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EXILE

*The first-born shall be the heir.
The second-born the warrior.
The third-born blessed as workers.
The fourth-born owed to the scholars.
The fifth-born to become a healer.
The sixth-born will forever wander.
Those with the gods' gift for the sorcers.
These shall be the seven tribes of the Swathe.*
THE BLOODLAWS, FIRST WRITTEN IN 1236

When hunting a demon, silence was the weapon of choice.

Thin shafts of sunlight broke the ceiling of the canopy, fragile and few. The faintest shift of a leaf or bough above brought the darkness of the loam sweeping. Parrots and waif birds high in the lofty trees continued to trill and cackle, oblivious to the dangers of the gloom below. A horde of bats twirled through the needles of a white pine grove. Their sharp clicks tickled the inside of my skull.

I rubbed my sore eyes, remembering at last to blink. My wearied yet watchful gaze switched back and forth from leaf to leaf, tree to tree, vine to vine. My arse was growing numb again, and I shifted myself on the gnarled branch to keep my legs from following suit. The hours were dragging, and my patience wearing thin like old mosscloth.

I am bored, announced a voice within my head. A demon's voice: haughty and grumbling as per usual.

"I know you're bored, Serisi," I breathed. "You've told me about fifty times."

The demon huffed. *Are you not?*

"No," I lied. The weeks in the loam had been longer than any of us had expected. The task of hunting the surviving demons of Shal Gara's war more arduous than we could have imagined.

I feel the deadness in your muscles, sense your wandering mind. You must be bored.

“It’s called patience, you irascible beast. Eztaral’s still in charge of the Scions of the Sixth-Born. She told us to lie in wait, and that’s precisely what we’re going to do.”

These are worm tactics. We have not had a good fight in a week.

“It’s not my fault our prey has learned to scuttle and creep about the loam, is it?”

They move like cowards. Now so do we, Tarko.

“Nothing cowardly about setting a trap for your enemy, demon.”

A twig snapped, twisting my head to the left. I tightened my grip around the spear I held parallel to the branch. The end of a twisted vine rope lay in my other hand. Its slack length reached up into the foliage. I sniffed, scenting nothing but the mulch of the wet loam beneath me.

With a sigh, I turned my head back to the patterned sky, where only a rift of blue could be seen amidst the tangled trees. Where the leaves didn’t compete for light, I was given a scant view of the treetops rising towards the west and north. There was a haze of late longsun heat in that distance, but I could still spy the faint golden crown of a faraway bloodwood. To the east, however, there was a rift in the forest that had once not been so empty.

The demons’ invasion had turned a strip of Swathe into a wasteland scarred with the remnants of their wildfire. The forest had already started to reclaim the earth, as though it wanted to erase the wounds of the demons just as much as we did. Yet it would take time. The black tips of burned treetops still poked above greener foliage. The pockmark of Shal Gara’s fall still remained: a dent in the Swathe carved by the toppling of a bloodwood I had once called home. That was one wound that would never heal.

Serisi had noticed the direction of my gaze. *You think too much of your old tree, Tarko. When will you forget those worms? They exiled us. They turned their ungrateful backs on us despite the sacrifices we made to defeat my father and save their miserable lives.* The demon paused, tapping her fangs together in the shadows of my mind. *Well... most of their miserable lives.*

“I wasn’t thinking about them,” I replied. “You know everything I need is here in the loam. The Scions and the Swathe are my home now.”

Then why do you still stare and sigh? Do you think I do not notice? You still blame yourself for its fall, I think.

“How many times do I have to tell you? I don’t blame myself. Shal Gara and the Swathe would have suffered a worse fate without us. They didn’t want our help, and that is fine. The rest of the Swathe will thank us instead,” I asserted, words I had rehearsed many times. “I stare because it reminds me what we’re doing out here and how much it matters. That two dead bloodwoods is two too many, and there are those who still need to be brought to justice for Shal Gara’s fall. Those who would see the same fire consume the rest of the Swathe, if given the chance. Keeps me from waning on long days like today.”

Shal Gara will realise its mistake one day.

Another rustle stole our attention. A shape was moving through the undergrowth. I shuffled a foot beneath me, ready to pounce, but it was a false alarm. Nothing but a snuffling quillhog, fattened on ticabo berries, judging by the blue and purple stains on his snout. He came waddling

through the undergrowth, grunting with every purposeful step as if he had some urgent business elsewhere.

I watched the plump swine idly amble through the tangle of undergrowth beneath my tree. When he was almost lost to sight amidst the ferns, I saw him pause and raise his tusks. He snorted at the air, head bobbing up and down. A ripple washed through his coat of sharp spines. I tasted the forest again as the quillhog did. There it was: a familiar stink of charcoal, like that of a campfire in the near distance. It caused a shiver to run across my shoulders.

I can smell them on the breeze, Tarko.

There came a faint crunch of dead leaves in the undergrowth. The hog began to tread backwards. With a finger, I lifted my hood and looked beyond the end of my branch to another tree. A similarly hooded shape crouched motionless in the shadow of the trunk, almost invisible in the brown and green cloak it was wrapped in. To the untrained eye, the figure might as well have been a protrusion of bark or a broken branch. A similar rope to mine stretched from the figure's hand into the branches above, and I saw it come taut. I pulled my rope tight to wrap around my fist.

As if a storm approached, the birds had ceased their songs. The insects' chittering had fallen still. My heartbeat filled my ears. I felt the demon within me grin in anticipation while the shadows swelled between the ferns.

A squeal split the silence as the quillhog turned tail. A hand of black bone and fiery veins reached from the undergrowth, grazing the quillhog's spines with its sickle claws. The swine fled in terror as a hulking beast burst from the undergrowth and gave chase with a jilted snarl. But the swine was too swift. Too nimble.

"*Gak dathiez!*" cursed a deep voice not of any human's making. Angry fire burst into life across the demon's spiked shoulders. He must have reared nine feet tall, and the smoke that emanated from his burned and stony hide swirled like a cloak around his form. Undergrowth withered grey and wilted to ash before its flames.

Every muscle in my body tensed, ready to pounce, but I held myself firm as star-iron until the demon had taken several more pounding steps after its prey. Birds and bats scattered above us, shrieking at the appearance of the monster.

"Now!" came a cry from the opposite tree. The camouflaged shape of Atalawe leaped from the branch and I heard the creak of her rope as it caught her weight. Without a thought, I did the same and hurled myself from the tree. With my obsidian-tipped spear held out straight, my rope jerked against my shoulder and yanked me into a rapid swing, heading straight for the demon.

The bastard creature realised the trap far too late. He spotted Atalawe and reached a hasty claw for her, but he failed to see me. I was closer, and with a yell tearing from my throat, my spear punched a hole in the demon's antlered skull and ran him straight through. I had to dodge when Atalawe's obsidian came bursting through his neck with a flash of flame. Impaled by our two spears, the demon was doomed. His inner fire stuttered as glowing ochre dribbled blood from his fangs. With a whine, our foe tumbled to the loam to sizzle in the muck.

Atalawe and I dangled from our ropes for a moment before falling with a squelch at the demon's side. We barely had time to grin at our victory. Two sharp blasts of a whistle came from another tree behind us. An urgent warning from Redeye.

My head whipped around as a second demon emerged from the undergrowth where the first had appeared. This specimen was taller, broader, and had a black iron hook of a sword clenched in his hands.

"Three Gods!" Atalawe yelled as she dove for cover. The mud was cloying, dragging at our feet and trying to steal our leafleather boots while we dodged the swings of the demon's blade.

When enough distance lay between me and the demon, I turned to stand my ground. Feeling my own demon snarl alongside me, I spread my hands to clutch at the mud. It took a mere moment to still my heart and concentrate.

With a clench of my hand, the mudmage magic within me unfurled. I seized a clod of muck and wrenched it from the ground. I brought it rushing to me and swung it into the demon's face with the force and weight of a boulder. The water in the mud made the demon's hide sizzle, scarring the left side of his jaw.

I had hoped that would be enough, but this brute was stronger than expected. The demon slowly turned his head and clicked his jaw back into place. I could feel his deep growl in my chest.

"Traitor," he spat in the tongue of the Swathe. Though his flaming eyes bored into mine, he did not speak to me, but to the demon within. "King-killer! Heretic! Betrayer to your kin!"

I snorted, answering with words that were not my own. "You follow lies, Bathnarok! The Iron Icon wants nothing but death for the Last Clan. I have seen it! Open your eyes."

"The Iron Icon will peel your spine from your puny body for such words."

A spear came flying past my head to the sound of Atalawe's yell. The demon swiped it aside with an indifferent blade. I pulled my hands inwards and two tendrils of dirt rose from the loam to hammer the demon from either side. No matter how Bathnarok hacked at them, my spells kept pressing until he was forced to a knee with a roar.

Bathnarok showed black fangs as he laughed at us. "The Iron Icon knows your name, Serisianathiel, daughter of Faraganthar," he crowed, seeming proud of himself. "The God of Chaos has cursed you and your worm. Your fate will be one of pain and punishment, and he will exact the toll of his vengeance with his own claws. You are a traitor amongst traitors, Serisianathiel! Fitting, considering your own betrayal will come at the hands of ones you trust!"

Neither of us gave the beast the satisfaction of a reply beyond summoning a spell to crush his skull. Bathnarok ducked my attack and hurled his sword at us in retaliation. I had to throw myself flat to avoid its cleaving blade.

I scrambled upright, hands ready with a shield of dirt. Flames spiralled around the demon's arms and wreathed his antlers. I threw out a clawed hand, abandoning my mudmage spells and trying to seize the demon's fire instead.

Not now, Tarko! Serisi howled in my head.

It worked. For a thin splinter of a moment, I could have sworn the flames bent to my grasp.

The demon fought dirty, kicking up a cloud of earth in my face. Yet instead of attacking, Bathnarok let loose a booming howl, turned his spiny back on us, and fled. My hasty dart spells smashed against tree trunks and broke the backs of ferns, only striking glancing blows against its hide as he ran.

“Where is he going?” cried Atalawe.

“You were right, Serisi!” I yelled to the demon. “They are cowards!”

Voices rose from the loam behind us. Other shapes appeared from the mud and undergrowth. Redeye descended from his tree on a platform of earth. I heard the bellow of Eztaral rise above the commotion of thrashing foliage.

“Kill that bastard before he escapes, Tarko!”

I followed the order gladly. After almost two months of hunting the demons that had survived the fall of Shal Gara, we had not lost a battle yet. More than fifty demons and navik dead, and this was the first enemy to run. I sprinted after the craven creature.

With the stink of charcoal in my nose, I chased the demon’s deep tracks. Branches and leaves slapped me in the face as I ran with mad abandon. Spirals of mud spun around my arms, obeying every crook of my finger and eager for a target. Something four-legged dashed beside me. A fleeting glance showed me it was Inwar. The jāgu’s sabre-jaws grinned wide with the heat of the chase. I pelted the ground faster as he easily outpaced me.

The demon suppressed his fire, using the shadows of the loam to his advantage. He zigzagged between trees to lose us, but I could see the saplings and tall bushes thrashing, betraying his path. Bathnarok could not hide. He was the spawn of darkness and dust. I was a child of the forest.

He could, however, distract us.

As I burst from a thick wall of vines ahead of Atalawe, my foot collided with something that wasn’t mud or loam, and I fell rolling head over arse. My ankle burned with pain, and as I looked back to see what had tripped me, I stared into the empty eye sockets of a human skull, half-buried in the dirt. A cold hand clutched my insides.

Tarko..., said Serisi.

Inwar had come to a halt by my side, rumbling deep in his furry chest. His emerald eyes weren’t fixed on me, but over my shoulder. My skin prickled across my arms as I turned around.

Another skull watched us from nearby: a severed head of an orokan yet to be picked completely clean. Broken bones lay scattered around it in no recognisable order. Beyond the skeleton, the barren dirt spread between three crooked ironpith trees, wrapped in a mist coloured orange by the faint light far above. Dead creatures lay rotting at their roots. Not a blade of grass nor leaf grew around their undignified graves, as if the forest was afraid to tread here.

Where is Bathnarok? hissed Serisi.

There was no sign of the demon beyond some wavering foliage on the far side, but I found myself not caring a speck of dust. I was more concerned with the pale, cottony threads of silk that encased the trees, forming webs and hideous, wrapped bundles of gods knew what. Where the demon had escaped, the webs quivered, humming gently. I instinctively cowered.

Why do we not give chase?

Serisi must have felt the blood drain from my cheeks. Felt the chill in the sweat beading my forehead.

Is this bad, Tarko?

“Oh, it’s bad, Serisi. Enormously bad,” I whispered. “It looks like your friend has let us right into a tharantos nest.”

“As much as I would like to teach that demon his lesson, I think it’s best we let this one go and make a slow and steady but immediate bloody exit, don’t you?” Atalawe whispered. I felt her nervous breath on my neck as she pulled me backwards.

I nodded repeatedly. “Couldn’t agree more.”

