from the matriarch, it was you who saved my skin. And that copper knife you found in the loam? It was the symbol the demons had ordered me to look for and follow. It was you who reunited me with the others. The Fireborn rose again thanks to you, Tarko.'

'Snakes, more than seeds.' My ropes creaked as I tensed in frustration. This rebellion of mine was not going so well. 'If only I had known, I would have ripped you limb from limb with my spells. I still might get that chance, you know, and I'll take it in an instant.'

'But you didn't know.' Juraxi's laughter mocked me. 'You were too busy playing sorcer, weren't you? Playing the hero of Shal Gara. It was so difficult keeping a straight and friendly face

whenever I saw you strutting about, a worker dressed as a noble warrior. You remind me of the people who saw fit to sentence me to death without a second thought. The Swathe has become corrupted by order, and through demonfire it will be cleansed. You and all the others. You will see the power of the one god firsthand.'

I fixed my eyes on the man with every scrap of hatred I could summon. I couldn't fathom the bleakness of a soul that would see such murder and chaos and call it friend, never mind worship it as a god.

'Not only does your idiocy astounds me,' I said, 'but your lies disgust and bore me.'

I spoke no more. My opinions had as much effect as pissing on the wildfire, but at least I had said my piece before I died.

'I bet you're happy, aren't you, Serisi?' I muttered under the roar of the wildfires. 'To be carted back to your father in the hands of madmen and hypocrites?'

The others had to shield their face from the heat and smoke. I stood with eyes stinging and rebellious. Even now, I refused to accept I had been so resoundingly outdone.

Precisely, replied Serisi, cold as could be. *My father has ordered it, and so it shall be. I have no choice.*

'I don't believe you,' I retorted. My hope sounded ridiculous aloud, but I pressed on to avoid the alternative anguish. 'You and I came to understand each other. Perhaps even cared what happened to each other. I know I changed your mind about the Swathe. You said yourself that not all of it was lies. You can't be that cruel. Not you.'

Can I not? I am no human. Your rules do not apply to me, Serisi told me at last, in the wintry and brooding voice she had first used when we were lost in the loam. It broke me, and the Fireborn had to haul me up.

I am a demon, and we worship chaos above all.

Before us, the forest roared with the crackling of burned wood and walls of fire. The trees hadn't yet burned were already stained black by the smoke and heat. Crisp leaves scattered around us. Trees heavy with sap exploded in sections deep within the flames. The primal human in me ached to run from the flames. The demon in me reached open-armed to feel the heat.

The wildfire was impassable and yet still the Fireborn shoved me on towards its

'What do you intend to do, purify all of us in fire right now, you fool?' I struggled, pushing back against the knives. 'That's suicide.'

'You have a demon within you – a glorious gift – and you're still afraid of fire?' Juraxi mocked me.

'I'm still flesh and bone, just like you.'

Juraxi raised his copper knife. It held every glint of the fire it looked like the copper flowed like liquid. For a moment, it looked as though the man had control over the wildfire. As he levelled his blade, the fire's face split down the middle. A path appeared between the inferno. A path of cinders and smoking ash, but a path all the same.

The heat was next to unbearable, even for me. Several of the Fireborn around me began to smoke gently on their shoulders and elbows. Even despite the pain they must have been feeling, they raised their hands to feel the heat. Some burned their hands willingly.

The wildfire, I realised, was hollow. The fire that we saw was nought but the walls of a circular fortress, burning through the forest just as Shal Gara moved. The patch of ground within was full of

crippled, blackened stumps of trees, the sky one of black smoke and lapping flame, and its inhabitants a swarm of demons and navik.

It seemed as if the demons had made camp. I saw moving buildings of charcoal and iron on log wheels. Teams of demons and navik waited in iron reins waiting to pull them on. Fires roasted meats of various forest creatures, mostly slow orokan. The meat looked burned to ash, and yet the demons still turned the spits.

Like the fire, the horde divided for us like a spear through black flesh. It was a narrower path than the previous. The navik gnashed at us constantly. Some leapt for us, but were pulled back on invisible leashes, or collided with unseen walls. I didn't know why, but each time, a pain flared in my head. No since Sheertown had I felt a headache like it. It was as if Serisi pushed against the confines of my skull.

Ahead of us lay a pavilion made out of broken trees. It looked like a pyre waiting to be burned, and on its peak sat the grandest demon of all.

Faraganthar sat hunched forwards as if deep in thought. Over the templed claws he stared at us with eyes of blinding white flame. Smoke surrounded him as a gown. His uneven horns, half of one missing, reached tall despite their crooked, root-like angles. A sword of star-iron, notched yet gleaming sharp with the recent touch of a grindstone stood point down in the wood. Its hiltless handle hovered at the king's elbow.

Once in the empty circle around the demon king's pyre, the Fireborn prostrated themselves on the ground like the grubs they were. As it turned out, we were not alone in our human company. Two other hooded individuals stood either side of me. They waited as I was made to kneel, faced towards the king. They did not turn to greet me, but I saw red stone masks covering their features. One was entirely covered, with no holes for eyes or mouth. The other showed the lower half of his face. Black-gloved hands lay folded behind their backs amidst folded robes of scarlet. I assumed they were the ringleaders of their repugnant band.

Faraganthar stared at each of his worshippers before he found me. Under his gaze, as spine-shivering as it was, I refused to bow. If there was an expression to be glimpsed on his face, it was one of intrigue, no doubt hiding a fierce and terrifying temper. The navik at my back yowled. I wondered how much earth I could throw at the king and Fireborn in one last defiant stand before the knives or navik sliced me to pieces. I decided not enough, and a voice of my own called me no less a coward than the Fireborn.

Show your respect, Serisi told me. 'He may spare you yet.'

'Lies. That's all I hear,' I muttered at her. My teeth chattered together.

Faraganthar waited for an age before he spoke, and I confess I jumped when he did. The demon's voice was like the grumble of Shal Gara's roots. His fangs clacked together like sparkstones being struck. Fire curled from his mouth along with Faraganthar's words.

'Where is my Serisianathiel? Speak, messenger!'

