

17

THE PROSPECT OF DEMONS

I'm telling you! There's a whole looming town or even a city down in those canyons. I hear their hammering. I hear their songs. I see lancewings and crows coming back and forth. Saddled. Not wild. You don't believe me? Fine! I'll prove it. I'll kidnap one of them and make them talk.
FROM A SCRAWLED LETTER FOUND BESIDE A SKELETON TIED HALFWAY UP A TREE

Wingmaster Caraq's roundhouse was just as oversized as she was. Encircled by railings, the building jutted out over the swirling pool of opal water. Candlevines ran along every line of wooden beam. Waif birds made nests in the thatch and squabbled over narin seeds.

"Sit, Scions."

Inside the roundhouse, Caraq had taken up a seat on a broad cushion. Only a handful of the riders were allowed to stay, nine altogether, and I was annoyed to see that irksome fellow Ogarosh was one of them. Pungent pine-sap candles were lit as Caraq had spare seats brought for us. Inwar apparently had no appreciation for their stink and went to stare at the fish in the river. I sat down quickly and gratefully. The ride on the lancewing had made my legs weak. The three hundred or so steps had shrivelled them up.

The nine riders removed their feathered helmets. They too had striped skulls beneath their armour, but none wore as many as Caraq. Gloves were removed and folded, cushions claimed, and legs crossed. I saw the tattoos of all seven tribes of the Swathe, from sorcerer to sixth-born.

"For somebody who says they aren't a matriarch and don't suffer any sages," murmured Redeye, "this sure feels like the Crimson Crown."

"Redeye," Atalawe hissed at him. "Have some manners, Brother."

"Don't you worry. Gaakaran warned me of your... *wit*, mudmage," said Caraq. "Believe me when I say that none of us are sages, and I am no matriarch. These are my seconds who give me counsel. Every one of us is here because the townsfolk voted for us. And that is why you can speak freely. Birthright, tribes and the Bloodlaws have no place here. Everyone gets an equal say in Lostriver, just as they are free to pursue whatever they please so long as it isn't murdering their neighbours." Caraq chuckled.

The wingmaster raised her hand with a grin. A horde of children that looked suspiciously like the sharp-chinned Caraq came from an adjoining room bearing platters of food, from fish to haunches of loamtoad and snake. After days of rations and dried meat charred over campfires, I almost drooled. The children didn't seem wary of us, instead coming to poke at our armour with whispers and sly giggling. Redeye crossed his arms and frowned so hard I thought he might break something.

These worms are so small and weak.

"They are just children, Serisi," I breathed.

"You said you don't follow the Bloodlaws?" Ralish asked, ignoring the food and the whelps.

"Why would we?" Caraq laughed around a mouthful. "I was a first-born training to run my father's market stall before my family was exiled. Try as I might, I couldn't understand a single word put in front of me. Glyphs looked upside-down to me. They did then and still do now. How miserable would I have been in my tribe? The Bloodlaws can crush you like seeds between stones if you're not careful. The Swathe is too powerful a force to be controlled with order, don't you think?"

Ralish's face broke into smile. "That I do," she said.

As do I. Caraq had won Serisi over, too. *I like this crow-woman.*

"Thank the gods somebody in the Swathe has their head on right," Atalawe said, devouring slice after slice of smoked fish.

"Ren told us how you convinced Danaxt to dissolve the laws to defend Shal Gara, Tarko."

I bowed my head, but whatever I had just eaten was as bitter as the memory. "It did not last long."

Caraq smiled. "Ren had much to say about you: the worker who moved a bloodwood. The sorcerer who killed a demon king and needs no nectra. Tales of you are already spreading, young man. For keeping the demons at bay, we must thank you. All of you. Ren was not sure what had become of you, but we had hope you survived."

"Unfortunately for the Fireborn, we did." Eztaral sniffed at a green biscuit. "And the war is not over," she reminded the room, curbing my pride in the same breath.

"My question to you is what in the Six Hells were you doing carting about a demon prisoner in the Gloomthickets? The leafroads swing north and west for a reason," she said while cracking a nut in one hand.

"We can handle the loam," Eztaral replied, a hint of a lie. There was still a caution in the way she sat stone-still. "As for the demon, we were delivering her."

The silence dragged. The seconds raised their eyebrows and shared glances. Caraq waved her hand in a circle.

"Delivering her where, might I ask?"

"That's our business," said Redeye.

It was Pel who spoke instead. "We had planned to take her to Dorla Sel."

Redeye scowled. "I don't trust them, Pelikai."

“Redeye,” the old sorcer snapped right back. “We could use some belief.”

One of the seconds spoke up. “Dorla Sel? What were you going to do, walk up to the gates with a demon and ask to see a famously private Allmother?” he asked.

Now that he puts it like that...

“That *was* the plan,” I replied.

Eztaral growled. “But thanks to our little disagreement—”

“What were we riders supposed to do? Nobody travels in the company of demons unless they’re Fireborn,” argued Ogarosh. He had taken to staring at me as if I were solely to blame for his gripes, whatever they might be. I wonder if he knew how wrong he was.

Caraq threw a seed at the man to keep him quiet. “Ren warned us of the Fireborn lunatics and their slippery ways. As you most likely know, when the bloodwood fell, the rest of the demons fled into the forest. We’ve been hunting them ever since. And we’ve seen plenty of their kind traipsing the loam alongside scarlet-cloaked and lizard-masked fools. To think any citizen of the Swathe would willingly choose to follow the demons is madness to us. For that, we hunt them too,” she explained. “The demon you claimed had already given us the slip twice in the past week.”

“Taiganatrax,” I said. I did not know why. It felt as though Serisi had spoken for me.

“Bless you.”

“No, that was her name.”

“I couldn’t care less what their names are, only that they don’t live to see another lastlight,” Caraq replied. “Although the Swathe has been shaken by the tragedy of two bloodwoods falling in a single season, the truth of Shal Gara’s sacrifice has been slow to spread. People don’t want to believe that two bloodwoods have fallen to wildfire, never mind *demons*. It disturbs their perfect order. The Fireborn know just as well as we do that the bloodwoods have become isolated and engrossed in themselves, and I reckon that’s what they are counting on. I know a plague when I see it, and if nobody else is going to stop it, then Lostriver will.”

I saw Pel stare at Eztaral. “It’s good to know we’re not alone.”

“That it is,” I said.

Ogarosh had another question. “What did you hope to achieve by bringing Allmother Tzatca a demon?”

“A warning, of course. The bloodwoods refuse to listen to the truth, so we will show them proof of it instead. Our plan was to beat the Fireborn to Dorla Sel and stop them from turning the Allmother’s mind before it was too late. Before they can take Dorla Sel’s nectra and open another doorway to the demons’ world.”

Several of the riders puffed their cheeks in doubt, Ogarosh most of all.

“I think it’s a grand plan,” said Caraq, catching a chunk of dried meat in her mouth.

“You do?” Ogarosh looked flustered.

“Of course I do! Rip the comfortable cushion of peace from under the nobles. Expose the Fireborn. Rally the bloodwoods to fight. Stop the demons from turning us to ash.”

Eztaral nodded. “That’s exactly right.”

“We are safe here. We’re hidden. We’ve got all we need,” said another rider. “Why would we risk Lostriver?”

“Why?” Ogarosh echoed.

“You would sit back and let the whole world burn? Do you not think the demon hordes would find us eventually?” Caraq asked.

“Water is their enemy! Hide under the waterfall and we’re safe.”

“I can’t tell if you’re a coward or just simply an idiot, Ogarosh,” Eztaral accused, making the man chew his lips.

“It might take a season or two, but they would find you” said Pel. “But when they did, you’d have navik streaming down these cliff-faces.”

“Navik?” Ogarosh scoffed.

Atalawe spoke around another mouthful of fish. “Warriors of the demon hordes. Grotesque little bastards.”

“Savage wretches with grasping arms and gnashing teeth. They can climb like a spider and jump clear over your head. They are wickedly fast, their claws are sharp, and their hunger is insatiable, and I would heartily caution you not to underestimate them,” said Eztaral. “Especially in large numbers.”

Ogarosh cast down his leaf of morsels, catapulting several nuts and berries across the platters. “You do not know Lostriver, Eagleborn Kraid. We are not as weak as you think we are.”

Caraq thumped her fist into her palm, showing her authority. “It is not about strength, Ogarosh. How many forts or battle-lines have you commanded compared to the eagleborn? How many battles? These are legends that sit on our council, both old and new. I would listen to them.”

I was also beginning to like Caraq. Apparently flattery worked to lift my spirits. I was acting like my demon.

Legend. I like this word, said Serisi.

Caraq thumped her feet on the floor. “I say Lostriver helps the Scions. Alone, you won’t be able to catch another demon and get close enough to Dorla Sel for it to matter. With me and my riders, we can trap, hold, and protect a demon long enough for—”

“Us to gain an audience with the Allmother,” finished Eztaral.

“Precisely.”

Ogarosh was not happy in the slightest. “This is foolishness.”

“Then I call a vote!” Caraq yelled as she got to her feet. Amidst mutters and a dramatic sigh from Ogarosh, the riders clapped their hands three times and sat straighter than they had before.

Caraq extended a meaty, food-stained hand to the door. “Give us time, Eztaral Kraid, and we will decide whether we can help you and yours.”

Eztaral bowed her head before clicking her fingers at the rest of us. We followed in silence, all except Atalawe, who lingered behind for a brief moment to grab several more handfuls of smoked fish.

“Thank you kindly,” she whispered to the solemn council before I pulled her away by her uninjured arm.

“For Inwar,” she explained in a whisper.

“Sure it is.”

Inwar purred like I’d never heard before. The fish barely touched the decking before it disappeared behind his blade-like fangs.

“Three Gods, you must have been hungry,” she mused.

Up there, Tarko.

I flinched at Serisi’s voice, expecting another assassin, but I saw only riders lurking at railings or idling in chairs, all of them doing a poor job of pretending not to stare at us.

“What are your thoughts, Scions?” Pel asked us as we came to stand at the edge of Caraq’s house, where a walkway reached over the river.

“You think this is going to a vote like we’re these Lostriver folk? Don’t make me remind you of how being in charge works, Pelikai,” said Eztaral, wearing a fierce scowl. She clicked her neck from side to side. “That being said, after what we’ve been through, I would happily have an ally. There is no shame in calling for reinforcements. What say the rest of you?”

“I agree. If the Cloudriders are willing to help us, what would we gain by denying them?” asked Pel.

Atalawe raised her hand with a wince. “Make that three for allies.”

“Four,” said Ralish. “If they have the sense to abandon the Bloodlaws, I trust them.”

“I don’t like it,” Redeye said, souring us with his usual brand of doubt. I was beginning to find it tiresome.

“Of course you don’t. You and that Ogarosh fellow are two planks from the same tree,” Eztaral said.

“I wasn’t finished,” the sorcer huffed. “But like the rest of you, I’ll take an ally. I don’t like this place beneath the earth. I don’t like the constant noise of the waterfall. But I like walking the loam even less. Count me in if I have to be.”

“Well, well,” Eztaral remarked. “Did you get hit in the head during that skirmish, Redeye? Or have you been drinking?”

I didn’t hear what Redeye mumbled, but I wagered it wasn’t complimentary.

Eztaral turned her green and red eyes on me. “That leaves you, Tarkosi Terelta. The worker who killed a demon king and won a war apparently single-handedly.”

I made a show of groaning, even though secretly I couldn’t help but enjoy the sound of those words. “I knew that would come back to bother me.”

“Well?”

“I can’t argue that I’m wary,” I answered, “but why shouldn’t we be after receiving so much denial and doubt from everybody we meet? Perhaps we’re doubtful because we’re unused to being believed and don’t know a good thing when we see it. If those riders decide yes, then I’ll take their help. They’re formidable enough.”

“Well said, lad,” Eztaral replied. “And Serisi?”

I took some of the dust from the floor and held a small spell in my hand. Serisi’s face appeared from the dust.

“I agree,” she whispered. “But I refuse to ride a bird.”

“Then we have our decision,” said Eztaral. “All we need is theirs.”

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In the hours we waited for the council to decide our entwined fates, we wandered Lostriver at Caraq’s invitation. The town stretched almost a mile down the river from the falls, and beneath the rushing curtain, we found an open cave full of buildings on stilts and tunnels that disappeared into the darkness. Their black mouths made the bloodwood-born in me shiver. I had no interest in seeing where they went. There were more nests here, from ragged rings of twigs to sprawling tangles of reeds and thread. Juvenile lancewings tore about above us, no bigger than Inwar and intensely mischievous. They swooped the jāgu over and over, making his tail curl between his legs.

The stares followed us wherever we went, but at least no trouble came our way. Some of the Cloudriders even came to clap the arms of the demon-hunters and those who had won the battle of Shal Gara. It was a refreshing change from the scowls and scoffs I had grown used to in the last weeks.

The more we explored, the more word spread that we were friends rather than intruders to be feared. Soon enough, townsfolk were greeting us with gifts of whole river-fish – which Inwar appreciated more than any of us – and cups of a wine they told us was made from mushrooms. Though the earthy taste made my tongue curl up, the heat of it spreading through my belly was much more enjoyable.