My calm shattered as the first spined legs reached from a funnel of webs. The face of a nightmare more terrifying than any demon emerged from the gloom. A dozen eyes glowed around hooked and gnashing mandibles. Where whip-like antennae didn’t wiggle, spines sprouted along a black and segmented shell thicker than any armour. Two bristled arms reached towards us. Scissor claws snapped together.

I became rooted to the muck. Demons were a new terror to the Swathe, one that I had already fought and beaten. The tharantos had ruled the darkest parts of the loam with terror for thousands of seasons. They were the first monsters we children of the bloodwoods learned to fear. A mere mention of them could make even the bravest hunters sweat. Only fools and madmen dared to approach their nests. And here was I: standing right in the middle of one. The hero of Shal Gara, frozen like a misplaced statue.

While I wondered what I had done to anger the gods and deserve such bad luck, another section of the webs started to quiver. A second monstrous insect crawled around the tree trunk with a chitinous crackling. If anything, this one was even bigger.

“Forget slow and steady! Run!” Atalawe yelled as she dragged at my arm.

While its mate clambered down the trunk, breaking branch after branch, the nearer tharantos lunged for us with a hissing roar that put the fleeing kind of fear in me. I tried to throw a spell over my shoulder but my magic was slow in coming. I grabbed for the sling at my side instead, already loaded with an iron ball, and hurled it with mad and desperate aim. The iron slingshot punched a hole in the tharantos’ shell and elicited a roar, but it did little to slow it.

Redeye appeared in the bushes ahead of us. His scarlet eyes went wide as platters, but he did not freeze as I had. The sorcer’s red-dyed hands were already at work. I felt the earth lurch beneath my feet. Tharantos claws whined over my head as I threw myself for the bushes. At my feet, a wall of dirt shot from the ground and punched the tharantos straight in its mandibles.

The fort spell bought us seconds only, but plenty enough for me to stand at Redeye’s side and spin my sling into a whining circle. When the tharantos showed its face over the peak of the wall, I took my aim and let the iron ball loose.

The missile moved so quickly the only way I knew I’d hit my mark was the backwards jerk of the tharantos’ head and the hole that appeared above its grotesque mouth, right between two

blinking eyes. Its legs thrashed about violently in its death throes, breaking Redeye's spell in half. We didn't dawdle to watch; another bloodcurdling roar told us the other tharantos was closing in fast. I could feel the thunder of its charge under my feet, and I wagered it wouldn't be best pleased at me killing its mate.

On some occasions, however, it was a fine thing to be wrong, and this was one of those moments.

I had no idea what thoughts – if any besides “eat” and “kill” – went through a tharantos' brain, but it turned out that loyalty and kinship were not values they held dear. Instead of pouncing to avenge the twitching corpse of its mate, the tharantos tore into it with claws and crashing mandibles. We were momentarily forgotten.

“Get running!” called Eztaral, deeper in the undergrowth.

Shards of carapace, dirt, and tharantos blood showered us as we fled. The wet crunching of the feast almost turned my stomach, but I clamped my mouth shut while we ran tight corners around tree roots and through grasping thickets just in case the tharantos changed its mind and wanted our meat instead. There were no words between us, only the sharp panting of our breaths.

I don't know how long we ran for. Nobody called halt. Everybody seemed happy to put as much distance between the tharantos nest and us as possible. So fixated were we on escaping, we didn't notice the clearing until we came tumbling onto its long, warm grass.

I didn't mind. I lay there for a moment, my face in the grass, lungs heaving, legs aflame, happy to be still.

That was until I heard the creak of a bow near my ear. Something cold and sharp tickled my skin. A foot pressed against my back, pinning me to the ground. As I tensed, ready to fight, I heard Serisi sigh within me.

Why is it every time we run, we seem to run straight into more danger, Tarko?

I didn't know, but it was a habit I was ready to put behind me.

2

OLD BLOOD

There're two weapons you should never hunt tharantos without. The first is a dozen big-bows and some gem-eyed archers, and the second is a sharp knife nice and close, so if it all goes to shit and mulch, you can see to yourself before the tharantos can get to you. The latter is a slow death that I'd think twice about wishing on my worst enemy.

FROM A SCROLL FOUND IN AN ABANDONED THARANTOS NEST NEAR DORLA SEL

“Should look where you’re going next time,” muttered a voice above me. Something four-legged and rumbling prowled around me.

I knew that voice all too well. I knew the green and white paws I could see out of my peripheries. Relief surged. Pushing the weight from my back, I rolled in the grass to see Ralish standing behind the bent bow, dressed in grey and copper Scion leafleather, and scowling darkly.

“Bloody idiots. I could’ve shot you,” she chided.

I moved the arrow out of my face for that very reason and watched her smile spread slowly, as though she fought it.

“I’ve seen how you shoot, Ralish,” I said with a grin of my own. “I’m not that worried.”

My cheek earned me a poke in my ribs with her foot, but she also clutched at my hand to help me up. Inwar poked his tongue between his fangs as if he somehow understood the joke.

I hadn’t had the wherewithal to notice during our escape, but Atalawe had led us right back to our camp. At the dead centre of a broad clearing, four pointed tents huddled amidst a grove of white narin trees. Something roasted over the small campfire, or so my nose told me. A wagon stood tilted by the lump of an old orokan by the name of Grumpus, who was – predictably – fast asleep. Birds picked at the fallen narin seeds around his enormous claws and squabbled in harsh song. Beyond, the forest of the Swathe reared up like a cliff-face at the clearing’s edge, where a ring of torches waited to be lit at lastlight. It would not be long in coming. I watched flies drifting alongside blossoms and dust motes in the slanted sunlight, lazy in the day’s last heat.

“Haven’t seen you lot so flustered in a while. What happened with the hunt?” Ralish asked.

“We wandered into a tharantos nest, didn’t we?” I replied, wiping the bucket of sweat from my brow. I had come to learn that sharing my body with a demon caused me to become interminably hot, among other things. I would have complained had it not been for the benefits. Serisi’s strength quivered in my muscles. While Atalawe and Redeye’s chests still heaved with breath, I had almost recovered. I felt ready to escape another nest all over again.

“Tharantos?” Ralish’s flushed cheeks fell pale. “Where?”

“Far behind us, don’t you worry,” Atalawe replied, lying in the grass while Inwar aggressively nuzzled her face. “Thankfully it was more interested in a bigger and easier meal. Never thought I’d be thankful for the concept of cannibalism.”

“You should be thanking my slinging arm,” I whispered. Atalawe rolled her eyes.

“You’re supposed to be huntin’ demons, you know that, right?” said Ralish. “Not botherin’ tharantos?”

Eztaral was already marching for the camp. She didn’t spare a word for us as she left. The eagleborn had grown gruffer in the weeks since our exile, which was something I hadn’t thought possible. Although Serisi and I had felled the demon king and won the war, the death of the bloodwood had been more my fault than anybody’s. Not, however, in Eztaral’s mind. The fall of Shal Gara weighed even heavier on the eagleborn than it did me. She had barely spoken of that last battle. For a reason kept secret to her, she held all the blame and responsibility, like a water-skin straining at the seams. She spent many a night on long watches by herself, and she spent her days agitated and testy, insisting on training every hour that we were awake and weren’t hunting sightings of demons.

“We killed one. Bathnarok, the other demon, got away from us. Led us right into a tharantos nest,” I explained. “Eztaral doesn’t seem the slightest bit happy about it.”

Redeye was scowling as usual; his favourite pastime. “That demon led us into a *trap*, more like it.”

“I told you they’re getting smarter.” Atalawe chuckled wryly.

“In that case, I chose a good day to watch the camp and leave you Scions to your hunting,” said Ralish as she let the others follow Eztaral to the fire. She and I hung back, walking slower.

Ralish was still holding my hand. She lifted it up to the sunlight filling the clearing and stared at the crisscross of black scars across my right palm, a stark contrast to the dye staining my hands earth reaver red. The new wounds from my and Serisi’s second bonding had scarred over mere days after the fall of Shal Gara. The arm I’d broken in the battle healed in a matter of weeks.

Ralish’s fingers traced the dark veins that spread out from the scars. The poison from the nectra and the bonding now covered my hand, arm, and much of my shoulder. Though difficult in the sunlight, the nectra’s faint glow could be spied amidst the black.

“These marks are still growing. You might want to ignore it, but I can’t,” she said. Her fingers felt cold against my neck, where the shadow reached out from my collar.

“As long as I have Serisi here,” I said, tapping my temple, “I’m still stronger than ever.”

Ralish scowled at me, searching my eyes for a sign of the demon lurking behind them. “So you say,” she said, thumbing the branded lines on my right cheek, the marks of my rank of maven.

“Don’t tell me you’re regretting your decision to tread the loam with the Scions already?”

“I’m still making my mind up about that,” she replied, waiting until I started to doubt before she threw me a smirk and made for the camp. “I chose this exile same as the rest of you, remember? Though it would be a fine thing to have a roof over our heads for more than one night.”

“That it would,” I replied.

When we reached the ring of tents and slumped into the grass, Eztaral was already poring over her weathered map, etching an X into it with the blackened tip of an ironpith knife. The parchment had been folded and rolled so many times it was beginning to fall apart.

Eztaral stayed silent while Atalawe took a brace of frogs from the spit and sliced them up for the rest of us. The eagleborn didn't eat, too busy counting the marks on her map.

The roast meat was tough, as frog always was, but I wolfed it down. I had both Serisi's appetite and mine to contend with, after all.

At last, Eztaral broke her silence. "Another demon dead. By my count, that makes thirty-one navik and twenty-two demons dead, and there's still no sign of the betrayer Haidak Baran and his gutless Fireborn cult," she muttered hoarsely, avoiding our eyes as she stabbed at the map. "That demon can't have gone far. We'll carry on the hunt at firstglow."

The rest of us clenched our sore muscles and wondered who would speak up first. The tiredness had been simmering away in our minds for the past few weeks. Life in the loam might have been freer than my existence in Shal Gara, but the danger of treading the loam was ever-present even without the demons or the threat of the elusive Fireborn. The traitors were slipperier than pineslugs, and the Scions had stuck to smaller settlements to stay hidden, trusting in isolated villages and tree towns, and braving clearings in the loam night after night.

"Eztaral," Atalawe ventured, "the demons are not only getting wise to us, but they're getting scarcer. It took us a week to find today's two."

"We should move on to Stormbeaten, like we planned to do," I interjected. It had been the plan since our exile from Shal Gara, and yet there always seemed to be another demon to hunt. Another rumour of a strange monster in the forest. Another village that needed our help. It felt as if we fought a fire stamping out one cinder at a time. "It's already been a week since my mother and sister went ahead with Pel to find my brother Texoc and keep him safe from Haidak. We should join them as we promised and hunt that bastard where he's most comfortable: in the canopies of the bloodwoods."

"We wouldn't come so close to dying every day if we were in the branches of a proper bloodwood again," Redeye muttered.

"No. These demons will lead us to Haidak. I'm sure of it. He needs their strength," Eztaral asserted. "Or would you rather leave them to roam from settlement to settlement, sapling to sapling, and let them spread their chaos and wildfire amongst innocent Swathefolk?"

"You know that's not what we're saying, Eztaral," Atalawe replied. "And you know they haven't attacked a village in weeks thanks to us."

"Precisely," argued Eztaral.

I caught Atalawe's glance. She shook her head at me almost imperceptibly, but I had never been one for keeping my mouth shut in times like this.

"Eztaral, we didn't know the Fireborn existed until they'd already infested Shal Gara. They burrow like lice. You know Haidak and his Fireborn could be worming their way into other bloodwoods this very moment, bending the ears of other sages and matriarchs, spreading chaos

where we can't fight it from the loam, and raising the necra to open a doorway back to the demons' world, just as Serisi's father wanted. There is still a third Fireborn leader we don't know the identity of, and who knows what they could be doing," I said, raising my voice more than I planned. Ralish was staring at me sidelong, but I pressed on. "I think it's time we do what was decided the first day we were exiled: we spread the word about the demons and the Fireborn. Turn the Swathe against them. Bring the bloodwoods together in case the demons come back, as our ancestors did the last time they plagued this world a thousand seasons ago—"

"That will not happen. We will personally make sure of it, or we will die trying. Don't you dare doubt me on that," Eztaral growled, at last meeting my glare. Her mismatched red and green eyes were like lastlight in the high canopies. "There still remains one problem with your plan, Tarko: half the settlements we've come across laugh at our mention of demons. Even with a hundred miles of the Swathe burned and Firstwatch and Shal Gara toppled, the Swathe still doesn't believe, curse them. How do you think we'll be treated in another bloodwood like Stormbeaten?"

"We make them believe, just as we made Shal Gara believe. We can show them the truth." I held Eztaral's challenging stare. "Serisi and I will."

Serisi had remained unusually quiet since our hurtle through the forest floor. All I heard of her was a subtle hissing of breath.

"We owe it to all those who perished to try," I said.