Still on his knees and elbows, Juraxi spoke into the ash. 'She is here, Majesty. This is the body in which she's been trapped, in a sorcer named Tarkosi Terelta. We've brought her back to you as you ordered.'

'As we promised,' added one of the standing Fireborn to my left.

Faraganthar eyed me. My face grew hot under his gaze. 'Can you speak, daughter?'

I spoke for myself, trying my best to stay standing even though my limbs trembled. 'She can't, but I can.'

Faraganthar blew smoke around his long claws. As if wafted over me, the shape of Serisi was revealed kneeling in the same patch of earth as I did. Her shape was gossamer spiderthread, but I saw her bowed horns. 'Well done, daughter. You followed my instructions to the letter. From within, you have crippled the worms. I am pleased with you. You have secured the Iron Icon's victory.'

Serisi's whisper was a rustle of ash about my knees. *Father.*

I took solace in the tone of her voice, and how subdued it sounded.

'And you: the thief who stole my spawn from her horde. The very hero of Shal Gara himself. I should have expected it would be you who pilfered the power of demonkind.'

His formality shocked me out of my despair. I had expected a barbarian. A beast with traits not of calm but impatience and cruelty.

'I stole nothing from you. This was an accident of magic that I had no part in.'

Faraganthar took his sword from beside him and stabbed it into the pyre. Logs tumbled to the ash. 'You speak the truth, worm, and for that I am pleased.'

I tilted my head, shocked. 'I... You don't seem surprised.'

'Why should I be, worm?' Faraganthar boomed. 'For I was there long ago, when another thief like you existed.'

'Did you know this?' I asked of Serisi.

I did not.

Faraganthar clacked his jaws again. 'I hear her voice within you, and my spawn does not know because there are few left in existence that do. When last we came to your world, there was a worm of your ilk. Faraganthar stood, and with each word he took a step down the pyre. Fire sprouted wherever he trod. I was but a prince at the time. A fresh warrior already a dozen times anointed in battle in your forest. One battle, our king vanished not to be seen again. I claimed the crown to see our war finished, but the worm who called herself Kī Raxa stood before the Last Clan, rebellious.'

'Kī Raxa?' I breathed.

'She had stolen the king's soul just as you have Serisianathiel's, and with it she turned his might against us.'

Even with the threat of death looming I still kept no leash on my tongue. 'And cut your horn from your head before banishing you, or so I've heard.'

Faraganthar stepped onto the charred dirt between us. Even without his pyre and at that distance, he still towered over me like a sapling, ten feet tall to be critical. His arms, cracked with veins of fire, swayed back and forth as he approached me.

'That is correct. I have worn the crown since that day, and to my horde I have sworn vengeance on your world and its insults. And behold, while victory lingers in my grasp once more, the past is repeated,' Faraganthar said. Reeking, sulphurous black smoke wafted around me as he came to a halt just out of reach of his claws. My neck clicked as I looked up at his burning face. My shuddering grew.

'Father, 'I blurted unbidden. I clamped my mouth shut. There was magic here not of my understanding. It poured from the demon king. The claw around my neck, already hot with demonfire, began to shake.

'Which piece of her remains?' Faraganthar demanded, almost deafening me. His sword, taller than I was, dug into the earth beside me and spat sparks on my neck.

I bared my teeth. My own magic crept into my veins, but at the first and faintest sign of blue in my bound hands, Faraganthar wielded his blade, thwacking me with the flat of the blade.

It was likely a light a tap for the demon king. For me, it was akin to being struck by a boulder. I somersaulted so violently, my legs landed before I did. I wheezed in the dirt. The blow had spurred my headache to blinding intensity. I blinked black spots from my eyes.

'You feel his pain, daughter, I know. But brace yourself, for there is much pain to come.' Faraganthar raised a fist, and with a clench of his long, claw-tipped fingers, red fire bloomed around me. 'For both of you.'

'No!' I cried. 'You'll kill us both!'

With unspoken orders, demons came forth with chains. They whipped them around my arms and legs and splayed me in all directions. I yelled as my joints felt close to ripping apart. I felt the wound on my left side opening up once more. A wet warmth spread along my ribs.

Faraganthar stood close. The charcoal and black bone of his face cracked as he smiled at me. His jagged jaws spread so wide his smile reached almost to his horns. I wretched at the stink of sulphur.

'Did you know, worm, that the magic of your world is almost as ancient as our own? Puny in comparison, naturally. You spend your short lives trying to wield what you do not understand, but they are siblings to a force greater than all else.'

Chaos, Serisi spoke. I echoed her aloud.

'I see my daughter has educated you, worm,' Faraganthar growled as if I had told the punchline of a joke early. His sword was thrust between my legs. 'And though the spell of bonding is a mystery, I know it is neither wholly our magic nor yours, but a bastard child of both. Now, which piece of her remains?'

I kept my lips tight as a sprung trap.

'Remove its clothes,' the king ordered, and held out his huge hand. Another demon raked at the leafleather around my collar until my whole coat was ripped free. Serisi's surviving claw was revealed around my neck and snatched away. Wounds were cut across my chest, and as blood leaked down my bare stomach, Serisi's claw was placed in Faraganthar's palm.

My body went immediately rigid. Pain lanced along my limbs. In the crowd of demons and Fireborn that now surround me, a wriggling navik was passed through the ranks. It scabbled on all fours before its king. Faraganthar didn't cast it a single glance before he seized it quick as a blink, snapped its neck, and rammed its face into the king's standing sword blade. Blood sprayed across me as Faraganthar held the dead navik over me and squeezed, as if I was some blessing to his dark god.

'By blood,' he snarled, and after tossing the corpse aside, he lowered his fist to my face. Fire sputtered along his claws. The heat was unbearable. Spreading as I was, I could move nothing but my neck, and I arched backwards until I was shoved closer. I cried out as the burning spread across my tattooed cheek. I swore I could feel skin blistering.

I didn't want to die. It was not a thought but an impulse of my body's own doing. Instinct, ancient and immutable. I could not speak, I could not fight the chains, but I did have my magic. It simply refused to obey me. No spells formed but the power rushed through me no less. Pressure built in my head as Serisi's scream joined mine. Dust rose around me against the demonfire. As my dark veins shone blue, Faraganthar's flames burned through a spectrum of orange and yellow until flashing white. I fought the heat as best as I could.

