

# 22

## BATHNAROK

*A poison? A mould? Lice at its core? Lack of nectra? Nobody knows what is killing Azcalan, season by season, but there are some that believe it is a curse, for those that turned their backs on the Three Gods and worshipped their own spirits.*

*“ON THE NATURE OF BLOODWOODS” BY TEMACH LILO*

With a stumble and plenty of cursing, we burst into the night air and onto a low and gnarled branch speckled with leaden workers. We worked our way further away from the caverns clutched beneath the roots. Cloaked Fireborn wandered about, pretending to keep watch. I scoured the marshes for any sign of the Cloudriders and Scions, but all I could see was the drifting motes of glowing moulds and fireworms. Above us, a city clung to the crooked tree. A nest-like structure hung half a mile of branches beyond, almost lost in the mist. A matriarch’s hall if I’d ever seen one. It was darkened, with only three solitary lights aglow. I wondered if Haidak Baran was ensconced within.

“Where are we going?” Ralish leaned against my arm.

“Anywhere that’s safe.” I took off my stinking mask and pulled my hood lower. The odour of whatever the workers were hauling from the marshes might have been worse. “Maybe there’s someone in this city that’s still in their right mind.”

A condemning cry echoed across the branch. “Stop those imposters!”

Behind us, a dozen Fireborn were pointing in our direction with copper swords and spears levelled.

“Shit.”

While I scoured the mists for any sign of the Cloudriders and Scions, we bolted up stairwells and suspended walkways to where a subdued market sprawled around the trunk. A forest of dead ivy infested the bark of Azcalan. Weak candlevine glowed, illuminating stalls that were carved out of large tortoise shells. Shadows milled around, poking at pallid fruits and vegetables that looked on the cusp of rot. Most stalls were half-camouflaged with strings of drying lizards and swampweed. Herbs burned in peat braziers to cover the stink of the marsh.

There were fewer Fireborn here, and our pursuers had been left behind. In a nook, we cast off the Fireborn cloaks and trusted in the dark grey of Scion armour to blend in.

We played at being traders, poking at hanging lizards and even pretending to barter here and there while embedding ourselves in muted crowds. Even when Fireborn came sprinting onto the branch, we did not run. We even gawped like the other customers while edging into areas of shadow. Half the Fireborn ran onwards while the others came to a panting halt and spread out, slow and wary.

A man in a stall set back from the rest beckoned to us. We stepped under the fronds of weed covering the turtle shell and kept our heads low.

“I know that look. You’re new to Azcalan, right?” he whispered.

Ralish poked at his scrolls. “Very new.”

“We ain’t like other bloodwoods. Likely got a lot of questions.”

“You could say that.”

“The tree’s been blighted for two hundred seasons now. Cursed by the gods is what they’ve always said. People die here far too young, see? Moulds get in the lungs, or bogs and marshtrolls swallow those who wander too far from the lights. Half of us were set to leave when salvation arrived. I never thought I’d see the bloodwood saved.”

“Saved?” I asked. That lump in my gut was back.

“Why of course! The Fireborn showed us there was another way. The Three Gods have spurned us. Teltori’s light never braves the mists. Gorna the god of soil seeks to poison us. Alokari’s rains seek to sink us.”

The superstition in me couldn’t help but wince at the blasphemy of hearing the gods’ names aloud. I looked past his shoulder to see a small shrine to the Three on the far wall. It was the kind I had seen in Shal Gara countless times. What concerned me about this shrine was that it had been spattered with black paint and broken in half. A single wooden cup of oil burned in its wreckage. My skin prickled.

“But there is another god, you see, a fourth,” said the trader with an earnest smile and clasped hands. The feeling of dread returned to my gut. “Caskerax is his name, the God of Chaos, and though the Three banished him to worlds unknown in the creation of the Swathe, without him, our world is incomplete. He and Lord Baran and his demonkind will save us and purify the poison in the tree with fire. You’ve come at a wonderful time, travellers.”

“Lord Baran?” I hissed. “He’s a traitor to Shal Gara. A liar. He’s conned you all.”

“Oh, no,” the merchant smiled. “He’s brought us back from the dead.”

We started to back away. Azcalan appeared to be beyond saving.

“We will not know suffering any more, but glory! Glory!” he began to shout.

“Glory!” repeated voices behind us.

“Curse it!” snapped Ralish. I saw why immediately: we were completely trapped. Citizens and warriors in red cloaks and Fireborn began to crowd us. At the edges of the market, the glow of demonfire began to grow.

“Tarko...,” said Ralish, bowstring stretched.

Magic shivered in my arms as I readied myself to fight. There was mud all around us. Half the huts were daubed in it. A whole marsh to bend to my will. Blue light shot up my arm as I centred my mind and gripped at my spells.

Before the blades could close in, I obliterated a nearby market stall into dust and brought it crushing together. Bones snapped alongside spears.

Finesse. Redeye's words ran through my head once more. I had waited for a chance to avenge Texoc, and I did so with relish. I focused my spells, seizing the copper blades out of Fireborn hands and turning them around on their owners. Ralish's arrows peppered the bewildered Fireborn. Their trap was swiftly broken in half and dashed to pieces.

Citizens began to run at us, wielding whatever came to hand. I drove them back and knocked them down with rush spells. It gave me little pleasure to fight those that had been conned and lied to, or broken against their will, or even simple fools, but I was given no choice. To deny sense and the Swathe made them my enemy.

Something solid and stone-like struck me on the back of the head. The pain staggered me into Ralish, whose arrow soared high across the market. Behind me I saw the merchant brandishing a rock.

*How dare he? Punish him.*

Perhaps these citizens did have a choice, and they were not simple fools. Perhaps they were simple traitors through and through. I dragged the merchant's stall to pieces around him, locking him in shackles of dust. His wrists snapped as I clenched tighter. The more I squeezed, the more my pity turned into outrage and hate.

"Tarko!"

I turned to see Ralish turn to shadow against a sudden wall of fire. It washed across the market branch in a wave, scorching citizen and Fireborn alike and conveniently cutting off our escape.

"Demonfire!" I yelled to Ralish, releasing the merchant so he could clutch at his broken bones. I could see and feel Bathnarok pounding his way across the scorched planks. A slingstone tore a chunk from his shoulder, but Bathnarok continued his advance without missing a step.

"It is time to face your doom, Serisianathiel!" he boomed.

I pushed a rush spell against him while I summoned clods of mud for dart spells. I hurled them at Bathnarok, but he cleaved my efforts in two with a sword of flame. A whip barbed with star-iron spikes hung in his other claws and grated on the wood.

Ralish's arrows were shrugged aside just like my spells.

"Get ready to run, Ralish!"

*We are not fleeing, are we, Tarko? You will let this bastard live? We are better than that.*

"Oh, don't you worry, my good demon," I chuckled through grit teeth.

Before Bathnarok's sword came to split me into two mildly roasted pieces, I drove my strength into a tendril spell. Mud enveloped the blade with a burst of steam. The demon's burning eyes shone through the cloud.

Bathnarok lashed with the whip instead. Its barbed tip was a wily creature and managed to reach around my shield to score wounds on both me and Ralish.

At the sound of her pained cry, I threw the shield in Bathnarok's face, seized his whip in one fist of dirt, and clamped his sword in another. I felt Serisi coalesce above me. I could see her in the fell faces of the survivors strewn around us, in the shadow rising against the fire.

With Bathnarok bound and powerless, Serisi rammed her forehead into her kin's face. Three times, she struck him with the force of earth and stone and all the magic I could muster. Bathnarok was thrown against the bloodwood's trunk with a piteous bellow.

"Ha!" Serisi and I roared. Fireborn shrank away. Citizens gawped at the stunned demon, realising their masters were far from benevolent and all-powerful. I stared down upon them with eyes that glowed with Serisi's fire. Spirals of dust traced my incandescent veins.

"Poor choices come with consequences!" I shouted to them.

"Wrap it up, hero!" Ralish's quiver was two arrows away from being spent. She swung her mattock at anything that came in her way.

"We need to go."

"Where to, Tarko? It's just an empty branch!"

I had my hopes, and I clutched at them desperately. My fears dragged at my feet and tried to slow me down, but there was no going back. Fire reached for us as we swerved between buildings and tangling vines. Bathnarok was giving chase and catching up fast.

"Traitor!" he shouted.

I shoved Ralish ahead of me. "You go on!"

"Curse you! I'm not leavin' you behind."

"I'll be right behind you. Trust me: I don't intend on dying in this poisoned bloodwood. I'll buy us time!"

Ralish ran for the shrinking end of the branch. It led to mist and marsh and nothing else for hundreds of feet below.

"Where's your precious leader Haidak?" I yelled to Bathnarok. "Your new lord and commander?"

Bathnarok spat fire at me. "The fire-haired worm is far from here, and he is not my lord!"

"Looks like it to me. You're taking his orders. Doing his bidding."

"We let him play his games as we have let you play yours."

"He'll be sorely displeased if you kill me."

"I do not care for his displeasure. Only my own! *Raskaa asha!*"

Twin swords of flame emerged from Bathnarok's sickle claws. He leaped for me with limbs spread. I swung upwards with an uppercut of a tendril spell. Fire ripped the air in two. The force of the connection threw me back, and before I could wipe the dirt from my eyes, I was already rolling to the edge of the branch.

*Tarko!*

An arrow thudded into the wood inches from my hand, and just as my legs lost their place on solid ground, I seized it. In my periphery, I saw Ralish holding her bow high. Demon's strength dragged me onto the branch just in time for Bathnarok to come swinging.

*By the Void!*

Despite's Serisi's worry, I had a trick ready. I seized my own hand with a tendril spell and hauled myself backwards. The blade of fire sank into the walkway with an explosion of flames. I brought more spells to batter Bathnarok in retaliation. The demon fought them like he was crazed. I did seem to have that effect on people, after all, demons included. And yet Bathnarok's approach seemed inexorable even in the face of my spells. I forced him to cleave through my mud walls as if they were tangling undergrowth, but they only slowed him. Ralish's final arrow struck Bathnarok in his throat. It merely angered him. The fire within his charcoal skin raged white-hot.

Judging by a frenzied yell, Ralish had reached the end of the branch, where it became skinnier than a boot's width. I spared a moment to glance into the night. Despite the cloying mist, the fire must have been visible for miles, just as I had hoped. Hope was quickly becoming my only weapon.

Whipping the sword from my belt, I let Serisi's construct wield it while I swung tendril after tendril at Bathnarok, sacrificing finesse for brute strength. For all I could tell, there were three demons in that fight, creatures of pure violence.

Bathnarok fought me back until I stood within Ralish's reach. I had only feet of space, and with every hammer of the demon's blades on my shield spell, that space shrank beneath my skidding boots.

"Where are they?"

Ralish grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me. "Is that what you're hoping for? Curse it, Tarko, I thought you had more in mind than that."

"I do!"

"No, Tarko. Not now. Not again!" Serisi's form snarled at me.

I shrugged, taking one hand from keeping my shield in one piece and clutching at the empty air instead. "Air beats earth," I growled.

Calm was abandoned. I let the ferocity grow in me. I taunted myself with the idea of failure, of death claiming us instead of victory. With a twitch of my hand, I felt the threads of the air and pulled on them. I saw the smoke spiral gently around my hand. I kept pulling until a wind raged around my free hand. The spell would have been invisible save for the vortex of smoke and mist it was beginning to spin.

"Yah!" I bellowed as I forced the spell as far as I could manage. It stalled Bathnarok long enough to bring my other fist in a wide arc. Air hammered the demon square in his chest, and for a fleeting moment, his flames were blown out, leaving only smoking black hide beneath.

I let my mudmagic fall as I clutched another handful of air. They were poor and rough spells, I didn't need Pel or Redeye to tell me that, but they were swifter and more powerful than the darts Bathnarok had spurned so easily. The demon was forced to angle his horns to wade against the

force of my magic. I kept the air streaming against him, not fuelling him as I had the wizard Maldorinil, but testing his fire like a furnace in a gale.

“Bastard worm!” Bathnarok howled.

I had mastered mudmagic. There were few better with a sling than I was. I had even dreamwalked. Now I had accessed another order of magic. Air, no less. And yet despite all that power, battle tactics were a skill I still sorely needed to practice. Bathnarok had centuries of advantage.

Serisi had already noticed my error in strategy. I felt her panic as Bathnarok crossed his fire-blades and began to swing. Not at me, but at the blackened branch keeping us aloft. The first blow gave rise to a horrid cracking that I felt through my boots.

The grin on the demon’s face was positively hateful as he called to me above the roar of wind and fire. His burning eyes moved to the glimmering marsh far below us. The surface of the bogs held the flicker of the flames. “I see the demon blood in you, Tarkosi Terelta! In your skin. Your eyes. You hear our tongue. You know our ways. You might have Serisianathiel’s power, but you are still nothing more than a worm. And that is why you are doomed. It is time to meet your end.”

“Cloudriders!” I began to yell at the top of my lungs. Bathnarok look confused and punished us with another hacking blow at the branch. The wood sagged beneath us. Ralish was already windmilling her arms for balance.

“Now would be a great time to show up!” came my howl. My spells faltered as I felt my footing fail, but I heaved all the air I could seize and hurled it at him. Bathnarok reeled backwards with a crackle of bone. For the space of a heartbeat, it looked like victory, but Bathnarok’s blades had done their job, and with an explosion of splinters, the branch snapped.

I reached for Ralish’s hand as she tumbled. Her fingertips brushed mine before she fell out of reach. Serisi roared with me as the ground summoned us closer.