"We owe it to the living not to fail again, I think you mean." Eztaral sighed as she got to her feet. "I will think on it, *hero*. Meanwhile, you have training to be getting on with, if I remember correctly. You can't win this war if you don't train."

I waited until Eztaral had moved out of earshot and begun to hack at a dead tree on the edge of the clearing with her sword. "Why is she blinded to this?" I asked Atalawe. "She was never this unsure in Shal Gara."

"Because every decision she made counted for a bitter victory, Tarko. No matter what she did, Shal Gara still fell," Atalawe reminded me as she stared up at the wavering treetops, swaying in a breeze we couldn't feel. Evening was approaching. Scarlet clouds streaked the purple sky. "She didn't believe in the return of the demons, and that resulted in the Sheertown Massacre. She believed in Haidak, and he turned out to be the leader of the Fireborn. She put her trust in you, and you were hiding a demon inside you. A demon that would have won her kind the war had it not been for Serisi's change of heart. I think Eztaral's allowed a little second-guessing, don't you?"

When Atalawe put it like that, I didn't sound much of a hero at all.

"But she knows we're right," I said.

"I don't think she does. Haidak is smart, ruthless, and unpredictable. Who's to say what he's planning? If I was in Eztaral's position, I would be torn in a dozen directions. At least with a demon in front of her and a sword in her hand, she knows where she stands."

Ralish was already nodding at Atalawe's words. I understood, but I did not agree.

"Haidak and his kind deserve justice," I said. "I don't care about the demons. His silver tongue and his noble blood make him the most dangerous person in the Swathe."

“Even more dangerous than you, Tarko?” Atalawe grinned.

“We’ll have to see, won’t we?” I replied. After Haidak had almost killed me in our last fight, I had vowed over and over he would never come that close again. Not now that Serisi and I were stronger than ever. “All I need is a clear shot and half a dozen heartbeats, and the Swathe will be forever happier. That will be the justice we seek.”

“You know,” Redeye pondered, “the more you talk about justice, Tarko, the more it sounds like revenge.”

I tilted my head. “And why not? After what Haidak did to us?”

“Never took you for the vengeful type,” whispered Ralish.

“Must be the demon in me,” I tried to joke, but she didn’t laugh. I reached for the dust beneath my crossed legs and tried to summon Serisi’s form. I spun tendrils of dirt together into a tower tall as my shoulder, but it was all my own doing, not the demon’s. Serisi did not show her face. Not a word was spoken in my head.

“What’s gotten into her?” Atalawe asked.

I had no idea, and let the dust die without a word. “Tired, most likely,” I lied. Serisi could be heard grinding her jaws in the darkness.

“You heard Eztaral: no time to rest, Tarkosi Terelta.” Ralish nudged me “You promised me a challenge this mornin’ and you’re not gettin’ out of it. Can’t win this war unless you train, can you?” she said, echoing the eagleborn.

Inwar trotted alongside us, sticking close to Ralish. She and the jāgu had become almost as close as he and Atalawe. I smiled. Nobody had asked or expected Ralish to pick up a weapon and follow the Scions. She could have gone south to Stormbeaten with Mother and Tesq, but she had stayed to hunt just like the rest of us. Best job she’d ever had, was how she put it. And though I liked to jest, when it came to putting arrows in a target, she was catching up with Blind Pel.

Ralish took the sharp louse mattock from her belt and slammed it into a fallen narin log. She swept an arrow from her quiver, barely looked at our tree-stump target before turning to stare at me, and loosed. The thud came moments later from forty feet away. Her green, parrot-feather arrow was buried dead-centre in the toppled tree, quivering slightly.

“First person to miss loses. No magic,” Ralish announced.

“I know the rules.”

She threw me a warning look. “Then why are you always tryin’ to break them, hmm?”

I loaded my sling with a stone from a pouch on my belt and took a few practice swings.

“Oh, get on with it,” Ralish tutted.

I took aim and threw. It was close, I had to be honest, but my stone cracked the arrow in half. The next stone I took from my pouch was bright turquoise. I slammed it so hard into the tree that it stuck in the deadwood.

Ralish took careful aim this time, face scrunched up and taking an age before letting her arrow fly. It cracked against the stone and bounced clear.

So it went for three more rounds before Ralish finally missed my stone by a thumb.

“Pel would be impressed,” I said with a smile.

She scowled. “Are you not?”

I caught myself, mouth mid-flap. “Of course, I mean—”

“You can kill a demon king yet you still act like a greenhand around me,” Ralish said, wearing one of her rare smiles that didn’t come with the usual curve of snark or sarcasm. I put my hand around her waist and leaned in to kiss her, but as usual, I felt the familiar sensation of being watched. Ralish could feel me tense at the wary growl in my head.

It was Redeye. The sorcer stood next to Inwar, munching on a frog skewer, his hat low and covering half his face.

“Don’t mind me,” said the sorcer, words garbled around a mouthful. “Just curious is all, seeing as it doesn’t look like much training is going on. Last time I checked, you were a sorcer trying to reach the rank of paragon, not a common warrior working on his slinging arm.”

With a tut, I straightened up, stretched out my hand, and watched the sapphire light bloom in my dark veins. My magic flowed into the earth beneath the stump of the toppled tree. With a sonorous cracking, the roots were heaved from the soil. I wrenched the stump from the ground until it sat like an ugly fort on its own hillock.

“I can tell you’ve been practising your manipulation. It’s not bad, but it’s still not good enough,” Redeye said, sighing.

The mudmage matched my stance, released a glowing vial of nectra from a belt running from shoulder to hip, and took a sip. Within five heartbeats, with his body shuddering, the sorcer’s noble-red eyes took on a blue and shining light. He waved his fingers like the undulation of a centipede. Pillars of black dirt rose from the mound of earth like tentacles. One by one, they wrapped around the roots of the stump and snapped them into jagged staves. Redeye even had the gall to stack them on top of the stump in a neat pile, prime for tinder and a sparkstone. When he was done, the sorcer dusted his hands and shrugged.

Ralish sucked at her teeth discreetly as she could manage. “Ouch.”

“There’s the bloody problem. Time and time again, mudmages think it’s all about brute force, and it makes them idiots. Force only goes so far before it gets you killed, and that’s why you learn finesse,” Redeye muttered. “Finesse is what separates the lower ranks of initiate, elevate, and maven from paragons, braided, and painted ones. Only finesse, not force, is what unlocks the mightier ranks. You’re lucky that you have a demon as a construct, but she isn’t a true construct spell. That’s still beyond you. I gave up caring about rank when I didn’t play at the sorcers’ politics, but if you want those extra brands on your cheek, lad, you need to do better.”

“Finesse,” I muttered.

“Finesse. Gone deaf, have you? Finesse, like when you bring out Serisi and shape her form. You think the other orders of magic can lift and hold and manipulate quite like we mudmages can? You try holding something with air. Or in slippery water. The true power of earth reaving isn’t in rush or dart spells or the clumsy tendrils you rely on, but in constructs and deft manipulation. Ever fought something with eight arms holding eight swords?”

I narrowed my eyes. “No...”

Redeye sighed dramatically. He worked the fingers of his right hand while still munching on the skewer in his left. His magic brought tendril spells rearing up from the earth again. Each picked up one of the broken roots and held it like a crooked sword. The tendrils circled each other in a hypnotic dance. The tremble in Redeye’s arm and the sweat around his glowing eyes betrayed the effort it took to maintain the spell, but he only pushed harder, and brought the tendrils closer so that Ralish stepped behind me. I was on the verge of summoning a shield when the dust blew over us. The roots clattered on the ground at my feet.

“You’re more powerful than most and’ve progressed in a fraction of the time thanks to that demon, but you’re only halfway there,” said Redeye. “You’ve no idea the kinds of magic some of the greatest painted and braided sorcers wield. If you lot get it into your thick skulls and realise that we’d all be safer in a bloodwood instead of the loam, maybe you’ll see it one day. Like in Stormbeaten, or the Forging in Dorla Sel. Then you’d witness true magic.”

“The Forging?” I asked.

Redeye ripped the last of his meat from his skewer. “See? So much to learn,” he said around the mouthful as he wandered away. “Better keep training.”

“Have you ever seen that man crack a smile?” Ralish asked once the sorcer was out of earshot.

“Cursed if I know. Give me a few more weeks and I’ll wipe that scowl off his face. I’ll show him. I’ll show all of them what I can do, Swathe and Fireborn alike,” I answered. I watched Ralish from the corner of my eye. “I did it again today, you know.”

“What? The fire magic?” she replied, leaning conspiratorially close. “Tarko—”

“I’ve sworn it to you, Ralish, and I’ll swear it again if I have to: it saw it with my own eyes in Shal Gara. During the last battle with Faraganthar, I felt the king’s flames obey me. I felt Serisi as if she stood at my back and fire flowed around my hands and hers. I held it in my palm, I promise you. Dismiss it as a lie if you want, or something I imagined in the madness of battle, but today I pulled the fire from that demon. Serisi will tell you the same.”

I will not, whispered Serisi at last.

Ralish held my chin. “It’s not that I don’t believe you, but you’ve got to prove it to yourself before the others will believe, too. How many times have Redeye and Pel told you how rare it is for a sorcer to wield two orders, never mind fire? That it’s somethin’ that no sorcer has ever done except Kī Raxa?”

“And if Faraganthar can be believed, nobody’s bonded with a demon since Kī Raxa either. What if that was how she managed to wield fire? If anyone has a chance, it’s Serisi and me. That’s why I’m going to try it again tonight,” I answered, itchy with conviction.

“Another night I sleep alone, is it?” Ralish tilted her head.

“What do you mean?”

“You might not think I notice when you get up in the middle of the night, but I do. You spend most nights with that demon, saying you’re keeping watch.”

For reasons that I blamed wholly on Serisi's presence inside me, tiredness didn't claim me as it used to. I barely desired sleep anymore. Part of the blame lay with the demon's energy keeping me awake. The rest lay with my trepidation. The others might have shaken their heads, but after a demon had hijacked my dreams, kidnapped my sleeping body, and almost destroyed everything I held dear, I found sleep wasn't the sanctuary it once was.

Regrettably, whether it was the death of Serisi's father or a product of our second binding, my dreamwalking ability had seemingly disappeared. Although the nightmares that had cursed me during the war in Shal Gara had diminished, they had not ceased. Yet when they did come, they were muddled. Flashes of fiction more than fact. The nonsense of any normal dream.

"But I am keeping watch," I said. "If I can't sleep, what else am I supposed to do with my time?"

Ralish looked injured by my words. She raised an eyebrow. "You should know by now I followed you into exile for more than revenge, tearing down the Bloodlaws, and saving the world, Tarko."

I remembered myself. "I won't stay awake tonight," I promised.

"Tarko!" came a shout. Eztaral's familiar bark. "Unless you've mastered the power of invisibility or I've gone very specifically blind, I don't see any training going on!"

"Yes, yes," I sighed.

Ralish kissed me on the cheek. "Serisi, you make sure he keeps that promise, you hear me? You have to learn to share."

All I heard was a demon's growl, but I nodded on her behalf. "She promises," I called to Ralish as she walked back to the fire.

I do not.

"And what's stolen your tongue, demon?" I asked to the croaking of frogs. Birds were singing their songs of lastlight. I kept my spells quiet, spinning shapes and challenging myself to see how intricate I could make them. If Redeye wanted finesse, I would show him exactly that.

Bathnarok, Serisi answered me at last. I could feel her drinking in the sounds and smells of the evening forest just as I did. The Swathe had swayed her heart, and it was always comforting to feel her appreciation for it. Betrayal was a hard wound to heal.

I built a pyramid of dirt and made it tumble in mid-air. "The demon that got away? What of him?"

He is a prince among demonkind. Of noble blood, if you will, just as I am. A son of a past king and born of a royal line almost as long as my own, Serisi said. *Did you not hear his threats?*

"They were lost on me in the heat of battle, to be honest."

Bathnarok said the Iron Icon has cursed us both. That the God of Chaos knows our names.

"And that scares you? You barely know the meaning of fear, Serisi." It was something I was enormously jealous of.

It means that the Iron Icon knows what has taken place here and that my father has perished. It means there is some connection that still lives between our worlds. Not a doorway, but minds

connected across the Void. The God of Chaos will be enraged at being cheated of his prize. Now he will stop at nothing to reach this world, even if it means the destruction of my kin and yours.

I puffed out my cheeks, both at the strain in my arms and at the doom Serisi doled out. “I’d say that only confirms what I said earlier: that the demons are trying to return. And seeing as they can only do that with nectra, and the demons we’ve been hunting can’t get their claws on any without conquering another bloodwood, that leaves the Fireborn. Eztaral needs to hear this.”

There is more, Tarko. Bathnarok spoke of betrayal. Of being a traitor amongst traitors. Of our downfall coming at the hands of ones we trust.

I paused my spells, letting the dirt fall to the ground and wiping my face of sweat. “What are you saying, demon?”