Everywhere we went, we were proudly shown lancewings as if they were the riders’ own children. Each one had a name that I’d forgotten by the time I was introduced to the next. Some of the birds lived right alongside their riders, with nests beside cots and a single roof over both. The bond between lancewing and rider appeared closer than I had ever seen in the nests of Shal Gara, much deeper than a lancer merely climbing atop a mount.

And it was not just lancewings that infested Lostriver. The strange piebald crows gathered there in their dozens. They were not big enough to ride, but they were big enough to fly baskets and bundles back and forth. Their harsh voices were constant. Some even looked to be holding court with lancewings. They were so well trained, we lost Atalawe to deep conversations with their owners and fellow wranglers.

With no Bloodlaws dictating Lostriver, the differences between every soul was riotous: some wore the styles and cloths reminiscent of Shal Gara, others old scales of Stormbeaten or Coriqal. Some were of the sun-beaten north. Others had the greyer skin of the south and west. There was no heresy nor madness like the godseers and first-born insisted would happen in the abandonment

of the Bloodlaws. Lostriver was not burning in the fire of rebellion; it was calmer than I had ever seen a bloodwood. I saw workers practising with spears, or healers knapping obsidian and cutting planks. The townsfolk did what they needed and they pleased, nothing more nor less. Chaos. Order. Balance. They were all gathered here.

When at last we heard a drum beat three times, we took it as our cue to return to Caraq's roundhouse. The strip of sky had turned a bruised pink by the time we arrived. The seconds were arranged outside, escaped from their suspiciously comfortable cushions.

Caraq had her arms crossed as we approached to stand before her.

"Well?" asked Eztaral.

"We have spent many words, and with four votes to six, we have decided..." Caraq played on our hopes with a pause. "That we will help you in your quest."

I clenched my fist.

"Then we are most appreciative," said Pel with a grand bow and his hand across his chest.

"This won't be easy," said Eztaral. "Blood will be spilled on both sides."

"We are prepared for whatever this choice brings us," Caraq answered.

More than half of the seconds nodded. Ogarosh, predictably, pouted as if somebody had slapped him in the face.

"And that is the end of it," said Caraq, clapping her hands three times.

To the thumping of boots and whispers, the seconds departed, leaving us alone with Caraq, who let a broad grin spread across her face. A small boy ran out from the house and collided with Caraq's leg. She mocked an injury before hoisting him aloft with one hand.

"Come, Scions. There is time to eat and drink before we begin our hunt," Caraq said. "My home is your home for as long as you are in Lostriver."

The Scions wandered inwards, enticed by the mention of both food and drink. The insatiable Atalawe was already rubbing her hands.

Caraq released her son and caught me before I could follow. "A moment of your time, Tarko?"

Should we be worried, Tarko?

I didn't think so. Ralish clearly had the same thought; she watched me carefully as I nodded to the woman, and let her lead me to the railing overlooking the river. The sounds of pipes and drums floated out from behind the waterfall.

"I hope I can trust you," Caraq said as she gazed at the lights blushing the falls yellow.

"What do you mean? Why me?"

"Because of what you are."

She knows, I tell you.

"A sorcer without nectra?" I guessed.

Caraq levelled a stare at me. "We both know you are more than that," she said. "Ren told me of many things. Some of which I have chosen to believe, and some of which I cannot believe."

"Such as?"

Caraq gazed over my head at the waterfall. "That a demon warrior lives within a Shal Garan worker."

She knows.

"You want to know if it's true?" I said, cutting to the bone of what Caraq was trying to say.

When I said nothing more, Caraq tapped her knuckles on the railing. "I do."

I stared across the river. "It's true," I said.

Caraq blew a long sigh. "How?"

"A magic we don't understand."

"Whatever magic it is or was, Ren tells me I should be glad for it," said Caraq. "I have to ask, Tarkosi. What does it feel like?"

Cramped and dark until recently, said Serisi.

"Ever-present," I replied.

"It's in there right now?" Caraq asked.

In more ways than one.

I winced. "*She* is. Serisi can hear every word you say."

Caraq swallowed. I could see her wondering if she should back away from me. "Then might I ask her one thing?"

No.

"Can we win such a war?" the wingmaster asked.

I did not answer. I let the demon decide first. She spoke my thoughts away.

"We will have to," I said, echoing her words.

Caraq's sombre face broke into her trademark smile as she clapped me solidly on the back. Without the demon's strength in me, I wager I would have been catapulted into the river.

"With you at our side, Tarkosi Terelta, I can believe it," she told me, and for the first time since Texoc's death, I almost believed it also.

"Call me Tarko," I said, making Caraq swell up with pride. "If I wanted to practice my magic, where should I go?" I had something in my mind I wanted to prove wrong. Its name was Pelikai Maladaq.

"You may practice, but I would ask you one thing first, Tarko."

"What is that?"

Caraq leaned close. "Know that Ren told me and me alone what you did, and what you... *are*. I did not truly believe until I heard your construct spell speak in the loam. It has taken some time for Lostriver to understand the prospect of demons. For them to know a demon is in their midst is a test I don't want to put my riders and people through. Not yet."

I bowed my head. "I understand, Caraq. You have my word. Serisi stays hidden."

Serisi could be heard grumbling between my ears.

It is not my fault if I am so terrifying, is it?

18

BRANDING

If we don't end war, war will end us.
FROM THE WISDOM OF HEKAR GOSH

I would have been more than happy with a point and a rough direction, but Caraq insisted on quite literally dragging me alongside her. With children scarpering around our feet, we made our way up stairs carved into the rock of the canyon. With the falls thundering in our ears, she brought me to a long hall of rock with a ceiling far too low and imposing for my liking. Water tumbled across one open wall. Torches of flame stood upright around the hall, casting pockets of yellow light. Judging by the shrines to the gods of soil and rain, and a cluster of tree trunks carved with ancestors' faces, it looked more like a place of worship than a place to train.

"We have few sorcers and even less nectra in Lostriver," Caraq was saying. "Those bloodwoods are not known for parting with it. Though that will not bother you now, will it?"

"Not in the slightest," I murmured.

Two lone sorcers in black crow-feather robes trained against one another. One had hands of blue, the other white. A water weaver and an air carver. I waited for the classic sneers to spread beneath their glowing blue eyes, but I was met with curt and respectful nods instead.

Well, this is new.

"That it is."

Others duelled with staves and spears or shot targets from small curved bows designed to be loosed while riding their birds. One small lancewing sat on the edge of the hall near to the waterfall. It was a ball of feathers, head bowed and eyes closed in slumber. Every other thwack of a spear or arrow in a target brought its beak rising up until it inevitably slumped downwards once more.

Caraq gestured to mannequins of driftwood dangling from ropes and troughs of dark, dried river dirt. She backed away respectfully as I stretched my hands out and clicked my neck to one side. I sought calm. Though the day had been long, the magic ran strong. My right hand went rigid as the power raced through my veins. A blue glow peeked from beneath the collar of my glove. I let it flow, spreading through my blood until I felt the magic consume me. Only then did I reach for the dirt.

The trough skidded across the floor under the force of my command. I pressed the cloud into flat halos that surrounded and spun around me in almost perfect unison. In teeth-grinding silence, I ran through the routine Redeye and Pelikai had forced upon my memory.

Three dart spells tore from me with a wave of my hand, striking each of the mannequins. Rush spells followed to batter the targets with rolling waves of dirt, and in the breath after I

summoned more earth to me, I unleashed whipping tendrils that broke them into pieces. The hall faded to shadow as I focused my mind to an obsidian blade. All I could hear was the rush of my blood. If I let myself fall deeper into my practice, I could feel the heat of Shal Gara around me. I could hear the gnashing of navik and demon jaws. I could even see the looming shadow of Faraganthar before me.

Serisi burst from me in the form of dirt and dust. Our minds flowed through my magic. Her claws swept the remaining wreckage from my path. I pushed the magic harder, growing Serisi until she was almost bent double beneath the roof. We pirouetted, breaking imagined foes into pieces at every angle and pulverising torch-shadows with intricate tendril spells that would have given Redeye a run for his gems.

I don't know how long I fought for. It was only when I finally let the dust die and drift in the draught of the waterfall that I realised several of Lostriver's riders and children had followed us up to the hall, and were currently standing dumbfounded. I saw Pel, Eztaral, and Ralish watching from the edges of the crowd. The complainer Ogarosh had come, too.

We have spectators, Serisi growled at me. She seemed pleased by it.

"Apparently so," I gasped, trying to master my breathing.

"Easy enough against thin air and wooden targets!" yelled a voice. It was Ogarosh, just as I'd expected. A gaggle of like-minded lackeys stood behind him. I didn't hear their muttering over the sound of the waterfall, but I could see their mouths moving, and the sneering curl of their mouths.

The tired and grumpy part of me reached for the loaded sling at my belt, but I saw Ralish and Eztaral shaking their heads in warning.

"Care to show our good Ogarosh what you're made of, Tarko?" called Caraq.

Only if we can use our bare hands. Can we, Tarko?

I looked to the other sorcers, whose nectra vials hovered halfway to their open mouths, their eyes wide. They came forwards with a less than enthusiastic shuffle and bowed respectfully to me before taking up positions either side of me at angles of attack. I gave them the respect of waiting for them to down their nectra vials and for the glow in their eyes to turn fierce. I could see their ranks now. The air carver was the first to approach, blowing up the dirt I had dropped in waves before her. I held out my hand flat before my face, ripped the earth from the wind, and sent it back in a dart spell that threw her backwards.

"Show them what you have, Lostriver!" yelled Ogarosh.

"Concentrate, Tarko!" I heard Ralish's shout.

The weaver was next. Rings of water surged around his wrist. A tendril spell reached out to me, and I slapped it away with a tendril of my own. My spells became heavy as earth turned to mud, but I didn't let it slow me. My strength was demon-born.

We duelled back and forth, tendrils of water smashing against fort and rush spells. I was biding my time, watching the air carver summon her spells. I felt a wind clobber me like a club to

the ribs. And again to the face. Invisible fists pummelled me enough for a rush spell of water to splash me from the side and knock me down.

A low murmur came from the small crowd that had gathered. I was too engrossed in the pain seeping across my face and down my chest. I felt Serisi seething inside my head.

I did not like that.

“Neither did I,” I growled. It was not that I was being watched by Ralish and the others. I was the hero of Shal Gara – the answer to a demon invasion – and here I was spitting curses and water.

I stamped my foot, sending a rush spell storming outwards to buy me time. The water weaver was in the middle of weaving an intricate shield of water when my tendril spells seized his legs and pulled him into the air. With a wail, he was left dangling upside down as I focused instead on the air carver.

Our magics met: a shield of dirt against a wall of air. The carver’s spells obeyed their namesake and began to erode my efforts. I heard Pel’s voice echoing in my head, telling me of the orders and their hierarchy. I snarled at that while I fought. If a worker could become a sorcerer, then mud could beat air.

I forced my spell forwards with another stamp. Dust swirled around me. Through the haze and my diminishing spell, I glimpsed the air carver trembling with the effort.

Use me, Tarko. Let me fight.

“This is a fight of magic, Serisi!” I hissed through bared teeth.

I summoned more earth to bolster my shield and threw it into the dust storm our duel had created. It worked, but only for a moment. I was left holding on to shreds of dirt and mud.

Are you truly going to let her beat you?

No, I was not.

I pushed. I wasn’t sure what earth obeyed me, but I saw the air carver slide backwards across the ground. I snatched a breath, held it, and heaved all my magic against her. With a whip-crack of pinched air, our duel broke.

I blinked dust from my eyes to find the air carver on the floor and wheezing. Faint applause and cheers came from the small crowd. Without a thought, I moved to help her up.

“What was that?” the carver asked me in a croaking voice, breathless. “That wasn’t mudmagic.”

Before I could answer or make sense of what she was saying, I heard Ogarosh and his lackeys complaining far too loudly.

“Step back. Leave her alone!” he was yelling.

“Calm, Ogarosh!” yelled Caraq.

I turned to see Ogarosh marching to me, his black cloak trailing and fists clenched as if he came looking for a duel of his own.

“Magic you might have mastered, stranger, but what of stone and wood and brawn, hmm?”

I could practically hear Serisi rubbing her claws together.

I looked to Eztaral, who bowed her head ever so slightly. A warning shone in her eyes. Pel had lowered his head, no longer meeting my stare. I don't know what I had done, but apparently it was something to cause them concern. Unfortunately, Ogarosh demanded all of my attention.

"You want to fight me?" I asked the man, watching him wipe the spittle from his lips.

"Caraq says you Scions are our finest hope. You look like troublemakers to me. You don't get to come here and play the hero without question or proof. I demand the proof. Draw your sword."

"No blood will be spilled between allies, Ogarosh!"

Ogarosh pretended he hadn't heard and spun his spear around his body.

I knew one could live through a war and still feel the tremble of trepidation on the cusp of the next battle. I know I did in that moment. Eyes were upon me, and I was a sorcer, not a warrior. I immediately reached for my sling instead of Serisi's sword.

"Cheat!" yelled one of the others that hovered behind Ogarosh.

I drew the sword from my belt instead. It felt heavier in my hand than I would have liked.

Let me loose, Tarko!

I tried. I truly did. As I'd practised, I tried to imagine Serisi standing before me. I even reached for her hand, but the spear came swinging before I had a chance to concentrate. I managed to knock the spear from my path and gave myself some space. Ogarosh did not just spend his time wagging his mouth, it seemed. By the way he spun his weapon, he was a warrior true and true.