# 23

## DEATH'S SHADOW

*I did not think it possible until now. To walk your own dreams is a common practice, but to walk another's, or to forge dreams for a mind not your own, was thought to be myth, or at very least a lost art. However, last night, I felt the presence of another in my dreams, and it has shocked me to my core, reader.*

*FROM THE TEACHINGS OF GODSEER MACAL, 1960*

I watched it all unfold before me. I felt the gut-punch of falling. I saw Ralish plough into a bog, breaking her neck on a fallen log before slipping under the waters. I saw a jagged and dead sapling splayed like a clawing hand and suffered the pain of its branches punching through my insides. I was speared like a ragged morsel of meat on a fork, left to stare at a half-moon above the mists and crooked branches of Azcalan.

I saw it all. I felt it all. I would have sworn my life on it all happening. And yet before the tree impaled me and my death came swooping, a shape of glittering green interrupted my fall. With a squeal and the pain of broken ribs half-blinding me, I found myself sprawled on a saddle and fortunately kept enough sense to cling on.

*Volechaser! You magnificent creature!* I heard a distant demon's voice bellow.

I strained to see Ralish. She was no broken body sinking into the mire but clutched in the claws of Thundertail and wriggling like a louse. Behind us, the entire force of the Cloudriders had descended on Azcalan. Blurs of scarlet and gold and sapphire shot through the flames that now consumed the trunk of the bloodwood. The battered Bathnarok tried his hardest to repel them, but in the face of their speed and numbers, and in his weakened state, he was soon knocked to his arse. Ropes and chains seized him, looped around every limb and doubly around his neck. With a strangled roar, I watched in awe as the lancewings lifted Bathnarok from the flaming stub of branch. They gave him a swift dunk in the marsh to silence his deafening curses.

With a great deal of effort from my tired muscles, I managed to roll myself into a seated position and strap at least one leg in. "What just happened?" I yelled to Vole. "Did you do that?"

I knew I had seen myself die. I pressed my hands to my chest, where I could still imagine my flesh stretched around the slimy branches.

*You are not alone. I felt it too, Tarko. If you ask me, it is either a trick of our minds, or the work of our binding, and we are more invincible than we thought.*

I didn't feel invincible. I had barely cheated death, and not even thanks to my doing. Yet there I was, escaped and safe. Alive. Victorious. The very air had obeyed my touch.

The confusion didn't die. I felt like I was wearing another skin. As if a great lie hung over me as it had in Shal Gara.

I had to endure the winds for long dragging minutes until the Cloudriders coalesced on a flat-topped hill with a crown of white pines. The crows and reinforcement lancewings had already set up a camp. Several birds perched in the splinters of the topmost pine branches, their riders holding spears ready and pointed at the evening sky.

Vole was first to arrive, of course. Thundertail blew up dust at my back. I tried to dismount gracefully and found my legs weaker than I thought. I crumpled to the dust. Vole poked at me in the back with his beak, making sure I was okay. Somehow, I didn't mind his errant tongue making my cheeky slimy.

"What just happened to us?" Ralish demanded, slumped up against her lancewing.

"Exactly what I want to know," I breathed as I crawled to put my arms around Ralish. She seized me so hard it almost hurt.

The lure of fresh sapwater soon proved more important, and Vole waddled to drink his fill from troughs that sloshed forwards on wheels. Shal Gara's nests could have used such a contraption.

The Scions were the next to land, and at their rear, a wriggling demon suspended from a dozen lancewings. Caraq rode close to Bathnarok's upturned head. His roars were lost in the thunder of the birds' descent, but I was sure they were full of curses.

Pel was the first to march at us. His old eyes were shining blue in the gloom. There was no smile in his face. He came at me fast, seizing me by the collar of my armour. The battle-rage still ran through me. I was close to pushing him away.

"Don't you dare look proud of yourself, Tarkosi Terelta. You disobeyed Eztaral's orders and abandoned your fellow Scions to chase a selfish vendetta to prove yourself and it almost cost you and Ralish your lives."

"It worked, though, didn't it?" I shot back. "Have I proved myself yet? Or do you still want to hold me back?"

"Gods curse you, Tarko." Pel seized me in a fierce grip. "I should be strangling you."

"I used air magic. It wasn't pretty but you were right about that, at least."

"There is no dissuading you, is there?" Pel struggled to dampen his scowl. "You're a madman and a fool, but you're lucky the gods do seem to want you alive. Despite your best efforts to kill yourself."

I shook my head. "I almost succeeded this time. At least... I felt like I died. I saw it happen before Vole broke my fall."

Before Pel could answer, I spotted Eztaral and the others on a warpath. Redeye was missing.

"Have you told him he's a fool yet, Pelikai?" the eagleborn yelled.

"I have."

"Then you're an accursed idiot as well, Terelta!"



Ever the seedwitch, Atalawe seized me and checked every cut and graze Azcalan and the Fireborn had given me. Ralish couldn't escape her, either. "We saw you fall. Thought you were both done for."

"You forgot your footing, Paragon, and put yourself in a disadvantage. I'd call that the strategic equivalent of pissing on your own leg," lectured Eztaral. "I don't care how powerful you are, you will never do such a thing again. Stupidity is not what I had in mind when I talked of giving our lives for our cause."

"I think you'll find," I said, standing tall, "it was all to lure the demon into the open so you could catch him. A gamble that would have gone better had you not been so late in arriving."

*Was that the plan? You could have told me.*

Ralish was squinting at me.

"Liar," Eztaral accused. "Lucky is what you are."

"Luck has nothing to do with it," I said.

Atalawe clapped me on the shoulder. "Whatever you bloody did, it worked. We have our demon."

I nodded. "And a prince of demons, or so Serisi says. One with royal blood. This is Bathnarok, the same beast that led us right into that tharantos nest."

Eztaral thumped her breastplate. "Then it was a fine hunt. But you ever disobey me again and endanger your fellow Scions, Tarko, and I'll skin you alive." Marrowthirst was waggled around to ensure I knew she was serious.

"Tarko, my boy! You've saved the day!" boomed Caraq as she waded through the growing crowds of Cloudriders. She thumped me on the back so hard I felt my teeth rattle.

*The big bird woman is right. I tell you, we are unstoppable, Tarko.*

"Where's Redeye?" I asked, looking around the plateau.

"Got turned around in the smoke. He's coming in right now." Caraq pointed to where a thirsty lancewing skimmed the forest canopy below us. Glassclaw bowled over several nesthands in her haste to land.

"Lagging behind as always," chuckled Atalawe.

*How true that is. Once again, he disappears in the presence of the Fireborn. More proof that Bathnarok's threat of a traitor is not as idle as we would hope.*

Filled with suspicion, I watched the sorcerer dismount and saunter to us. A bloody cut sat on his brow. I couldn't help but doubt him. He had given me enough reason, and now when I thought of the third Fireborn lord watching impassively over me in Faraganthar's fire, I imagined Redeye behind that mask of red stone. The suspicion burrowed deeper into me every time I considered it. "Where have you been?" I asked.

"Getting lost, is where. What happened to you, Tarko? Was setting fire to one bloodwood not enough for you?"

I scowled darkly, unable to avoid the sight of Azcalan's fire to the south. "You're getting lost and left behind a lot since Stormbeaten."

Those scarlet eyes, still holding a faint glow of nectra, flashed fiercely. “Must not be in as much of a rush as you are, Tarko.”

“Enough, the both of you!” Eztaral crossed her arms. “Redeye is right: what in the Hells happened in that bloodwood?”

“Tell me we don’t have to do much explaining and apologising to another matriarch,” Atalawe groaned.

Ralish shook her head. “Azcalan is more poisoned than you think. It’s almost a good thing that she burns.”

“Explain,” ordered our eagleborn.

“We followed a demon down a tunnel that led to a cavern right under the roots of Azcalan. Bathnarok and another demon were there, along with a hundred Fireborn or more. There was a carved hall with a godseer and crowds of mindless folk worshipping the God of Chaos.” Ralish shuddered.

“What?” Atalawe blurted.

*Let me speak.*

I held my hands one above the other and stirred the dust into a demon’s face. Caraq and the others formed a circle around me.

“The demons have taught your seers to combine nectra with demon blood and the Iron Icon’s dark magic to create a window to the Starless Plains,” said Serisi. “Not a doorway as before, but a thin veil to peer through.”

“The Starless what, sorry?” Caraq held up a hand.

“Worm—Citizen after citizen was being shepherded there to gaze upon the face of the God of Chaos himself. It melts a weak mind, and they have already melted the minds of hundreds. All of them drooling slaves. For what reason, I do not know.”

I nodded. “There were cages upon cages of them. All dead in the mind, obsessed with chaos. They referred to Haidak as Lord Baran and called him a saviour. The detestable bastard has managed to turn an entire bloodwood against the Swathe, just like we feared but in a way we didn’t dare imagine. They even said the matriarch had been shown the godseer’s portal. She is lost somewhere amongst the cages.”

“Tarko killed the godseer and we escaped before a whole crowd of them turned on us. Fireborn and Bathnarok gave us chase. The rest you know.”

Eztaral grunted. “That we arrived just in time.”

“‘Just’ is the right word,” I muttered.

“Haidak managed to poison an already poisoned tree. We’re lucky Azcalan didn’t have any nectra. But surely not all of them were turned. We can’t just abandon the rest to fire.”

Serisi’s form shifted between my hands. “They are beyond saving. There is no cure for gazing upon chaos. Even those outside the cages turned on us in the name of the Iron Icon.”

I bored into Redeye’s scarlet eyes. “That is why I won’t be held responsible for the fiery death of another innocent bloodwood.”

“You are not responsible,” Eztaral corrected me. “The demons and their Fireborn are.”

Silence was held between our little circle. The eagleborn decided for us.

“If the bloodwood has already fallen to the Fireborn, then we let Azcalan burn.”

“Eztaral!” snapped Atalawe.

“We are talking about a full battle and evacuation, Atalawe. Tarko said there are hundreds of Fireborn in Azcalan, and by that reasoning I would say letting a stronghold of theirs burn is a better idea.”

Atalawe shook her head. “Thousands of innocents might burn with them.”

“Thousands of innocents who would fight for Lord Baran and his lies.”

“They made their choice when they sided against the Swathe,” I muttered.

Ralish was staring at the glow in the distance. “But believing some lies isn’t a choice. The Bloodlaws taught us that.”

Atalawe thumped her staff in the dust. “Ralish is right.”

Eztaral stared beyond at the pillar of black smoke scoring the sky. She took her time to speak. “Caraq?”

The wingmaster bowed her head. “I will send scouts to find out what has become of the bloodwood. If there are any that can be saved, Lostriver will see to it.”

“Then I say we go pay our demon a visit and see what he can tell us,” decided Eztaral, leading the Scions towards the noise filling the air, and this time it was not the thunderous wings of the birds.

Caraq lingered behind and stared at Ralish and me sidelong.

“Why are you staring at us like that?” I challenged her.

“I saw you fall,” she said, her voice unusually quiet for once. “And I see that fall in your eyes still.”

Ralish and I swapped a glance.

Caraq nodded knowingly. “You saw a death, correct? Your own?”

“What if we did?” asked Ralish.

“I thought it was my magic.”

“Not so, even for you, Tarko.” Caraq turned to point at my lancewing. As if Vole knew we were talking about him, he turned his beak to face us and chirped.

“The ancestors spoke of lancewings that fly so fast they can alter the passage of events. Choose another time, as it were.”

I blinked hard. “You’re telling me Vole did this?”

*Surely not the bird.*

Caraq smiled as she walked away. “Perhaps.”

*No. I still maintain it was us, Tarko.*

I was not so sure, but I caught Ralish by the arm.

“I’m sorry I dragged you into that bloody mess,” I began. “I thought of Texoc and lost myself like I promised I wouldn’t, and it almost meant losing you also. I don’t think I’ll ever get that memory out of my head, but I know I never want to see it again.”

“You didn’t drag me,” Ralish muttered. I could see her own memory darkening her eyes. “I chose to follow you. Not that you gave me much choice in the matter. But you also held off Bathnarok long enough for Vole to save us. Just when I thought you were done showin’ off, too, you had to go and become an air carver.”

I shook my head. “I could have held back. Calmed myself and waited for the others.”

“But you didn’t,” she said, taking me aback. “You might not be able to wield fire but it definitely wields you more and more since Texoc.”

“It won’t happen again, Ralish. None of us will come that close to death again. Not now I can wield air.”

“I believe you. Just remember what you promised me about changing, Tarko.” The kiss she put on my cheek was brief but enough to convince me her feelings for me hadn’t turned to ash, but it didn’t remove the stone in my chest.

“Come on,” she told me before heading towards the crowd that had formed around the demon. “Let’s see if this demon was worth seein’ our own deaths.”

I moved to Vole instead and put a cautious hand on his folded wings to thank him. He fixed me with his black eyes, and in them I saw my own death once more. A shudder ran through me as Serisi whispered inside my head.

*Perhaps this bird did save us, but on level ground, Bathnarok would be ash on our wind by now. You know it to be true. Ralish is right: I feel the fire in you. Fire like a demon’s wrath. But she is also wrong: we do not change, we grow even more powerful each day. With this new magic, my blade, and that bird, we are truly the greatest weapon this land has seen, and I doubt our power is done growing. The Fireborn will rue the day they chose to stand against us. We are unkillable.*

I found the demon pulling at the corner of my lips. Though I was sure the others would have branded it as arrogance or pride, Serisi was starting to make a lot of sense.