You spoke before of the third Fireborn leader behind a mask. A third lord that stood with us in front of my father Faraganthar when he sentenced us to death? Juraxi was one. Haidak was the other. But who was the third? she asked me. How much do you truly trust these other worms, Tarko? What is to say one of them is not Fireborn? That their lies run that deep?

“You can’t be serious!”

Calm yourself, worm. I am merely suggesting we be wary. We have been betrayed at every turn. I believe it will happen again.

“You’re just as cheerful as Redeye,” I huffed as I took aim at another dead tree on the edge of the clearing and let my magic hammer through my arms. The sorcer might have been a severe grump, but he was right, and I cursed him for it. Since Shal Gara, my magic had reached a ceiling that I was finding difficult to break. Redeye, Eztaral, and Pel knew it just as well as I did. Even now I felt their watchful eyes.

“Finesse,” I mumbled to myself, stretching my fingers once again to manipulate the earth into fine strands instead of the club of a tendril spell. I wove them together as though they were threads on a loom. It made my head pound with effort. I even heard Serisi grunting.

I managed to build the shape of an arm before the exertion broke the spell in two. Dust drifted on the air. The urge to kick at its piles and curse them was strong, but I was stronger. I had not shied before, and I would not now.

Once again, I raised my glowing hands.

*

When sweat stung my torso and my limbs hung limp and aching, I at last returned to the campfire. Redeye was in his tent. Atalawe slumbered beside Inwar while Eztaral patrolled the ring of flaming torches that crackled in the breeze. The Swathe was more alive at night than it was in the day. Screeches broke the constant rustling of trees. Twigs snapped, never failing to whip my head around in the direction of their noises. The shining eyes of barkwolves or spiders were always present somewhere along the clearing’s edge, held back by fire and moonlight’s glow.

Even after weeks in the loam, I wasn't sure I would ever get used to its ferocity. And after the day's escapades in a tharantos nest, I was especially vigilant.

Sitting across the fire from my tent, where I knew Ralish to be, I watched the flames. I bent my mind to them just like I did the dirt.

Serisi's shape washed around me, fragmented and faint in her form of dust. "I felt it in Shal Gara just as you did. But I am no wizard, and you are no Kī Raxa," she said in a voice of whispers.

"Did you not see it today?" I muttered.

"I saw... something."

"Ha! Even you can't deny it."

I reached my hand, forcing my concentration away from Serisi, away from the forest and the screams of things being eaten, away from anything but the flicker of the flames. Fractions at a time, I bent my fingers to the fire, longing to see it obey my will. *Move!* I yelled in my head. A lone tongue of flame appeared to lean towards me, and I tensed harder, wide-eyed and head pounding with effort. But it was merely the night's breeze. Nothing happened beyond an ill-timed gust of wind that brought me smoke and cinders to choke on instead.

Serisi tutted. "Perhaps one day."

"You wouldn't be trying to master fire magic again, now would you?" asked Eztaral, leaning against a torch-pole. "Because that's exactly what it looked like to me."

I shrugged, disappointed. "Like I said last time: it happened before, and it can happen again."

Eztaral came to sit at my side, also captivated by the fire. "What does your demon think of your plan, Tarko?" she asked, talking to me although the demon's head hovered above my shoulder.

"It is a wise plan," Serisi replied for me.

"Of course you two stick together," Eztaral snorted. She kneaded her temples so hard I thought she might scrape away the tattoos that bordered her scalp. "Fine. Against my better judgement and many seasons of vast and valued expertise, I'll agree with you that the Fireborn are too dangerous to be left to their own, no doubt nefarious, devices. Because of that, I've decided we will head to Stormbeaten. But I won't have you grinning like a fool like you've won some big argument, Tarko. This is your wish, not mine, and if it all comes crashing down on us again, it's on your head."

I reached beneath my shirt and brought out the demon claw that bound Serisi to life. It burned anything else that touched it, from living wood to skin, but it was hardly warm in my grasp.

"Just like Shal Gara," I reminded her. "I'm the one that bears that burden, not you."

"Go to bed, Tarko," said Eztaral, peering at me closely. "It's my watch tonight and I won't hear a word of complaint about it. You get some rest for once, and maybe instead of pretending to be Kī Raxa, you hurry up figuring out how to walk those dreams of yours again. We could use the insight."

With the eagleborn's footsteps receding and with a clench of my hand, Serisi folded into nothing and back into my mind. Though I kept my face impassive, it didn't mean a trepidatious

feeling didn't twist my stomach. Serisi felt it and bared her jaws, grinning for the both of us. Thee notion of justice crossed both our minds.

In the dying firelight, Redeye was proven right again: justice was nothing but a mask for revenge.

3

OF VINES

During the past demon invasions, Shal Gara once attempted to use captured tharantos as weapons against the demons. It worked. For a short time, at least, until the tharantos decided their human wranglers were easier meals.

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Once more, the dreams came fragmented and blurred. Nothing made sense beyond snatches of Haidak Baran's face and glimpses of our camp, over and over from different places in the trees. The forest was filled with white flames wherever something crawled or slithered or flapped.

I awoke in a sweat to the sound of Eztaral's orders to wake up and start moving, and her threats of a swift kick and a poke from her sword if I didn't. I chose the former, quickly slipping on my Scion's uniform of grey leafleather. A sphere of akiga juice and map-scrolls perched on my belt, and a pouch of metal bullets and slingstones was slung across my shoulder. It was when I came to put on my boots that I found the faint stain of mud on them.

I ducked as a portion of the tent started to come down.

Ralish was already outside, packing up the tent even while I clambered out of it.

"Late as always," she greeted me. "And you say you don't need much sleep anymore."

"I had some strange dreams," was all I said, voice hoarse.

Atalawe was kicking dirt over the fire coals. "That hasn't happened for a while. You dreamwalking again at last, Tarko? Anything of use?" she asked, far too cheery for a rude awakening.

"Did Eztaral tell you to ask?"

"No?"

"Answer's still no," I said through a yawn. "Nothing like I used to."

"Well, chin up." The wrangler beamed her trademark smile. "Took you a while to handle it last time."

"It didn't take several weeks."

Ralish poked me with a strut from the tent's roof. "Come on, you surly bastard. Grab that pole. The mighty Tarko's not goin' to leave the hard work to the mere mortals now, is he?"

Sounds more like a threat more than a question.

"That it does."

"What's Serisi sayin' now?" asked Ralish.

"To listen to you."

“Wise demon,” said Ralish. She had worked hard to grow used to Serisi watching and listening to every moment, even the private kind between just the two of us. But Ralish only had to deal with the thought of Serisi being there amidst us, not her constant presence in my thoughts.

I felt the pull of Serisi and set her free. Dirt swirled about me until a figure of a demon stood tall before us, almost six feet taller than any of us humans. She shook her horns and stretched her claws wide, making Ralish duck.

“And good morning to you, demon,” called Atalawe, making Serisi bow.

I pointed to the tent. “Make yourself useful, Serisi.”

The demon controlled the construct spell as much as I did, her will conjoined with my magic. Or worm-magic, as she insisted on calling it.

Serisi reached for a side of the tent and seized a pole. Her dirt and gravel had grown stronger, and by the crunch the pole let out, she almost snapped it.

“Such a flimsy house,” Serisi rasped.

I caught Redeye watching and shaking his head. I decided to prove him wrong and cast another spell of thin tendrils that came together to neatly roll and lift the tent canvas. My spell slipped, sending half the canvas unfurling from the wagon. The second try succeeded, although I loaded several handfuls of dirt into the wagon at the same time.

Piece by piece, and with magic and a demon to help with the lifting, we packed and folded the tents onto the orokan-led wagon. Atalawe was busy muttering at Grampus, telling him that he was not as obedient as her old orokan Nod had been.

I’d recently learned that shortly after we had turned our backs on our fallen bloodwood, Atalawe had tried to steal Nod back from Shal Gara. The stubborn orokan who had carried Pel through the loam had survived the fall, but sadly had been claimed by wranglers and was far too protected for any sort of thievery. None of us had any doubt that the stubborn old Matriarch Danaxt of Shal Gara would follow the traditional rule of exile: to return was to hang.

In single file behind the wagon, we left the clearing that had played our home for the past week. We Scions had hidden deep in the loam to hunt our demons, far away from the leaffroads that forded the endless canopies between the bloodwoods. It was likely they were being patrolled by Fireborn scouts or lackeys, looking for the exiled Scions.

There was only one way to tread the forest floor: carefully, and with your wits sharp as an obsidian shard. The night was terrifying, but the day wasn’t without its dangers. Amongst the colossal roots, sunlight was little more than moonlight. The paths of hunters and wanderers did their best to keep to the dappled sunlight sneaking through the canopy, but that changed with every sprouting leaf, every fallen branch. Even the wind. The spears we had fashioned for hunting were now faced up and outwards into the loam, where anything could be lurking in the undergrowth or wrapped around a branch, waiting to spring.

Atalawe had delighted in listing all the varieties of death that called the Swathe home. I knew the infamous culprits: tharantos, gloomsprites, barkwolves, woefang spiders, ravens, and of course the rarer but terrifying grimspores. Even an irascible quillhog could be dangerous enough. But

Atalawe had opened my mind to many others, such as fisher vines, and carnivorous nests that ate any bird stupid enough to land in them, and the scorpions with a human face on their tails to lure in fools. And the creeping rugs of moss that could envelop you in your sleep and digest you over months. And how if I ever heard my name being sung from the shadows, to never follow it and walk the other way.

I wish my mind had stayed closed. Expecting death behind every tree made my eyes hurt. But vigilance was the greatest defence against the loam.

Judging by the sun's position and certain mosses growing in certain places on the upper branches, we were headed due south. Eztaral was making good on her promise. I hadn't spent more than a week away from my mother and sister in my whole life, and despite the distraction of our hunt and the fate of my world hanging in the balance, I found myself missing them, and worrying over Fireborn plots.

Ralish seemed to notice. She nudged me while we walked. "They're fine, Tarko. Nothing will have happened. They have Pel with them, and I pity the idiot that tries to take on your mother. I really do."

"Do you think of your family?" I asked.

"Almost every day. I used to tell myself I saw their ghosts in vinelight or in the dance of the fireworms in their lanterns. They're somewhere in the Six Heavens now and memories are all they are, so rememberin' not only honours them but keeps them alive."

I smiled. "An archer and a scholar. You were wasted in the worker tribe just like I was."

Ralish examined the tattoos of three crossed nails on the backs of her hands. "I'm not lookin' forward to seeing the orders of the Bloodlaws alive and well in Stormbeaten. The best thing Shal Gara ever did was get rid of those strangling laws."

The abolishing of Shal Gara's ancient Bloodlaws and the rule of order had been my doing, but I kept quiet on that matter. There was nothing to boast about. "And then they reinstated them just as quickly," I said.

Ralish sighed. "Don't get me riled up about that again. If only the rest of the Swathe had seen what we did, and how it saved us."

"Maybe they will one day," I said wistfully.

"Too much order stifles and corrupts. Too much chaos destroys even those who worship it. Balance is what this forest has taught me," grunted Serisi's form, shifting across the loam behind us. "That is what I fought for and I will fight again to show my kin."

"And silence is what I prefer on long marches," called Eztaral, ever the warrior. We did as we were ordered, held our tongues, and focused on our march.

After several hours of silence, I recognised a crooked and blossoming narin alongside a fork in the path. It was there that Atalawe called a halt with a raised fist. Inwar prowled the edges of the path, tail swishing as he sniffed at bushes. Serisi had picked up a scent as well. She wafted into the undergrowth, claws grazing the leaves as she peered into the gloom. I raised my hands, both to stretch my arms and to let my magic brim in my veins, ready to fight.

“Demon?” I whispered.

Atalawe shook her head. Eztaral drew her stone sword and held it flat.

“Get off the path,” Eztaral muttered, and one by one, we crept onto uneven ground.

Serisi scouted for us, stepping ahead to drift between the branches and ferns.

“Yah!” erupted a cry.

For hunters, we did an awful job of recognising a trap.

To the sound of zipping ropes and creaking of wood, a deadfall trap tumbled from the upper branches and crushed Serisi beneath it. Had she been a real demon, she would have oozed ash and fire in a grotesque heap, but as a spell, she faded into a cloud of dust. I snatched her right back to me.

“You all right?” I asked her.

Cowardly traps, was all she said in my mind.

Hunters emerged from the undergrowth, clad in suits of hide and braided leaf and vine.

“Where the... where by the bleeding trees is that beast? I saw it with my own two eyes!” yelled a voice. Its owner showed himself between two ferns, a large axe in his hands. He wore a jāgu pelt, and I could hear Inwar growling disapprovingly.

“Nothing more than a construct spell,” Eztaral greeted the man, stepping out from the bushes. “Cast by our sorcer here.”

I waved a red-dyed hand at the hunters, even swirling a little dust as proof.

“You tread our hunting grounds,” warned the man.

“Then maybe you should put up a sign, or set your traps somewhere other than a path,” said Atalawe, stepping forwards and tapping her fingers on her spear of ironpith and obsidian.