He will strike high! hissed Serisi. I tried to follow her instruction and caught the spear on the blade.

Watch out for the—

Ogarosh's foot whacked me solidly in the ribs.

—kick.

The Scion armour saved me from pain but not from the force. I skipped away across the dirt as we circled each other again. I used the time to concentrate, even daring to close my eyes as I tried to force the demon into my body.

Tarko...

I dodged just in time.

I tire of this!

"I'm trying!" I snarled.

Ogarosh let a smile crack his wrinkled features. "So it appears."

The rider came at me with a flurry of jabs. There was no pulling of the attacks. Ogarosh was out to wound me.

I clenched my jaw and focused my mind once more. Whatever magic governed Serisi's power was slipperier than the power of nectra. As I madly thwacked away the spear and tried my hardest to avoid the blade, the calm became harder to hold on to. A ferocity grew in its place.

Tarko!

The long obsidian blade of the spear swung for me. I was too slow to stop it. I could only watch it coming with a mask of rage on my face. The rest of my body should have tensed in anticipation of the impact, but instead I let it come. I was powerless. I even shut my eyes, imagining the demon standing over me.

A heavy reverberation ran through my arm. It was so powerful I almost dropped the sword.

When I opened my eyes, the sword was angled close in front of my face. Ogarosh's spear had broken against the blade, and the jagged remainder was pressed against mine. Stone squeaked against silver.

Hah! I yelled, hearing my voice hollow and tinged with echo.

It was then I realised I was not in control. I was an observer behind my own eyes. I knew this feeling.

"Hello there," I heard myself speak to Ogarosh. A demon's words spoken with my lips and tongue.

Serisi? I asked.

She did not listen to me. I watched instead as she turned the blade of her sword and twisted Ogarosh's weapon away. Serisi stood her ground, blocking strike after strike almost as if it amused her to play such a game. I felt her smile spreading across my face as she blocked, parried, and otherwise drove Ogarosh mad. It was then I saw his pattern. The way Serisi repelled him made him overreach. I felt Serisi's laughter burst from my mouth, and I felt her lust for battle infect me.

Let me try, I told Serisi, and no sooner had I spoken than she receded, hauling me from shadow and shoving me back into my own body. I managed to fend two blows before I struck Ogarosh's lower leg with a kick and sent him sprawling.

"Again!" I yelled.

Serisi swept in as I withdrew into a darkness. Ogarosh's cronies came rushing, whooping as they had in the forest.

"Keep your blows friendly now!" Caraq yelled.

Serisi was kind enough to obey. When she had finally finished toying with them, sending them stumbling about the place, she put each of them on their arse in a variety of different ways. The last fellow she simply charged at, and he tripped on another's arm as he retreated.

Ogarosh came for one last attempt. Serisi moved my body faster than I had ever moved. A flurry of strikes landed on the rider before the demon smacked the spear shaft out of his hand.

Serisi! I yelled, but I needn't have worried.

The silver sword stopped a hand's width from Ogarosh's neck.

"Well done, Tarko!" announced Caraq, putting an end to the fight with a clapping of her hands. The applause spread. Cheers even came from the younger riders.

I watched Ogarosh's fright simmer into a concoction of emotions. Maybe rage. Maybe embarrassment. He pushed the sword away and got to his feet. I expected him to storm away, but he stayed facing me, lips working away over words unsaid.

With a clench, I took back control of my body and let the demon slink into the darkness of my mind. “Fine fight,” I said to him, extending my hand.

“How many seasons old are you?” Ogarosh growled.

“Nineteen.”

“Demon magic,” he replied. He slapped my hand aside and gave me the angry departure I had expected.

Caraq was busy shooing away the crowd. Pelikai was frowning at the ceiling. Eztaral was staring at me with a smirk on her face. Ralish looked stuck somewhere halfway between the two. I didn’t have time to decide; they began to trail after the Lostriver folk. Once the others had picked themselves up – or in the case of one fellow, been dragged away by his heels – I was left alone beside the fluttering torches. The waterfall’s noise slowly replaced the pounding in my head. The slumbering lancewing was awake, staring at me with one eye.

That was highly entertaining, though a shame not to spill a single drop of blood.

“Thank you for not killing him,” I muttered. “That might have been a little harder to explain.”

Together, Tarko, we are unstoppable.

I confess, I enjoyed the sound of that.

In a moment of curiosity, with the fury of the demon still vibrating in my bones, I reached for the torch beside me. My magic surged without question. Dirt swirled around the torch-pole, but I focused solely on the fire until all else in the hall turned black.

Once more, the flame leaned towards me, almost driven from the sap-soaked bundle it fed on.

“Tarko!” came Eztaral’s distant shout. I turned again to find her and Pel standing with arms crossed at the top of the stairs. He swivelled as soon as our stares clashed. With a snort, and to the thunder of the waterfall, I trod the straw-scattered stone and followed in the others’ wake. I could have been dismayed. Annoyed. Enraged, even. I was anything but. There was a wonderful solace in knowing I was right.

Eztaral was leaning close to Caraq, with the wingmaster nodding at something before she thumped down the steps.

“Come with us, Maven,” Eztaral yelled. “And hurry up about it.”

Now what?

I didn’t know, but Eztaral barely said a word as we ambled slowly along the river. Pel strode ahead of us, led by Atalawe. It was only when I noticed we did not aim for Caraq’s roundhouse that I spoke up.

“Where are we going?”

Eztaral pointed to where the wingmaster could be seen standing in a gouge in the cliff, beckoning to us. “You’ve come further than I thought possible, Tarko, and it’s time to recognise that.”

I trod the stairs, confused but willing. Caraq waited alongside a cloud-haired woman who looked more of a seedwitch than Atalawe did. A brazier burned nearby. On the pillars, I saw symbols and intricate glyphs that reminded me of the Sorcer's Temple of Shal Gara.

"What is this?" I asked.

Atalawe looked proud. "It's time you had another brand on that cheek, lad."

"Are you serious?"

"After that display? You've earned it."

"Pelikai?" Eztaral muttered as she pushed me into the circle carved in the stone. "The words. You know they have to come from a higher rank."

Old Pel shuffled in front of me. He took some time to meet my eyes, and his voice began in a hoarse whisper. "By nectra and the gods of sun, soil, and rain, you have been blessed, and it is and shall be your right to wear their blessing upon your mortal skin. By the spirits, you have been blessed to wear the mantle of magic. And by all mortal laws, you have been blessed a sorcer. By these three blessings, I brand you with the rank of paragon. Of the sorcer tribe and of the earth reavers. Bring honour to the bloodwoods, the Swathe, and your family name. Through might and magic!" he called out.

"Through might and magic!" I repeated.

"Kneel," croaked the seedwitch as she raised the brand from the brazier with hands shakier than I would have preferred and aimed for my cheek. Her aim was true and neat, thank the gods, and I felt the kiss of the hot metal against my skin below the other ranks. There was no pain, no heat; only a slight sting that felt like cold breath. As always, Serisi hissed as she savoured the metal's touch, and this time, she was not alone. I almost leaned into the brand.

"Rise, *Paragon* Terelta," Eztaral ordered me. I did so, stretching tall and looking between the Scions.

"Don't make me regret it," she whispered before Caraq thumped me on the back.

"Come, Scions! This is a night to celebrate. There is *ūlana* wine to drink and a river of fish to eat. Tomorrow, you meet our fine lancewings and learn how to hunt the Cloudrider way."

"What?" Serisi and I both blurted.

Caraq laughed at my face. "You didn't think we were walking to Dorla Sel, did you, Tarko? Gods, no. It should be a challenging but fun morning for you. Well, perhaps not for you, Tarko."

"Why's that?"

The wingmaster grinned broadly. "Ogarosh is master of the nests."

"Marvellous," I said.

And just as I thought our luck was turning around.

19

VOLE

They insist on calling it dark magic. What is the meaning of that? The fools forget so quickly the old ways of root and berry, leaf and sap. The further they climb those bloodwoods, the more their heads are lost in the clouds, I swear it. I will not give the nectra back. I will continue my experiments. There must be other properties to nectra beyond summoning the gift of the gods through drinking it, as the sap-sorcers do. Or making their precious jewellery glow. There must be ways to harness its rawest powers.

FROM THE NOTES OF HERETIC GODSEER CORDAX, SENTENCED TO DEATH IN 987

I told you, Tarko: I did not agree to this.

“Once again, I don’t think we have a choice, Serisi,” I whispered, as I stared down the length of a sharp beak at two enormous black eyes. A grey tongue darted outwards to slap me in the face. I wiped sapwater from my cheek while Ralish snickered at me.

Disgusting.

“Is... is there a way of *not* hunting the Cloudrider way?” I asked of the crowd on the demon’s behalf, having to yell over the storm of hovering lancewings. In the confines of the stone nests and tunnels, they were louder than the waterfall.

“Impossible! And don’t interrupt!” Ogarosh shouted at me as he shouldered past. I swore I heard him chuckle as he barged past me, thoroughly enjoying whatever revenge he could eke from this so-called tour Caraq had forced him to give us.

“Alas. Looks like we don’t have a choice, Serisi,” I whispered, making sure to pretend to be apologetic. The need to fly again was one that had kept me awake most of the night. That, and the ūlana wine Caraq had insisted on filling our cups with.

Serisi threw an empty threat at me. *I will murder you all.*

“As I was saying! Lostriver flies only the finest and fastest lancewings. You think Shal Gara could boast about its purebred birds? Hah! Lostriver’s lineage is purer,” Ogarosh scoffed, making sure he was staring at me. “It’s why our prey barely ever gets away, and why you’ll slow us down if you insist on hunting on foot in the tangle of the loam. If I remember rightly, even the formidable Scions of Shal Gara and their hero sorcer couldn’t escape us.”

Ralish leaned close to me. “Why do I feel like I would have done a lot of people a favour if I’d shot him in that skirmish?”

If Ogarosh heard that, he didn't give any indication. "Our riders spend far more seasons bonding with their lancewings," he yelled. "Most of us have been beside our birds since the moment they pierced their shell. The better the lancewing and rider know each other's minds, the more deadly we become. This lancewing right here I have known all my life. Scions, meet Daggerthorn."

Daggerthorn chirruped at the sound of her name, leaving a ringing in my ears. Atalawe was the only one of us who approached the shimmering turquoise bird. She held up her hand and the bird pressed her beak against the wrangler's palm. The lancewing's golden throat puffed outwards proudly.

"Magnificent," she said with a broader grin than usual.

How she can be calm so close to that monster?

"Not scared of lancewings, are you, Serisi?" I asked.

Serisi growled at my smirk. *I am rightfully cautious.*

Ogarosh led us further along the row of nests of twigs and pine needles. I swore each was more pungent than the last. The lancewing filling the neighbouring nest was a half-giant. Her head was buried in the back of the nest, leaving her fanned tail of black and white to face us. Purple and blue feathers shone like leaves of metal in the sun and vinelight.

"This is Ana, Caraq's own bird," Ogarosh said. "She's named after the river that flows through this canyon."

More names were yelled over the clamour as we trod deeper into the cramped dark of the tunnel that ran behind the nests. The stone roof above my head was not like being in a louse-mine; I could almost feel the weight hovering above me, waiting to collapse. Specks of dust fell constantly. The stone hadn't the heat or energy of a living bloodwood.

At last we came to the furthest depths of the tunnel, and by then my throat was tight. By the way Ralish seized my hand at one point, I was not the only one suffering the discomfort of being underground. A half-circle of nests awaited us, each of them occupied. Faint light of the sun goddess poked through curtains of vines.

"And these will be your lancewings!" Ogarosh yelled. "Their past riders have gone to the Six Heavens, fallen to the demon scum, and their mounts will serve you well as long as you're with us. Mark my words though, Scions, you had better treat these birds as if they were your own offspring. I don't like the thought of you riding them at all, but Caraq speaks otherwise."

"We appreciate it," Pel called out, ever the polite and formal one amongst us. Ogarosh frowned all the same.

No, we do not.

The demon's complaints went unheard as we were shown to our lancewings.

"For the eagleborn, you can ride the veteran Neverfade here. For you, sorcers Redeye and Pelikai, two lancewings of the same clutch, Galebraver and Glassclaw. Atalawe, a wrangler of your experience can handle Sunshadow. Ralish, meet Thundertail, who makes far too much noise for her own good."

I waited with arms crossed as Ogarosh reached the end of his list. “Forgetting somebody, are you?”

Let him forget, curse you.

“I wish,” Ogarosh said quietly, barely audible. With a faint crook of his hand, he showed me to a smaller nest at the end of the row.

“You, Tarko, get a bird that is most special indeed. He doesn’t usually like the feeling of somebody on his back, but maybe somebody as impressive as you can tame him.”

I do not like the sound of this beast, Tarko.

“Are you serious? I’m no wrangler.”

“Shame.” Ogarosh shrugged. His face was stone. I followed the stretch of his arm and his pointing finger to a smaller lancewing perched upright in its nest. The bird seemed glad for the attention, blinking incessantly and waving his beak back and forth. His feathers were a bright green, with a purple crown and blue running along down his throat and breast. There was a white streak along his head as though somebody had attacked him with a stick of chalk.

“Tarko. Meet Vole.”