# 24

## OF CARVING AIR

*I have done it. Even now they come to tear down my door for betraying my kin, my ancestors, the gods and all their spirits too, no doubt. But I have done it. The tests of boiling and casting the oldest blessings worked! The potion turned to sandglass, I swear it. A window, believe this or not. A window that showed me darkness beyond measure and an endless clearing of rusted skeletons. Great arms and cogs of what looked like metal lay buried in red dust. There was nothing but ruin, in this place. There were voices, I say. Voices like rumbling clouds I have never heard the like of! The spell burned through the bowl and table before I could make sense of any of it. I know I will ever see such a thing again. Though I hear the boots outside and fists on the door, I go to the Six Heavens or Hells knowing I was right. That's right. I knew you would read this, Matriarch, and you should know that this common old seedwitch won after all. Murder me, if you will, but you will always know I was right, and that you were wrong! Remember that when you look upon my lifel—*

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

Bathnarok was, in a word, incensed. I doubted he had ever experienced a chain around his wrist, never mind spent time as a prisoner.

The chains and scorched ropes still held his limbs aloft. A ring of Cloudrider spears hemmed him in. Bathnarok's fire burst from him like crashing waves, turning the dust black and causing riders to dance back and forth.

Ogarosh was circling him, poking with a long spear in an effort to make him still. It was not working. As he levelled another round of threats at the demon, a rope snapped from around Bathnarok's arm, and riders scrambled to lash an ironpith chain in its place. One Cloudrider was batted fifty feet across the plateau. Another was clawed across his face and neck and went down screeching. Flames sputtered in the demon's palms.

"Pel! Redeye!" yelled Eztaral.

The sorcers bounded to help, lashing the demon in place with spells. Bathnarok bellowed at the touch of the water. It gave me guilty satisfaction to watch his black hide scar grey as ash.

"How exactly are you going to get him into that cage?" Redeye posed the question we were all thinking. The cage in question waited expectantly nearby, begging to be filled.

"With difficulty," Eztaral huffed. "Any ideas, wrangler?"

Atalawe was rubbing at her chin. Soot still mired her face in great streaks. "Serisi, do demons eat?"

“Ash and flesh,” I said, relaying what the demon told me.

“Can you starve a demon?”

“It takes weeks.”

Bathnarok found me amidst the crow and snarled. “*Shrugek!* You think you can hold me? I will whip you all with your own spines!”

I swaggered between the riders and their spears. With blades hovering beside my head, I smirked at the demon.

“I killed you,” the demon prince hissed at me in demonspeak.

“Takes more than that to kill me, Bathnarok,” I replied, and without thinking, I found myself speaking in the same harsh, guttural language. I could hear the murmurs of the riders behind me. “Haven’t you heard that from your Fireborn friends? Or Lord Baran? Where is he?”

“Elsewhere, seeing to this world’s end as he has been tasked by the glorious Iron Icon.”

“What do you and Haidak want with hundreds of mindless slaves? What are you planning?”

“Hah! You will not get your answers from me, aberration. I will use your bones to pick my teeth!”

“You’ll answer, or I’ll have barrel after barrel of water poured over you.”

Bathnarok twitched for a brief moment before filling his mouth with fire. I had to step back to avoid the flaming spit launched my way.

I spat right back at him, making his hide sizzle before I withdrew. I found the others staring at me with confused looks.

“What?” I asked.

“You can speak demon now?” Atalawe asked me.

“Apparently so,” I muttered.

*Another gift of our binding, Tarko.*

“Bathnarok won’t give us anything.”

“Pel, keep him weakened with your water spells. Enough to get him in the cage without anyone dying.”

“With pleasure,” replied Pel.

Eztaral led the Scions to the edge of the flattened hill, where a trickle of a waterfall cascaded through pine roots into the dark forest below. A blue parrot was camped in a tree, mocking the lancewings by mimicking their chirps.

“What’s next, Eztaral?” asked Atalawe.

“Dorla Sel, is what.” I beat her to the answer, already eager to get going. “Beating Haidak to the Allmother.”

“Tarko is right. Nothing changes, and we are running out of time. If Haidak can do this to one bloodwood, then we know he can do the same to others. The longer we dawdle like we’re enjoying a longsun day, the more Haidak can wag his silver tongue and create more enemies for us.”

Atalawe stayed quiet, absently ruffling Inwar’s ears while she fought inside her mind.

Caraq had come to join us. She sat on a broken tree stump and poured a water-skin over her head. “Longsun heat. A life in a canyon is a much cooler life.”

“You’ve got something to say, haven’t you?” Eztaral asked her.

“That I have. We have a problem.”

“The demon?”

“No, with Dorla Sel. My scouts tell me the Forging begins in three days.”

“What?” Redeye blurted.

Atalawe sucked her teeth. “That is a problem.”

*What do they speak of?* Serisi asked me, irritated.

“What’s going on?” I demanded.

“The Forging. The contest of the Swathe’s finest sorcers, remember?” said Atalawe. “The grandest competition in all the bloodwoods. Getting an audience with that hermit Allmother is close to impossible on a good day, but during the Forging, it’s inconceivable. Only the final four elite champions are permitted to see Tzatca before their last battle. That is one of the rewards, after all. Bloodwoods traditionally use that opportunity to petition the Allmother for something they desire.”

“And it takes at least two full days to fly to Dorla Sel from here,” Caraq added.

Eztaral nodded. “Then we will have to move fast before we’re caught up in the madness of the Forging.”

“Did you say the elite champions?” I asked. Every Scion turned to look at me.

“That’s quite enough, thank you, Tarko,” Pel tutted. “We don’t have time to satisfy your ego. The Forging is a hive of backstabbing and politics. It pretends to be an honourable competition when behind the scenes it’s a fierce market of favours and trades between the nobles. It’s nothing but a glorified duel put on for the amusement and profit of a bloodthirsty crowd that want to see nothing more than sorcers and kin tear each other apart. It is a distraction we don’t need.”

“You sound almost bitter, old man,” I poked at him.

“Pel competed once. As did this grumpy brother of mine,” Atalawe said.

“What? You didn’t tell me that before.”

Redeye snorted. “And both of us failed miserably in the face of politics.”

“What if Haidak is already there?” Ralish asked. “What if he’s going for the Allmother and her nectra via the Forging? Using it to gain an audience, I mean.”

“He’s no sorcer,” said Atalawe. “But I wouldn’t put it past that foul mind of his.”

Redeye snorted. “Or he’s already turned Tzatca against us. Dorla Sel could be a trap just like Stormbeaten and Azcalan.”

“Complain all you want, Redeye,” I growled at him. “We do what we’ve done from the start: we trust to hope.”

Eztaral smacked her hands together. “Like I said, nothing changes. We reach Dorla Sel before the Forging begins and the matriarch’s eyes and ears are closed.”

*Simple, just how I like it.*

“As do I,” I muttered.

“How soon can the lancewings be ready to fly and the demon ready to move, Caraq?”

The wingmaster scratched at her neck as a roar rolled across the plateau. “Firstglow.”

Eztaral nodded. “Let us speak to the Allmother first, and then we’ll send a lancewing to fetch you. If the Fireborn are in Dorla Sel, I won’t have them interfering.”

Caraq stamped her foot. “A fine idea. We’ll keep this Bathnarok caged and a safe distance outside Dorla Sel until you need us. After seeing what these Fireborn bastards did to Azcalan, the Cloudriders are at your beck and call.”

“We appreciate it,” I said, gaining a stare from Eztaral.

“You, Tarko, should be training.”

“But I just fought—”

“Fought a demon with air magic, am I right?” the eagleborn questioned me.

I smirked. “You know it.”

“Good for you and good for us, but I won’t have you wielding air carver spells around your fellow Scions and Cloudriders when you have no idea how to use them. Pelikai will instruct you until we leave at firstglow. Won’t you, Pel?”

The old sorcer took a deep breath. “If I have to. As long as that doesn’t decide your own fate too much for you, Tarko?” he muttered to me.

“Fine with me,” I hissed. Despite my tired body, I felt the urge to stretch my newest powers, if only to shrug off the shadow of death I still felt breathing down my neck, and test the demon’s promise.

“I don’t know about anyone else, but I need food and a sleep,” Ralish said. “Have fun, hero,” she whispered to me before taking her leave with the others.

I was left with Pel and an awkward-looking Redeye.

“What do you know about air magic, Redeye?” I asked him.

“More than you, I’d bet,” he mumbled to me.

Pel clapped his hands. “Air carving is all about finesse.”

Redeye chuckled as he wandered his way out of range.

“You might be a paragon in mudmagic, but you’re barely an initiate when it comes to the order of air. That’s the first lesson.”

“Thank you,” I muttered.

“Now, *Initiate*. With the order of earth reaving, you have rush spells, shields, and darts, and eventually fort, tendril, and construct spells. With the order of air, you must learn different weapons. At lower ranks, there are surge, wall, and vortex spells to master. Above maven rank, you will learn blades, spears, and air manipulation. Each has their own application, as with earth reaving,” Pel lectured. I drank it all in. After Shal Gara, I knew the worth of listening.

“First, I want you to knock me over with a simple surge spell. Think similar to a rush spell in reaving, but you concentrate your magic into finer points. While mudmagic relies on calm, the order of air relies on emotion and will.”



I clenched my fists, summoning a blue glow to my veins.

*Show them what you can do, Tarko.*

I concentrated, thinking of my brush with death and the rage it boiled in me. I focused that energy into my magic until the air reverberated around me. Piece by piece, I forced it under my will, and sent a wind gusting towards Pel.

The old sorcer weathered the blow with ease. The wind wafted his clothes and hair, but he barely leaned past his hunched version of upright.

“A fine start, Tarko, but you’ll have to do better than that.”

Our training unfolded over hours while the Cloudriders set out torches and lit fires. With the surge spells on their way to coming with ease, the wall and vortex spells came next. Both tested my mettle, but with concentration, I was soon breaking the tips from pines with sharp thrusts and sweeping barrages of air.

“You’re a long way off, but you’re getting there,” Pel reassured me.

“He’s forgetting mudmagic, is what he’s doing,” Redeye complained.

“Enough of that, Redeye. You’re just jealous.”

The way the sorcer shrugged and blustered told me Pel was right, but I didn’t rub it in. I let Redeye wander away, dealing with his own problems instead of adding to mine.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say he was indeed jealous,” I said.

“And if he heard *you* say that, you’d have a bigger problem.” Blind Pel’s abrupt cry shook me. “Again, Initiate!”

The old sorcer swung a spell of water at me, dragging moisture from the pines and ground and seeking to skewer me with a tendril. I responded with a surge spell that battered at Pel and threw up dust on the rest of the camp. His tendrils still crept through the dirt, whipped into a ripple by my spell, but still weaving towards me. I pulled a wall out of the earth, and Pel split it in two with a blade of water. It was vexingly effortless for the old paragon.

“Air, not earth, Tarko. You want to learn, then we do it my way.”

“If it puts Haidak in the loam, then fine,” I said.

Pel narrowed his nectra-blue eyes at me. Without a word, he marched to the nearby camp, now far dustier than before, where he found two fat orange gourds and hauled them back to me.

“These are Haidak Baran,” Pel said.

*How I wish.*

“Cut him in half,” the old sorcer challenged me. “Clean, with an earth spell.”

I readied myself. Pel meanwhile stood to my side, something in his hand. With a tendril sharpened to a blade, I sliced – and somewhat crushed – one of the gourds.

“And now the other,” said Pel. “With a blade spell of air.”

“I haven’t learned that yet.”

“You clearly think you’re ready for it.”

It took all my concentration to press the vortex into a blade of air. It also took what felt like an hour. At last, I could almost see it hanging before me like a faint shard of the purest sandglass.

I wielded it in an arc as I would a sword and utterly missed the gourd. A puff of grey dust was all I got for my troubles. Pel stared at me from under furrowed brows.

Anger fuelled a dusty whirlwind around me. I tried again and failed even more miserably than the first time. Wild emotion wasn't enough. It had to be focused and filtered into an accurate force.

*You embarrass us once again, Tarko.*

"By the Hells, do I," I snarled. "You trying to rile me up?"

*Perhaps, I heard her snicker.*

It was working. By my third attempt, I sliced the gourd's bulbous head off and let the fat seeds spill out.

"Again," ordered Pel.

I huffed even though I had already done what he asked. How the air carvers had the patience to endure trainers through a veil of anger was beyond me.

I pulled at the air and turned it into a flimsy blade. But while I aimed, a small pebble struck me in the cheek. The spell shattered into a faint puff of air.

"Ow, for gods' sake."

"You know you don't have the luxury of time and concentration in a fight. Haidak's coming at you with everything he's got."

Another blade was slowly forged. Another pebble struck me in the neck. I only nicked the gourd this time, and when another pebble hit, I turned on Pel with a rush of air. Pel held out his hand to block my spell with his own. The round shield of water, ragged at the edges in the wind, held fast until I realised what I was doing. Pel taught me a lesson, spinning his shield to drive my spell away and slapping a tendril across my arm. The water splashed onto my cheek. The pain was so instant I almost drew my sword in sheer rage.

"Too much anger, Tarko," Pel warned me.

I seethed as I tried to ignore the pain burning on my cheek. The water was already seeping into the cracks of my armour. Its touch was like blades slicing down my back and chest. Serisi hissed as she shared the pain.

"I'm sorry," I managed to growl, pretending I was simply jaded while I silently begged the pain to cease.

"You lack control, Tarko. You let that vengeful demon get the best of you. And I'm not talking about Serisi. I'm talking about that thing inside you that runs off into demon-filled tunnels and almost gets himself killed in—"

"I thought we were done with doubt," I grumbled.

"I'm done with trying to argue with you, but until you and I and all the rest of us can sleep with both eyes closed, and the Swathe doesn't have to know doom, I will worry about you," he said with a weary and somewhat forced smile.

I changed the subject. "When do I get to add white air carver dye to my hands? Has that ever even been done before? Do I add my ranks to my other cheek?"