“Who do you think you’re talking to, scholar?” said the hunter, jabbing a fist at Atalawe. A fist decorated with three nails just like I had. “What do you know about hunting?”

“She’s a wrangler, so more than you, evidently,” muttered Ralish at my side.

“All right, all right. That’s enough,” came another voice. A greying woman came forth, wearing a pelt of barkwolf furs and holding a double-ended spear. “No harm done.”

“They ruined our trap!” complained the hunter with the axe.

The old woman ignored the upstart. “I see worker tattoos on your hands,” she said, pointing to me. “A sorcer and a worker. You don’t see that every day. Where you headed, travellers?”

“Mulchport,” said Eztaral.

The woman smiled. “That is our home. Do you know the way?”

“We have travelled to it more than once,” Eztaral told her.

“I recognise these strangers,” whispered another hunter, leaning close to the old woman.

“As do I. You’re the ones who saved Mulchport from that fire-beast, correct?” she asked.

Atalawe wasn’t the only who wore a prideful smile. “That we are. Killed another yesterday, in fact.”

A muttering and scoffing spread between the hunters. We had grown used to such doubt. Despite the tragedy of two bloodwoods falling, almost every person we had met since Shal Gara

had laughed at the mere notion of demons in the Swathe. And though the whole forest had seen the sun turn black, it had been dismissed as an omen of the wildfires and nothing more. One wandering sixth-born we had crossed paths with had even told us it was all the fault of an unattended campfire. It was, quite frankly, maddening.

There were a handful in the town of Mulchport, however, who had seen the proof firsthand when a demon wizard had come to burn their town to the loam. That handful apparently weren't among these hunters. Save for one.

"Then we will travel with you and make sure you go safely to Mulchport. You did us a kindness helping Mulchport, and we'll return the favour," said the grey woman.

The hunters grumbled in unison, but they obeyed their headwoman nonetheless. One by one, they fell in alongside our orokan and wagon. There were a dozen more lurking in the loam. Every one of them gave Redeye and me a wide berth, as if they were afeared of our magic. Only one – the man wearing the jägu pelt – dared to bother us.

"Sorcers, is it? Tell me: does magic work on creatures of make-believe?"

"They're called demons," I corrected him. "And they're as real as that axe in your hand."

"Psh. Fairytales and children's stories. Nothing but fearful delusions."

I stayed quiet, letting the man snicker to himself.

"You'll have to forgive Lokana," said the old woman. "He wasn't in Mulchport when that demon was sighted, and he's too stubborn and dumb to believe others smarter than him."

I grinned while Lokana stalked away, scowling murderously at Ralish and me.

"My eyes might be old, but I saw those demons just as plain as I see you travellers. All of Mulchport heard what happened in Shal Gara. They blame wildfires, yet I've seen what's truly to blame and what the black sun warned us of. Let Lokana and the other idiots scoff. I know you do good work, whoever you are."

"See, Eztaral?" I called out. "There's hope after all."

Eztaral flashed me an equally murderous look.

Our muddled group of Scions and hunters walked on in silence, keeping our eyes peeled and our weapons ready against the loam.

It was only after an hour, when the hunters heard the snuffling of quillhogs further up the path, that we broke formation. The hunters, eager to do the work of their calling, readied their spears and crept off the path to investigate. The Scions closed in tighter around the wagon and Grampus. My gaze roved the forest while we walked through a patch of trees strangled by vines. They hung across the path like ineffectual curtains, draping over the wagon and the muttering orokan.

Atalawe was staring at the branches above, eyes squinted while the hunters plied their craft.

"I don't like this," she whispered to me as I edged closer.

"What is it?"

Atalawe's head bobbed back and forth, as if she tried to spot a bird amid the leaves. "You smell that?" she asked.

Aside from the stench of the orokan and our unwashed bodies, I smelled nothing out of the ordinary at first, and then I caught the foul scent of rotting meat.

“You do, don’t you?” Atalawe replied for me. “I thought I was imagining it.”

“What does it mean?”

“Danger,” hissed Atalawe, before yelling after the hunters. “Fall back!” she urged.

“You don’t get to give us orders!” challenged Lokana.

Before the explanation could leave Atalawe’s mouth, a deafening squeal shattered the quiet of the loam. Ahead of the wagon, a quillhog was being hoisted into the air, a rope-like vine wrapped around its fat belly. The vine kept hauling it aloft, but the quillhog wriggled so much that it escaped the vine’s clutches and tumbled into the ferns. No sooner had the quillhog fled than did one of hunters start screaming. A man rose above the undergrowth, limbs flailing as he was pulled into the higher branches.

“Fisher vines!” shouted Atalawe, already bounding into action.

What in the Void is a fisher vine?

I had no answer for Serisi, but my magic sprang forth all the same. Ralish took aim with her bow but didn’t fire. All we lacked was a target.

Another hunter was captured and pulled aloft at a startling rate. The individual snagged first had now vanished behind the leaves. It felt like a rain fell in his wake, and when I wiped my face, my hand came away bloody.

“Up there, Tarko! Aim for its body!” yelled Atalawe, while Eztaral went to work with her sword, hacking at any vine that dared to swing close to us.

“What bloody body?” I yelled. All I could see above me were leaves and tangled branches.

The vines, Tarko! hissed Serisi. I saw them at last: certain vines were shifting unnaturally between the others. I traced their skinny, gnarled lengths until I glimpsed it: a triangular, insectile body moving through the branches on three grasping arms. From its bulbous body hung a tangle of skinny tentacles that dangled deep into the loam, just like vines.

“What in the Six Hells is that?!” I bellowed.

“A fisher vine, I said! Now shoot it!” screeched Atalawe.

I stowed my magic and reached for my sling instead. I felt the weight as I swung it, closed one eye to take aim, and threw.

There came an unholy shriek as my metal slingshot connected. One of the hunters began to unravel from the vine that had captured him. He fell like a boulder into the bushes below him, and I swore I heard the snap of his bones.

Another hunter fell prey to the fisher vines before Ralish could strike it with her arrows. Blood rained as her arrows peppered the branches above. I joined her with my slingstones, and after several attempts, a fisher vine came crashing through the branches to land at Eztaral’s feet with a crunch. The beast was all leathery hide and gnashing mouth, and Eztaral wasted no time in sentencing it to death with her sword.

“Finesse,” I hissed to myself, raising dirt from the churned earth beneath my feet and driving tendrils of magic into the branches. I soon found a fisher within my reach and squeezed the knots of my spell until its body split in two.

The last fisher screeched as I seized each of its vines with a different tendril and pulled them from its body with a grotesque crunch. The creature tumbled like the other, making a horrid burbling sound as it fell. Atalawe saw to it with the thick end of her ironpith staff. Green ichor leaked from jagged mandibles as the monster met its end. The wrangler spat in its single, bulbous eye.

Gradually, the hunters picked themselves up, looking wan and their tails between their legs. The dead and wounded were hauled upright. Lokana stood like a crooked pine.

The grey hunter arose from the bushes, smearing blood across her forehead. “Well, if that hasn’t changed your mind about these people, Lokana, then you’re even stupider than I thought.”

Lokana had no words. No spite. One by one, the hunters nodded their thanks to us as they shuffled southwards towards Mulchport.

“How’s that for finesse, Redeye?” I challenged the sorcer as he passed me by.

“Hmph.” The sorcer only shook his head. “Told you we’d be safer in a bloodwood,” was all he said, looking instead to Eztaral.

Our leader wiped the green blood from her blade with a scowl.

“We’ll see about that.”

4

MULCHPORT

Not every town and city in the Swathe lingers in the branches of a bloodwood. There are untold numbers of settlements that cling to lesser branches, or hover just above the loam, or build right on the forest floor. In the rivers of the north, there are some settlements that ride the currents, meandering from one waterway to the next on giant barges.

FROM "FATE OF A SIXTH-BORN"

"That's not right," I muttered, watching a caravan roll into the town on the back of an armoured millipede. Each saddle-like segment carried a different wagon, stuffed with bolts of mosscloth and spiderthread.

I have seen a hundred worlds and a thousand different beasts, and that is the most hideous thing I have ever witnessed, Serisi confirmed in my head.

Night had spread its pitch-dark claws amongst the loam, and the hunters had finally delivered us to Mulchport. Even though this was our third visit, and even for a bloodwood-born, the town never failed to bewitch me – millipedes notwithstanding.

We stood on the loam and stared up at the vine-lit town of Mulchport as though we'd never seen it before. Until now, we had only seen the settlement in the daylight. At night, despite being a fraction of the size, Mulchport glowed with almost as many lights as a bloodwood city.

Stuck between two fallen and entangled trees, Mulchport filled the triangular shape left by their meeting trunks. Tier upon ascending tier glowed with vinelight and firewood lanterns. It barely reached as high as the Rootfort of Shal Gara used to, but it was twice as bright and lively with noise. I could already hear the voices and instruments of the songmakers, passing down the oldest stories in the oldest ways. They hadn't been forgotten here as they had been in Shal Gara.

I didn't know what a port was supposed to be, but apparently it had something to do with ships and the sea and plenty of coming and going. There was plenty of that in Mulchport, but instead of ships, it dealt in wagon trains and nomad caravans and lancewing convoys that chose the less travelled and more dangerous roads. At its peak, two spurs of leafroad met. One led south, the other east.

I found a smile on my face. Mulchport might not have had the sheer size of Shal Gara, but it captured the soul of the city I once knew: one of vibrancy and bustle. Nothing in Mulchport seemed to stay still for more than a heartbeat. Standing at its dead roots, I could see the dark silhouettes of crowds wandering Mulchport's walkways, traipsing from night market to alehouse and back again.

Visiting nobles brushed shoulders with workers. There was less care for order and the Bloodlaws in Mulchport, and it made the town a haven in more ways than one.

Lancewings docked at the upper levels of the town. The deep droning of their blurred wings mingled with the songmakers' drums and pan flutes. Their metallic scales caught the town lights, shining deep emerald, scarlet, or opal. I recognised the colours of foreign bloodwoods on the birds' riders, such as the purple of Rōkama Dar or the green and gold of Dorla Sel, the seat of the Allmother and capital of the Swathe. Some were travelling warriors or sixth-born. Others were nobles on noble business, whatever in the Hells that consisted of. The rest were traders or grizzled travellers unloading tablets or furled maps from their lancewings. And here and there, much to the clenching of my jaw, I spotted the silver and red of Shal Gara.

I nudged Eztaral, who looked at me as if I had spat on her arm.

"You better have a good reason for poking me, Maven Terelta, otherwise you'll be learning to cast your spells one finger short," she muttered. Although Eztaral agreed with me about the shackles of the Bloodlaws, rank and file she would always cling to.

"Look." I pointed to the Shal Gara birds. "Anyone you recognise?"

Eztaral squinted her mismatched eyes. "Curse it. That lancer looks familiar. And that man with the eyepatch there is our old friend Ravenborn Ren Gaakaran. Though by the look of the new feather around his neck, I would say he's now Eagleborn Gaakaran. Matriarch Danaxt must have promoted him after the battle."

Atalawe hummed in agreement. "Probably because out of her two previous eagleborns, one turned out to be a traitor, and the other is now an exile."

"Or because almost all of Shal Gara's warriors are dead, and their choices are lacking, Sister," muttered Redeye.

"Enough out of both of you," tutted Eztaral. "We don't know who we can trust, and that means we'll trust nobody. Understand?"

"Even Gaakaran?" Atalawe asked. "You trained him ever since he was a warder."

Eztaral growled and adjusted her sword belt. "And did I not train Haidak Baran just the same, Atalawe? Gaakaran answers to Matriarch Danaxt and Envoy Okarin now. Who, if you care to recall, were the ones who saw fit to banish us."

Even in the tumult of hunting and surviving the loam, I had not forgotten Okarin. I could remember in vivid detail how she had done nothing while her mother, the matriarch, exiled us from Shal Gara. That betrayal still stung as sharply as it had that day.

"You've heard my orders, now obey them. We are here for shelter and food, and then we'll be on our way. In, out, unnoticed and unbothered," Eztaral commanded us.

I think going unnoticed will prove more difficult than you think, Serisi whispered to me. I immediately saw why: the Scions of the Sixth-Born had a fan in Mulchport, and his name was Sage Two Moon.

Mulchport, unlike the bloodwoods, had no matriarch nor a court of sages to rule it. Instead, it had one lone sage, and his title was not only affectionate but self-proclaimed. Two Moon didn't

wear robes or silver feather around his neck like the sages of Shal Gara had, but a snakeskin waistcoat over a simple shirt and treads that strained around his ale-belly. His hair was a nest a crow would have been proud of, bound with bright feathers, beads, shells from Stormbeaten's coasts, and multicoloured gems. The tangle reached to the man's sizeable arse and stretching his earlobes were two huge white disks, and I strongly suspected that was how he had earned his name.

Two Moon was already bustling towards us, hands raised as if he were about to grab Eztaral in a hug. That would have been a dire mistake. It had taken a war and a bloodwood falling for me to get a single embrace from her.