Vole cheeped as he shuffled back and forth on his perch.

Vole? Like a rodent?

“Vole? That’s it?” I asked.

“Volechaser is his full name. He’s fast, no doubt, but he has an awful lack of attention.” Ogarosh sighed. “Almost flew into a tree last week chasing a shadow. Better be careful with this one. A dozen riders have tried their best and failed.”

“But I have no idea what I’m doing. I’ve only ridden a lancewing several times, and two of those were against my will.”

Ogarosh pushed me forwards. “Oh, I’m sure you’ll get the hang of it.”

I refuse, Tarko. This is madness.

I felt the twinge of pain in my head as she railed against me. She hadn’t done such a thing since betraying me in Shal Gara, and it was a fine thing to know I was still in charge.

“It’ll be fine, Serisi. Calm yourself,” I whispered.

Before Serisi could complain any louder, nesthands shoved a heavy saddle into my arms. I stared around the arc of nests and watched the others saddle their lancewings with ease. Only Ralish and I were clueless, but at least Ralish’s bird seemed trained. It had already bent closer to its straw bed to allow her to go to work, and she did so with a grin.

I was not so lucky. At the mere sight of the saddle in my hands, Vole sent detritus flying in all directions with a blast of his high-pitched wings.

“Great,” I muttered as I approached.

It took me twice as long as everybody else to get the saddle on Vole’s back, never mind the help of two nesthands. I fought to tie the straps across the belly of the fidgeting bird. He didn’t seem to like me one bit. I wasn’t sure if he sensed the demon in me, but he made his feelings quite clear when he batted me and a nesthand into the wall with his wing.

“Okay,” I said, sitting up wheezing and painfully aware of the others staring at me. Ralish had a hand covering her mouth. I didn’t know if concern or a mocking grin hid behind it.

This Ogarosh worm wants us dead or maimed, and this horrific bird will be the cause of it. I tell you.

“Problem, Tarko?” Ogarosh yelled to me.

“You know what the problem is. You’ve given me a cursed la—”

“Nonsense!” Ogarosh ignored me, clapping his hands at the other Scions instead. “Let your lancewing trust you and get used to your presence. Once it’s calm, place one foot in the saddle slow and easy. Use the handles, and swing the other leg over. Then strap yourselves in.”

It was as if Volechaser had heard the orders and decided to do the complete opposite. A wing darted for me again, knocking me flat. I came up as quick as I could and managed to seize a rope of the saddle. With much embarrassing hopping, I at last stuck one foot into the leafleather sheath on the low side of the saddle.

Vole turned to look at me with mischief in his black eyes. I remembered that look from the nests of Shal Gara. Before I could react, Vole took flight again and hauled me off the floor by my leg. I dangled upside down in mid-air with wings deafening me.

“Gods curse it!” I yelled.

You make us look a fool, Tarko.

Serisi was right again.

Hand over hand, I used the leafleather of my trews to climb upwards and seize the handles of the saddle. In my periphery, I saw the other lancewings take flight and angle themselves to leave their nests at sedate speeds. Vole turned as if he would do the same. In a moment of panic, I hauled myself upright, put my other foot into the opposite hold, and grabbed the straps.

I had only managed to strap in one leg when Vole burst from the vine fronds covering the window of the nests.

By the Void! Serisi screeched in my head. Had I any breath in my lungs, I would have shouted something similar.

Vole tore straight up towards the sky, almost peeling me from the saddle. As the bird hurtled upwards with sheer rock mere feet from my head, I battled to tie the last straps before I went plummeting to my death. I had never been more glad for the demon’s strength, and in Serisi’s panic, her power ran fierce. When at last I managed to get two hands on the saddle handles, I dared a frantic look backwards. The other lancewings were close but already falling behind. I swore I could hear faint shouts over the wind’s roar, but whatever words chased me were lost to rushing wind. Vole might have been utterly mad for a lancewing, but he was faster than I had thought possible. I felt like an ant clinging to an arrow.

We burst from the mouth of the canyon and into morning light streaming through the loam. Overhanging foliage snapped before the bird’s blurred wings. Leaves spiralled. One smacked me across the face and cut my cheek. The blood streamed over my ear under the force of the air.

It struck me then that I had no idea what I was doing aside from submitting to the mercy of the lancewing and the straps of the saddle. Which, for all the Three Gods knew, I'd tied completely incorrectly. I tried to look behind me again, but I saw nothing but a sea of green canopy as Vole escaped the forest.

Much to my terror, he did not stop there. His vertical climb continued as though he were headed for the doors of the Six Heavens. Fierce fingers gripped my chest as I was forced to watch the Swathe continue to fall beneath me. The weight of wind pressed against me only grew stronger. We had now climbed higher even the tallest giants of the forest. There was nothing but cloud between me and the rest of my world. The Swathe was a carpet of green and gold beneath me, unending and breathtaking. I could even glimpse the mountains scraping at the borders of the sky and the smears of distant scarlet bloodwood crowns to the north and west. The remnants of the demons' wildfire was a black scar to the east, like an obsidian sword blade thrusting into the forest. I felt Serisi staring as hard as I did, albeit through stinging and streaming eyes. She was silent. Serene, almost.

When the air became thin and my breathing difficult, and with the fire of the sun goddess beating down on us, I feared we might never return to the ground. Panic was poised to set in at precisely the moment that Vole seemed to change his mind. He folded his wings for the briefest of moments at the peak of his climb, and I felt all the strain on my chest and legs vanish. It was as if all my weight had disappeared and I had become a spirit. My arse even lifted from the saddle for a horrifying heartbeat. It was mercifully short-lived, but I would have taken an hour of that ungodly feeling compared to what Vole put me through next.

It is a law of nature and order that what went up, must come down. And so we did, and at a speed that was double what we had ascended at. The wind tore at my face as if trying to rip it away. I could barely see except for the endless mass of the forest racing up to greet us with terrifying certainty.

"Vole!" I roared. It was the only action I could take to save my skin.

To my surprise, the lancewing responded, and not in a good way. Vole reared up to clip the needle-points of pines with a piercing screech. The weight that had vanished from my body came back to crush me. I felt my eyes descending into my cheeks, and every bone in my body pressed towards the loam. It brought shadows creeping into my eyes, and unconsciousness beckoned its claws at me.

A memory came to my aid. I knew lancers' saddles were designed to tell a lancewing which direction to go. I squeezed my legs into the bird, but he went in the opposite of every direction I gave him. When I tried to trick him, Vole pirouetted into the canopy instead and almost decapitated me with a branch.

"That's enough!" I yelled, giving up. Yet again, Vole tried to shake me. I held on quite literally for dear life as the lancewing raced through branches at speeds I couldn't even comprehend. Just when I thought we would dash ourselves into the trunk of a birch tree, the

lancewing would slide through the air and miss it by a hair. There was nothing I could do but hold on and pray to the Three Gods and the ancestors that I would see another lastlight.

Eventually and mercifully, the lancewing grew bored of terrorising me. By the time he sought the touch of the sun again, now glowing over the western reaches of the Swathe, I was drained. The lancewing decided to seek a tall pine high above the rest of the canopy and rested on a branch. Vole chirruped loudly and turned his head to stare at me. I had yet to peel myself from the saddle, and there, hunkered against the handles and expecting trickery at any moment, I met his gaze. I was immediately lost in those depthless eye. Serisi and I studied the bird long and hard until time was lost and the shadows moved without us. Vole was content to do the same. If there were any thoughts shared, I don't know what they were apart from a plea not to kill me.

What is it thinking? More ways to end us?

"I don't know," I breathed. "But I hope not. I think he was testing me to see what I would do. I get the feeling he just wants to be free. That he doesn't like following orders. Being treated as an object."

Then you and he are well matched.

With a harsh cheep, Vole broke our stare. I found myself blinking as he flexed his wings and tail wide. I watched his feathers spread out like reaching fingers. When he was done stretching, he once again took flight. This time, however, at half the speed. I let him fly for miles until I tried again to guide him. I flexed my foot once, twice, and on the third time, he followed my bidding. I got the sense Vole did not obey me but instead choose to agree.

"Thank you," I sighed in relief.

I tapped my foot again and Vole agreed once more. I don't know what – if anything – I had done except allow the lancewing to be free to fly how he wanted, but I felt I had passed some kind of test. I was relieved.

I started to enjoy myself. Without a blindfold, I could take in every detail of the forest that raced past me. Vole showed me both the loam and the canopy in the space of a breath. We dashed past orokan swinging from branch to branch. Barkwolves snarled at us as we chased their packs across the loam. In long stretches of clearings larger than I had ever seen, antlaks looked up from their grazing to glimpse our streak across the sky. Wild lancewings came to race us between the treetops, and Vole outpaced every one of them.

I imagine this bird does well with the female birds.

I laughed, finally gaining the nerve to release my grip from one handle.

Tarko...

I held one arm in the air as if I swung a sling, and, tensing my legs, raised the other. Vole frightened me once with a swift spiral around a tree, but I pressed on with a grimace until I had both hands free and held wide. Vole pushed himself to ferocious speeds while I yelled until my throat rasped.

When at last Vole's wings stirred up a spray in a river, I realised he was headed home. I half expected to find myself on the far shores of the Swathe by the time he rested his wings. At

bewildering speed, I watched the riverbank rise up around us until it became a ravine, and then a canyon, and before long we were hurtling between fallen branches and clawing vines in a skinny gloom.

The spray of a waterfall stung my face before I realised we had returned to Lostriver. When the roar of Vole's wings faded momentarily in a dive over the waterfall, a new noise replaced it: the thumping sound of wooden drums.

With some slight direction, Vole decided to land outside Caraq's roundhouse where other lancewings were perched along the walkway. I recognised their colours as the birds Ogarosh had given us. There was a crowd of riders on the boards, gathered around a circle of Scions. In its centre, I saw the glint of an obsidian sword held to a familiar neck.

Eztaral had Ogarosh on his knees. Marrowthirst rested on the man's shoulder. A number of obsidian spears wagged in the eagleborn's face. Caraq was close by, big hands raised for calm.

What in the Void have we missed?

While I had spent my day almost being murdered by speed itself, it seems a disagreement had broken out between the Scions and our new allies.

"What by the Hells is going on?" I yelled from Vole's back. "Why do you look as if you're all ready to kill each other?"

"A question we were just asking Ogarosh here!" snapped Eztaral. "Seems he put you on a lancewing that shouldn't have been ridden, Tarko, and put you in all kinds of danger that I was momentarily about to punish him for."

Ralish refused to relax the arrow nocked on her bowstring. It was aimed directly at Ogarosh's forehead. "What was it you called it, Ogarosh? A fine joke?"

"He's alive, isn't he?" Ogarosh complained. "Unhurt, too, by the look of it."

"Fortunately for you, Ogarosh!" boomed Caraq. "Does this look like the kind of hospitality I ordered you to provide? Did I ask you to play jokes?"

"It was the only lancewing we had spare, Caraq," said Ogarosh.

"Lies."

"He put me on my arse last night, it was only fair I put him through Lostriver's paces."

"Not on Volechaser. That bird has the speed of the sun goddess herself in his wings."

"Well..." Ogarosh spat blood to the boards. "Tarko must have done something to him. When have you ever seen Volechaser so calm? Or not sulking and fighting with the others?"

Caraq blinked at me. One by one, the others turned. "What did you do, Tarko?"

"I held on. That's all I did," I answered. Just as I thought Vole still enough to dismount, he wriggled enough to send me tumbling to the walkway. "Vole did the rest. Once he got bored and realised I was there to stay, he seemed to take a shine to me."

"You're lucky," Caraq told me. "It wouldn't be the first time that Vole has thrown a rider."

Ralish at last loosened her bowstring and stepped close to me. "You were gone so long we thought you were mush against a tree trunk or lyin' broken in the loam."

Atalawe spoke from the side of her mouth. “Three riders have already died on Vole’s back or shortly after falling from it.”

I turned to look at Vole, still perched behind me and nonchalantly preening his wings. Even the other lancewings appeared to be treating him with space and caution. I glared accusingly to Ogarosh, who pretended he had conveniently not heard Atalawe’s words.

“What’s done is done. I’m alive. I don’t know how, but I am.”

“That you are, Tarko! As blessed by the Three as ever,” proclaimed Caraq, clapping a hand across her knee. “Now, Eztaral, would you be so kind as to refrain from decapitating our dear friend Ogarosh?”

The eagleborn released Marrowthirst from against Ogarosh’s neck. Ogarosh got to his feet, adjusted his tunic of crow feathers, and managed to bring his eyes to meet mine.

“I see you’ve proved me wrong again,” was all he muttered, and even that looked as if it tasted sour. I stayed silent. I felt shade fall as Vole stretched his wings over me.

“Then all is well. We remain friends. And now that you’ve tasted the air like a true Cloudrider, do you feel up to a hunt, Scions?”

“Ready and raring,” Eztaral growled, still standing facing Ogarosh with her hands on her hips.

Nice to see she cares so much, even though she pretends she does not.

“My scouts have brought rumour of a demon northwest of us near Azcalan. Something lighting fires and burning highfields out of their trees.”

“Azcalan?” I heard Atalawe groan.

“Then what are we waiting for?” I asked, already reaching for the rope dangling from Volechaser’s saddle. Surprisingly, I heard no complaint from Serisi.