“When you learn control, lad. That’s all the training you’ll get today.”

“I’m not tired.”

“Some of us are, lad.” Pel shook his head as he began to wander towards the campfires. I let him go. Alone, I removed my armour and furiously scrubbed at the water that still scorched my skin. Wherever the demon veins reached, pain throbbed. It took more time than before to die away, and at last I breathed a relieved sigh.

*I did not like that.*

“Me neither,” I muttered. Even though it filled my thoughts, I refused to voice the notion of a weakness aloud.

Redeye had returned to lurk in the shadows. I caught him looking me up and down.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“I could ask you the same question. You acted like that in the marshes. Almost as if...” Redeye rubbed at his stubble. “As if the touch of water harms you like it would a demon.”

“And where were you during that last battle? What were you really doing?”

“Told you. Got lost in the smoke is all. Seemed a good idea to be cautious after you almost helped that wizard kill us.”

*I do not trust him.*

Once more, I heard my mother’s voice telling me I was wrong about the sorcer. I had no idea where that trust came from, but I somehow knew she was wrong.

“Convenient,” I spat. “I’m starting to think you’re hiding something, Redeye. The others might not see it, but I do. You’re acting suspiciously. Doubting us at every turn.”

The sorcer snorted at that as if I was mad, but I also caught the glare of fury in his scarlet eyes. “And I’m starting to think you’re listening to that demon far too much for our good.”

With narrowed eyes, I left the sorcer to wander to a solitary patch of dust beyond the lancewing perches.

Shrugging off the echoes of the pain, I turned to my spells and the carving of air until the sun died in the west and the smell of roasting pits called to my exhausted body.

# 25

## WEAPON

*Nothing blunts a sword like peace.*

OLD SHAL GARA ADAGE

*The dream was different from the others. I felt it in the force of the hot wind that raced across the darkened plateau; in the charcoal stink that filled my nostrils.*

*There was none of the blur or muddle to this vision that pervaded my recent dreams. Though shadow crouched on the horizon, I could see the forest stretch from north to south, east to west.*

*The wind turned my face to the south, where a poisoned bloodwood still crackled with flame. Cinders replaced the stars. To the north, I saw another light blossom. A fire bloomed like a red flower, and this time in a monstrous bloodwood that filled the horizon. Behind it, amidst the distant mountains and on the northern shores, more sparks burst into life. Trees crumbled beneath the heat as the flames raced through the forest.*

*I was too horrified to turn away. I was forced to watch the fire burn even though I felt a cold breath growing behind me. I swivelled to witness a blank sky, robbed of stars and light. A void commanded the skies. I could see its shadow racing across the Loamsedge and covering the scar of Shal Gara. My heart thudded in fear as it swept towards me, drinking in the ash and smoke of the burning Swathe like a ravenous storm. Tendrils of shadow reached for the plateau I stood upon, alone and vulnerable. They rose into walls of obsidian and blood-red wood, trapping me in a blank stretch of sand that curved like a half-moon. I felt the hot grit sliding beneath my bare feet as I looked upwards at the roaring walls.*

*It was not the Iron Icon's face that emerged from the void as I imagined, but the bloody face of my brother Texoc, filling the sky.*

*"Failure," his voice boomed, "is all you are destined for."*

*Laughter rocked me like the waves of Stormbeaten's cliffs. While I cowered, teeth gritted, I watched the face shift into a grin I knew too well. Fire-red hair glowed in the midst of the shadow as demons fell from his locks. Haidak's smile loomed, sharpened to demons' fangs. Flames ate away at his skin until only a skull ogled me. Behind those eyes, before he stuck me down, I saw chaos lurking.*

Serisi felt the tickling of something across Tarko's forehead. His eyes were closed, but the demon's senses were sharp. The worm's body convulsed in the depths of a dream that filled Serisi's mind also.

Again, came the fingers across her neck. Serisi threw her claws into the darkness of rustling canvas. Something soft collided with her palm, and she seized it tightly. A shrill cry split the darkness beside her.

"What in the Six Hells, Tarko?" a voice yelled.

*Shit*, Serisi thought, as Tarko surfaced from within her in a panic.

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I awoke to a scream. My bleary eyes opened to find my hand clamped around Ralish's wrist, my nails digging into her skin.

I let go immediately, horrified. I was not alone. Ralish withdrew from me, clutching at her wrist and the red marks that were already visible.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"I don't know! I was having a nightmare. Perhaps dreamwalking."

"That demon did this."

*It was an accident. Instinct.*

"You shut your mouth, Serisi!" I hissed.

"I told you I wouldn't sleep next to a demon, Tarko. That wasn't some idle comment!"

*An accident, I say!*

"I didn't mean to do that. It wasn't me."

"Get out," Ralish ordered. The dread was a hot flush in my face and a deep sunken feeling in my gut.

"Ralish—"

"I don't care! Out! Both of you."

Dragging my shirt and treads with me, I did as I was told.

"What in the Six Hells did you do, demon?"

*She was touching me. Your dream bled into my mind. I thought she was an enemy.*

"She is anything but! And don't you dare blame me. Gods curse it."

I stood outside the tent for several minutes before I strode away in anger.

"You've ruined it. In the loam, I promised to keep her safe, don't you remember? And here I am—"

*I will speak to her.*

"Bleeding trees, you'll do no such thing. For some reason, that woman sees fit to be with me, and you've just driven her away. Hurt her. That isn't what I want from this power of ours."

Serisi stayed quiet while I kicked at rocks in angst and worry. It was before firstglow, and the stars still ruled over the night sky. The torches of the Cloudrider camp shone into the dark, turning the treetops orange.

I closed my eyes to imagine the demon lingering in the dark of my mind. I didn't hear the footsteps until they were behind me. I turned to find Atalawe standing there.

"What's wrong? What's happened?"

"How do you know something's happened?"

"I've been wrangling wild beasts almost as long as I've been learning seeds. Humans are no different. I can see it in your raised hackles, your fists."

"It wasn't me. I was dreaming like I haven't since Shal Gara. I don't know if it was the dream or Serisi's confusion, but she... she hurt Ralish."

Atalawe immediately tensed up, eyes wide. "How badly?"

"Bruised her arm. Serisi wouldn't have gone any further. I woke up with my hand around her wrist."

"I was worried this might happen. A slip."

"It was not a slip," I said sternly. "Instinct, was all. Confusion and instinct."

Atalawe was staring at my neck and cheeks.

"Don't say it," I warned.

"I won't," she said. "When was the last time you slept well, Tarko? You might slumber when Serisi is up, but your body is restless. I have leaves that can knock you both out. Give you the sleep of the dead."

"No. Not after this."

Atalawe offered a slight smile. "I'll go see Ralish. You give her time alone now."

That was the opposite of what I wanted to do, but I begrudgingly took Atalawe's advice with a liberal amount of grumbling and wandered the edge of the plateau.

*It is too cold, Tarko.*

"Just what you deserve."

*I apologise. There. You know how little I like saying that word. It is too human, but I say it now.*

I poured my attention into my magic and drowned out my worry by trying to force a vortex of air to spin in my palm. It took me more effort than I expected. Once I had it spinning and stable, I summoned a handful of dust with my hand and held it twirling beside the miniature whirlwind. The two orders were treacherous to balance, each trying to outdo the other, not unlike my demon and me, if I was truthful. I let the two spells merge until the whirlwind and dust spun together. Only momentarily before they ripped each other apart, and my spells faltered.

To the north, I stared upon the distant and glowing form of Dorla Sel, wreathed in cloud. Although it was barely the width of my thumb, the bloodwood still reached like a golden mountain over the rest of the forested sea.

I expected the bloodwood to burst into flame at any moment, the same as in my dreams, but fortunately for my sanity, it refused to no matter how long I stared at the tree.

“Do you think that dream was real, Serisi? Did we dreamwalk, and glimpse Haidak burning the Swathe?”

*I felt no touch of my father or any others of my kin. I did nothing.*

“What if it’s the Iron Icon, bleeding through gaps in our world? There could be other windows. Other godseers. Other halls of worshippers. Maybe that’s why we dreamwalked. We’ve glimpsed Haidak’s future.”

*Perhaps. It is a future I do not wish to glimpse again.*

I kicked at the dust. “We—you can’t do that again, Serisi. How can I trust you to stay controlled? How can I trust myself, for that matter?” I snapped. “We already have enough doubt to deal with from the others.”

Serisi sighed. *As we demons say, even the mightiest warrior drops his sword now and again. But a simple accident, is what it was. Do not listen to their doubt.*

My right hand shone with the sapphire glow of magic once more. Orange fire ran in stutters between the nectra. Dust billowed about my char-coloured skin, sprouting claws from my nails as if I bore the hands of Serisi.

“What if we are changing, like Ralish and Pel worry I am?” I asked.

*Then it is for the better, and for the salvation of the Swathe. Ralish included, Serisi said. What if we being like this is the only way to save her?*

Never mind vengeance and the blood of Haidak Baran. Never mind vindication. That was reason enough. Letting my dust fall, I shifted orders from earth to air and summoned a wild wind to test the pines of the plateau. To the sound of their creaking, the falling of leaves, and the twittering of several inconvenienced bats, I lost myself in my magic.

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The arrival of the timid sun might have brightened the smoke-laden air of the forest, but it did nothing to illuminate my black mood. Clouds sulked on the horizon at being outmatched by the pillar of Azcalan’s smoke.

*At least we can say two bloodwoods have fallen to the Last Clan, offered Serisi. If nothing else, it is more proof.*

“That’s some poor and tragic solace, demon, but I’ll take it.” I remembered a recent time where we fought tooth and nail inside my head. I had lost count of the ways she had promised to kill me. Now I wondered what I would do without her.

What a thought that would have been for the Tarko working the nests of Shal Gara barely months ago.

The same could also be said of Ralish and the rest of my strange family of Scions. But they had not spent the night trying to lighten the weight of my mind. Serisi, despite what she was, might have known me better than any.

Ralish, I could understand. I had hurt her. Scared her. But it was not my fault, not the fault of the man she had chosen. With every hour that had passed, I felt more unfairly punished.

I saw the flap of the tent I had been watching half the night rise up. Ralish appeared beneath it in full Scion armour, bow in hand and stocked quiver of grey-fletched arrows on her shoulder. I saw her gaze shift left and right until she found me. When at last our stares locked, there was not the forgiving smile I hoped to see but a frown instead. It was some relief that she walked towards me while the Cloudrider camp dissolved around us.

I stood, brushing the dust of the arse of my treads, and became abruptly aware of what to do with my arms. I crossed them as Ralish stood before me. Close, but not touching.

“Let me see,” I said, motioning to her wrist. Keeping her eyes on me, she unclasped the grey leafleather and copper vambrace and showed me five black bruises spread across the inside of her tanned wrist. One of my nails had broken her skin.

“Do you have anythin’ to say?” she asked.

“I can only apologise for the demon that did it.”

“Getting harder and harder to tell you two apart. I trusted somethin’ like this wouldn’t happen. Now I can’t help bein’ filled with doubt.”

“Wonderful.”

Ralish tilted her head.

*We are in trouble now.*

“That’s what you give me? Audacity?”

“It was an accident, Ralish. I’ve apologised.”

“Have you?”

“You think I’m changing for the worse,” I snapped, “but if I am changing at all, it’s for the better.”

“Well, if this is what you’re turning into, I’m not sure I want to be as close to it as I am now,” was all she said as she walked to where the lancewings were being saddled.

“Ralish!” I called after her.

“Ouch.” I heard Eztaral’s rasping voice behind me. She was loitering nearby, fixing the last of her armour. “And it was going so well at the start.”

I gave her a scowl as I began to do the same. “I’ve never done *this* before. Bleeding trees, I’ve never done any of this before.”

The eagleborn rubbed at the dark bags beneath her eyes. “That goes for all of us. Not since our distant ancestors has the Swathe had to face such dire times and circumstances. Still no excuse for losing control of ourselves, though, is it, Tarko?”

“Atalawe told you what happened,” I replied with a sigh.

“That she did. And that explains why I heard you casting spells for more than half the night.”



I said nothing as I strapped Serisi's sword to my belt. We scuffed the dirt on our way to check on the demon.

"And how are you coming along?"

"Irritatingly gradually."

"Redeye said you progressed faster than he's ever seen. That you performed the same as you did when learning earth reaving and acquired carving spells that initiates take weeks or months to learn. I wonder whether it's not all in your blood. Your father Teyak was a fine air carver."

"I'm surprised that Redeye said anything positive about me."

"You still suspect him of hiding something," Eztaral growled.

"I do."

"And yet he still believes in you just as we all do."

"All anyone believes is that I'm reckless, over-reaching, and now dangerous. You think I don't notice every time one of you looks at these?" I said, pointing to where I knew the veins crept up my neck and jaw. "And maybe you're right, but this is what made me the hero in the first place, curse it. Serisi and I come as one."

"You're not a morning person, are you, Tarko?" asked Eztaral, staring at me from the corner of her eye.

I bowed my head. "Is my foul mood that obvious?"

"Clear as sandglass, boy."

"You haven't called me that in a while."

"Sometimes you are Paragon Terelta, impressive and dangerous, and others you are still that boy staring at me with eyes wide as an owl's from Pelikai's wagon, with all kinds of pressure heaped upon shoulders far too young. Far too impetuous and naive. If I'm brutally honest, I tend to forget that boy these days. That might have been a mistake. The blind old loamer tells me I should apologise to you for throwing you into the fray and for treating you as some mindless weapon."

"It's already too late for that, Eztaral," I said with a smile. "I am the weapon you wanted."

The eagleborn was, for once, without a reply. At least for a moment.