'And by fire, I release you, demon!'

My body bucked against the chains so violently I swore I was torn from at least two of my limbs. White light filled every inch of my vision, so hot even the demons recoiled. Its searing heat infected every one of my pores until I was allowed to collapse to the earth.

I would have considered myself dead had it not been for the pain plucking at every fibre of my being, for the head. I felt empty. Though my ears rang with the thunder of the spell and roaring wildfire, there was a silence in me. The shake returned to my hands. Not just of mortal fear but of weakness.

Prising open my eyes, I saw the gnarled, clawed hoofs of a demon before me. My gaze wandered upright to ribs of black iron, burning from within, to shoulders of twisted roots, to a face of fire feet from mine. Though the shape of her jaws gave her a demon's grin, I saw a perplexed expression in Serisi's eyes.

She flexed her claws, now whole again, and stretched from her crouch to her full height. Her horns jangled with adornments of iron splinters and pendants. Smoke curled about her like wind-blown hair or frayed robes.

Faraganthar stood over her. 'My daughter.'

'My king.'

I had not been expecting a tender moment between father and daughter, and I didn't quite witness one. There was a moment of staring, a shared tilt of the head until horns clashed once, and then Faraganthar turned his flaming stare at me.

'You did well, Serisianathiel, and served your clan and god with honour. What you showed me through this worm's mind will be invaluable. We will feast on flesh in your honour when the battle is over. 'And now, worm they call hero, you will know the punishment for your thievery and imprisonment of my kin.'

'I told you, it was an accident.'

A fist of a Fireborn struck me in the cheek. There was something oddly familiar about that moment. I looked up but saw nothing but red stone and shadowed pits for eyes.

'Your time for speaking out of turn is over, Tarkosi,' a man hissed at me. The voice was muffled, but its owner clearly knew me. I stared at him, believing it to be Kol Baran but hating that it was still left unproven.

Faraganthar boomed my sentence. 'You stole power that does not belong and plied it against this horde. You have taken the lives of Voidborn and demonkind. You, like Kī Raxa, have been a splinter in our eyes, but no more. You will pay for your theft and refusal to bow before the god of chaos. Stake him to the ground and let him see what demonfire truly feels like. Let it purify him, and let the Iron Icon toy with his ash and bones.'

While the demons roared and the Fireborn looked on with what I assumed were great smiles, Serisi looked above to the sky of smoke and the sun goddess almost completely consumed by darkness. I studied her mighty jaws clenching until the demon turned to fix me with a glare. We stared at each other to the noise of the horde, each trying to figure the other's minds in a silence we weren't used to. I hoped she saw the hate in mine.

'My king,' she spoke up, quiet of voice. My eyes went wide. With held breath and pounding chest, I watched the demon reveal her doubts and felt a reckless hope flood me.

Faranthar played as though he hadn't heard. He spread his arms and claws wide and let the voices of his horde fuel his flames. The king blazed.

'Father!' Serisi said again, louder.

The huge demon whirled. 'What is this interruption? You wish to have words with your former prison, daughter? Bathe in his blood before battle?'

'No—'

'You have an objection, Serisianathiel?'

Silence fell across the horde. Now, I saw Faranthar's composure slip to anger. It was as if a cage door had swung open, and the real beast was finally unleashed. The time for pleasantries was over. Now he delighted in his rage, and it looked like he had been waiting for Serisi to protest.

'Let the despicable worm live,' said Serisi. 'Let him live to see his defeat.'

Faranthar clacked his jaws together. 'No. He will die here by my fire.'

'Then I will take him as a slave. Torture him slowly as long as his pitiful life allows.'

'You will do no such thing!' Faranthar roared, coming close enough to entangle his horns in hers. 'I see now have spent too long in their company. You are have grown soft and weak. You are tainted, daughter! But we will have the human filth cleansed from your mind in the glorious fire of victory. You will stand by my side as their tree falls from beneath them, and once we have shown them our true power, we will consume their precious nectra until their sun turns black forever, and we can bring the Icon Icon to this world. He awaits us as we speak.' To the cheer of demons, the king lifted Serisi's chin to show his daughter the sky, and the pale sliver of a sun goddess almost completely consumed by darkness.

Serisi seemed dazed, as if she had awoken from one of my nightmares. 'The Iron Icon comes here?' she asked.

The demon horde cheered in answer. Serisi stood straighter, and the king laughed in a cruel fashion.

'Of course! There is no going back, daughter, did you not understand? You yourself showed me the core within this tree. This Shal Gara. The first tree we smote had not enough nectra, and so we hunt a larger one. With it we can open a door large enough for all our clan. We are not here to save the Starless Plains. Instead we shall claim a new world for ourselves, and what better a world than one that deserves my vengeance? All will turn to ash when the God of Chaos himself arrives, and once we consume will have the power to find new doors to other worlds, and the chaotic glory of the Iron Icon will rule over all.'

Serisi clenched her fists. 'You would kill another world, as we did ours?' she argued.

Faranthar licked his teeth with a molten tongue. 'What did you expect, daughter?'

'Have you not learned from how we ravaged our Starless Plains? We destroyed ourselves, and you would do it again and again, my King? Willingly? These worms may be our enemy but I have

seen how they live with their world, not against it. They do not consume in the name of sacrifice to the Iron Icon, but learn to live with the chaos around them. There is another way to keep demonkind alive.'

'You speak of order and harmony?' Faraganthar looked disgusted. 'You would betray the God of Chaos?'

'Not order, but balance! Mastery, Father—'

'How dare you be so bold to speak of anything but conquest? What have they done to you, daughter? What lies did he tell you?'

The king brought a flaming fist towards my head. I felt a single, searing claw scrape a line across my skull.

'None. I saw with my own eyes and none other here has seen what I have!' Serisi replied, smiling at my torture.

'I have seen it, spawn! You do not understand the task I have been given, daughter, nor the fate that awaits the Last Clan if I should turn back,' Faraganthar shook his head, and for a moment I thought I saw worry in those white eyes. 'The Iron Icon has given me this task, and I will not fail him! I cannot! Such is a fate worse than death.'