“Calm yourselves, Scions,” said Caraq, wearing a fierce grin. “We need another day to prepare a cage, and we riders won’t go chasing a rumour without a sighting.” Caraq put her fingers between her lips and whistled so sharply everybody present winced. “For now,” she said, “now that we know Tarko isn’t dead, there’s more riding to be done.”

Caraq’s huge lancewing I had seen curled up in the nests emerged from the mouth of a cavern and filled the canyon with a teeth-chattering drone. “The clouds aren’t mastered in one flight, and we need you sharper than a spear blade,” Caraq called out as she mounted the railing with a hop and skip and climbed aboard Ana’s saddle with mind-boggling ease. Her lancewing hovered over the water, turning the river into intricate ripples as the blur of wings throbbed.

“Ogarosh!” Caraq bellowed. “I know we have another clutch of birds. Give Tarko a ride that won’t kill him.”

“No,” I blurted involuntarily. I could see Vole staring at me in the corner of my eye. “I want to stick with Volechaser.”

“You mad?” Ralish demanded of me. “What’s to say he won’t throw you the next time?”

I have no clue why, yet I trust him, Serisi whispered. The damnable bird.

“I know this sounds strange, but I have a strong feeling that he won’t.”

“A feeling?” she asked. “Well, that’s reassuring.”

“You believed in me before I proved myself, right? You had a feeling.”

“You aren’t a wild beast, Tarko...”

Half of us is.

“...and you weren’t likely to break every bone in my body if I was wrong about you.”

“Trust me.”

Ralish scowled, but she gave me the slightest of nods before she sought out her bird. She climbed her saddle as if she were a practised lancer, and her bird burred excitedly as her wings added to the thunder.

I turned back to Vole, who had already spread his wings wide. I ran my hands across the feathers of his neck. “And why have you changed the colour of your leaves so quickly about this, demon, hmm?” I asked Serisi.

I do not want to say. You will only mock me.

“Go on. Tell me.”

Your world. This Swathe, she growled. I cannot remember one so large and alive and drowning in colour. I was... lost to it.

“I know that feeling,” I smiled.

But to see the dark hand of the Iron Icon upon it shames me. To think that our first wildfire only burned so little, and how much the God of Chaos would burn makes my bones heavy. I cannot stand it.

“Me neither, Serisi.”

Though it seems a murderous creature, the bird has shown me such a glorious existence. So I will forgive it for trying to kill us, and if this creature can help us stop the Last Clan, then so be it. I will endure this flying.

I couldn’t help but smirk. “Or, I think you know you don’t have a choice in the matter and are trying to make it sound like it’s your idea.”

See? I knew you would mock, hissed Serisi.

After two terrible attempts, I was back in the lancewing’s saddle once more. Vole even gave me a moment longer to strap both legs in this time. Only a moment, mind.

The others had already blasted upwards and were quickly reaching the canyon edge. Vole seemed to be watching them, waiting for something.

I cleared my throat. “Vole? You going to wait here all day or—”

My head almost snapped from my neck with the force at which the lancewing took off. We exploded through the canopy before the others even left the canyon.

20

A WIZARD'S FURY

Stormbeaten's Matriarch Cohulun refused to take a husband unless her proposed could beat her in a fistfight. Nobody ever defeated her, and Cohulun died the last of her line.

FROM "SCROLL OF THE DEAD" BY SIXTH-BORN OROK OTWA

Two nights were all it took for me to develop a hatred of whichever breed of frog called Lostriver home. They were impressively loud and incessant in their croaking. Aside from the occasional lancewing patrol and the hooting and hollering of those still drinking elsewhere in Caraq's house, the moonless night was filled with the sound of frog. Not even the waterfall could drown them out. Every now and then, I would hear a squeak as Inwar caught one. It did nothing to cease the collective croaking.

"Are you ever going to sleep, Tarko? Not that I don't appreciate havin' you instead of the demon, but I worry."

Ralish's hand reached out through the darkness to alight on my back. Her skin was cold against mine. The light of distant vines shone into my eyes through the narrow window of our room.

"Too much in my mind."

"I can hear your teeth grinding. Hear you whisperin' to Serisi."

Ask her who else I am supposed to talk to.

"Mm."

With a sigh, she shuffled closer and took my left hand. Her fingers moved over the black scars in my palm and traced the black threads up my arm. She pressed her knuckles to my cheek. "Is it this?"

I shook my head. "I don't worry about that like the rest of you do."

"What is it then? Aren't you enjoyin' your new role as a rider? Did Volechaser rattle you?"

"Not since my first flight. I think he's taken a liking to me. And I don't think I'm enjoying it as much as you seem to be," I chuckled.

Ralish smiled. "I had no idea until we came to Lostriver, but I think I was born to fly, Tarko. I saw the Swathe like you did. It broke my heart to come down. I don't think I'll get over seein' that."

"I'm simply glad you didn't kill Ogarosh before I got back."

“It was close.” Ralish snorted. “I’m glad you’re not in pieces. You’ve chosen a dangerous lancewing.”

“A fast one, though,” I muttered. “Too fast.”

Her nails walked down my spine as I resumed my staring.

“Why don’t you tell me what’s botherin’ you, and then I can get some sleep of my own? Especially if those cursed frogs shut their mouths as well,” she said.

I smirked wryly. “Neither Pel nor Eztaral has spoken to me yet.”

Ralish nodded. “About the fire magic?” she asked. “They made you a paragon.”

“That they did, and I’m grateful. But I can tell they still don’t believe in me as they should.”

“They will, once you prove them wrong.”

“I’ve shown them already.”

Twice.

“Twice now,” I added. “I’ve come to expect this from Pel, but not Eztaral.”

“Then forget them. We have another demon to hunt at firstglow, and that’s far more important.”

I hadn’t heard her speak. “I don’t understand their doubt. Serisi and I have already proved nobody can beat us when we work together. Proved that I can handle this power and this bond. How many times have we survived? Again and again? Even now our power grows. I’ve done so much, and yet they still cling to uncertainty and worry. I’m the hero of Shal Gara, for gods’ sake.”

“Careful, Tarko. That kind of arrogance doesn’t suit you,” Ralish said to me as she sprawled in the covers.

I arose from the bed with a groan, feeling the night air across my naked skin. I reached for my treads and tunic.

“Where are you goin’?” she asked.

“To train.”

Ralish pulled the mosscloth sheets around her. The arrow pendant against her chest shone.

Better listen to her, Tarko. As much as I loathe being a part of your little fest of pitiful love, I do not think it would be worth our while. Ralish is adept at giving me a headache.

Even though I pinched myself to teach Serisi a lesson, I knew the demon was right. I knew I was wrong. And yet I still stared at the door a moment longer than I should have. Ralish sighed.

“The days feel like they’re speedin’ up. Seems like danger has loomed in every shadow since Mulchport. Here? It feels almost... *normal*. Now, I don’t know when we might get this kind of normalcy again, especially seein’ as we’re leavin’ for gods know what in a few short hours, but if you don’t want to spend those few hours with me pretendin’ not all is training and war and death for once, then you’re welcome to go. Don’t blame me if you regret it.”

Told you.

As quickly as my treads and tunic went on, they did the opposite. Ralish was as wise as she was captivating. War robbed its victims of more than just peace. It attacked humanity. Chiselled

at every facet to see what it could break. To fight that was a battle not just in the loam or on the branch, but also in the mind. In the heart. I had almost forgotten that.

I seized Ralish's face in both hands and heard the inevitable groan of the demon.

*

The huge cage sitting in the morning glow was an ugly thing. It screamed "hastily built" at me the moment I stepped from Caraq's doorway and clapped eyes on it.

The design was simple: four stout limbs of ironpith and a mass of thick vine rope. Walls of crisscrossed bars of stone bound with copper. A heavy ironpith lid was propped open on what seemed to be worryingly flimsy posts. Spikes and spears of burned wood pointed inwards. All the behemoth needed now was a captive. And I was determined to give it one.

"Will it hold a demon, Serisi?" I asked, reaching for the sawdust strewn across the walkway. Serisi emerged to hover above my head, body half-formed. We drew stares from some of the riders.

"Combined with your worm-magic, it just might," she whispered as her sawdust claws ran across the bars.

"Good morning, Tarko!" Atalawe yelled to me as she marched brusquely along the boards. Inwar made the gathered lancewings bristle. The jāgu chattered at each of them with a strange noise I'd never heard him make.

"That it is," I replied with a smile.

The wrangler slapped me on the arm to a thump of Scion armour. "And aren't you in a cheery mood this morning? What's the cause, I wonder? Excited to be on the hunt, I bet."

Serisi grumbled as she turned accusingly to face Ralish, who had beaten me out of bed and was now feeding her lancewing Thundertail sapwater from a bucket.

"Ah, I see," Atalawe said with a knowing smile.

I huffed. "That's enough of that."

"You deal with death so long you want to feel a little life, am I right?" she asked.

I stared at her closely while I ruffled Inwar's tufted ears. "Strangely enough, that's exactly right," I said.

With a crash of a door, the imposing Caraq came marching into the small crowd. "Smoke in the north! Wildfire, so the scouts say. Our time is now, Scions and Cloudriders! Get yourselves saddled and ready."

Eztral strode in Caraq's wake with Pelikai and Redeye trailing her. Our glorious eagleborn, though armoured and armed to the teeth, was more hollow-eyed and raspier than usual that morning. "It's as simple as it always was. We catch ourselves a demon, we take it to Dorla Sel, we demand an audience with our fine Allmother Tzatca, and we cut the disease that is the Fireborn and demonkind out of the Swathe forever," she growled. "There will be no dying. No getting wounded. And no taking revenge on our demon prey. We need this one whole and alive."

I turned as soon as she had finished and squeezed Ralish's hand for a fleeting moment before seeking out Vole.

"Tarko," Pel caught me. I was forced to turn. "You seem quiet. What's going on with you?"

"Being held back, is what's going on," I said coldly, before looking away.

Pel found his voice. "Tarkosi," he snapped. He closed the gap between us with slow steps. I caught Redeye and Ralish staring in our direction. "Speak your mind."

"You know I'm starting to shift fire with my magic," I muttered. "Yet neither you nor Eztaral will acknowledge it. Why not push it? Use it?"

Eztaral came to stand between us. Her mismatched eyes were shrouded in tired wrinkles. "This is the kind of thing that we discuss in more detail later, not on the field of battle. Now, I'm going to trust this won't affect our hunt. As for you, Tarko, all I care about is that demon inside you and you using the magic you already know."

"I thought I was done proving myself and my power, but I see I'm not. I wonder if Kī Raxa suffered this much doubt and scrutiny."

Eztaral seized me by the collar of my breastplate. With her other hand she tilted my head to glance at my neck. "I need you focused, Tarko, and here you are forgetting yourself. Now is not the time for harsh words, and I need you to believe me on that. Once we have the demon in the cage, we will talk. Until then, Tarko, I still need you safe and sound."

She is not wrong. Distractions lead to defeat. Defeat leads to death.

When the eagleborn released me, I said no more, bowed my head, and turned away. Dust spun in cartwheels behind my heels as my magic died. My eyes burned beneath my brows.

My lancewing was at the end of the row, dancing from foot to foot. He lowered his beak in a bow at the sight of me, but the sight of the demon made him chirrup harshly. Vole chattered until I reduced Serisi to dust and wiped my hands clean. With a shuffle of the bird's wings, he seemed satisfied enough to let me approach.

"Tarko!"

Void. What now?

"My thoughts exactly."

It was Caraq this time, bearing a gift of leather and sandglass visors. They looked like a crow's beak, and weren't as large as the riders' helmets of black feathers and glowing gems, but they were fine enough to, as Caraq put it, "Keep a fly or beetle from blinding or choking you."

One by one, the Lostriver lancewings beat their wings. The canyon shook with their thunder. My whole chest vibrated like a drum skin when a team of heavier lancewings seized the vine cables and ironpith chains that ran from the corner of the cage.

"Take wing and give no mercy! To the clouds, riders!" bellowed Caraq, and with a piercing shriek she and Ana rose first, followed closely by Ogarosh and Daggerclaw. Eztaral's bird Neverfade went third. Vole had yet to flap his wings once by the time all the Scions had taken flight. Even the cage had now taken flight and was inching upwards.

Tell me you are holding on, Tarko.

“You already know I am,” I said through gritted teeth, every muscle ready for what I knew was coming.

Vole did not disappoint. I had learned how he worked: once the lancewings were far enough away that catching them was a challenge, he exploded into the air. I doubted one of my slingstones could have outpaced him. Crows spiralled in our wake.

After an involuntary yelp, the fist of the wind and the sheer speed tried to peel me from the saddle. My body felt heavy as metal, but I found leaning flat and close to the bird worked better. It even seemed to make Vole fly a hair faster, much to Serisi’s dislike. She yelled between my ears in wordless stream of stress.

“Ease up, Vole,” I called to the lancewing once we had drawn level with Caraq’s half-giant of a bird. Caraq and her lancewing both glanced at us as if we were breaking some rule, but when she beamed and raised her huge spear to the northwest, where the River Ana swerved back and forth through the forest groves, we pushed our lancewings faster. Ana gave Vole a challenge by the looks of it, but the smaller lancewing never let Ana creep ahead. My ears rang with the maelstrom of wind, yet at least now I could see without having my eyeballs plucked out. I noticed the distant yet diminutive crown of a bloodwood poking above the forest’s mountainous canopy.