"That you are, Paragon, but don't you forget that boy either," grunted Eztaral. The thump on my back was all I needed. "Though I should probably be calling you initiate again? This is the problem with being unusual or out of the ordinary. There are few rules or precedents."

"Good morning to you, Scions!" Caraq greeted us in her usual earsplitting style. She had her fists on her hips and a broad smile across her face.

Bathnarok stirred at the wingmaster's noise, spitting fire. Ogarosh had constructed some kind of demon-silencing device with buckets of water, tall poles, and long ropes with indiscriminate riders at the other end. Bathnarok sat hunched with a violent fire in his eyes.

"Ah. Witness. Here comes the saviours of the precious Swathe," he mocked us. "I have told you I will not give you the answers you seek. I prefer to watch as you realise the futility of your

persistent endeavours.” Bathnarok’s laugh echoed in his chest. The crowd of riders hissed until the demon hushed.

Atalawe and Redeye had arrived. The wrangler shone with enthusiasm compared to the mudmage’s dour demeanour. He seemed to be rather preoccupied with Azcalan’s smoke.

“How’s the cage?” asked Atalawe.

Ogarosh had earned a vicious burn in the night’s watch over the demon prince. The bandages covered half his face. “Rebuilt. Reinforced. Ready,” he grunted at us.

The cage had doubled in thickness, and now had a door instead of a roof hatch.

*It is even uglier and more rudimentary than before, but it may work.*

“Serisi gives it her approval,” I said, catching Ralish’s eye as she at last joined us.

“Sorcers,” Eztaral ordered.

Wielding earth and water, Redeye, Pel, and I stepped up to Bathnarok. He tensed as if to lunge, but my spiked tendrils of earth, crossed in a lattice, held him still.

Eztaral was polite enough to ask first. “Get in the cage, demon.”

“You will have to kill me before I allow myself to be trapped behind your bars like a common beast.”

*See? We demons are not used to such things,* said Serisi.

“Evidently,” I replied.

“Then kill you we shall,” the eagleborn offered. “Sorcers! Riders!”

Bathnarok chuckled. “You would not dare. I am valuable to you. *Raskaa asha*. Clear on your worm faces, it is.”

Atalawe stamped her staff. “We can find another demon, can’t we, Eztaral? We already found two of them.”

“Ahh. Not as valuable as I.”

Serisi whispered between my ears of demon princes and royal blood.

“That’s right, because you want your shot at the crown of the Last Clan, don’t you?” I called out. “You think if you do what Faraganthar couldn’t, the Iron Icon will reward you and make you king.”

Eztaral laughed coldly. “You and Haidak deserve each other! So the question for you, demon, is do you want to get in the cage and keep your chance to be called king, or would you rather give that all up and die just to spite us? Your choice.”

Bathnarok glared at each and every one of us before he made it. With a petty show of strength and pulling at each of his chains, Bathnarok chose our cage instead of our spells.

“Good decision,” I told him as the door was slammed, bolted, and locked.

“You will reap the rewards of your arrogance soon, traitor,” Bathnarok hissed. “All you love will crumble and die before you are struck down by the Iron Icon himself, and you will beg with tears of blood streaming down your face and fingers scraped to the bone for something as merciful as death.”

“Three Gods,” Atalawe said, “and I thought Eztaral liked her words.”

“Pipe down, wrangler. I’ll give you words,” Eztaral muttered before she stood upon a crate. “Scions. Cloudriders. Our time is now! This infestation of treachery and heresy is at an end! No more bloodwoods will know the touch of demonfire nor the poisoned tongues of those spineless, heel-licking lice that call themselves Fireborn. We’ll chase them to the very ends of the Swathe and drive them into the Untold Waters with our blades if we have to and rid our lands of their bile and the last shred of scorched demon hide. And this glorious, peaceful future starts today. With proof that the eyes of the Swathe cannot ignore. There won’t be a single soul left in a position of power that will dare curl their lip at the mention of demons any longer! Let’s make those who follow chaos wish they’d never dared to test the Swathe and its Scions of the Sixth-Born.”

*She is very good at the speech-making. We demons normally just rip prisoners into pieces and shower in their blood.*

“To Kī Raxa, to the Three Gods and their spirits, and to the bloodwoods, we make this vow!” Eztaral yelled. We Scions stamped our feet and hammered our armour three times, making Bathnarok snarl.

Caraq grinned. “Let’s show these Dorla Sel types what Lostriver’s made of. Take wing and give no mercy, Cloudriders!”

Dust-clouds arose as the glittering birds tested their wings. The roar was deafening. I swore even Bathnarok flinched.

The Scions waded between the reverberating lancewings, each finding their own mount. Vole had already spotted me and was chirping as if demanding I hurry up. I caught Ralish’s arm before she reached Thundertail.

“I’m sorry,” I told her.

“I know,” was all Ralish said in reply, but she didn’t step away. In the hurricane of lancewings taking flight, we stared at each other.

“It won’t happen again. I’m in control.”

“I hope that’s true,” she replied.

“See you in Dorla Sel,” I said. “Never thought I’d be saying that.”

Ralish put her lips to my cheek before she turned to her lancewing. I watched her rise into the air as the dust swirled around me.

*Are you going to stand here all morning or are we going to see this glorious matriarch of yours?*

“That we are.” I dashed towards Vole to keep him from chirping himself to an early grave. The straps were barely fastened when the lancewing couldn’t contain himself any longer. My head was pressed into my shoulders and my eyes into my cheeks as he tore into the sky, piercing the crowd of lancewings like an arrow through a barrel. I found a laugh break free from me as Vole hung at the top of his arc, floating on momentum before diving for the forest. I set my eyes on the golden crown of Dorla Sel and the Allmother that waited within.



# 26

DORLA SEL

*No bloodwood has fallen since the mighty Tenacho, who fell to wildfire five hundred seasons ago today. She once stood proud in the east, where now the Scorch and dust hold sway.*

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

If somebody had told me several days ago that it was possible to fall asleep on the back of a lancewing, I would have laughed heartily in their face. After half a day on the back of Volechaser, however, and I was proven terribly wrong.

I awoke from a strange dream of black and burning pines with a shock. I'd grown used to waking to tent canvases, canopies, and the thatch ceilings of Lostriver. Waking up to seeing the green carpet of the Swathe miles below me caused me to jump so much, Vole thought I'd asked to be rolled in a spiral. He obliged.

*By the dead stars of the Void!* Serisi screeched within me. I heard my own yell escape my mouth over the rushing air.

Vole chirped in what I assumed was the lancewing version of laughter.

*He mocks us.*

“I don't even remember falling asleep,” I said, lifting the new Cloudrider visor to rub at my weary eyes.

*I let you. I believe the wrangler is right: you need the sleep for once.*

“Where are we?” I looked around, counting the Scions and Cloudriders about me. There were a score leading the charge across the clear skies to Dorla Sel. Another forty lancewings and piebald crows lagged behind us like a bejewelled cloud. The dark lump of a caged Bathnarok hung beneath them on a horde of chains. The demon prince's fire caused smoke to streak behind the Cloudriders like a long pennant.

*Same place as we were before. Somewhere over this endless forest.*

Ahead, beyond Vole's gleaming feathers, I was confused to see that Dorla Sel had barely grown closer. The only difference was the bruised clouds now hunched on the horizon behind the bloodwood. The carpet of the Swathe rose and fell with hills and valleys unseen beneath its almost endless canopy. An ochre river cut a canyon through the trees below us, crisscrossed by the bridges of leafroads. Cloud and mist trailed around the taller trees: giant ironpiths and cedars that dreamed of being bloodwoods. We had to take great detours to avoid the watchtowers and larger towns that clung to their heights, all to keep Bathnarok out of sight. Scouts circulated constantly to keep us on the fastest and most secretive path we could find.

An hour further, and we found ourselves racing above the polished surface of a golden lake, where square boats and barges idled. Their painted sides bled into the waters around them, as if they floated on spiralled rainbows. One was large enough to house tall buildings that leaned precariously over the barge's side.

*What is this hideous sea trapped between the trees?*

"It's called a lake, or at least I think it is." I felt Serisi shudder as I gazed around the width of the lake, which was so vast the western and eastern edges were mired in a haze.

A giant fish lay on the far shore, surrounded by people carting away shield-sized chunks of its meat. Purple blood stained the pale shores. Waterfowl scattered from the storm of passing lancewings, and I swore I heard the yells of the lake-dwellers as the birds swarmed the shoreline. By the time I looked back to glimpse shaking fists, we were already gone, and hopefully soon forgotten.

The sinking sun lit a blaze in the clouds that now stretched across the skies. Pinks fought with ambers across a sky of furrows and feathers, as every bit as distinctive as the Swathe below. In the north, the menacing weather had only darkened. Half of Dorla Sel's colossal canopy was now veiled. The bloodwood's lights had already begun to glow.

*I feel a shiver in your spine. I feel like we are being watched.*

I blamed it on the sight of the distant city, and I was so enraptured that I didn't hear the cries of the other Scions and riders. Only when Vole made my stomach lurch with a swift and unexpected dive did I see Caraq waving her arms.

A shadow fell across Vole's wings, and it was no cloud. I spun in the saddle, catching sight of a black and ragged tear in the sky. In a flash of horror I thought the God of Chaos himself had ripped through the heavens out of pure hatred for Serisi and me. But unless the Iron Icon had a beak and obsidian feathers, this was something else entirely, swooping in the Scions' direction.

*What is that beast?*

"If I'm right, it's a raven!"

Vole peeked in the monster's direction and put a burst of speed into his wings. My cold knuckles cracked as I held on tighter.

Vole might have outrun the raven, but with the other lancewings scattering in every direction but ours, we had been singled out. The raven's roar echoed across the golden forest. I turned again to see it folding its enormous wings into a dive. Its beak was already open in anticipation of a snack.

Vole pushed himself faster and lower to the treetops as the raven descended, closer and closer until its beak hovered mere feet from Vole's tail feathers. I could have counted the raven's rows of teeth if I wanted, but I was too preoccupied with the piercing red eye trained on me. The snap of the black jaws might have missed Vole's tail, but it split my ears. The raven's wingbeats pounded the air as it somehow kept up with the lancewing.

*She is toying with the beast, said Serisi.*

I realised then that Vole was leading the raven away from the others. My heart stilled enough to shift my fear into outrage, and with a stretched hand I grabbed for the air around the raven's wings. With a hasty surge spell, I leaned a skinny pine into the raven's way, causing it to swerve before I battered it with wind. The raven screeched at us once more in anger and began to gain on us again.

I thought myself mad, but before I could hurl another spell, I swore I witnessed the raven's wings slow. I watched the slow yawn of its vicious beak.

*It is happening again, Tarko. This is the bird's magic.*

I looked ahead and discovered we were headed directly for a huge pine. Vole powered through the air without pause, turning sideways and tucking his wingtips in between two stout branches. Leaves clipped my arms. The dastardly bird had tricked the raven, and I had helped provide the distraction.

As the stretched moment stuttered back to normal, it was too late for the beleaguered raven. The monster hurtled into the tangled branches and collided with the trunk with a crash and an enraged squawk. The tip of the pine began to topple to a deep rumble while the raven thrashed wildly with claw and wing.

We were already a mile away when the raven at last took to the air again. I was relieved when it didn't give chase and instead hunched in the broken pine tree, with feathers poking out in all directions like a bristling quillhog.

"Thank the gods," I yelled to the wind.

Vole soared as I patted his feathers. With a sharp trill, he carved through layers of cloud as we searched for the rest of the Scions. The evening had swooped to fill the grave of the sun. Colour was slowly dying. Though Dorla Sel glowed like a beacon, I was on the verge of concern when at last I spotted them: a faded glimmer of green, blue, and scarlet amid the canopy. As flecks of rain started to pelt my helmet and breastplate, Vole pirouetted into their midst. I nodded to Caraq and Eztaral, whose birds shrieked at Vole as if they admonished him for his recklessness. I knew that feeling.

"Where do we make camp and feed the birds?" I bellowed. I had to ask the question three times before Caraq heard me.

"We don't!" She grinned, pointing above us, where a fat crow raced through the patchwork ceiling of clouds. Two launchings flanked it, and curiously, I saw half a dozen wooden barrels hanging from the crow's sides and claws.

Vole knew exactly what to do and ascended to soar alongside the crow. It greeted us with a croak, and the feather-clad rider on its back tapped one of the barrels with a long stick. Each of them had a hole drilled in their centre and a funnel poking upwards. Vole chirruped, and while streaking through the sky, managed to poke his long beak into the barrel and drink his fill of sapwater.

*I am impressed.*

One by one, the other lancewings came to refuel. Vole stuck close. He seemed to enjoy the rain, lapping raindrops with his whip-tongue, while I hunkered closer and closer to the bird's back as the rain grew heavier. My hood was drawn tighter around my face. I brought the jerkin under my armour up around my mouth and nose. It was the best I could do, and despite the occasional raindrop that snuck through to sear my skin, it worked.

The clouded night claimed us. I couldn't see anything but streaks of driving rain and the occasional glimpse of a forest lit by lightning. Trying to keep count of the Scions was impossible. All I could do was trust in our lancewings and their keen eyes and hope they were headed in the right direction while the sky crackled around us and a caged demon roared.

\*

Sleep snuck up on me once again, and I awoke to a morning heavy with clouds and drizzle. The Swathe was slowly disappearing as we climbed above the weather. The cold grew intense, frosting my visor, but the sky was painted blue high in its highest reaches. A pale moon lingered in the west, stranded in the light of a blinding new sun.