'You're afraid, aren't you?' I hissed. 'You want a lesson in order? When it came to the order of things, even a king can be a slaves to a gods.'

Faraganthar looked as if he would disembowel me right there, but his raised claws grabbed an iron spike from a diminutive demon and thrust it at Serisi. 'Stake this worm to the earth so that he may burn!'

With pursed jaws, Serisi took up the spike and turned to me. She needed no hammer. Her fist drove it into the earth between the links of my chain.

'So this is what it's come to?' I muttered to her. Her sulphurous smoke washed over me.

'I have no choice.' Serisi answered me with another stake to the left chain. 'I tried.'

That she had. 'You kept your word after all,' I breathed.

When Serisi tried to rise, she found the sword blade above her neck. The king held it there and forced her to stay crouched. Serisi did not look at me, but I saw the colour of her eyes change from white to yellow as she forced herself to calm.

'Do you betray me, daughter?' boomed Faraganthar.

Serisi withered into a bow with arms spread. I had heard her scared before, and I heard it now.

'How could I, King?' she replied. 'Yours is the will of the Iron Icon.'

Faraganthar scraped the sword against Serisi's shoulder. His voice was dangerously low, like roots cracking. 'And yet you already have,' he growled.

Another chain slapped across the ash. More demons appeared to wrap it around Serisi's arms.

'Father!' Serisi yelled as she struggled.

Faraganthar's roar half-deafened me. 'Do not lie to me, spawn! I felt your presence in my head. I had thought you were calling to be saved, doing my bidding, but instead you were watching my every decision and every move of this horde. Were you not?' He seized the iron chains and wrapped them around Serisi's neck, layer on layer until he pulled tight.

Serisi strained against her father's strength. 'It was to gain the worm's trust!' she seethed. I could feel the heat coming from her. 'Without trust they would have killed us—me straight away!'

‘You not have not only forsaken your kin but your king and father! You are sick, Serisianathiel! Plagued by ideas beyond our own. A demon that betrays chaos is no demon, and as such you deserve no place in this horde any longer,’ Faraganthar roared. ‘Seize her! Stake her down beside the worm that has poisoned her mind!’

Demons swarmed. Serisi fought them off with her claws, but length after length of iron was wrapped around her until she was littered with chains, horns to feet. Stakes were hammered into the ground through the links, and within moments of roaring and clanking, we were not one prisoner, but two.

Faraganthar presided over it all. ‘Let her watch while the worm is consumed by our righteous fire. Let her ponder her treachery while the iron of the Starless Plains melts to her very soul.’

I was not jealous of that death whatsoever. ‘You would do that to your own daughter?’ I yelled, gawping, confusion trumping fear momentarily. Demons, these creatures might have been, and yet I still hadn’t expected that level of abject cruelty. Serisi had shown me more than that.

Faraganthar’s scorn was pure callousness. He looked at us both as if we were insects cowering beneath a boot. ‘She is no spawn of mine any longer. The moment she chose to cross me, she ceased to be Voidborn and became dust upon the wind. Those are the matters of chaos and my right as king. Our god of gods will now judge her in the Void. And soon shall he arrive!’

The demons saw no injustice in the king’s decision. Quite the opposite. They hammered their fists against their chests and raised their voices to the sky. The wildfire around us reached ever higher, and just sneaking above the crown of bright flames, I saw the morning sun for the first time in days. It explained the gloom more than the smoke, for the sun goddess’ face was almost completely swallowed by chaos’ darkness. A thin sliver of her remained like a cut fingernail on a grey sheet. That revived the terror in me.

‘A fine day for vengeance and paying what is owed! To glory and chaos!’

Faraganthar said no more on the matter of sentencing his daughter to her death. Shouldering his sword, he kicked me aside with a vicious foot, and put us behind him. I stretched to watch him between the stream of charred bodies and navik, but not once did the demon king look back. His attention was devoted to the shadow of Shal Gara beyond the flames and smoke. His daughter was as good as dead to him.

The Fireborn, however, hung back. Juraxi watched me with an impassive face, the faintest hint of glory in his expression. He stood like a crony behind the two masked ringleaders. One moved with the demons, eager to escape the fire, but the other – the one who had saw fit to strike me – shrugged away to watch a little longer. I knew a grin hid behind that obscured face. A Baran’s grin, if my suspicions held true.

‘You will pay for your lies, Fireborn! You are a fool if you think you are on the winning side! I know it’s you behind that coward’s mask, Kol Baran!’

Serisi was also currently roaring at the top of her lungs – if she had such things. Her beast-like noises became more desperate and enraged the more of the horde marched past us. Some spat fire at us as they looked upon us. I received more than few burns in the process.

‘Father! See sense!’ Serisi beseeched, but no amount of shouting changed our fate, and we were left to the clamour of marching claws. The stragglers grinned at us before they loped on to war.

I was as shocked as Serisi was, and not merely because of Faraganthar’s cruelty, but for what she had done for me. ‘Hard to please, your father.’

‘Shut that hole in your face, worm. This is all your fault. I wish I had left you for the fire and kept my mouth shut.’

‘Funny,’ I snarled back, ‘I was thinking the same about you.’

Serisi lashed at her chains, but they were too tightly wound and their stakes too deep in the solid ground. Again and again she shouted, until she had worn herself to a seething, flaming heap. ‘I am demon-kin, his own spawn, and yet he has every right. Such are the matters of chaos. It does not mean I agree with him,’ she breathed with a puff of smoke.

‘Why did you speak out for me, Serisi?’ I asked. ‘You’re right, you could have kept your mouth shut.’

She gnashed her jaws. ‘What does that change now?’

‘I need to know. Was it guilt?’

‘No, you despicable creature,’ Serisi replied. ‘I do not... *care* for you.’

‘Could have fooled me.’