Azcalan, said Serisi. Even a voice in my head was somehow drowned out by the wind. *I wonder what the wrangler fears so much.*

“Hopefully we don’t have to find out!” I yelled behind the beak of my visor.

When we escaped the canyon, the sun goddess had painted the Swathe pink with firstglow. When we at last came upon a sign of our prey, she was already sloping over the west, seeking a grave amongst the black mountains.

Caraq’s bellowing was barely audible. “Smoke ahead!”

Squinting, I could see a faint column of grey smoke that peeked above the canopy and trailed amongst the treetops on a conspiratorial breeze. At first, I was not sure if it were simply a campfire, or a sixth-born’s watchtower, or perhaps a small village amongst the branches. But as the miles raced by, and Vole began to tremor with effort, that column of grey turned into a roiling mess of black smoke.

That is no campfire. I taste the Last Clan on the air.

I smelled it, too. Sulphur ran on the wind.

Caraq swirled a hand in the air. Two-thirds of the riders and lancewings raced east and west to pincer the fire. “With me, Scions!” she bellowed. Like a stone hurled into a sea of moss, the giant bird somersaulted and dove into the thickness of the canopy.

By the Void! Serisi yelled as Vole did the same, almost catching me out. *What is that feeling in your stomach?* she asked me.

“It’s called wanting to throw up,” I told her. I patted myself with a rapid hand to check I hadn’t lost my sling or sword.

The lancewing threw Serisi and me into a maze of proud sycamore boughs that spewed spinning, winged leaves as the hunting party blasted through their quiet grove.

Highfields hung beneath the canopy, spanning the high spaces between branches and trunks. There was a muddy marsh between their arched and tangled roots. Walkways hung heavy with moss. It would have been an idyllic scene had it not been for the demonfire that raged through it.

Every field I saw was aflame and already burned to ash. I saw not just withered crops but the charred bodies of fallen workers and farmers. Others lay dead amongst the wandering roots, their corpses left in grotesque positions. A trail of fire led from one burning walkway to the next. I felt the familiar pounding of battle in my chest. Memories of Shal Gara drowned me. I felt the old rush of dreaded marvel mixed with the hatred of the demons' callousness.

Chaos. A demon was here not long ago. A wizard.

My hands gripped the saddle tighter. If Vole had heard Serisi or felt my trepidation, he utterly ignored it and surged ahead to where the smoke billowed darkest. The Scions and Caraq could barely keep up. I could hear their calls on the wind.

A bonfire was consuming a ring of houses and highfields built about a once-white pine. Screams came from those still alive and trapped inside. Not content with burning through the homes and tree, the wildfire spewed in jets of flame to spark other fires.

There!

“Where?” I yelled.

In the flames on that field. At one with the fire as all demonkind wizards strive for.

I looked closely, watching how the fire moved. It was tricky to spy, but there was a demon amidst the flames, where they burned deep scarlet and fierce orange. A skeletal body of charcoal and fury walked at the heart of the inferno.

“What are you doing, Tarko?” yelled Caraq. Eztaral flew by my other side.

“You’re looking right at a demon!” I replied, letting the others stare as I did. “A Last Clan wizard!”

This one is too dangerous to catch. Maldorinil is not to be trifled with. He is the grandpaw of the greatest wizard in the Starless Plains.

“We can’t keep this one alive!” I told them, but before they could speak a word, Vole rushed straight towards the flames as if he would spear the wizard with his beak. I could hear the other lancewings following me, sweeping in from three directions.

“Stop!” I yelled, when I could feel the heat of the fire on my cheeks. Vole ignored me, sliding through the air sideways. If he was trying to catch the wizard’s attention, it worked. A hoof stamped upon the ash and cinders. A face of grinning black bone emerged from the flames. Wavering claws came creeping outwards to reach for us. The demon showed itself beyond the fire just in time for the Cloudrider charge.

A fireball soared to strike at us. Vole evaded it with ease, and I swivelled to watch it explode in the branches above us. Scrawny, wriggling figures fell tumbling with inhuman shrieks. Vole stared back at me with a fierce look.

“There are navik in the branches!” I bellowed to the Scions, now hovering at my back with spears and spells raised. With the thunder of wings and fire, only they and Caraq heard me. We

were forced to watch as the navik sprang from their hiding places to tumble down onto the passing lancewings, like ants shaken from a leaf.

“Ambush!” Caraq bellowed, whistling sharply three times.

Lancewings careened in every direction, seeking the sky once more. Caraq’s swift actions saved dozens, but not all. Where the navik collided with the birds, I saw riders ripped from their saddles and falling, fighting with the navik until they crashed to the loam. More navik began swinging from the branches on ropes, wielding woven nets and spears.

“Sorcers, get those shield spells up!” Eztaral charged for the wizard. “The rest of you concentrate on the demon!”

Those who heard the order swarmed inwards, with their shrieking war-cries adding to the maelstrom. The riders were not new to battle; blood began to rain as navik found themselves horrifically outmatched by the speed of the birds. Even in the midst of our swooping attack, Vole spared a moment to spear one in mid-air and send it squealing and spinning to the marsh.

Ignoring the wall of flames that rose up at the wizard’s back, I swept my sling from my belt and took aim. Ralish beat me to it. With Thundertail surging in front of me, I watched the arrow streak through the smoke.

Maldorinil was ready for us. He reached a sprawled hand littered with bracelets of charred bone and skulls. The arrow came to a halt before his claws, and with a twist of his wrist, the stone arrowhead began to glow until it shattered. I spied a smile between those jaws. Fire bloomed, turning the ensuing onslaught of arrows to ashes and spears to cinders. Only a number of weak shots made it through the wizard’s fire. The demon looked hardly inconvenienced. His broad crest of horns and spikes glowed as the flames soared higher.

“*Karketh!*” Maldorinil roared, levelling a claw at me.

“Fly, Vole,” I said, squeezing my legs into my lancewing’s sides. “Bloody fly!”

Fire chased me. Vole was forced to duck and weave as the fireballs blasted the sycamore grove. The Scions followed me, and I saw one narrowly miss Pelikai as his lancewing Galebraver pirouetted.

Caraq led the Cloudriders in a spiral around Maldorinil. Our wings beat a hurricane that fought against his fire. Every rider hurled everything they had at the wizard as they flew. I drove a stone into his ribs, eliciting the first roar of pain we’d heard.

As soon as I had another stone in my sling, Vole broke from formation and raced me perilously close to Maldorinil. I held my breath as we ducked beneath the fire and the wizard’s claws, so close I could see the pitted, twisted surface of his cheekbones. Only then did I loose my stone, aimed for the demon’s face. The blow knocked his jaw sideways with such force it looked permanent. Fragments of stone peppered me as Vole tore up into the sky and narrowly missed singeing his wingtips. Another lancewing behind me was not so lucky. I turned to see Redeye’s bird spiralling towards a highfield with smoke trailing from its tail. Before it could escape, the lancewing’s saddle peeled from its back, and the sorcerer tumbled into the ash and dirt. The bird dunked itself in the marsh-waters before tearing back into the sky.

“Protect Redeye!” I heard a cry from Eztaral.

I was already unstrapping my legs from my saddle.

“Down, Vole!”

Vole listened the third time I told him, and with a shriek, he plummeted to the smouldering highfield so fast I thought I would land next to Redeye with a squelch. But the lancewing crushed me with a vicious halt, long enough for me to hurl myself from the saddle. I crashed into the blackened furrows beside the sorcer.

Redeye was far too dazed to climb to his feet. He could barely speak. All he could do was point towards the inferno that, much to my dismay, had noticed our fall. Maldorinil had turned in our direction, his broken mouth wide and full of rage. A storm of spears fell upon the wizard, piercing him several times to no effect. His iron skin broke obsidian to shards. He raised his hands with a callous laugh as he jumped onto our tier of field. Rivers of demonfire began to flow in our direction.

“Three Gods!” Redeye finally found his voice.

Magic must fight magic!

“Oh, so *now* you’re content to stay within me and let me do the fighting, Serisi?” I snapped. “Get up, Redeye. Do something other than complain for once!”

The insult stirred him. He reached for his nectra and poured most of it down his throat. The rest slicked his chin and neck. “Curse you, Terelta!”

I didn’t care. I was already dragging the untouched dirt from beneath the char.

Of all the battlefields for a mudmage to find himself on, a furrowed field is perhaps the most advantageous. Pillar-like tendrils rose and formed fists and blades. I almost laughed aloud as swathes of earth lifted under Redeye’s power. Serisi emerged from me, and I weaved her twin swords of dirt and pebbles.

“For Texoc!” I roared.

Fire clashed against earth in an explosion of smoke and hot dust. I was glad I still wore the Lostriver visor. Ash and choking sulphur whipped at us. While the Cloudriders rained sharp and vicious objects, even charging Maldorinil with spears, we hurled our magic against him in waves of blunt force.

The wizard was powerful, I had to admit. For every spell I threw, from tendrils to shields, he forged the same out of fire. The savage flames couldn’t burn our spells save for scattering molten sandglass in all directions, but the force of them put an ache in my arms and a pounding in my head. I saw Redeye recoiling from the heat before long. The fire didn’t seem to touch me in the same way. If anything, Serisi relished the heat. In her construct form, she swiped at reaching claws of fire with her earthen swords.

Vole hovered at our back, shrieking with every step closer Maldorinil came. The now spinning column of fire that dominated the syca grove travelled with the wizard.

“Kill the fire and you can kill him! He draws their magic straight from the flames, just as you do from dirt!” Serisi snarled at me.

Redeye followed my lead as I heaped wave after wave on the demon. There was none of the finesse that Redeye had badgered me about, but war is dire and filthy. There are few rules.

The wind changed for us, blowing hard in our favour. Flames died to smoke as we buried the bastard spell by spell. Lancewings dared to strike closer and closer until Maldorinil cowered. The fire did not shine white and gold as it had, but a deep crimson, shrinking back around his skeletal form.

“I’ll take his flames from him,” I growled, surging forwards.

Redeye tried to grab at me with both muscle and magic, but I escaped him. “Tarko!”

Keeping a shield of earth and the dirt-made demon at my back, I marched to meet the demon head-on. Maldorinil towered over me. I had seen only Faraganthar reach such a height. Serisi’s form had to stretch to match him.

“Maldorinil!” Serisi spoke the demon’s name. “Your doom awaits you!”

“The worm and the traitor!” I heard the wizard yell in demonspeak. “Long have I waited to cross paths with you both.”

“Then today is your unlucky day, demon!” I bellowed before I reached for the fire that coursed across his skin and drew circles around his limbs. My earth shield faded as I threw two hands behind the effort. Only Serisi and Redeye kept the fire at bay as I fought to control the flames.

“Bah!” Maldorinil boomed.

“What are you doing, Tarko?” Redeye’s shout failed to stop me. As did Pelikai’s.

“Tarko! Not now, curse it!”

I would show them all how wrong they were. As I let calm die and fierce resolve fill me, I watched the flames burning on the wizard’s shoulders lean towards me. Within moments, Maldorinil’s fire shook around him. In the gust of a gale, I felt the heat surge around me.

“It’s working!”

But I was lying to myself. I did not notice my error, nor the fire that was rising again, shrugging aside Redeye’s onslaught. Maldorinil boomed with mocking laughter as the flames encircling him shone white-hot once more.

Serisi saw the truth. “It is doing quite the opposite, Tarko!”

My hands fell, and my horror grew as Maldorinil stretched tall over Serisi and me. I saw other faces hiding in the fire beside him. Other demons waiting to strike.

Serisi knew exactly what to do. “Sword!” she yelled.

I dragged two mountains of earth to me and hammered Maldorinil from either side to buy me a heartbeat or two and throw the sword to Serisi. Driven by earth and magic and murderous demonic intent, the silver sword hurtled through the air in a wide arc and collided just below the spines of Maldorinil’s misplaced jaw. I felt the impact reverberate through my magic moments before the inferno exploded. As the demon’s skull broke from his neck, a wall of flame split the highfield in two. Riders scattered in every direction. The fire would have consumed me had I not managed to throw up a hasty shield spell.

Serisi's sword had been thrown beside me. As soon as I seized its handle, I felt the earth beneath my feet crumble away with a stomach-churning jolt. Before the field gave way, I felt Redeye seize my arm in time for Vole to grab me in his claws and pull us to safety. Fire burned on the sorcer's cloak and on the cloth of my sleeve beneath the armour. Redeye was batting at flames on his chest with one hand as we flew. Vole did the only thing that made any sense and dunked us straight in the marsh.

I surfaced coughing and in searing pain from the touch of the water. It refused to die no matter how hard I wiped at my face. The fire, at least, was out. Only a burned patch remained on my armour. The Cloudrider visor fell from my head in pieces as I struggled upright.

Redeye had fared worse. His cloak was singed to a crisp. A portion of his dark hair was missing, and his gloves were burned husks. He sat steaming in the marsh-water with his face a frozen grimace.

"That didn't go as I thought it would," he grunted.

I had barely hauled myself out of the water when a spray drenched me from the lancewings landing around us. With deep cracks and dull moans, the highfields were coming apart and collapsing piece by piece. Through a faded patch of smoke, I watched the white pine crumble in half. Its fall shuddered the earth.