*Much better.*

"I'm quite ready to have firm branches or loam beneath my feet again," I told Serisi. It felt like my backside had melded with my saddle. I shifted the straps, stretching dead legs and wincing at the needles that prickled my muscles. "It surely can't be long now."

It was not. As we raced through wisps and anvil-shaped clouds bubbling up from the storms below, I saw Dorla Sel.

The topmost crown of the bloodwood reared hundreds of feet above the clouds: a peaked disk of copper-gold leaves and spiked with tall towers and spires. It wasn't just our height that made breathing difficult. Dorla Sel was magnificent in the firstglow light. The bloodwood shone as if its leaves were forged from metal.

The Cloudriders around us screeched as Caraq raised her spear and pointed towards our goal. Half of them peeled away to accompany the caged demon while the rest proceeded with us to Dorla Sel. Caraq led us in a steep dive, back into the whirling storm.

The bloodwood looked like a pillar built to hold up the very Six Heavens themselves. Not only was Dorla Sel taller than Shal Gara had once stretched, it was thicker in branch and trunk, grander in the city's architecture. A score of leafroads reached up to meet her branches and the web of walkways that surrounded them. I had thought my old home to be crowded, but Dorla Sel made a sport of where and how intricately it could build. Some branches looked as though they sagged under the weight of the tiered decks built upon them.

Caraq led us at the tip of an arrowhead formation as we thundered over miles of golden highfields. Canals and aqueducts ran through the treetops, some overflowing in the rain and spilling waterfalls hundreds of feet down into the loam below. My fellow second-born workers



raised their rakes and spades at us as we tore overhead. They did so in a weary way, as if they had done it a hundred times already that day.

It was then that I heard the throbbing in the air. It was no fault of the storm behind us, nor the wingbeats of the lancewings. It sounded like drumming, and it only grew louder as we approached. I caught sight of pennants and streamers woven between the treetops and cascading alongside a wide leafroad that led straight to the trunk of Dorla Sel. Statues of jade and obsidian thrust their spears and glittering hands into the gloomy sky. More than one were missing their heads. Weathered stumps remained, and in their place, wreaths of flowers had been hung.

Three enormous statues commanded the entrance to Dorla Sel: a ringed leafroad with walls and gates to keep those on foot at bay if needed. Behind its arc stood the Three Gods carved in wood, obsidian, and golden quartz. On the left stood Gorna, god of earth, with his tharantos arms and root legs supporting a score of walkways. Beside him stood Alokaris the wolf-head, god of rain with a waterfall spewing from his mouth. Above them, Teltori the mighty lancewing goddess arched her quartz wings over the leafroads, beak stabbing down at the main gate to Dorla Sel.

Crowds were gathered on the main leafroad in their hundreds, as if they tested the strength of its chains and pillars. Every one of them clamoured to be let into the city at the top of their lungs. Their colours were so muddled I swore it gave me a headache. Those already inside Dorla Sel lounged on countless walkways and balconies, waving at the unluckier souls down below and blowing piercing notes on wooden trumpets at arriving lancewings.

*All this commotion and pageantry. You worms sure know how to make a meal of things with your ceremonies.*

Heads turned as we flew overhead. Cheers erupted from those who weren't maddened by the queues. We weren't the only arrivals flying into Dorla Sel. Other formations of lancewings approached from behind us, explaining half of the thunder in my ears. The other half could be blamed on the constant drums pounding in the bloodwood, as if Dorla Sel was on the cusp of battle. For all I knew, she might have been.

More riders came from the west and east. Each bore their own blazing hues and waved flags from their lancewings' backs, making us look rather dun between our Scion grey and copper and motley Cloudrider camouflage. Above, I caught glimpses of giant crows and emerald parrots gliding into the lower branches, mist spiralling around their pinion feathers.

With a whoop, Caraq led us after them: upwards to where a forked branch bristled with three-tiered nests made of ornately carved crimson wood. Spiralling watchtowers stood at intervals above them. Shal Gara's nests were famed in the east. Although Headman Karonak had been a bastard with a whip of a tongue and a cruel heart, he had run those nests in perfect order. Dorla Sel's might have been impressive from a carpentry point of view, grand as any noble's mansion, but the overlapping masses of riders and workers and birds had the look of a mess to me.

As the Scions and Cloudriders approached, an enormous green lancewing rose up from the nests to block our way while a gang of arriving lancewings all painted with chalk and orange streaks slid past us unchallenged.

*What is wrong with us that we are not allowed to enter?*

“And who are you? Your colours are not expected. State your bloodwood and your purpose!” yelled the lancer on its back.

Caraq took the lead. Her lancewing Ana was the largest in Lostriver and still looked dwarfed. “We are the Cloudriders of Lostriver, here on business with the Allmother.”

“Of course you are. The nests for those not attending the Forging are below,” said the man in a haughty tone I wanted to thump him for. He wagged his spear in the rough direction of the roots and the loam.

*Rude. Put a slingstone in this fool’s eye, Tarko.*

The Dorla Sel lancewing did not move, instead pressing closer so that we were effectively shooed away.

The nests for us lesser folk were two branches down and not nearly as impressive as those above. At least there was no pompous lancer to stop our lancewings from perching in an array of empty nests, all camped under one arched roof. Nesthands scurried about as I used to, filling troughs and buckets for our arrival. I felt the jolt in Volechaser as he was determined to be first, almost colliding with Ana. I held up my hands to show a squinting Caraq it was nothing to do with me.

A toothy and rakish overseer in the Dorla Sel colours of green and gold oversaw our immediate yet lacklustre welcome.

“Dorla Sel greets you,” he said in what could have been the most unenthused greeting. “Sapwater at firstglow, midday, and lastlight. Bugs and worms are extra. Fifty gems per each day of the Forging.”

“Since when does the hospitality of a bloodwood cost gems?” Redeye protested.

The overseer sighed before launching into a stream of babble. “Since half the Swathe is treading our branches over the next weeks and nests and rooms are in high demand and ever scarcer quantities, the headwoman feels it’s only fair to reimburse ourselves for our extra workload.”

“I wonder how many times he’s recited that today,” Atalawe tutted to Inwar’s yowl. He looked hilarious trussed up at Atalawe’s back. Judging by the constant bared fangs and wild fur, he had hated every moment of the flight.

“All right, Overseer. Enough talk. I’ll give you forty, and you will have a deal,” Eztaral said with a sigh.

“Fifty. Cheaper than the other nests, let me tell you. Go check. It’ll be sixty by the time you circle back in an hour.”

With a nod to the rest of us Scions, Eztaral slid from her saddle. I gratefully did the same, my legs almost collapsing beneath me they were so numb. Somehow I seemed to fare better than the others, who staggered about. The Cloudriders were, of course, barely affected.

The overseer, once he’d successfully picked something out of his sizeable teeth, held out his hand. Eztaral dropped a mosscloth pouch of gems in his palm, and the man squirrelled it away before producing up a tablet of fresh clay and a stick for scribing.

“Who are you, then?” he asked.

Caraq kept our identities hushed, informing the man we were all Cloudriders of Lostriver.

“Never heard of you.”

“Good,” Caraq boomed. “That’s why it’s *Lost-river*.”

“What are you here for aside attending the Forging? Trade?”

Eztaral crossed her arms. “We’re here to see Allmother Tzatca as soon as possible. So when you’re done scribbling you can lead us to the nearest high-ranking second-born.”

The overseer looked between us, a sparkle in his eye. When none of us uttered a word, the man began to laugh. He laughed all the way out of our cluster of nests, and every time he looked back he guffawed all the harder.

Atalawe kicked a lump of moss in his direction. “What a charming personality.”

“This city doesn’t feel one bit like Shal Gara,” Ralish was muttering over the chirruping of the feeding lancewings. They seemed as exhausted as the rest of us. “Feels like two cities crammed into one.”

*Why did he laugh at us?* Serisi asked.

“I don’t know, but I know I didn’t like it.”

“No time to waste, Scions. Eating and sleeping can wait until we’ve seen the Allmother. As soon as we have Tzatca’s ear, we’ll send a scout to have Bathnarok delivered. Caraq, you’ve got that leader’s air. We’ll need you.”

“Never thought I’d have a chance at meeting the Allmother.” The wingmaster adjusted her feathered armour officiously. “Cloudriders! Keep watch with a keen eye. Don’t trust anyone. Keep your eyes sharp and on the lookout for even a hint of a jade mask and red cloak.”

“We won’t be fooled again,” swore Eztaral. “Get moving, Scions.”

Walking two by two with helmets on and hands on weapons, we marched along the nests, making sure to shove aside the overseer on our way towards Dorla Sel’s colossal trunk. We were soon besieged by crowds milling back and forth, quite content to gawp at Dorla Sel’s branches while shuffling irritatingly slowly. I found it oddly familiar when we began to gather intrigued glances and stares. Our matching armour and our distaste for crowds drew pointing fingers. We weren’t the only ones. Several groups of armoured warriors and scorers were busy battling the crowds. At least they had the wherewithal to have a drummer beating a path for them.

*We need one of those.*

“No, we don’t.” The monstrous jāgu at my side was doing a fine job of keeping people at bay, and Eztaral was already clearing her throat.

“STAND ASIDE!” she bellowed at her full and terrifying volume. A path through the crowd opened up within moments. We even got the attention of some nearby Dorla Sel warriors standing guard on pedestals above the deck. The attention raised the hairs on my arms.

Skyrisers rose and fell between every layer of branch, and Eztaral waded towards them. Apparently, there was not only a queue for them, but a price. Another handful of gems saw us rising up into Dorla Sel’s midsection, where drizzle fell from the clouds. The bloodwood’s crown

was still obscured from view, and the climb slow. I felt a pain growing in my neck from my gaze flitting about, drinking in all the details.

Every branch held some marvel that stirred a simmering in my chest. I had missed this tangle of leafroads and walkways and branches. I had missed the bustle, even though this level of it tested me after the months in the loam. The drums rang in my ears all the while, forcing memories of Shal Gara and battle into my head. I heard Serisi seethe as a stranger bumped into me. I turned with a sharp look and found a small child mouthing a timid apology.

*This is the closest I have seen the Swathe come to chaos without being aflame, Tarko.*

I didn't disagree.

It took another three skyrisers to escort us into the misted reaches of the clouds and into the crown, where the Star of the Tribes resided, or so Atalawe informed us. The hall of the ruler of the Swathe and a building shaped like a seven-pointed star, with an upended spire hanging beneath it.

"What's bothering you?" I asked Pel, who had a sour face on him.

The old sorcer chewed his blue lips. "It has been a long time since I was here, is all."

Atalawe thumped her staff on the skyriser. "Changed a little, hasn't it?"

"You three are sorcers, aren't you?" whispered the boy who had barged into me before. He pointed between Redeye, Pel, and me. By the cut of his fine mosscloth and the minder keeping a protective hand on his shoulder, he was a noble heir, yet to get the mark of a tree tattooed on his throat.

"We are sorcers," I told him. "The best in all the Swathe."

The wonder widened his eyes. "Which bloodwood are you from?"

"We aren't from any bloodwood," said Ralish. "Not anymore."

The wonder changed to confusion as he noticed Redeye and Pel's nectra hanging from their belts but not mine.

"I have never seen your kind before. Do you think you will win?"

"We're not in the Forging, lad," Atalawe told him. "We're here for something far more important."

The boy scratched his head as he pondered what could be more important than the Forging he and the rest of the bloodwood seemed so obsessed with. He was on the cusp of another question when he stabbed a finger in the direction of Dorla Sel's trunk.

"There it is!" the child gasped.

"What?" I asked.

"The Obsidian Forge itself."

Between a break in the clouds, I saw it: a ring-shaped arena of black wood and glassy obsidian that surrounded Dorla Sel's trunk as if shadow had cut the bloodwood in half. Crowds dominated every leafroad and platform that touched it. Ribs of bloodwood carpentry reached above its tall obsidian walls. Flags of every bloodwood colour ran from the pennants that encircled the ring. Half of it was roofed with interwoven bloodwood leaves, while the other half was open to the drizzle, and I glimpsed a half-moon of sand within.

“The young’un is right.” Atalawe beamed. “Witness the very Forge itself, Tarko. The largest sorcer’s temple in all the lands, and one of the finest training grounds when it’s not playing host to all every sorcer in the Swathe.”

*Did we not glimpse a place such as this in our last dream?* asked Serisi.

“I don’t know,” I told her. “Perhaps.”

*I can smell the blood and magic emanating from that place.*

I couldn’t deny that the curiosity burned in me also. Ralish appeared to notice, and I felt her tug at my hand as I stared down below at the passing formations of lancewings and marching warriors.

“I see that look in your eyes. You’re wonderin’ how you’d fare in that Forge,” she said.

“And what do you think?” I asked, already poised on an answer of my own.

“Two rounds. That would be my wager,” muttered Redeye.

I rolled my eyes. “Thank you for the vote of confidence.”

“The strongest sorcers from every bloodwood and tree city are here. Some have been training longer than Pel and I, each from bloodlines of sorcers longer than a leafroad. Even past champions are here. You, Tarko, have been a sorcer for barely half a season,” he said.

“Then imagine how embarrassing it would be for them if I beat them?”

To Atalawe’s snort, Redeye fell quiet, leaving me to stare as the Forge slipped back into the mists. Blue sky and the goddess’ sunlight were beginning to show through the branches above us. I could see the faint outlines of stout, triangular towers, some even made of chiselled stone instead of wood. Metal adorned their roofs and balconies.

I felt a tug at my cloak.

“What war?” squeaked the child beside me, before his minder pulled him closer to her fern-leaf skirts. I kept silent and forced a smile in way of answer.