‘I told you before, it is this place. It is this world of yours that I have come to care for. I had not thought it possible, but beside the war and destruction in my father’s eyes, I saw him blinded by his promise of blood. He will stop at nothing to conquer Shal Gara, and if he reaches the necra I saw through your eyes, he will make good on that very promise. He will be able to summon the God of Chaos himself to tread your earth, and once that happens, all of this will be lost. There is no being that can stand before him and live. Your Swathe will become another plain of dust and ash and the horde will suffer once more. I have not been lied to. I have not been swayed by you worms. But what I have seen is the truth.’ Fire flashed from Serisi’s eyes. She struggled again. ‘I can’t believe I am speaking these words, but I do not want that to happen. I will not, not for my kin nor your forest. That is the truth.’

I stared into that fire. ‘I am glad for it, Serisi. Not because I was right, but because you are.’

‘You...’ the demon grunted, pausing her efforts for one moment to bow her head. ‘And you spoke for me too.’

‘You’re welcome.’

‘I didn’t thank you.’

‘We make a strange pair, but if it’s the only hope Shal Gara and the Swathe’s got, then they’ll have to take it,’ I gritted my teeth and extended my black-veined fist to the demon. She looked me up and down, and although she barely hid the curl of her charred lips, she put her claws to my skin. I swore I heard the hiss as she scorched me.

Bones crunched and wounds protested as I arched my head. The Fireborn and demon horde was all but disappeared through the veil of flame. And with its departure, the ring of wildfire around us had began to creep forwards. The circle was closing in fast. The sweat stung my eyes as I flexed my fingers. ‘I guess it’s time I got us out of this mess then.’

Serisi was heaving at one stake over and over. ‘And how exactly do you propose to do that?’ she squinted at me.

‘Magic, of course,’ I snapped. My hands clawed at the air, seeking the weight of the baked dirt around me. Yet however I grasped at it, both dirt and magic escaped me. I felt a perturbing emptiness in my limbs.

‘What in the Six Hells?’ I yelped.

‘Tarko—’

‘Wait!’ I tried again, heaving harder on the earth as I exhaled slowly and willing my heart to calm. The soil must have been so compacted and dry that it was close to rock. I hauled on the drifts of ash and dust instead. Barely a swirl obeyed my will. Only pain answered my call, lancing up my arm to my skull. I twitched it was so powerful. A wave of nausea drowned me. I felt... *normal*.

‘What’s happening to me?’

The realisation had struck Serisi sooner than it had me.

‘It is me, Tarko!’ she snarled at me. ‘Or rather, the lack of. My father told you: you stole Voidborn power. Without my magic in you...’ Her words trailed off.

‘You mean to tell me it’s been you all along? My abilities? My spells?’ I was horrified. ‘Was there any part of me in us?’

‘It was not all my doing. A meeting of my magic and yours, or a trick of the nectra, I do not know!’

‘Then you better have another idea, Serisi, because I’m not burning to death here!’ I yelled, losing all calm. The wildfire was accelerating towards us. The curtain of roaring flame filled my eyes. I tried once more to reach my magic but the lack of nectra held me as much a prisoner as my chains. I strained until I was left gasping for breath and slumped in the dirt. The scorching wind dragged tears of effort from my eyes and across my cheek. A tree collapsed as its bones were turned to ash.

‘You can control fire, right?’

She did not answer. She was too busy hacking at the ground with what little movement she had. Her breathing had become a snorting of flame. Smoke whirled around us.

‘Serisi!’

‘All demons can, but not for long. I am no wizard. And not while these chains melt through my skin!’

A hundred feet and less away, the wildfire now stood. I could feel Faraganthar’s will in it; in the way the fire’s reach clawed at the air around us. Fingers of it spread across the dirt. Sparks from burning detritus shot at us like slingstones. A strange smell of charred meat filled the air as cooking fires were consumed. I felt the burning in my face already. The iron chains were growing unbearably hot. And onwards, foot by foot, my doom approached me.

I tried my best to shuffle to the very limits of my chains. I kicked at the stakes, but they were as firm as trees. As long as my withering strength held out, I pushed myself as far as my chains allowed. ‘Serisi, I swear to my gods and yours, I’ll fight your father myself if you get me out of here!’ I shouted.

‘I am trying, curse you!’

Whatever progress she was making, I didn’t see much of it. Instead I yelled to the fire-filled air, howling at the gods and spirits for help while the pain of burning set into my toes and soles of my feet. A constant stream of noise came from my mouth, part scream, part cursing.

Out of my clouded peripheries, I saw a spar of metal launched into the sky in a shower of soil. My chains hadn’t relaxed in the slightest but Serisi had one arm free and was furiously shedding chain.

‘Agh!’ I cried out as the flames touched me. Serisi flung out her hand, driving a wedge into the fire. Shadow, not wildfire, fell over me. A great weight pinned me down. I felt no air in my lungs, only char and heat. The inferno consumed us, but in the face of Serisi’s demon magic, a vital pocket

was carved in the flames. With her mind and free hand on the rest of my chains, it was diminishing rapidly. I heard her roar over the flames’.

With my body starved of air, I began to choke. I barely felt the claws seize me, or the scrape of earth beyond my feet. I knew only the pounding in my head and the heat burning every part of me.

It took an age for me to realise I wasn’t roasting alive. I kept waiting to burst into flame while I writhed, but it never came. When at last air found my lungs again, I heard Serisi’s deep voice speak very close to me.

‘You can open your eyes Tarko. It is over.’

I didn’t want to. Not least because I could feel the demon’s breath on my cheek.

‘You are whole. Singed but whole.’

I cracked open one eye to see Serisi crouched over me. Her pitted, jagged face of grey, copper and black studied me just as closely. The roaring behind me told the inferno was close. The wildfire had passed over us as a wave in its loyalty to the horde and its wizards. Its great sloping wall of it pressed on west, ever hungry. A destroyed forest stood around us, burned to ash and no fuel left to give the fires. What flames still shone were kept back by the demon’s reach.

I patted myself down, feeling raw patches of skin and burned leafleather. Some of my long hair had become crisped and curled. *Whole indeed.*

Serisi was free of the chains despite one arm. A coil of molten iron remained on her hand. It had bitten into her thick skin. I saw the pain in her face alongside the relief.

‘Thank you,’ I said through a series of torturous breaths. ‘You saved me.’