The reason the sage was so enamoured with us Scions was due to the fact we had saved Mulchport from the roving demon wizard. Of course, most of the townsfolk had claimed it was a simple longsun fire, and regurgitated the lies circulating about Shal Gara. When Bathnarok and his kin were sighted by Mulchport lancewings a week back, Two Moon called on us again. I was of the opinion we could have charged some gems for our demon-hunting services, but as Eztaral had sternly reminded me several times, the Scions did not work for profit.

"Well, bleeding trees! If it isn't my favourite people in all the Swathe!" Two Moon boomed in a voice that sounded like he was shouting into a barrel. His cheery demeanour faltered when he saw the wounded hunters amongst us, groaning as they were dragged about on their stretchers.

The grey hunter came forwards. "Fisher vines, Two Moon. Came out of nowhere. Lucky we ran into your friends here."

"Lucky? Not for Jab and Ocala," grumbled Lokana as he pushed past me, still full of bluster and angst. "They're both dead."

The woman shooed him away. "And more would have died without their help, Lokana."

Two Moon pointed to sun, soil, and made the sign of rain. "Then by the Three Gods, I'm glad your paths crossed."

"As am I," she replied, bowing to Eztaral.

Despite the fact we'd saved their skins twice now, the muttering of the Mulchport hunters told me they did not agree. Spurred by the yells of the grey woman, they dragged their wounded towards the town and left us alone with the self-appointed sage.

"You ignore them, my good friends. I don't care whether they believe; the truth is Mulchport is safer thanks to you," Two Moon babbled eagerly. "Were you successful? Were the other demons slain?"

Atalawe beamed. "We killed one."

"The other escaped," said Redeye.

Despite the flash of worry that crossed his broad face, Two Moon clapped his hands so loudly the sound hurt my ears. "No matter! I'm sure you'll be victorious soon! Bleeding trees. The sooner those foul creatures are sent back where they came from, the better I can sleep at night."

Who is he calling foul? asked Serisi.

I pinched my palm to quieten her. I had not yet dared to even speak of Serisi in Mulchport, never mind show her. Half the town would think me mad, and the other half a monster. It felt like the first days of our binding all over again.

“I imagine you’ve come for supplies?” the sage continued effusively, speaking as much with his hands as he did his mouth. “Whatever you need is already yours. I will pay the gems and pull whichever strings you need pulled. Take what you please. Stay awhile, if you’d like.”

“We are headed south, Two Moon,” Eztaral replied firmly.

“To Stormbeaten? Are you needed there? Are there more demons? Don’t tell me another bloodwood is in danger?” Two Moon wrung his fingers. “Bleeding trees.”

Eztaral shook her head, remaining secretive. “Elsewhere.”

“Then I’m sure it’s important, whatever the reason!”

“All we need is something to eat that isn’t dried loamtoad and somewhere to bed down for the night that isn’t moss and dirt.”

Two Moon started to gather us up one by one and usher us towards Mulchport. “Then look no further! We’re busier than ever, but I’ll make sure the finest beast-hut is at your disposal. I’ll have Maldahak at the Scornful Claw to clear her best rooms. You will have all the provisions you need. Water. Clothes. Weapons if you need them. Company of the tender kind, if you want—”

Eztaral stood like an ironpith tree, resisting Two Moon’s touch. “We’ll keep to ourselves, Sage. The demons have friends in the Swathe, and they are no friends of ours. We would rather nobody know we are here.”

Two Moon rubbed his stubble with a loud scraping, like a brush against a plank. He looked deeply bewildered. “What kind of wretches would betray their own kind? Their own forest?”

Atalawe clapped the sage on the shoulder. “Pray you don’t meet them and have to find out. They have a liking for lies and slitting throats, and are lurking where you least expect them.”

“Bleeding trees. Could... could they be here in Mulchport?”

“Probably,” said Redeye with a sniff.

“*Maybe*,” Eztaral corrected the sorcer, accompanied by a sharp glare and an unspoken order of *Shut the loam up*.

“Bleeding trees.” Two Moon’s eyes were wide and his cheeks puffed. “Then you’d best lay low, if I were you.”

I could see Eztaral’s patience being tested in the bunching of her sharp jaw. The pattern of tattoos around her hairline was beaded with an unusual sweat. She forced a grin. “What a fine idea.”

Two Moons beckoned conspiratorially. “Come with me.”

The sage led us to the edge of Mulchport and quieter entrances to the town. Amidst the skeletal roots knitted together like the reaching fingers of the dead, cottages huddled in knots and burrows. People gathered their washing or raked the leaves from their steps. I swore every one of them stared at us from under their turbans or hoods or braids. Serisi shared my wariness, grinding her fangs.

The wooden palisade that ringed the town was guarded by warders without colours or uniforms. They seemed to be united solely by their furrowed brows and keen mistrust for any comer or goer. Even despite Two Moon's presence, the warders glowered at us as we passed.

Keeping his head low and eyes busy, Two Moon showed us to a beast-hut far from the main paths and stairs: a simple and drab row of roofed pens that squatted on the forest floor. He whispered in the ear of the owner, a man with a braided beard down to his knees, and a pen was swiftly opened for Grampus and the wagon.

"You can trust this man," Two Moon assured us. "I'll bet my life on it."

"How can you be sure?" I asked.

"Because he is my father," said Two Moon with a grin so wide it almost reached his ears. He patted the old man on the shoulder and pointed us on to a broad stair. With Atalawe and Inwar staying behind with the wagon, the rest of us proceeded into the higher reaches of Mulchport.

Though we climbed only a few levels up, it felt good to rise above the loam once again. This was where my feet belonged: on branch and plank and platform, not mired in dirt and undergrowth infested with danger. Serisi didn't agree. I could feel her gaze looking down, measuring the paltry height.

"And how are my favourite mudmages?" Two Moon asked of Redeye and me.

"Tired," was all Redeye grunted. He seemed preoccupied with the passing of every townsperson. There were fewer people on this side of Mulchport, but still enough to cause the sorcer to scowl as though every figure hid the copper knife of a Fireborn beneath their threads.

"Happy to be back and out of the loam," I added, distracting Two Moon.

"Where are the others who were with you before, the two women and the old man?"

My right fist clenched. "Also elsewhere."

Two Moon chuckled, patting me on the back so hard I coughed. "You can trust me, young man, don't you worry. I'm no friend of demons. But bleeding trees! Look at you, lad: looking stronger and leaner than last time I saw you."

I caught Ralish's stare just in time see her shake her head at my smirk.

"Got some fisher vine blood on you, though. Up on your neck there," Two Moon said, poking at his own throat.

I dabbed at my skin, knowing it was the black of my veins rather than dried fisher blood. "That happens," I replied. "Comes with the calling."

"Rather you than me! My job might not be as death-defying as hunting demons, but it's plenty tough for me. It's hard work keeping all the traders and travellers who come through here happy, and keeping those who stay even happier. Got to keep the people fed, peaceful, and safe from firstglow to lastlight. That's why I could use a few sorcers like you, you know. To keep Mulchport quiet and dependable."

Redeye cleared his throat. "We're not for sale."

"Alas, but how I wish you were! I'd pay a pretty gem or dozen for two mudmages like you," Two Moon sighed wistfully. "Matter of fact, I've been seeing a lot of sorcers coming here from

the south and east. I asked them, too, but they just laughed at the idea of demons. Can you imagine? Bleeding trees. Besides, they're all on their way northwest for the Forging. Can't believe it's been five seasons already."

Redeye was looking at me sidelong.

I grow tired of that sorcerer's baleful staring. If I were you, I would show him the back of my claws. Even we Voidborn smile once in a while. Him? I think his face is stuck like that.

"Good to know," I muttered, stowing my smile.

Two Moon clapped me on the back again. "If you change your minds, you are always welcome here, friends! And speaking of here, we've arrived. Welcome to the Scornful Claw."

"Here" was a long hut squished between two giant support beams. The alehouse was made of vine thatch, all tightly bound with sap and interwoven with blooming candlevines. The words painted on its sandglass windows were a long list of rules, such as a ban on beasts, singing, loud conversations, muddy boots, songmakers, and even magic.

Ralish hummed. "Looks... *welcoming*."

With a guffaw, the sage led us to the door. "Old Maldahak might be a grumpy old miser, and it's a wonder she's still in business, but bleeding trees, if her ale isn't the best in the Swathe. Have no idea what she puts in it. Her house should be bustling because of it, but her ways keep it quieter than any other."

"Just how we like it," Eztaral replied.

Barely one foot over the threshold, a squawk of a voice greeted us.

"You read my rules?"

Behind the low wall of wood that formed the counter, I spotted a gnarled face. The rest of the woman was hidden, and all I could see was an upturned bowl of white hair and two fierce amber eyes.

"As always, Maldahak," announced Two Moon as he swaggered along behind us. "Hard to miss."

The wide end of a patterned snail shell poked above the counter. "Eh?" she yelled, holding its thin end to her ear.

"I said as always, Maldahak!" Two Moon yelled. "I could read them to you backwards by now, you old pain in the arse."

Maldahak moved along the counter while her eyes stayed fixed on us. "I thought I banned you, you big lummo. Last time you were in here, there was a bird living in your hair and it shat all over my chairs. Rules ten and fourteen clearly say no birds, no shitting."

"Bleeding trees. Don't you get yourself worked up now. I won't be staying. These travellers needed directions to a quiet alehouse, is all. You're welcome for the business," Two Moon answered her, already shuffling back out the door. "And with that, I bid you safe travels, *strangers*. Wish I could do more for you."

Judging by his exceedingly obvious wink, I hoped that Two Moon never pursued a career in acting, but I appreciated his kindness. It had been hard to find in the loam.

The Scornful Claw was far from busy. Three fine-dressed drinkers sat further down the row of tables. I could not see their faces, but they wore pale fishbone armour streaked with orange and a shade of brown that was unfortunately similar to the colour of dung. A man of the scholar tribe sat at the counter. He sipped gingerly at his bowl of ale as if it was scalding hot, while a huge tortoise gradually made its way across the room.

Serisi huffed. *Does this place have a plague in it or something?*

Eztaral chose a table close to the door. We kept our eyes low and our voices lower. Maldahak at last appeared from behind the counter. Even though I perched on a stool, the old woman barely reached my shoulder. She made a big show of hobbling around our table with a stick in one hand, checking us over with her feral eyes.

“Only got two rooms,” she hollered even though she was mere feet away.

“Two will be fine.”

Eztaral had the snail shell horn shoved in her face.

“Speak up!”

The eagleborn obliged her with her usual volume. “I said two will be fine!”

Maldahak tutted through her snaggle teeth. “Tsch. No need to shout. Those weapons stay sheathed and quivered, you hear? And you sorcers. Yes, these eyes might be old, but I see the marks beneath your hoods and the colour of your hands. There’ll be no magic in my house, just like I told those others over there.”

I followed the direction of her twig of a finger. The other drinkers turned to us at the mention of magic. I saw the matching tattoos of curving daggers on their brows and cheeks, stark against pale southern skin. The hands that cupped their bowls were dyed white, and that made them air carvers. I couldn’t see the branded lines of rank on their faces.

“Sorcers of Coriqal,” whispered Eztaral. “A stunted bloodwood east of here that hunches over a bay of black sand and open water. They should count themselves lucky Faraganthar’s demons didn’t go for their nectra instead of Shal Gara’s.”

Maldahak brought over bowls of water and ale. How her worn old fingers managed to carry so many at once baffled me. Once her palm glittered with gems, she left us alone, grumbling loudly about the rudeness of strangers before she disappeared behind the counter. I couldn’t help but wonder why she’d opened an alehouse in the first place.

Two Moon might have been loud and a fool, but he was no liar. The ale was deeply cold, sour, and held a strong flavour of ūlana fruit. I drained half the bowl before I came up for breath.

Foam still on her lip, Eztaral issued her orders. “We’ll stay here out of sight and be up gone before firstglow. I don’t want any of us speaking to anyone. Understand? The less people see of—”

“Where do you hail from, strangers?” came a call from one of the foreign sorcers. I watched a woman lean back in her chair, toasting us with her bowl held high. The twin tails of her hair brushed the floor.

Eztaral looked to the vine-thatch roof as if quietly threatening the Three. “Curse it all,” she muttered beneath her breath.

The silence stretched to awkward proportions, too long to pretend we hadn't heard. Ralish gave the woman a vague answer. "We travel here and there."

That only seemed to intrigue the sorcer. She clomped her boots loudly on the floor as she turned to face us. Enough for me to see the noble red shade of her eyes and the glow of nectra beneath her cloak. By the four branded lines on her right cheek, she was a paragon in rank.

"Who do we have here? A worker, a warrior, and two mudmages, I see. Two mavens, one banished," she said with a smile far too wide and whiter than the bone plates of her armour.

"Readmitted," I corrected her.

"Charming. Forgive me, I don't recognise your colours. Copper, black, and grey. How... *imaginative.*"

"You wouldn't recognise them," I replied. "We aren't from any bloodwood."