Vole landed nearby and prodded me harshly with his beak. Old Pel was striding across the marsh with the water receding from wherever he stepped.

"What in the Six Hells was that, Tarko?" he yelled. I had never seen him so incensed.

How dare he talk to us like that?

"Killed a demon wizard is what I did, Pel, correct me if I'm wrong!"

Pel seized me by the collar and hauled me upright.

"You almost killed yourself and the rest of us by fuelling that demon like you did!" he said, glowing blue eyes searching my face.

With a demon's rage, I shrugged him away. "Fuelled it? What are you on about, old man?"

Eztaral appeared at Pel's side, half of her armour black with char. "I told you he would try if you didn't help him, did I not, Pel? And now look what's happened!"

Caraq's lancewing buffeted us with her wind. The top of her spear was broken. "What is the meaning of this, Scions?"

I could feel Serisi coming to the surface as if to fight. "Yes, educate us please," I growled, straining against the impulse to say more.

Pelikai's hands clawed at the skin of his scarred head. "You've been trying to master the wrong order, Tarko! You think you can control fire, when in fact, you somehow have an ability to wield the order of air. I hardly believe it myself, but it is true."

"What?" Ralish and Redeye chorused.

I stared at my red-dyed hands. "What did you say?"

"You fanned the demon's flames with an air carving spell, Tarko!"

"You all saw it," Eztaral growled.

My mind swirled. “Air? But... why didn’t you tell me, Pel?” I demanded.

“Because I promised your mother I would keep you safe, that’s why, lad!” Pel snapped. He pointed a finger at the marks on my neck. His voice ran low and dangerous. “Every time you use your magic, that blight on you grows. I know you want to ignore it for the sake of defeating Haidak, but what would it cost you to master a higher order of magic? You say it is the nectra, yet Serisi is already taking more of you, day by day. I endangered you once, and I will not let it happen again. Your mother has already lost one son. She doesn’t need to lose another. Neither do I. I’ve seen enough Tereltas die.”

I do not remember giving this blind sorcer any reason to doubt me.

I was not listening to the demon. Blue ran through my veins as I remembered Texoc.

Eztaral put her hand on the sorcer’s shoulder. “You do not have a choice, Pelikai.”

Pel pushed the eagleborn back. “And you should worry more about Tarko and a little less about this war, Eztaral. You gamble with his life for your own needs. Just as you did in Shal Gara.”

Eztaral whacked her sword against her breastplate and pointed it at me. “I told you I would make him a weapon, and he has become more than you have ever thought. I will not stop now.”

“It will kill him! Just like it might have killed Kī Raxa, if it’s true she too had a demon in her head.”

“And I would expect any one of us to give their lives in this war!” bellowed Eztaral, face inches from Pel’s. “Any one of us, if that is what it takes to keep our vow and save the Swathe. I hold myself to the very same standards. Don’t you dare doubt it.”

Pel shook his head, wordless.

“Do I have any say in this?” I yelled. “This is my burden, not any of yours. I am tired of having my fate decided for me. My mother was wise enough to believe in Serisi and me. You all should too.”

A shriek from Caraq’s lancewing put a stop to our bickering. “There will be time for such talk later, Tarko! The hunt is not over.”

Daggerthorn and Ogarosh swooped out of the thick smoke and into our circle. The fire shone on his lancewing’s golden throat. “Other demons were in the fire. Navik creatures, too. They are escaping!” Ogarosh yelled.

I caught Ralish’s stare. A burn reddened her left cheek. She narrowed one eye at me as she guessed the clockwork that was churning in my skull.

We do not need their worry, Tarko of the Swathe. Together we are better than them. We should show them what a weapon truly looks like. Prove their doubt wrong.

Serisi was right.

Without a word, I darted for Vole, seized his saddle, and swung myself onto his back. The lancewing didn’t pause to question me, instead darting away at his usual breakneck pace and spattering muddy water across Eztaral and Pel.

“Tarko!”

21

THE ROOTS OF AZCALAN

It might surprise you, Sister, to hear I am but one of only three temachs in this entire sapling. These people seem too lazy to grow and breed as we must in the east. They care nothing for the thousands already ash on the breeze. Half do not understand the Bloodlaws or the Sorcer's Edict, and the rest flat-out refuse to consider them. They worship the old spirits of the mountains instead of the Three. Their sages scoff at the threat of the demons and tell me to leave. If they will not listen, I fear Dorla Sel will need to send warriors to convince them instead of fourth-born like me.

FROM AN ANONYMOUS LETTER SENT TO DORLA SEL FROM GORA KARA IN 1286

Beyond the conflagration spreading through the highfield wreckage and drier sections of the marshes, demons escaped into the loam. They were mere flashing points of light between the thick and choking smoke, but I set my squinting eyes on one and steered Vole towards it.

There was no outrunning Volechaser. My lancewing pounced, fanning the flames of an escaping demon. But when they blew out, leaving only a brawny navik holding a smoking torch, I realised there was mischief at work.

A ruse! They seek to escape through slippery tricks. Cowards.

"Gods!" I despatched the navik with a slingstone to the skull, and chased the next glimmer of fire I spotted between the shadows of syca trees. As Vole closed the distance at frightening speed, more navik tried to leap for us through the smoke. Vole batted one into the hazy abyss with a swipe of his wing and a damning shriek.

The next fire was yet another navik. This one and another stabbed at us with spears before I crushed them with dirt.

I started to question my choices upon discovering the third escaping fire was also a diversion. Vole raced back and forth between the trees, growing angry and frustrated. It was only when the lancewing soared into the highest stretch of canopy and began to tear around in circles that we glimpsed another shine of fire in the smoke. There were three this time, close-knit and fleeing north. Three demons. I had fought worse. With a stone in my sling and my sword close at hand, I prepared myself for a fight.

In the moment that Vole's wings stirred the smoke into spirals, the lights vanished into the undergrowth.

They suppress their fire, Tarko. Keep watch.

With a tap from my foot, Vole swivelled in mid-air, chirruping loudly. Fire burst into my life behind me. A demon wielding an enormous sword of flames leaped from the bushes, aiming to cut us in two. Had I not been on Vole's back, it might have succeeded.

The moments stretched into stillness as Vole shifted to the side effortlessly. The sword missed him by a hand's width and slammed into the loam instead. I hurled an iron slingstone before the demon could haul it free. My shot struck the demon in the back of the skull and exploded from its face. He hit the earth with a hiss of quenched fire and steam. I grinned with pleasure.

Do we not need one alive, Tarko?

"They deserve it!"

Another demon, a skinny runt of a creature, came bursting from the ferns swinging a chain and ball around its head. Vole took this one before I had a chance to reload. The demon unleashed its chain, but Vole was already out of reach and looping behind it. He dove sharply, piercing the demon through its neck with his spear of a beak. A wing crushed the demon against a tree stump, long enough for me to sling another iron ball, striking in the place where a heart should have been.

Tarko!

"We still have one!"

The last light flared as it fled me. Vole tore after it, but yet again it disappeared moments before the lancewing could catch it. No trail of smoke nor sulphur hung in the air. No fire that I could see, only a gaping hole in the earth. At first I thought it a crater between the ferns, but it sloped downwards under the roots of the forest and further north. A faint light of fire receded into its depths.

"What in the Hells is this? Do demons burrow?" I yelled, trapped by the hesitance of the dark and the deep.

When it suits us. We built great mines to pry the metal from the rock. We tunnel beneath the walls of enemies that do not live in impossibly large trees.

"Speaking of..." I said to my demon as Vole rose up into the branches. More lights speckled the haze, glinting off sprawling marshes dominated by the shadow of a crooked bloodwood. I knew most bloodwoods to grow straight until their crown split, but this one bent in the middle like a crone's spine.

What will you do?

"We need ourselves a demon, and if it means going underground then so be it," I said with a dry throat.

Alone?

"I have you, don't I?"

I cannot fault you for your boldness. It is far from wise.

"But it is necessary," I replied, shortly before the sound of wings roared past me.

Ralish and Thundertail skidded through the air to alight on a branch. "There you bloody are!" she yelled at me.

"Where are the rest of the Scions?"

“Somewhere behind me, lost in the smoke.”

“Good,” I said while I loaded another iron pellet into my sling.

“What in the Six Hells are you doin’?”

“Catching a demon. One escaped into this tunnel. The others can argue all they want. I have justice to serve,” I said.

“Alone? Well, you can think again,” snapped Ralish as she steered her lancewing down to the loam and jumped from her saddle. The squelch was audible. “You coming or not? I know you won’t wait for the others.”

“You’re not fighting me on this?”

“Eztaral can use you if she wants. Redeye and Pel can doubt you. Atalawe is just... herself. But me? I believe in you. I’ve also learned you’re as stubborn as a louse, and I know there’s no stoppin’ you. Whether it’s arrogance or vengeance or just the need to prove yourself that you’re chasin’, I’m not sure, but I’ll make sure you don’t kill yourself doin’ it. For the Swathe, of course.”

“I...,” I began to say.

“I know,” she said, brushing past me and tapping an arrow to her bow.

The tunnel dripped with dark intention. Both in beads of water seeping from moss on its shadowed ceiling, and in the thick gloom that stuck close like unwanted cloaks. Even when we found torches burning atop broken spears, the dark pawed at us. There was no sign of our prey. Only a faint smoke hung in the air alongside the stink of demon. Once more, I felt pinched by the earth. Unnaturally squeezed and short on breath. I kept my magic close at hand, simmering beneath my surface.

The passage stretched on, weaving back and forth to give us corners to poke cautiously around. Every time, I expected the face of a demon, cornered and trapped. Every time, my expectations were cheated. Only more dreaded tunnel and the mischievous dancing shadows of beams and torches.

I felt as if we walked a mile before the tunnel’s earthen walls transformed into pale pink wood. Ralish ran her hand along it.

“Bloodwood root,” she said. “And it don’t look healthy either.”

We followed the root further into the dark. We did not get far until we heard the voices. A whispering that stood the hairs of my arm on end.

Cages interrupted the dirt wall. Black bars of ironpith locked away dozens if not scores of people beneath the earth. By the looks of the ribs poking through ripped clothes and their hollow eyes, they had been starved. Some came to the bars to stare at us. Some reached for us with pale, cadaverous hands. They bore only mumbled words for us, none of which made sense. I reached for a man’s hand, tattooed with workers’ nails like my own. I shuddered at how limp it was.

“Who’s done this to you?” I asked, while Ralish poked at the lock to his cage.

They look like they are cursed or diseased, Tarko. Do not let them touch you.

“Our lord and master,” the man whispered.

“Is there no matriarch in Azcalan?”

The man showed me his teeth. “There was. She met the face of chaos.” He waved a hand to a gaunt and shivering figure at the rear of the cage, huddled into the wall, lips moving without sound. Both eyes had been clawed from her skull. Scarred black pits remained.

Another fellow twitched at us. A man with the white hands of an air carver. “As we all did.”

Ralish paused. I let go of the hand. “What?”

“Glory to the Iron Icon,” they began to whisper.

They are traitors.

“They’re... Fireborn,” I muttered.

“Glory. Glory. Glory,” came the slow and sibilant chant.

“They sound like they’ve been hit on the head with a hammer,” muttered Ralish.

Such is the feeling of looking upon the Iron Icon and the God of Chaos himself, but how?

I knew the answer lay ahead of us, and though it clenched my stomach to go ever deeper, sure enough, after three more corners, the tunnel reached a balcony overlooking a cavern. The roots of the bloodwood filled the space. Scaffolding of wood and rope wrapped around them. Hundreds of workers moved about the walkways, painting a yellow slop onto the faded roots. They moved as if they were sleepwalking.

What is wrong with this tree?

At the centre of the cavern, where the colossal column of a heart root burrowed into the earth, fires burned and an acrid smoke eked. Crowds of red-cloaked figures watched over a long and skinny line of people. Others were constantly being added to the rear, and the wise ones joined quietly. Those who hesitated or complained were shoved by more wearing crimson. I looked around for any sign of the red stone mask of a Fireborn lord, or scarlet hair, but these were Fireborn I didn’t recognise.

“Is the whole bloodwood under the thumb of the Fireborn?” whispered Ralish.

“Three Gods, I’m sure I don’t want to know the truth. We only came for a demon.”

One by one, the citizens were guided to a hall hollowed between the tangled roots. Its doorway shone with fire. Thin veils of spiderthread wafted across it. A huge demon, wrapped in a clouds of smoke, perched above the door, watching.

Bathnarok.

“Who?” Ralish asked me as I echoed Serisi.

“The demon that escaped us near Mulchport,” I told her.

And led us into a nest of tharantos.

Another streak of fire appeared below us. It was a wiry demon with long tresses of black smoke. It carried a long hammer on its shoulder.

“*Ashin raskaa. Kartesh bero shrugok gra corin okka!*” it called out.

“What is it saying?” Ralish whispered.

“He’s talking about us. ‘The rest are dead. Killed by the wretch of the fallen city.’ And don’t ask me how I know that. I’m still confused by it.”

As am I.

“Shrugek mira gak kastar dathiez vot!” Bathnarok boomed. *“Ash toria nix bakar kavi gra resh kastar farathar.”*

“Then the wretch will meet his end at last. I do not care for what the fire-haired worm wants.”

“Haidak.”