Serisi tilted her horned head at me. Her jewellery had melted into her bones. ‘You owe me your life now, Tarko. A dangerous situation to be in with a demon.’

My jaw was beginning to drop in concern when she cracked a ferocious smile. ‘As much as this is still all your fault, and though I promised to rip you to shreds and feast on you and roast your bones—’

‘Your point?’ I wheezed.

‘Perhaps you should live a little longer.’

If that was as demon’s version of a compliment. ‘See? You do care.’ I pushed myself to my hands and knees.

She poked a tongue like a glowing ingot at me. ‘Call it a tactical choice, like Eztaral once said. Doing this alone will be more difficult.’

I stared at my ashen palms. ‘I don’t know what good I will be without my magic.’

Serisi pulled a thread of fire to her and seemed to drink it into her body with a shuddering sigh. ‘You have your other uses, worm.’

‘Let’s hope so,’ I said, as the east drew my eyes. There was not much distance to speak of with the constant haze, and polluted clouds, but I could look along the broad road Shal Gara and the wildfire had cut. Behind the smoke, filling the rare glimpses of sky, a darkness lurked. It can not be night; the sun was still climbing, and yet it filled every corner of the east. ‘Because we have a demon king to stop.’

Serisi clenched her injured fist to make the veins of hardened metal creak in her hand. ‘Fear not, Tarko. There is not a faster demon in the horde than I.’

I liked to think I knew the demon well by now, but that was the first time I had heard doubt infect her voice.

30

UNRAVELLED

None of my fellow fourth-born will admit the bloodwoods are a dying breed. All the saplings are known and named. Gora Kara in the far west. Scree in the mountain slopes. And young Firstwatch guarding the east. They came from seeds cracked half a thousand seasons ago, and not a seed has taken root since then.

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

Across the hellish landscape and between fallen trees at an angle to the wildfire, we hauled ourselves. It took us a good distance north and as such, forced us to run faster than my scorched feet and aching bladder. Never mind the weakened in my bones as if the fire had dried up every scrap of strength in me. I kept one eye on the ground that sought to trip or burn me, and one on Shal Gara. My home was already drenched in smoke. Over the ceaseless wildfire, I could hear the roar of the bloodwood’s drums.

‘I have to stop or I’ll piss my trews,’ I blurted, when another dose of nausea struck me. My chest ached from breathing so hard.

‘We have not the time, Tarko.’

‘Then you go ahead!’

The demon snarled, and by the way she leaned in a log, an exhaustion plagued her too. ‘Do your business. At least I do not have to witness it firsthand any more.’

‘That pleases me no end, believe me.’

I scrambled between a log to relieve myself in frantic fashion and barely stayed upright as I did so. A river of thoughts ran through my head, and its current threatened to drown me if I listened to it. I knew my life still hung in the balance; that Shal Gara itself teetered in destruction; and my magic was gone. Taking stock did not help me now, only action. Once again I found myself staring east to the empty road of destruction. Everyone has a coward in them, I believe, it all depends on how much attention you pay yours, and mine was currently screaming to run.

I ignored it completely. A world waited on me.

When at last I had one less thing to worry about, I dashed after the demon, almost immediately falling onto a knee with a curse.

'I will not carry you, 'she muttered.

I glanced at Serisi's long and with arms. I was still getting used to see a demon up close. Her form was still alien to me. 'I don't need to be carried, thank you.'

I fell and rolled once more, and as I came up I knocked against Serisi's jagged hip. I winced as more pain wracked me.

'Who is that?' growled Serisi.

'Are you mad? Who is—oh.'

Standing in the char between Shal Gara and us stood a lone Fireborn, hooded in scarlet and masked in a matching face of stone. A long sword of metal stretched out from his hands, point low and swishing back and forth. Fifty feet lay between us.

'I would wager, 'I said, brushing my hands of ash, 'that is Sage Kol Baran come to finish what he started. He killed my father, now he wants the son.'

The voice was still masked. 'Tarkosi Terelta! Still alive as I expected. How did I know Faraganthar's sentence would not be the death of you?'

'What can I say? Luck walks with me.'

The sword came to point at me. 'No more. That ends today.'

'There's no point in hiding now! Show your face, Kol Baran. I know who you are.'

The Fireborn tilted his head. 'Do you, indeed? Your confidence is your downfall as ever.'

First came the hood, pulled back by black-gloved hands. Scarlet hair flew in the wind. He was right: my confidence did falter. It crumbled.

From beneath the red cloak came the finest leafleather and copper armour, and as the mask was loosed and dropped to the cinders, the face of Haidak Baran glowered back at me. Hatred lay upon it. 'Surprised?' he taunted me.

I gave him my best shrug of the purest nonchalance, even though within I cursed myself for being duped. Not least by the fact he was my old nemesis, but because I had come to trust him, and for a sliver of a moment, I realised how Shal Gara felt when they looked in me.

'Not in the slightest!' I lied while my mind became not a river but a burst dam. 'Who else but a Baran could be behind such treachery?'

Haidak laughed heartily. 'Kol Baran is past his time and weak of mind in his long seasons. He has no part in this. I gave my father a chance to have a part in this and he turned me down. Called me a doomsayer! Saw fit to ignore and disown me, would you believe it? At least he had the intelligence to keep his mouth shut, unlike you, Tarko. No, I was the one – through sheer boredom – who found the scrolls and copper knives of seasons past, left to me by ancestors dead. It was me that sought out the remnants of the demon's cult and learned of the glorious purification that waited to revisit the Swathe. And though I gazed into the scared fires and I heard the demon's

whispers, I didn't truly believe until I saw them with my own eyes. And wouldn't you know it? I was right. It was all true, and when Juraxi appeared to me with Faraganthar's message—

'Lo and behold, you saw an opportunity to be even more of a poisonous little shit than you always have been.'

With a grimace, Haidak began his walk towards me, his sword held straight. 'I promised them our nectra, and saw my chance to end the endless and tedious cycle of this accursed forest. Born, live, die, become dirt for the trees. Not a soul spares a thought for a scrap of dirt beyond the borders of our forest. We were raised as warriors when the last wars are already fought and done. What is there to do but become sage, to stare upon the cycle from further above? The monotony is nothing but punishing.'