Not anymore.

Eztaral poked me with her foot, expertly aimed in the middle of my shin.

While her fellows stayed seated with hands over their smiles, the woman came to get a better look at us. "Sorcers without a bloodwood? I've heard of your kind. You're from cities built in the bigger ironpiths and pines, or loam-folk living in flat towns in the mud, correct? You know, it sounds almost freeing. No matriarch to proudly serve. No order to uphold and protect. No thousands to cheer as you pass on the streets..." The sorcer's grin widened with every word, and she held all of our scowls without a care.

It is strange, Serisi said inside me. Her words seem friendly, and yet for some reason, I have a terrible thirst to pull out her teeth one by one.

"You're not alone," I breathed. The urge was strong.

The sorcer stared at me. "What are you doing here, strangers? On your way to be tested in the Forging in Dorla Sel—"

"Elsewhere actually," I replied, cutting off her sentence before she could speak any more.

"A secretive sort, aren't you?" She tutted as if we had ruined her fun. "Mind you, it's probably for the best. Mudmages don't normally get very far in the duels. You'll save yourself a long and disappointing journey."

Eztaral chose that moment to turn around, showing the Coriqal sorcer the brands of rank on her cheek. All six of them. Even with the eagle's feather hidden under Eztaral's cloak, they told the sorcer everything she needed to know: she was outranked. For those that upheld them, the order of the Bloodlaws stretched from east to west, north to south. Ranks and tribes held fast all across the Swathe, no matter your bloodwood.

"Funny thing is, we don't mind long journeys in the loam," the eagleborn growled. "Or on dangerous roads. Why? It's nice and quiet. Far more preferable than listening to the one fool you always find loitering in alehouses waiting to dole out thinly veiled mockery to make them feel superior and advice that wasn't asked for and is *unbelievably* unappreciated. What you can save us from is a lot of bother, and you can do that by closing your mouth, scurrying back to your table, and finishing your drinks quietly amongst yourselves. And I do have to emphasise the *quietly*.

Here's a helpful tip: if I can hear what you're saying, you're speaking too loudly. Unless, that is, you would rather spit in the face of the Bloodlaws and continue your little ill-fated routine... Paragon."

While I struggled to keep a straight face, the sorcer straightened, touched her forehead in salute, and obliged the eagleborn.

"Treeless loam-eaters," I heard her mutter once her back was turned.

Eztaral settled back in her chair and raised her bowl for another. She tried to hide it, but I could see the satisfaction on her face.

This is one of those rare moments when I find your world's devotion to order more rewarding than chaos. The eagle woman has a way with words.

"That she does, Serisi," I said with a grin.

"Haven't heard you go off like that in a while," said Redeye. "Thought you'd lost the knack."

Eztaral nodded slowly, her green eye narrowed at me. "Takes a certain person to bring it out of me."

"Why *is* there one of those in every alehouse?" Ralish asked. "And why are they usually a sorcer?"

Redeye's face was so buried in his bowl his reply was barely audible. Somehow his scarlet eyes still found room to stare at me. "Nectra goes to your head, is what they say."

"What's this Forging everyone's talking about?" I asked, immediately curious.

Eztaral tapped a hook of a finger on the varnished table. "Every five seasons, each bloodwood in the Swathe sends their best sorcers to the capital of Dorla Sel to compete for glory, gems, and a coveted audience with Allmother Tzatca, the ancient Grand Matriarch of the Swathe. Four days of duels between the finest sorcers in the Swathe, ending in a four-way battle to crown a champion who's paraded through the bloodwood as if they're Kī Raxa reborn," she told me.

I thought you were Kī Raxa reborn, Tarko.

Redeye sucked his teeth. "They used to call it the Tournament of Sorcers before it became nothing but carnage for bloodthirsty crowds. Now they call it the Forging. The grandest competition in all the bloodwoods. The Bloodlaws and the Sorcer's Edict were both written in a time of war. With no grand war to fight, we have turned to fighting each other."

Consider me intrigued, said my demon.

Before I could delve further, the sorcers of Coriqal finished their drinks with a clanking of bowls. Maldahak popped up to slap her hand on the counter.

"No damaging the bowls! Rule six!"

"No matter, old mother. We're leaving," said the sorcer as she weaved through the tables around us, avoiding our eyes. "It's become a little stale in here. Need a good breeze to air out the stink of filth."

Before the door could close, I spied the blue glint in the sorcer's eye and caught the wave of her white hand. A gust of wind rushed across our table. Redeye's bowl was shoved into his lap. Eztaral's empty vessel tumbled across the floor in two pieces. Most of Ralish's full bowl ended up

in my face. Serisi hissed at the touch of the liquid. As always, I felt the sting of it alongside her and clenched my jaw as I made to stand.

Eztaral dragged me back down by the sleeve. The demon in me strained to shrug away, but I didn't obey.

"We won't cause a scene, Tarko," Eztaral warned me. "Nor will you, Redeye. That's the kind of news that travels."

Maldahak appeared so abruptly at the edge of the table I almost spilled even more ale on me.

"Charging you for the bowl," she yelled. "And for the mess."

I would like that small worm a lot more if she did not have the means to speak, Serisi growled.

Atalawe and Inwar opened the door. "You wouldn't believe the bunch of pricks I just walked into, let me tell you—" the wrangler began.

"Rule three and five! No yelling! No beasts!"

"Gods have mercy!" Atalawe blurted as she recoiled in shock at the deafening woman standing at her hip. She looked around in confusion before pointing beside me. "What about that bloody tortoise?"

I turned around and immediately recoiled when I found the sleep-eyed face of the tortoise near to my elbow. He looked as though he had been about to chew on my armour.

"That's Hobble, and he's mine," snapped Maldahak. "Now out you go!"

Atalawe and the old miser glared at each other for several moments before she threw up her hands. Inwar hissed.

"I'm sleeping with the beasts," Atalawe said as she marched out of the door. "Enjoy your evening with this hag."

Even Redeye had to chuckle at that.

*

With the sun goddess long lost behind the trees, Mulchport was filled with the thunder of bustle and merriment. Lancewings came and went in their dozens. The muffled rumble of duelling songmakers and stamping feet was constant. A pair of drunks outside were busy trying to start a fight with a wooden column that had apparently offended them.

I watched it all from the tiny circle of sandglass Maldahak called a window. Ralish was asleep in the bed. Eztaral sat in the corner, hands stretched over a small ironpith pan of dimming coals. A half-full bottle of ticabo wine sat on the bed. Though the edges of the room were starting to blur, I took another swig before Eztaral snatched it back.

"If you're going to keep watch, Tarko, you don't do it while marinating yourself in wine like you're a haunch of loamtoad."

"I'm fine," I whispered. "And far from tired as per usual, thanks to Serisi."

Eztaral snorted gruffly. The late hours and wine had put a foul mood in her. “What a pity. Just imagine how simple this could be if you did us the wonderful favour of dreaming where Haidak is lurking.”

“As I’ve told you: it hasn’t been the same since Shal Gara. If Serisi and I do dream, it’s like looking at a reflection I don’t recognise in a smashed mirror. Nothing makes any sense to me.”

“And you thrash about all night long,” added Ralish from under a pillow.

Eztaral picked up a dying coal with her gloved fingers. She drew a line in the air with its trail of smoke. “What if Serisi’s interfering now? What does *she* have to say for herself?”

“It’s been long enough, Eztaral. I thought you trusted her,” I said between clenched teeth. Using the ash from the edges of the pan, I brought Serisi to life. Half-made and hovering by my side, she was pale in the faint light of the window. “And you can speak to her yourself, you know.”

The eagleborn turned reluctantly to the demon’s shape. “Well, Serisi?”

“It is not my fault, eagle-worm,” she whispered. “I do not interfere.”

Eztaral folded her arms. “What did I say about calling us worms?”

Serisi hissed. “It was my father’s mind that was the true power behind how Tarko could dreamwalk, and the reason he glimpsed some of the truth before I learned to bend his dreams. My mind still roams when Tarko sleeps, but it is not the same as it was before. Without Faraganthar, the minds of the demons who survived the battle are fragmented. Mine included. I have no power over his dreams.”

Eztaral shoved back her chair to stride across the room. “Then try harder.”

Serisi muttered something in demonspeak before Eztaral could close the door behind her.

“What did you say, demon?” she snapped.

I answered for both of us. “Nothing,” I said. The door shut, and with a clench of my fist, Serisi faded back into my mind.

“How exactly are we supposed to we try harder?” I asked the silence.

Both Serisi and I stared at the skin of ticabo wine Eztaral had left on her chair.

Do you remember the first time I stole your body, Tarko?

I did. I had been drunk on victory and fifty-season vintage. I reached for the wine, considering it as it sloshed around. It was a fine way to bury the world and its worries for a time, if nothing else.

Helped us dream last time, did it not? Serisi said cautiously.

“Helped you, you mean,” I snorted. Nevertheless, I had few other ideas.

I lingered at the brazier’s edge with the wine until the coals began to dim. Only then did I seek out my bed – swaying ever so slightly – and slump down next to gently snoring Ralish. She mumbled something before rolling over and placing a hand on my chest. She felt cold against my constantly warm skin.

“Just like Shal Gara,” I whispered to the demon. I could imagine her shape in the shadows chasing each other across the walls.

Just like Shal Gara?

The demon's whisper came too late as I slid into a sea of black waves.

As you wish.

“Wait...”

5

MONSTER WITHIN

The oldest and first horrors of the Swathe were the gloomsprites. Shadow-creatures said to be left over from when the gods made the world from clay and water and fire. Night bled into the day, hiding behind rocks, trees, and clinging to the feet of the first tribe. They grew minds for mischief and, eventually, murder. They stole the souls of the lost and wandering, jealous of the gods' first gift of life.

FROM THE NOTES OF HUNTER QUIB'S SCROLL "LOAM SURVIVOR"

I was paralysed. Not even a finger would obey me. Though I felt as if my conscience dangled from a vine in a void, I was not numb; I felt every waft of Ralish's breath on my chest. I felt the icy deadweight of her arm on my chest.

Only my eyes obeyed me. I still stared up at the same moss-clad beams, watching the brazier-light etching shapes on the ceiling, but the edges of my vision were ragged like torn parchment. At first I thought it was the wine's fault. It seemed as if my eyes were a foot further in front of me than usual.

What's happening?

My voice sounded as if I shouted into a barrel, deafening and hollow.

What in the Six Hells?

I felt my lips moving. I felt the breath over my lips. Though I spoke with my voice, they were not my words, and not my doing.

"See? I was right. I knew you would not like this, Tarko."

Serisi! What have you done to me? I yelled.

*

Serisi tested her voice again, trying to accomplish what the worms called a whisper while Tarko raged against the inside of his skull.

"It is different when you are awake," she breathed in her stolen voice.

This isn't dreamwalking, curse it! This isn't what I wanted. You stop this right now!

Serisi scrunched up her face of mushy skin. It felt too loose, as if it would slide off at any moment. Try as she might to ignore it, it never felt right.

"I will not," Serisi replied.

You... You've done this before, haven't you?

“Shal Gara was the first time—”

Answer the question, demon. Don't lie to me. I can feel your thoughts.

“Two weeks ago, when you were trying to dreamwalk, it happened again. Then again five days ago. Each time you fell asleep, I felt a power surge into me and I awoke with our places reversed.”

I knew it! Why by the loam didn't you tell me?

“Because I knew you would react like... this.”

Put me back this bloody instant!

“I cannot, not until your body wakes. I cannot control it.”

Well, try again!

“I have tried before. Trust me, Tarko: I have wandered the clearing's edges for hours upon hours, trapped and bored until you awoke.”

Was that why I woke up in the grass that one morning?

Serisi shrugged. “Perhaps.”

Curse it. You're why Ralish thinks I don't sleep at all.

“So it would seem.” With a wrinkle of Tarko's lip, Serisi reached for the cold hand that lay on his – *her* – chest. With finger and thumb, she lifted it gingerly as though it were the arm of a diseased navik and shifted it aside.

“Why you creatures insist on touching each other so much astounds me,” Serisi whispered as she raised herself up to stand at the window. Two faint sparks of red shone in the reflection of the mottled sandglass. Her true eyes, shining through Tarko's.

This is abhorrent.

“You grow used to it. At least now you know how it feels to be me, Tarko.”

You and I agreed to bond a second time in this way. We did it to save the Swathe. I thought we had an understanding.

“You and I agreed to bond through magic we did and do not understand. We are bound willingly, yes, but yet it does not mean I do not pine for a freedom of my own. This is not of my doing, but merely our bond developing. Changing. A change you might loathe, but I do not.”

Tarko fell silent.

“I will take that to mean you agree.”

I'm never sleeping again.

The fire in the demon wanted to laugh callously and remind Tarko of his lack of choice. But her time with the worms had softened her hard shell, chaos damn them. She... *understood* Tarko's plight, and that alone should have been detestable to the average demon. Not to her. No longer. She growled deep in her throat. It sounded pitiful as a human.