“I would imagine so,” I murmured.

Half the queue began to shuffle as if they regretted whatever decision had led them into this cavern. A Fireborn without his lizard mask held up his hands and bared a smile so large I could count every one of his teeth even at that distance.

“All is well! All is well. Remember they are our benevolent masters. Kind and fiercely protective. You will see the truth soon.” His drivel continued much like that until calm was restored. One woman who had just arrived wore a deeply concerned frown and eyes wide as moons.

Bathnarok stepped from his perch to fall to the ground. I felt the reverberation of his landing through my ribs. The demon barely bent a knee as he struck the dirt. A sword of flame grew from his fist, reaching out under the demon’s throat. *“Brakoth ashi.”*

“Find him,” I hissed, watching the two demons stalk into separate tunnels.

“Why are these citizens willingly acceptin’ this heap of orokan shit?”

“Some Fireborn lies, I imagine.”

The veils of the hall shifted as a citizen was led from its firelight and down into adjoining tunnels. They smiled almost drunkenly as they were taken away.

“More important, what are they doin’ to them? Torture? Herbs? Magic?”

“I think we need to find out. Who knows how long they’ve been at this and how many of these people have already fallen to this spell?” I looked up to the roof of the cavern. “What if this whole bloodwood is Fireborn?”

Ralish ran her fingers through the feathers of an arrow. “Atalawe did say Azcalan was poisoned. Maybe she just didn’t realise in which way,” she sighed. “This is no longer merely a hunt, is it?”

“Doesn’t look like it,” I muttered.

“Hmph. I should’ve brought more arrows,” said Ralish. “What’s the plan then, Tarko?”

“We need to know what’s in that hall, but there are far too many to fight, even for us—”

For you, perhaps.

“—I say we take two red robes and go see for ourselves in the covert way.”

“That’ll do.” She pointed an arrow past my face to where two Fireborn guarded another tunnel.

I gripped my sling and gave a silent nod. A smile forced its way across my face.

“What are you grinning at?”

“Nothing. Just a far cry from when we first met in mines like these.”

“When everythin’ was much simpler,” Ralish whispered. “And tedious.”

The smoke lingering in the cavern was our willing ally, and thanks to its haze, the Fireborn never saw us coming. One got an arrow in the back of the neck, and the other a slingstone that caved in the back of his skull. After dragging the bodies into a nook, we took their cloaks and masks, wiping what blood we could from them. Thankfully the scarlet cloth did a fine work of hiding the stains.

Taking up one of the abandoned spears, I followed the path to where the hall's mouth yawned. Fortunately for us, Bathnarok and the other demon had stormed back into the tunnels. It was only the other Fireborn that we watched between the slits of our masks.

What is that stench?

Serisi was not wrong: whomever I'd killed for the mask had foul breath when he'd been alive. Not only was the jade mask sweaty and heavy, but it reeked of pipe-leaf and rotten teeth. It didn't help that the tension of hiding amongst those I hated to a murderous degree made my heart race and my breathing hasty. I tried to breathe through my mouth as we drew close to a Fireborn. He struck his spear on the ground three times at our passing. I did the same, and luckily no words were traded.

The thin spiderthread veils of the hall reached for us as we approached its steps. Two more Fireborn stood guard at the doorway. Another was escorting a teary-eyed woman out of the hall. She was gibbering so rapidly I wasn't sure where one word started and another began.

"Another for the cages," muttered one of the Fireborn as we passed. He seemed deeply bored of his post, as if their dastardly activities weren't dastardly enough.

The one standing opposite tutted as if it were a heated issue. "They're gettin' too full if you ask me. Mess and shit everywhere."

"Still more to come. This half-dead bloodwood's got more fools clinging to it than Baran thought. Already got enough if you ask me."

I flinched at the name, almost turning to stare, but Ralish nudged me onward.

"But nobody's askin' you, are they?"

We left the men to their grumbling and entered the hall. The swampy heat was stifling, catching in my throat. Piles of ash burned along the edges of the hall. Braziers crackled, and whatever they burned was sulphurous and stung my throat. What put a heavy weight in my stomach was who we shared the hall with.

Spread across every stone tile of the floor were people lying prostrated with their faces down and arms out sideways and palms up. So prostrate, in fact, I thought they were dead. There must have been a hundred of them spread across the hall, each dressed in a crimson robe. A rough path wandered through their comatose numbers. I spied the wideness of Ralish's eyes through the slits in her mask.

Navik worship the Iron Icon in such ways, Serisi told me. That did little to calm the unease in my gut.

A godseer draped in red feathers presided over the end of the hall. His head was bowed, his arms raised, and body rocked back and forth. A stone altar sat before him, and a basin hollowed

out of its top held a shimmering liquid I recognised immediately. It was nectra, though with swirls of black that tainted it a muddy purple.

That is demon blood mixed in the nectra, said Serisi. That is how the Last Clan opens each doorway to another world: with rivers of blood and fire. In centuries past, we sacrificed hundreds of prisoners. This time, we were forced to use our own kin. Demon after demon was sacrificed. Even those of more ancient, more powerful demons. Royal blood is far more powerful. My father could have opened the doorway much easier, but the king refused.

The citizen was being shepherded towards the altar. The feather-wrapped godseer lifted his head, and I saw that his eyes were as red as flame itself, with veins as black as mine spread across his face. Heavy silver rings hung from pierced ears, cheekbone, and jaw. Blood or paint stained his lips scarlet.

“Come closer, child,” he rasped. “Feel the gaze of the one true god.”

The citizen, a worker just as we were, hesitated. The Fireborn escorting her was more than persuasive, shoving her to her knees so that she emitted a whimper.

“I changed my mind,” she tried to say, but a kick silenced her.

Ralish and I watched from afar as the worker was forced to lean towards the nectra. The godseer circled his hands over the bowl. A flame burned beside him in a dish, and with a taper, he borrowed the flame to touch it to the spoiled nectra. The liquid took on a roiling flame that burned blue and orange.

Demonfire, whispered Serisi as the braziers of the hall grew darker, as if doused by a rushing wind all at once. I felt nothing on my skin except for a creeping chill.

The nectra began to move. Not merely in circles around the bowl, but rising up in a flat disk as if the godseer was a water weaver working a spell.

The water turned blacker than any midnight. Fire brimmed its edges as the citizen was forced closer. The obsidian of the water was reflected in her eyes. A ripple of air expanded from the ring with a hot wind that somehow chilled me. In the pitch black of the nectra, I saw the liquid fall away into depths unknowable. I glimpsed a void above a plain of red dust. Flames burned in the darkness, etching reaching claws. A face of horns loomed. Larger than imagination, it stretched across the void towards the ring of flames.

There are times that fear overcomes a person, when it grips like a trap snapping shut. I was caught in such jaws in that moment. The scholars say it is a gift from the gods, born in times before humanity climbed the bloodwoods. An overwhelming desire to flee or fight, they say, and I was driven to that choice in that moment. A deep dread penetrated every fibre of my being. I had to hold myself back from sprinting from that chamber.

Look away, Tarko.

“What?”

Look away! You stare at the face of chaos itself!

I turned Ralish’s head as I turned mine, breaking her avid staring and making her flinch so much that she raised a fist at me.

I saw now why the other Fireborn turned away also. The worker started to convulse. She strained, teeth bared. A single tear of blood trickled down her left cheek before the flaming nectra died an abrupt death.

“Got a bleeder, have we?” tutted the Fireborn as he thumped the now dazed worker in the face with a stained rag. The godseer wiped his hands as he muttered something that sounded vaguely like demonspeak.

This is a spell of dark magic if I have ever seen one. That was a window into the Starless Plains, where the Iron Icon waits. I have not seen the Last Clan perform such a feat before. My kin must have found a way to combine your nectra with the Iron Icon’s magic and the power of demon blood. To see the face of the God of Chaos... I felt Serisi shudder. It quite literally breaks a mind as feeble as a worm’s. They are turning their minds to dust and making clueless slaves. We cannot let them continue.

I wholeheartedly agreed.

“Off we go,” the Fireborn ordered, prodding the worker onwards with little care for the way she stumbled down the steps.

“You two,” shouted the godseer. The abrupt noise caused us to flinch, and I couldn’t look into his eyes without seeing the flames of the Iron Icon reflected. I tried to shrug the fear away, but it stuck to me like sap.

“You do not belong. You.” A finger with nails so long they curled in on themselves reached for me. “You are cursed with knowledge. You already know the face of the God of Chaos.”

That got the Fireborn’s attention. I banged my spear three times as I had before, but whatever that meant, it counted for nothing now.

The bleeding worker was pushed to the floor to convulse. The Fireborn levelled his spear at us. “Who are you? Speak!”

The silence reigned far too long for my liking. I could feel Ralish slowly turning to look at me.

“Erm. Just two lowly Fireborn, no different from you. Merely doing the usual... er, Fireborn things,” I blurted at the Fireborn.

Are you... are you quite serious, Tarko? Void. You always have been an awful liar.

Unsurprisingly, my excuse did not seem to work. Perhaps because we were already treading towards the exit.

“Show me your faces!” the Fireborn ordered.

Kill her, Tarko, before she calls for the others!

It was as if Ralish had heard Serisi roaring in my head. An arrow punctured the Fireborn in the chest, but she fell writhing and moaning far too loudly.

“By the loam!” Ralish snarled as she stretched to put another arrow in her.

It never reached its target, instead lodging in the head of one of the worshippers as they arose. He was not the only one. At a sharp hiss from the godseer, every worshipping citizen lifted from their slug-like posture and stood tall. As one, the horde turned to face us.

“Tarko?” said Ralish. “Time to prove yourself!”

I already saw the opening between me and the godseer. I whipped the sling from my belt and did what came naturally. The iron ball scored a line in a citizen’s forehead before lodging in the godseer’s face. The man catapulted backwards and fell from his seat, dead as Azcalan’s roots.

“That’ll do!” Ralish yelled.

The godseer’s death slowed the horde of mind-melted citizens long enough for us to make our escape.

“Shall we?” Ralish said.

“A great idea!”

And so we ran, weaving between the veils that sought to strangle us. Several worshippers had recovered from their shock at the godseer’s death and began to paw at us. Their weak hands snagged at my stolen cloak in an effort to drag us down. We had to shove them roughly to keep them from swarming us.

“Glory. Glory. Glory!” they began to chant.

Ralish punched one woman straight in the face as she tried to cling to her leg. I hurled a brazier into the middle of the mob, catching several on fire and finally eliciting some noise from the ghouls. It gave us a precious moment to hurtle for the doorway and straight into the faces of three bewildered Fireborn. They didn’t seize us, however, but pushed past us.

“What in the loam is happening?” one yelled behind his mask. They froze at the mindless crowd of swarming worshippers. Some ran about aflame while the others all pointed at the doorway and us escapees and united in a scream.

“The godseer and those worshippers have gone mad!” I yelled as we kept moving.

Much better. A fine ploy.

And it seemed to work, too. At least long enough for Ralish and I to run from the dreadful hall. We were aiming for the tunnel and our waiting lancewings, and all manner of escape, when we saw the demons returning.

“This way.” I tugged Ralish up the slope of the cavern, to where stairwells had been carved around a thinner root.

It took an inordinate amount of willpower not to fight the Fireborn that got in our way. We clung to our disguises instead and made it look we were running news to somebody above. But shouts were already catching attention. Smoke had begun to pour from the hall alongside dazed and smouldering worshippers. The demons had begun to run.

Ralish and I were almost beyond the cavern when a Fireborn with a spiked mask and a tall spear stopped us in our tracks. He looked like a higher rank than the two lumps either side of him.

“You there! What’s the hurry? What’s happening below?”

I fed them the same lies, but the Fireborn shook his head.

“Why you running the opposite way?”

“To warn Lord Baran?” I said, my voice reaching high.

The Fireborn swapped glances. “Lord Baran is not in Azcalan.”

Ralish and I took a ponderous step backwards as the Fireborn lowered their spears.

May I? Serisi sighed in my head. *You have lost it again.*

I tutted. “Fine,” I said, already sliding into the shadows of my own mind. I felt my hand reach for Serisi’s sword. “Ralish, stand behind me.”

She did not question me.

*

“Fine what?” the Fireborn challenged me as he started to lower his spear. “Spit it out!” The worm stared at Serisi with befuddled eyes, and she had no choice but to make use of his hesitation. Before his spear could skewer her, Serisi slipped under his guard and thrust the sword up into the soft part of his jaw.

A kick knocked the spear from the other, buying time to manoeuvre the twitching worm into the way of the third’s spear. With a yell, Serisi threw the body at him and, while he struggled, sliced across the Fireborn’s belly to open him up.

With only one remaining, Serisi ran him through and threw him from the root, sending him flying into a squirming heap on the tunnel floor.

By the gods. What a mess, said Tarko.

Serisi stared at Ralish, looking her up and down.

“You’re not Tarko right now, are you?”

“I am not.”

“That explains... *that,*” was all she said as she wiped blood from her cheek and stepped over a pool of entrails. Serisi grinned as she gave up Tarko’s body.

*

I opened my eyes to the sound of baying shouts coming from below. A dead body falling from the heavens was a fine way to attract attention and ruin a disguise.

“Stop them!”

“Halt!”

Ralish and I pushed each other ahead in a frantic sprint. We had not escaped yet.