I continued to be surprised. 'You're telling me this is all due to... *boredom*? Every battle? The Sheertown massacre? The night you murdered scores of your own people? All of this for your own amusement?'

Haidak spread his arms wide. 'And why not? All of this is below me. Let Juraxi and the other Fireborn worship and pray to the demons as gods, I say. I believe in their chaos and chaos only,' he laughed. 'And Sheertown? Necessity, Tarko! That's what moves the world. Shal Gara's forces were too strong and had too much hope. They swallowed up my lies of marauders far too easily, just as you did with every word out of my mouth. Hah! You should have seen the pride in your face when I thanked you for saving my life.'

'You unimaginable bastard.'

'Hardly, Terelta! I will be the one that leads us to a new age, free of the dusty matriarchs and doting sages watching the seasons turn around on themselves. I am meant for more and Faraganthar has promised it.'

His arguments were painfully close to mine. Had I not said the same to Ralish, or the envoy? Had I not railed against the Bloodlaws in the same way, and craved different? Yes, but my methods, however, were so very different. That is what set a rift between us: I wasn't a murderous idiot.

'My father promises nothing but death, worm!' Serisi growled at the man, she had paced sideways, making us harder to attack as one. 'Victory will only bring the Iron Icon to this world, and he will tease your flesh from your bones for his amusement.'

'Lies!' Haidak laughed with his red eyes wide with bloodlust. 'He will make me a king of me all once Shal Gara falls.'

'You'll have nothing to rule over, you dolt! Faraganthar's unleashing a force that will turn the entire Swathe to *this*,' I stamped my foot and looked around us, surreptitiously casting around for a weapon that was more than a rock or a burned branch. Serisi was my only weapon. My dry tongue rasped around my equally dry mouth.

'You know, I'm glad I came back to see what was left of you,' Haidak yelled at me, now twenty feet at most. His sword tip danced a figure of eight. 'It was disappointing handing you to

Faraganthar's judgement, I must say. But now? This way I get to carve you up as I have ached to do, ever since you came crawling back to Shal Gara.'

'I don't know if you noticed, but I have a demon at my side.'

'A demon that betrays chaos is no demon. You're a traitor as much as I am,' Haidak snorted. He seemed genuinely unperturbed by the demon's outstretched claws.

'Then let us fight,' Serisi growled.

The demon performed some magic of her own, holding up her uninjured hand to grasp at thin air. With a narrowing of her eyes and a muttering of a tongue I did not understand, a sword of fire coalesced above my head. It was a curve of pure flame, burning red at its core and yellow on its blade. It must have been easily six foot long.

Now I saw the bead of sweat on Haidak's forehead. I raised my hands in habit as if my own magic would obey me. All that came was pain, and I picked up a rock instead.

'What by the loam?' I muttered as Serisi snatched the flaming sword from the air and held it above her. Like the warrior she always claimed to be, she marched out to confront Haidak.

'Yah!' he barked, breaking into a run with his sword in both hands.

Serisi was quick, I gave her that, but for her size. Haidak ducked her swing and kept running, able to hack at her ribs and legs. The sword was sharp, and despite the demon's tough hide, cracks of orange light appeared where Haidak had struck.

The bastard spun around with Serisi's sword chasing him. Time and again he parried her thrusts. The metal blade grew black with soot, but the fire could not reach him. Serisi turned to magic again, sweeping her blade through his guard. With me watching on and wishing all kinds of harm, Haidak proved himself the warrior I was not, over and over.

Overconfidence, however, was Haidak's flaw. As he snuck past Serisi every time to land slice after jab, I saw her guarding her arm, not wounded, but waiting, and as I watched, she chose her moment.

The sound of the sword blade against Serisi's arm was a shriek of metal striking metal. The demon's arm kept swinging, driving Haidak's sword against his face and batting him to the ash. I was striding to him with a rock in my hand.

The roar of the wildfire soared for a moment, enough to drag mine and Serisi's attention away from Haidak. My memory of the nests jogged me just in time. It was not fire but the arrival of Haidak's lancewing. The giant bird was aimed to stab at Serisi's chest with its needle-pointed beak, and would have succeeded had Serisi not heard my shout.

The demon rolled to the side to let the bird spear the ground. The bird's wings beat ash into the air in a dense cloud as it reversed. One wing thwacked Serisi in the face. She reeled, swinging her sword madly. The bird moved effortlessly out of the way.

Haidak came at me with a grin. I withdrew, still searching for a weapon. And there, in the dirt, a blackened lump of star-iron that looked like a broken dagger. It had barely survived the fire, it had no edge, and it had curled in the heat, but it was better than the rock I had in my other hand.

‘Where’s your magic, Tarko?’ Haidak brayed. ‘Your precious magic you were so quick to lord over me. You might have conned all of Shal Gara, but I watched you. Juraxi was sure Faraganthar’s daughter was hidden elsewhere, but all this time I knew. All I had to do was stoke the fires of war and wait!’

He hacked at me but I bounded free. My body still had fight in it.

‘You speak of boredom but you sound jealous, Haidak,’ I shot back at him. ‘Are you sure you have your story straight?’

‘Jealous of what? Look at you now, a pretend sorcerer!’ Haidak spat. ‘Where is your magic? Fight me, curse you! Or are you nothing without your demon?’

It was a bad time to throw the rock. It was a bad aim, too. Haidak swatted it away with his sword, and I stood unaccompanied and empty-handed.

‘My, my.’ There came the curl of his lip. ‘What has happened to you? Where is the hero of Shal Gara, Maven Terelta, wielding earth like few others can? To have progressed so far only to have fallen right back to nothing. Well, well! Perhaps I should just leave you in this dirt like the worm they call you!’

Haidak lunged at me, and I tried to remember every piece of advice Eztaral or Atalawe had ever given me. I dodged left and heard the blade whistle past my ears. I turned to avoid him chopping back at me and brought the star-iron lump down onto his arm. The armour did its job, and I was left far too close to Haidak. His elbow caught me in the collar bone before I reeled away. He came at me with his blade slicing in diagonals. While I quietly and fervently wished I had a sling, I resorted to throwing another rock. Haidak missed it this time, and the rock cut a line in his forehead, as red as his eyes and hair. The injury sent him into a rage. I saw the fervour he had in the nests, the delight in the blood he was about to spill. The man was a maniac. I thought I had been hiding something in me, when all this time it had been Haidak who had lived a deeper double life.