The jolt of the riser stole my attention. We were still several branches beneath the upended spire of the Allmother’s palace, yet our way was already blocked by a wall of warders, warriors, and lancers riding on the backs of barkwolves. Their green armour of woven wood shone with varnish.

It was impossible to see any more than their eyes beneath their tharantos-carved masks, but I imagined tired and impatient faces hid there. The incessant queues of people heckling them with questions and demands already wore on me, and I had only just arrived.

“Make a path!” barked Eztaral. It was far less effective than before. From the look of their scarlet eyes and purple eyes and extensive jewellery, half of the crowd looked noble to me, mostly heirs or old warriors, or godseers draped in gold and silver and jade. Umbrellas of fine hides, feathers, or metal wings threatened to poke me in the eye with every step.

We came to a wall of first-born in pure white mosscloth. One of them scoffed in Eztaral’s face at her stern request to move aside, for which Caraq soon taught him a lesson in manners by forcibly knocking the man aside.

*Much better*, said Serisi, while I smirked. There was something so inherently satisfying about nobles being shown the fragility of their rank and power. However, nothing moved a crowd like a sorcerer in its midst. Never mind three battle-scarred and wing-weary sorcerers armed to the fangs. No tribe was more feared. Nectra ruled over blood and birth.

“Halt there!” yelled one of the lancers as we muscled our way to the front of the line, where the warriors stood in a barricade of short spears and tall shields. Our commotion had already been noticed. Caraq and I stood before the keen-eyed warriors and let them stare at us.

“Who are you?” demanded the lancer, manoeuvring his barkwolf closer. Inwar yowled as the wolf bared fangs at him.

“The Clouddrivers of Lostriver, and we’ve come with dire news and warning for Allmother Tzatca. We need to see her as soon as possible. Today.”

Chuckling broke out amongst the closest warriors. Several others that stood at their lines snorted mockingly.

“You lot will say anything to be granted an audience, won’t you?” sighed the lancer.

Eztaral stepped forwards, finding fists pressing against her breastplate. “Excuse me?” she growled. “This is no lie. We have an urgent and important message for the Allmother that concerns the whole of the Swathe.”

The lancer’s smile was patronising at best. “Then tell me, and I’ll see she gets the message,” he offered.

*Are all the worms in this tree repugnantly offensive?*

I hoped not.

“Hells, you think I’d entrust you with this information, Lancer? This is not for the likes of you but for the ears of the Allmother herself.”

“How convenient.”

I was losing my patience rapidly. “What are you talking about?”

“What do you think all these others are doing here? Here for the cleaner air and some sunshine? No. Like you, they all think they have a right to see the Allmother. And like I’ve told everyone else who tries to feed me a pack of lies and orokan shit about an important message, the trade of the century, or a matter of life and death, or marauders burning their village, the Allmother doesn’t want to see you. She hardly sees anyone as it is. This, boy, is the Forging.”

Pel spoke up. “But we still have a day before—”

The man gave us another derisive snort. “Before what? The Forging starts tomorrow, you fools. As I keep telling your fellow idiots here, the Allmother has already closed her doors.”

Eztaral stamped her foot. “Then how do we see her?”

The lancer laughed. “You don’t! Not unless you win the Forging.”

“Fetch me a higher rank or a sage, curse it. This is a matter of life and death, including yours!”

“Is that a threat, stranger?”

“That’s a command from an eagleborn, *Lancer*, by order of the Bloodlaws.”

The lancer pinched his lips and whistled sharply.

Another barkwolf and rider joined the fray: a greying warrior in golden armour with green ribbons trailing from his neck. He wore no mask, showing off the six lines of rank plain on his scarred cheek.

“What is it now?” asked the fellow eagleborn.

“Another lot that say they have dire and urgent and all manner of terrible news for the Allmother.”

The eagleborn scratched at his silvery beard. “You’d think they would have come up with better excuses by now. Which bloodwood do you hail from?”

“None. And this is no excuse, Eagleborn. This is the truth. We came straight from Azcalan with this news.”

“Word has it that festering old bloodwood’s burning.”

“Just like Shal Gara,” I interrupted, “And it will happen just the same to Dorla Sel if you don’t let us take us to the Allmother.”

The eagleborn’s face stayed dour for some time before he finally cracked into a smile.

“Ha! You almost had me there for a moment!” he chuckled. “Three Gods, no. Nobody sees the matriarch during the Forging, not unless you’re one of the Forging’s four final sorcers. And you clearly aren’t any of them. You look more to me like grimy loamers with no bloodwood to call home here to make my headache worse than it already is. Shameful. Psh. And you call yourself an eagleborn.”

With a flick of the barkwolf’s leash, the eagleborn turned his back on us.

Both Eztaral and I stared after him with teeth bared and fists quivering. An indignant rage filled me. So much so, I felt my skin burning hot, and a faint orange glow came from my veins.

It took Ralish and Atalawe to peel Eztaral and I away from the line of warriors.

“If we act like enemies, the matriarch will never grant us an audience except to probably execute us. We’ll be of no use to the Swathe then, will we?”

Atalawe’s words were wise, and though I hated them immensely, I unclenched my fist from around Serisi’s sword and let myself be dragged way while the warriors snickered between themselves.

*I have a terrible urge to wipe those smirks off their faces,* said Serisi.

“Well?” Redeye shrugged, once we had barged our way back through the insolent crowd, we and stood catching our breath on a curve of the lofty branch.

“Well *what*, curse you?” hissed Eztaral, on the cusp of livid.

“What do we do now?”

Eztaral clearly hated that she had no answer for that.

Caraq drummed her fingers on her crossed arms. “Way I see it, we should just bring the demon here and force them all to see the truth. They can’t deny what their eyes see.”

I kicked at the railing. “They’d find a reason, I’m sure,” I replied.

Atalawe sniffed. “Then we find a matriarch we can convince and who has a sorcer in the fight and ask them to help. Naxāko said she would be here, correct? We might have a chance to reach Tzatca through her.”

*There is another way*, Serisi told me.

“Unless...,” I began. The Scions had already guessed my mind.

“Absolutely not,” said Pel. “You are not entering the Forging.”

“Why not?”

Eztaral pinched the bridge of her nose. “Because we don’t have the time. Because it may get you killed. Because you’ll make a very obvious target for the Fireborn, if they’re here. Enough reasons, Terelta?” she seethed. “No. Hope is not lost. We find Matriarch Naxāko and show her the proof she wanted. She has more weight than we do. Perhaps she can petition the Allmother before it’s too late.”

“Assuming Haidak and the Fireborn hasn’t already got to her as well,” said Redeye.

I looked up to the distant tip of Dorla Sel, hundreds of feet above me, and cursed that hope was all we had to wield in this bloodwood. Not since Shal Gara had I felt as meaningless as dust.

A flash of red caught my eye between the clouds. My gaze chased it, but it seemed nothing but a mirage. A glint of sunlight and nothing more.

Or so I hoped.



# 27

## OLD FRIENDS

*It is said that more saplings took root and more bloodwoods flowered in the seasons after the demons left than ever before. If there is any solace to take from the war that took everything from us, that is one I can accept.*

*FROM THE ONLY SURVIVING COPY OF "KĪ RAXA'S MUSINGS"*

Dorla Sel had apparently never heard of maps or signposts. They had covered Shal Gara almost to the point of condescension. To find our way around the bloodwood and the whereabouts of a certain child matriarch, we had been forced to ask passersby and traders wherever we could snag them. Nothing came for free in that bloodwood. Every citizen insisted on a gem for their troubles, even when it came to answering a simple question. There had been bribes aplenty. Possibly threats on occasion as we grew more and more tired of the crowds and the constant profiteering. Serisi insulted every one of the misers at length. The words would have no doubt physically cut them if she had been heard.

"I don't know any Naxāko, but she'll be offering up her sorcers in the Obsidian Forge, if she's any kind of smart!" whimpered the man who had just moments ago demanded ten gems for telling us precisely where Naxāko could be found.

Atalawe let go of the would-be thief's arm, and Inwar hid away his sharp fangs.

The man slammed the shutters of his shop, as if that would keep us out, and Eztaral set a course for the black walls of the Forge, now blotting out the bloodwood above us thanks to chasing a false rumour to a cloth market.

"You heard the man. And if this one's lying too, then at least we know where he lives."

To the faint whimper I heard behind the shutters, we delved back into the crowds. I had come to the conclusion that half of the Swathe had travelled to Dorla Sel to watch the Forging.

"How long has this Forging been happening?" I asked Atalawe.

"Since four hundred seasons ago, when two sorcer matriarchs held a duel to see which of them would take the throne of Rōkama Dar. The two duelled to the death, and the winner, in honour of the sister she had killed, held a championship to decide the finest sorcer in the Swathe. Scholars think it was a ploy to die in battle, to be with her sister in the Six Heavens, but she never lost and died in her hall as an old woman. On the anniversary of her death, her daughter announced the Tournament of Sorcers. It was eventually moved to the home of the Allmother, was renamed the Forging, and has happened every five seasons since, save for Black Storm or the seasons when the Battles of the Bloodwoods interrupted."

“The what?”

Atalawe swelled her chest as she flexed her scholar’s muscles. “When bloodwood fought bloodwood, my good Ralish. Civil war, they called it, though there was nothing civil about it. For tens of seasons, it raged across the Swathe and into the Scorch, until the four bloodwoods involved decided to settle it in a Forging. That’s why the Forging’s champion is now decided in a final four-way battle.”

“If a sorcer gets that far,” muttered Redeye.

Eztaral chimed in. “And why the final battle is now to the death, not merely to gallant defeat.”

Pel was rubbing at a scar on his forehead as if it hid a memory. “There’s not a sorcer that comes out of the Forging unscathed. We sorcers are stubborn creatures. Duels usually go on until the bitter end.”

“Yes, yes, I get your points.” I scowled as I ascended the stairs to the plaza encircling the Obsidian Forge.

Another wall of warriors guarded one half of the plaza, where the battleground of the Forge sat. I could only catch a glimpse of the pillars and expanse of wood and stone beyond. Intermittent cheering could be heard alongside the clashing of weapons. I could hear Serisi sniffing at the scent of blood and sweat. And death.

By good fortune, there were no warriors barring our path from the covered the other half of the Forge. Streams of people came and went from its wide doors, where the gods of soil and earth held mighty blades across the entrance. The goddess of sun once again perched above their heads, wings spread and streamers hanging lank in the mist.

I’d thoroughly expected more kinds of madness and bustle within the enormous hall. What we found instead was organised as precisely as the contraptions of cogs and narin wood springs the carpenters of Shal Gara used to make for children. That wasn’t to say the hall wasn’t as crowded and deafening as all the Hells, of course. But it was an organised deafening.

Queues of entourages of all different bloodwoods and tree cities snaked back and forth, yammering amongst themselves. Announcements of names and ranks were yelled as if it was a competition of volume. The carvings of past champions leered at us from the lofty roof that burned with vinelight. Parrots and waifs carrying scrolls battled for space above our heads. I couldn’t have touched the walls for the sheer amount of Dorla Sel warders keeping watch.

Nearby, a bushy-bearded godseer appeared to be giving a tour to a group of tall and noble visitors clad in armour made of stone coloured like Inwar’s eyes. I caught snippets of the man’s droning words as we followed the flow of the crowds.

“...and since the two thousand and eighty-sixth season when the new Forge was built atop the old arena, this hall is where hopeful sorcers come with their matriarchs, envoys, upholders, and all manner of advisors to be offered to the Forging. They are given chambers within the upper levels and whatever they desire during the four days of the Forging itself. Vittles, visitors, wine, private training halls, and warders to keep them far away from the – let us say, occasionally

*overenthusiastic* – crowds of supporters and fans. Please excuse the commotions: the disasters of the wildfires in the east and south have caused quite the stir and delayed many in their travels.”

“What’s an upholder?” I asked the Scions as I blinked in the bright vinelight tracing the angles of the great hall.

Eztaral pointed at the entourages currently arguing with the officious scholars over this amount and that little rule. “They’re somebody who gives you the gems necessary to offer yourself up to the Forging. If you ask me for my opinion, they’re a big pouch of gems on legs and dressed in fine wormsilk. Usually sorcers have the matriarch of their bloodwood or city backing them, or a sage, or even a powerful citizen who smells a profit from a mile off and comes to fatten their pockets and have their ego tenderly stroked.”

“Profit? How?”

Atalawe looked at me as if the answer was written on the walls around us. “Gambling, lad.”

Serisi hissed eagerly in my head. I could imagine her jaws opening in ravenous greed. *Gambling, you say?*

“Half of these dusty old temachs sitting at their tables are taking official wagers over the duels and who will win overall,” Atalawe was saying. “Big wagers, too, witnessed and signed. Heirs and nobles let their sorcers fight while they profit off their deaths. Not to mention all the warriors who come to test themselves. That’s who you can hear in the Forge now, warming up the crowds.”

As we wandered, the tables were soon overtaken by stalls, smiths, and carpenters. Here and there, I saw the nectra. Ironpith boxes and armoured wagons betrayed the telltale blue glow. Warriors clanked alongside them, caring not for which dignitary or noble had to scurry out of their way. There was no magic without nectra. Except in my case, of course.

In one corner, I saw a familiar streak of black and teal on triangular shields. Stormbeaten colours. They were wolf-faced highwarders for the most part, with sages amongst them, each wearing obnoxiously large and cumbersome headdresses of teal feathers and fish scales.