“Do not worry. I will not harm you, Tarko.” She pawed at the rubbery skin covering her arms. “Though I have been meaning to tell you that now I know how pathetic your human bodies truly are, it is a wonder you survived the Sheertown Massacre, let alone the war with my kin.”

You leave my body alone. Stop grabbing at me. I can feel that too, you know.

Serisi shifted from the window, seeking the door.

Where do you think you're going?

“To walk. To breathe air that is not the sour stink of this house. Your nose might be weak, but my senses are not.”

Three Gods curse it! Tarko yelled, realising his uselessness. Serisi felt him tensing his mind against her, but her control was steadfast. She might not have understood or been able to control the magic, yet she was glad for it.

With Tarko muttering all kinds of complaints and threats, the demon closed the door, fumbling the bolt with unpractised hands. Tarko's legs, half the length of hers, had taken some time and training to walk gracefully on, but she was a swift learner.

The Scornful Claw was dark. The tiny maggot of a woman they had called Maldahak had disappeared. If Serisi hadn't known better, she would have assumed there was a demon hiding in that old bitch, too.

The hour was late yet Mulchport was still rife with all manner of noise and commotion. It seemed as if the whole town remained awake. Serisi watched the ruckus from beneath Tarko's low hood. The majority stood around on walkways and flapped their mouths and tongues. Others threw their precious gems at each other as they yelled over rings of scrawny fighting lizards. Some heckled the merchant-types or the worms who pranced and juggled for pay. A handful wandered through the crowds giving blessings from the worm gods, and wafting bowls of smouldering herbs that offended Serisi's nose.

The chaos of it pleased Serisi, but the rude jostling of the crowds wore on her. She tensed Tarko's muscles, shouldering those who didn't move aside quick enough.

Do you mind? Watch yourself, Serisi. This is my pathetic body, not yours. remember?

“And yet I make it stronger, can you feel it, Tarko?”

“Have a care, boy!” said a man, taking umbrage by the way Serisi shoved him aside. “You got something wrong in your head?”

“You have no idea,” Serisi said, trying a human smile.

The burly man puffed out his chest. “Lookin' for trouble, son? You've found it.”

Serisi! Eztaral said not to make a scene, and this looks suspiciously like the start of a scene to me. What are you doing to me?

Serisi was enjoying herself, was what. She was born a creature of chaos, after all. A shove came at her shoulder, and she rolled with it as she had learned to over eons. It was basic combat. The man stumbled over his own momentum and collapsed into a game involving gems carved like cards. The uproar was immediate, but Serisi had already disappeared into the crowd.

That was far too close. Turn around and go back to the alehouse before you get us into more trouble. Or worse, curse it. Mulchport could be crawling with Fireborn for all we know.

Serisi smirked as she ignored Tarko, as he had done to her many times. It was not revenge. Nothing as petty as that. It was exercising a freedom. Scratching an itch she had not scratched in months.

“Stop complaining, Tarko of the Swathe. You die, I die, remember? Nothing has changed.”

Muted grumbling was all that answered her.

“If you do not trust me by now, Tarko, then we clearly have not learned anything.”

Tarko stayed silent, watching through Serisi’s eyes.

The demon in her stolen body stalked to the peak of Mulchport, where lancewings hummed and nesthands ran to and fro to keep them fed. Crowds leaned against the railings, watching the hubbub and the powerful birds. Serisi mimicked them, feeling the air bother her borrowed hair.

“I do not like those bird-creatures,” Serisi opined. “But they do impress me.”

Well, how fantastic for you. But wait! Here’s a wonderful idea: how about you get me back to the Scornful Claw this moment and you don’t get me killed?

Serisi snorted. She grabbed another onlooker by the shoulder, who looked savagely disturbed by the intrusion. “Where are these birds going?”

“To Dorla Sel,” the woman blurted excitedly. “To the Forging.”

“You a sorcer? You look like a sorcer judging by your marks. An earth reaver by the colour of your hands,” said the male at her side.

“That I am.”

Tarko groaned.

A look of simple wonder came over their faces. “Are you competing in the Forging?”

Serisi had no idea. She played along. “Maybe.”

Serisi!

“We have our parchments of entry,” the woman said with pride, waving a sheaf of tanned lizard skin. “We will watch for you.”

“And I will shower you in the blood of victory,” said Serisi. The humans fell silent and their eyes became wide and frog-like. Serisi flashed a grin before leaving them be.

What... What does that even mean?

“I’m not used to pretending to be a worm,” she muttered.

Then do better! Please. Take us back home. I grow tired of asking.

“Fine.”

Serisi took her time, meandering through markets and loitering near fight-pits she was delighted to find at Mulchport’s core. They were crude hollows, caged in wood and surrounded by crowds baying for violence. The pits involving humans rather than beasts were far more entertaining. Serisi waded into the crowds to watch, a smile spreading across her face.

Do we have to watch this? Tarko asked plaintively.

“A little longer. Why did you not tell me you worms enjoyed such bloodsport? There is chaos amongst your order after all.”

It wasn’t long until Serisi found the meagre clutch of gems in Tarko’s pockets and marched immediately to the next pit preparing itself for another bout.

Don’t you dare. Those are all I have. My mother saved them. You don’t even know what you’re doing.

“I know more than you could comprehend,” Serisi said before pointing to an older human with a broken face. She handed a pit-master every stone Tarko had: about two-dozen gems all told. “That worm to win. That uglier brute with one eye.”

You’re choosing that old wreck? I swear to the Three Gods, you’re going to lose all my gems.
“Just watch.”

Much to Tarko’s bewilderment and Serisi’s amusement, the fight was over within three blows. All of which came from the fighter Serisi had bet on. Blood sprayed the pit of wood and canvas, and a torrent of gems came back to the demon. She stuffed her pockets while muttering from the side of her mouth.

“Surprised, Tarko? Or did you not know gambling is all chance and chaos?”

All right, fine. You made your point. But that’s enough, you hear me?

“Want to double your winnings, lad?” enticed the gap-toothed pit-master. “Next fighter’s up in a shake of an orokan’s tail.”

“Do I?” Serisi asked.

No, you don’t.

“I think I do.”

The man slapped Serisi’s back with a hand greasy with roast lizard meat. “Good lad! Which fighter takes your fancy?”

Serisi surveilled the two fighters, each suspended in a cage beside the pit and busy showing off their muscles and scars. Beyond their bars, she spotted the buffoon they called Two Moon on a balcony poking out over the fight-pit. She felt Tarko’s burning stare behind her eyes.

We need to go.

“I will take the shorter fighter,” said Serisi.

“Really? Hah! Your loss, sorcer,” said the pit-master with a display of teeth that looked like a burned fence.

I assume you see something I don’t?

Serisi had. She was rooting for the runt. Runts had more to prove. “Chaos,” Serisi whispered.

The fighters entered their ring. Blows were traded back and forth until faces and knuckles bled. The shorter worm was hounded back and forth, taking blow after savage blow until he looked like he was done for.

All my gems...

The bigger lummoX faltered, tripping over the runt’s foot. The lesser worm pounced, driving his thumbs into his opponent’s eyes in a dirty but satisfying move. The lummoX recoiled, allowing the runt to kick him over and over in the ribs until he collapsed and was pummelled senseless. Easy prey.

“Hmph. Lucky choice,” grumbled the pit-master as he doled out her winnings.

Serisi ran out of space in her pockets there was so many gems to hold on to.

Fine. I stand corrected, I suppose, Tarko admitted. But you’ve caught the eye of more than just the pit-master. Remember them?

Serisi looked across the pit to see the sorcers from the alehouse leaning against a railing. They were staring in her direction. “Good,” she muttered.

What do you mean ‘good’? That’s not what I want to hear!

With the pockets of Tarko’s cloak jingling, Serisi set a circuitous path around Mulchport’s lower levels, doubling back on herself until she approached Maldahak’s alehouse from the opposite direction she had set foot out the door.

You’ve got to be joking with me, Tarko sighed.

The three Coriqual air carvers now loitered outside Maldahak’s doorway, and they had already noticed Serisi’s shadow on the deck. The demon grinned.

I feel that smile, Serisi. You back away and lose them. You don’t have my magic or my sling. Serisi chuckled. “You should know by now I need neither, Tarko.”

Serisi...

“Look at this fool, talking to himself! These treeless louts are stranger than I thought,” said the leader, the paragon who had stung them with magic earlier. She now wore a mask of a fish-skull lined with fangs. Her twin tails of hair were wrapped around her neck like a scarf. A bone sword was clenched in one white-dyed hand, the other held a vial of nectra. “Where’s your bigmouthed eagleborn now, mudmage?” she yelled. “I was hoping to teach her a lesson in manners as well. Alas, you’ll have to suffice.”

“How long did Redeye say nectra took to work on you worms?” Serisi whispered to Tarko.

Ten heartbeats or fewer. But that’s beside the point! You’re going to get us murdered if you try to fight them without my magic.

“Believe in me, Tarko,” she told him.

The Coriqual sorcer stamped her foot. “You listening to me, you stinking loamer?”

Serisi smiled, spreading her arms wide. “Teach away, worm. I am waiting.”

“You dare to call me a worm?” she snapped, incensed. “You feckless bastard! I’ll show you what a real sorcer looks like. And unfortunately for you, I’m the best there is!”

Serisi sprang into a run as soon as the sorcer touched the vial to her lips. Not in the opposite direction as Tarko would have likely preferred, but straight towards the foolish woman who had dared to offend her. Even unarmed, even without magic, Serisi was still the daughter of a demon king. A royal heir of destruction and a war-forged harbinger of chaos.

Serisi!

The flat of the sorcer’s bone blade whipped predictably over Serisi’s head. The demon landed a fist on her ribs with a force that elicited a curse from both her and Tarko. With a wheeze, the sorcer fell like a sack of meat cut loose from its rope. Serisi followed with a kick that broke her mask in two and put her facedown on the wood, dribbling blood. Her vial of nectra spilled across the boards. A smile spread across Serisi’s face. She had missed dealing out brutality with her own claws.

The next sorcer was closer to his magic, and a spell buffeted Serisi for a moment before she swept one of his legs from under him and broke his nose with her elbow. Before he could recover, she seized him by the throat and hammered him senseless against the deck.

The last sorcer stood his ground well, battering Serisi with wind and cheap worm-magic until she found a way to slip beneath the onslaught. The sorcer's balance fell to her fierce grip. In panic, he swung a wooden club in a wild arc. Serisi caught it flat in her palm, wrenched it from the man's grip so fast it snapped his hand, and pulverised his jaw with the remnant. She stood over the female sorcer with the jagged piece raised.

Serisi, stop! That's enough. Mulchport might not be a bloodwood, but they'll still string us up for murdering three sorcers.

"No matter. The lesson is over." The demon stood heaving with mortal breath over the broken and moaning sorcers. She threw the club at the ground, inches from the sorcer's face. "These are your best, Tarko? Rogues and braggers? It is not good enough. This is why the Swathe will not win without us," she growled.

The Coriqal sorcer spat blood, looking up at her with a half-conscious leer before she groaned and promptly passed out.

I'm not going to argue that right now, but all that matters is getting out of sight before somebody sees us and we're held accountable for this mayhem.

"You worms and your rules," she tutted. "And do not think I know your true thoughts, Tarko: you did not ask me to stop until I had broken the last worm's face."

Tarko's silence told her she was right.

Leaving the senseless sorcers behind, Serisi swiftly ducked into the doorway of the alehouse. The stink immediately offended her nose. A shadow perched beside the counter, almost lost to the gloom.

"Tarko," it rasped.

Don't you even think about giving us away.

Serisi agreed. "Eztaral." The eagle-worm was hunched on a stool, feeding something to the strange tortoise.

"Heard a commotion outside. Wouldn't be anything to do with you, would it?"

"Some drunken w—fools."

A squeak of a stool borough Eztaral closer. Even with Tarko's dim vision, she could see the danger on the eagleborn's face.

"There's a shine in your eyes tonight, Tarko. More of that demon in you than normal."

"Must be Serisi's doing," the demon in question replied. Serisi put her foot to the stairwell.

"Get some sleep now. Remember what I said."

"Dreamwalking," Serisi muttered.

Don't linger, you idiot. Go.

Serisi did as I told her and marched up the stairs, seemingly content with her excursion. I shivered within the shell of my own body. The pound of my heart sent waves through my extremities. The demon's battle-lust infected me. I refused to tell her the Coriqal sorcers had deserved it, or that I was glad Serisi had unleashed a beast upon them, or even that the pain in my knuckles felt good. The matter of being held hostage in my body was far more disturbing.

I was glad when Serisi stowed the gems in a pack and finally put my body back in bed. I felt the shiver in her as Ralish rested a hand on me once more, and I felt her power fading. The ragged edges of her vision pieced itself back together in patches of black. The sleep stolen from me came flooding back.

“We’re going to have words tomorrow, demon,” I breathed. “Harsh words.”