My pondering cost me. Haidak cut against the leafleather cloak and sliced into the muscle of my left arm. I cried out, swatted him away with the steel, and got another cut to my thigh that sent me staggering. I found a hard and uncomfortably warm wall behind me and turned to find Serisi at my back.

Haidak and his bird circled us, waiting for the kill. I hated every moment of it, flinching back and forth. I nudged the demon.

‘Any ideas?’

‘Some. Most you will not like,’ Serisi snapped at me.

Somehow, after everything, I had never trusted the demon more. ‘Do it.’

With gritted jaws and much straining, Serisi stretched out her claws and fire-sword. The flames around us obeyed instantly, drawing inwards to make Haidak and the lancewing scurry. In the gap we were given before the spell died, I threw everything I could find at Haidak, and in that brief moment I almost felt a sorcerer again. But Haidak was encased in the finest armour gems and

an eagleborn could buy. I was mischief to him and that was it, and he came at me with the intent to put an end to me. Behind me, Serisi was grappling with the lancewing's beak, trying desperately not to get stabbed as she lurched back and forth across the ash.

'Tell me, Haidak Baran. Tell me before you put an end to me,' I said, playing to Haidak's ego. 'What did your Fireborn friends think of you cutting them down on the Night of the Copper Knives? Or your father, sending cronies to kill him? Is that why I saw him stare at you like orokan filth on his shoe?'

Haidak scoffed at me. 'My Fireborn are highly devoted and highly obedient, Tarko. Unlike you so-called Scions, they know the meaning of sacrifice for the greater good. The finer ruse. And as for my father, if you must know before you die, he was not happy about it, but too attached to his life it seems to whisper truth in the matriarch's ear.'

'So if Kol Baran isn't one of you, who was the other Fireborn too cowardly to reveal his mask?'

Haidak had enough of my stalling. 'Hah! You will die wondering, Tarko!'

I performed my last hope and the dirtiest trick of all: I scooped up a handful of dirt and threw it in his face. It was enough to make Haidak cry out.

'You bastard mudmage!'

I didn't waste any chances, and lunged forwards to smack Haidak right in the jaw. The same place he had struck me in the nests all those days of darkness ago.

'By the Three Gods, did that feel good,' I laughed.

Haidak's cry seemed to draw the lancewing's attention. I dove for cover as it came at me instead in a protective swoop. I arose to find Haidak's sword slashing across my chest. The pain was slow in coming. I stared down at the blood oozing from the long cut in the leafleather.

'Tarko!'

With Serisi charging forwards, Haidak aimed a stab at me. In a moment of madness, I lunged for him, not giving him room to move his sword. My assault wasn't pretty. It wasn't refined. It was a mad pummelling of Haidak that caught him off-guard and drove him back into the claws of his lancewing. I managed to dig the star-iron into his shoulder before the bird seized him and tried to haul him aloft. The movement was so quick I had no time to let go. I saw Serisi diving, and just before Haidak and I left the ground, she slammed her claws into Haidak's thigh and clung on with such tightness the man squealed as demon and two humans were hauled aloft.

It was my turn to be pummelled. Haidak, even in midair and with the air screaming past us, he thumped me over and over in an effort to dislodge me.

'Die, Terelta! Give up and die like the useless worker shit you are! It's time you learned your rightful place in the loam.'

Those were the words I needed to hear. All the sorrow of my lost magic, all the fear for Shal Gara, it paled in the face of all the rage pent up over seasons. I saw Haidak's grinning face in my

mind, and every time he had cast me from a job, mocked me, wounded me. With energy I didn't know I had left, I seized his neck with my spare hand and squeezed. Haidak did the same to me, black Fireborn gloves around my throat, and locked us tighter as the lancewing zipped through the trees at breakneck pace. Blurred forest and blinding fire rushed beneath us. Serisi howled as if this was far too unnatural for her. I was surprised Haidak's leg hadn't been torn off from the demon's weight. I thanked the gods the lancewing had a tight and dutiful grip on her master.

Our strange chain of odd links dangled on in a heart-seizing ride until I saw Shal Gara looming. The bloodwood came at us far too fast. The lancewing tried her hardest to shake us free, even swinging Serisi through the city's foliage despite Haidak's strangled cries. Stars were beginning to cloud my eyes by the time the lancewing released us over a crowded branch. I fell to the cries of confused archers taking aim.

The impact ripped Haidak, Serisi, and I apart. I felt the breath vacate me as I struck the deck. Wood scraped every edge of me as I rolled over and over until I landed at somebody's boots. A bewildered woman in lancer's armour hurriedly pointed her obsidian spear at me. Rapid glances told me we had landed in a circle of warriors on the Branch of the Seasons. Even with my deafened ears I swore I heard the familiar voice of Eztaral keeping the warriors in place. I barely had time to make sense of my surroundings before I heard the cry of, 'Demon! 'fill the air.

Serisi roared as itchy archers loosed their bows. My demon shielded herself as the arrows thudded into her carapace. They stuck as spines from her back.

'She means no harm! 'I bellowed. 'Leave her alone!'

The nemesis was yelling over me. 'Seize them! 'Haidak spluttered, voice hoarse from his crushed throat. He dragged the steel from his shoulder and threw it to the deck while golden lancewing blasted us with its wings from above. 'Seize them both, I say!'

I found myself on my feet, struggling against the wind and ignoring the spear that poked me. I was beyond feeling pain. 'Haidak is the traitor!'

Eztaral's voice brought everybody to a standstill. 'Everybody stand right where they are or I'll have you all killed in an instant with no questions asked!'

I found a smile on my face. Though she was as likely to strike me down as save me, and it had only been half a day since I had fallen from Shal Gara, the sound of Eztaral's voice warmed my soul. She burst from the wall of shields and armour to glare at the scene before her, from a demon, to the prince of Shal Gara, to the foulest traitor the city had ever seen: me.