*But no Matriarch Naxāko.*

There was no sign of her amongst her citizens. Spreading between the queues, we Scions scoured the crowds like hunters wading through thick and irritating undergrowth. I got used to picking out which sorcers and entourages had come from the lesser tree cities or flat towns. The tree cities did not glitter or shine nearly as much as those who had journeyed from bloodwoods. For the flat-towners, their stone armour was a clear giveaway, as were the beetle antlers protruding from their snarling masks and helmets. The greatest clue was that they didn’t have the pompous swagger nor the scarlet eyes of bloodwood nobility. I saw more than a few terse words shared between the differing tiers of Swathefolk. Warders swarmed swiftly to keep it civil, but the air remained crisp with tension. It was the air of firstglow before a battle.

“Do you think Shal Gara is here too?” Ralish asked me, sticking at my side.

“Seems only right they would be, but I have no idea who they would they send,” I said. “I frankly could not care. They cast us out. They had their chance to help in this war. Let the fools suit themselves. Never appreciated me there. I’m glad I had the excuse to finally leave.”

*You lie.*

Serisi was right. My words were lies, a blanket to cover up the corpse of my bitter guilt. I’d long decided that Shal Gara would never forgive me, and I had no interest in meeting that blame face-to-face.

“You know, I bet there are plenty of citizens who disagreed with Matriarch Danaxt’s decision,” offered Atalawe, as if sensing my thoughts.

“Envoy Okarin, for one. Though she did nothing about it,” I said.

“Okarin,” Ralish snorted. “She could have done something if she’d had the stones.”

I agreed. “She wasn’t the noble I expected her to be, I must admit. She listened to us about the Bloodlaws.”

“She’s red-eyed just like all the rest. Unless it benefits her, she’s not interested. She held her tongue that day because it didn’t suit her to do otherwise. I don’t trust her. Never ignored my instincts and won’t start now,” said Ralish.

Eztaral clicked her armoured fingers and pointed above our heads.

“There she is,” I muttered.

Upon a walkway of twisted wood, we saw the diminutive figure of the child matriarch, with her distinctive silver hair braided into an intricate nest. Four highwarders armed with their enormous obsidian blades walked behind her. At her side was a curious figure ensconced in a dark grey blanket. They walked at a slow pace and with a stiff limp.

We walked with purpose, with the eagleborn and I leading the charge to the bottom of the steps that Naxāko plodded down. Her highwarders apparently recognised us given the way they surged around their matriarch, blades crossed in an obsidian barrier.

“Matriarch Naxāko,” Eztaral announced. “How good it is to see you here.”

*And yet the child does not look in the least bit pleased to see us,* said Serisi.

“Eagleborn Kraid,” replied Naxāko. “How unexpected.”

“The last time we met, you demanded proof of the threat we spoke of. Do you remember?”

Naxāko looked insulted. “Do you take me for one of the doddering old grey-hairs? Eyes watery pink with age and fifty seasons on the throne? Of course I remember.”

“We have that proof, Matriarch, as you asked for.”

Naxāko worked one of her heavy rings around her finger. “I’m afraid, after consideration, I’ve changed my mind.”

“You what?” I spat.

“You mind your tongue, sorcer,” hissed a highwarder who got the full force of my scowl. I swore flames burned in my eyes.

“I have every right to do what is best for my bloodwood,” Naxāko said sternly. “And after I heard the other side of your argument, it was obvious who to believe.”

*She has been poisoned against us, Tarko.*

“Who changed your mind?” I demanded to know.

The grey-clad and hooded figure standing apart from Naxāko hobbled closer. As they reached to show their face, I caught sight of the scarlet cloth beneath the grey. I saw the grin twisted by pink scars and welts. Several teeth were missed since last time I’d seen them. As was one arm. A sleeve had been pinned around the remainder.

An inferno filled my cheeks as I recognised the bastard.

*It cannot be... I killed him.*

“Juraxi!” I yelled. A breeze stirred across my skin as my magic flooded me.

Before any of the Scions could act – including me – Atalawe sprang for him. The highwarders scrambled to intervene, but by the time they had spears trained on her, she already had Juraxi pinned against the nearest pillar and was choking him with one hand. Juraxi’s feet had left the floor. Inwar stood at her side, jaws open wider than I had ever seen, as if the jāgu was ready to swallow the bastard whole.

“If it takes killing you twice for what you did in Stormbeaten, that’s fine with me,” she seethed.

“Unhand that man!” yelled Naxāko, but Inwar’s fierce growl managed to stall the highwarders.

“Surprised to see me, Scions?” he choked, dribbling saliva from his scarred lips. “As wonderful as it is to see you, Atalawe, you might want to curb your enthusiasm. There’s no violence allowed within the Obsidian Forge except between the sorcers.”

Juraxi managed to point, and another blade of disappointment stabbed me as Dorla Sel warriors swiftly surrounded us. Their short spears balanced on their vambraces, ready to stab. Obsidian glittered in our faces.

“Not unless you want to spend the Forging in Dorla Sel’s prisons,” garbled Juraxi. “Or hang from the Branch of the Dead. That would be a real shame.”

“This man is a mass murderer! He is a liar and a traitor to the Bloodlaws!” Eztaral proclaimed.

Another voice came to mock us. “And he is under my protection!”

We turned as one to see Haidak Baran standing brazen and bold in the centre of the crowds, arms folded behind his back, crimson hair spiked and tangled, and a shit-eating grin on his accursed face. Burned copper armour shone like a flame in the vinelight. Four of his Fireborn, masked and cloaked, stood at his back. For some reason, a sage’s silver feather now dangled around his neck.

“No exercising grudges. No seeking of revenge. No fighting of any kind,” Haidak crowed. “None of these are welcome in Dorla Sel or the Forging by the Allmother’s sovereign command. Isn’t that right, warders?”

A warder with finer armour than the others shouted at us. “All is settled in the Forging!”

“This is orokan shit,” I hissed.

“Release this man,” ordered Naxāko in her shrill voice. Her face had grown red, almost matching the birthmark streaking her cheek. “Or my highwarders will save Allmother the trouble of hanging you and cut you down where you stand.”

Eztaral’s growl was so deep I barely made it out. “Atalawe.”

Juraxi was beginning to turn the colour of a ticabo berry, but before he was choked unconscious – or something more permanent – Atalawe let him slide down the pillar. Juraxi tried to smile as he brushed off his scarlet collar with his remaining hand.

“The right of sanctuary, I heard one of the godseers call it,” he gasped. “Isn’t that right, Lord Baran?”

“That it is!” Haidak crowed. “And no one, not even the righteous Scions of the Sixth-Born, is exempt.”

Eztaral took a step towards Haidak. The traitor did not flinch. If anything, he grinned wider.

“Warders, you cannot let these people walk freely around your bloodwood!” Eztaral urged. “He is responsible for the burning of Shal Gara.”

Whispers came from the crowds of onlookers. Half of them were aghast at us. The rest hid lips curled in a desire to see some drama unfold.

“Shal Gara?” Naxāko interjected. “You are mistaken! Lord Baran is the sole surviving sage of Azcalan’s recent fall, you fools.”

“What?” Atalawe blurted.

More whispers from the crowd as Haidak’s face turned sorrowful.

“Thank you for your assistance, kind and wise Matriarch Naxāko,” Haidak said with a bow. “Another disaster in an already troubled season, and a terrible fate for an already tortured bloodwood. It’s my honour to preserve its memory. Here, in the grand Forging.”

“Lies!” I spluttered, exasperated. “He’s from Shal Gara!”

Eztaral wasn’t done giving them something to whisper about. “This man is dangerous, underhanded, and a traitor. He’s here to feed lies to the Allm—”

“Have some respect!” came a damning yell from the crowd. The Dorla Sel warders shook their heads as they crept closer, protecting the Fireborn. There was not a cursed thing we could do about it. I had never been so infuriated in my life. Serisi’s rage was hot on my skin. Faint dust stirred around my boots no matter how hard I dampened my magic.

Haidak put a hand to his heart. “Again, I thank you. I’m sure you are as dismayed by Shal Gara’s fall as I am about my bloodwood Azcalan. But your distress has twisted your minds. You have travelled far on this pathetic quest of yours to spread doom and calamity and blame me for what amounts to simple wildfire. I can tell you’re weary from this absurd crusade. I don’t think I’m the only one who can smell the stink of mud on you. Or is that your new friend here? The one dressed as a crow,” Haidak asked of Caraq.

The wingmaster pursed her lips into a smile.

“Play your games all you want. If only these people knew what a deplorable traitor to your kind you really are, even the warders would rip you apart without a care. If there is anything left

after I was done with you,” I told him through clenched teeth. Haidak only seemed to relish in that fact. I closed the gap between us slowly. “What are you doing here? Come to whisper more chaos and lies in the Allmother’s ears? You won’t get that chance.”

“More ridiculous accusations! Dear me. I am simply here to represent my tragic bloodwood. As sole remaining ruler of Azcalan, I have come to offer a sorcer to the Forging. One of Azcalan’s finest. A true sorcer. One who would give a fraud like you a challenge, Tarkosi, even despite that fresh brand on your cheek.”

I stepped even closer, within reaching distance of the hateful prick. The warders stood ready in my peripheries. It took everything I had to keep my hands at my sides. “Who?” I asked, my voice a guttural effort not to shout.

“You’ll have to wait until the Forging, Tarko Terelta, just like every other peasant outside these walls,” Haidak chuckled quietly. “You’ll enjoy watching, I’m sure. It looks to be quite the competition this season. Every bloodwood and town worth their nectra is here to duel.”

“Don’t expect to leave this bloodwood alive, Haidak,” I promised him.

“My my, Terelta. There’s that fire in your eyes again. Such aggression. Such venom, you might say,” Haidak replied. “By the way, where is the rest of your sorry family? Your brother Texoc, for instance? I do hope nothing has befallen him. Do give him my regards, next time you see him, won’t you?”

*Oh no.*

The Fireborn had the cheek to turn away from me, as if I was nothing but a toothless shadow to him. My fist was already swinging before I realised I had lifted my arm. I never connected the punch, and I was thankful in hindsight. Ralish hooked my arm, and though she struggled to hold back Serisi’s strength, she had stopped me from making my dire error. Her snow-blue eyes were fierce and the shake of her head firm. “Don’t be the demon. Not now. Be Tarko and see sense,” she whispered.

Haidak flinched ever so slightly, momentarily outraged at my knuckles close to his face. It was a shade of the satisfaction I wanted, but I still relished in it.

“Pitiful, that you need your lover to save you from yourself.”

Warders rushed in once more like a Stormbeaten wave, but I had broken no law. I lowered my hand to my side. I didn’t need to look to know my fist glowed blue beneath my gloves.

I could see Haidak struggling with his restraint as I did. He turned to leave us under the watchful eyes of the warders. “Enjoy the Forging, Scions. I’ll give your best to the Allmother when I see her.”

“Escort these troublemakers outside,” ordered the lead warder. The warders began to lay hands upon me, but Naxāko once again had something to say.

“Leave him!” she called out, noble eyes narrowed at me. “He is quite obviously a fool and clearly hard of hearing, not to mention a foreigner to this bloodwood. Give him another chance to learn. He will not be caught breaking the rules again.”

“You can promise this, Matriarch?” asked one of the warders, conveniently spitting on my neck in the process. I couldn’t help but flinch at the sting of the moisture.

“It will not be my neck if he doesn’t,” was all Naxāko said before her highwarders escorted her back into the fray of the crowds.

Once I was freed and not stoking their excitement, the onlookers quickly lost interest and went back to their bustle and bartering. I stared at my clenched hand, catching myself longing to be drenched in Haidak’s blood. I had never felt such bloodlust in all my life. “Thank you, Ralish,” I whispered.

She frowned. “Somebody had to stop you. If that was you, I mean.”

It had been, and I blamed Haidak instead of my demon.

*In time, Tarko, we will have our revenge.*

“Told you we would be too late,” Redeye muttered at my back.

Pel was not encouraged, either. “This situation is nothing short of hideous. Haidak and his Fireborn in the Forging, roaming free and clear, and nothing we can do about it!”

Atalawe shrugged. “Not in clear view, at least.”

“We are Scions, not assassins,” said Eztaral.

Ralish was grinding her knuckles against her forehead. “How in the Six Hells has he managed to make himself a sage out of Azcalan’s fall? Or turned Naxāko for that matter? What did he say to make her turn?”

“I can have my lancewings here within the day. How can they deny the truth when it is in front of their eyes?” Caraq offered.

“The Fireborn would deny it. They’ve lied or threatened or promised their way into the pockets of Naxāko already, so what’s to say the other matriarchs would grow a backbone and stand up against them? Haidak will lie his way out,” snarled Eztaral. “We need the Allmother behind us. She can command them all.”

I let their arguing wash over me as Serisi and I stared across the great hall, eyeing armoured sorcers and glittering nobles alike. As if I wielded Volechaser’s magic, the crowds appeared to slow. I watched faces contort in laughter and scowls. Sages clasped hands and bowed to long-lost friends.

A pounding of drums interrupted the clamour of the great hall. A loud voice, yelled through a cone of leafleather, cut the air.

“All offerings must be made before lastlight! Those not belonging to a competing sorcer will be ejected from the Obsidian Forge for the duration of the Forging!”

The realisation hammered into me like a slingstone to the skull.

*Tarko...*

I felt Serisi twitch inside my head as the Scions’ arguing continued. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking, demon?”

*I am. It is the only way.*

“And are you willing?”



*With every fibre of my charred soul, Tarko of the Swathe.*

“Then it’s decided,” I whispered, catching Ralish’s eye between the arguing circle of Scions. Her eyes widened as she saw me glance at a nearby group of sorcers clad in all manner of pelts. I waited to see whether she would stop me, but all Ralish gave me was a subtle nod, even if her eyes didn’t hide the worry within.

Without a word to the others, I set my sights on the nearest temach sitting behind a table without a ridiculously long queue and marched towards him with indefatigable purpose.