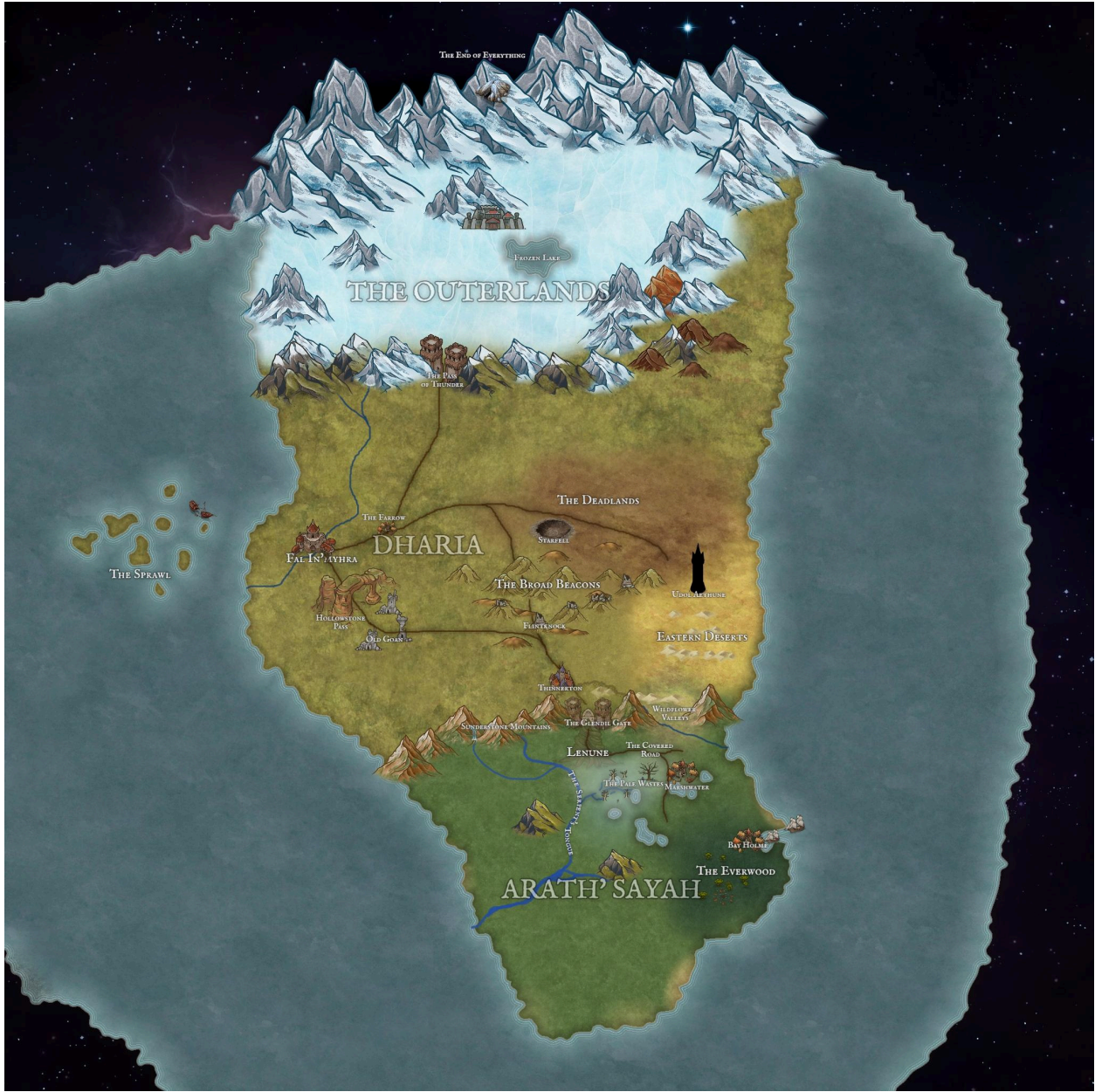


The Aether

—Book One—

The Spider And The Shadow

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The Elves are a proud folk, confined by their own designs to the forests of the southern lands. It suits them well to be away from us. It suits us even better.

-Learnéd Gryfar: The Curious Races of Anima, III Edition.

CHAPTER 1 - THE ELDERGROVE CULT

Things in these wild trees hid from the light, and they came out to play in the dark. Eluse did not want to be on the road by nightfall. It was not a place for a prince.

“Move it, boy. We won’t die on this road for you.” Iridian’s snarl cut through the twilight.

Eluse gritted his teeth and put his heels to Shanta, his dappled whitetail buck. He could snipe as much as he liked, but Eluse knew that Iridian, chief advisor to the King, would die wherever his father commanded it. Still, if there was one elf Eluse would not dare say that to, it was Iridian.

The cool of the shade lifted the sweat from the day’s ride, and Shanta matched the pace of Iridian’s elk. The fat, ancient forest disappeared into a withering black, tangles of thorny roots snaking across the ground, threatening to pull Eluse in. He gripped Shanta’s leather reins tightly and ignored the quiet dread that grew with the shadows.

One of the Crownswords loomed up on his right. Erenil, an older elf. Her sage-green face was covered in ancient scars and a hunk of lip hung loose.

“Scared, Eluse?” she whispered, in a voice that hoped he was. “I shouldn’t worry. Any Eldergrove cultists in these trees will have been bled dry by the wastelings.”

“Don’t lie to him,” another drawled, riding up on the left. This one was fat enough to threaten to overbalance his elk when he shifted in his seat. His face held a grin that was far too pleased with itself. Eluse had forgotten his name, but didn’t really care enough to remember. “The wastelings and Eldergrove hunt together. They curse the trees, I reckon, and the woods themselves come alive and strangle you.” They both snickered.

Eluse rolled his eyes. “Well, I ought to be grateful for the two of you then. I can make my escape while they break your necks.”

The Crownswords chuckled arrogantly, and Eluse pressed into his deer. In truth, the stories of the Eldergrove Cult put a cold wind in him, but he couldn’t afford to show it. It wasn’t worth the bluster of these elves who were paid to guard him. The woods had grown dangerous lately, but a dozen Crownswords surrounded him. Proud and tall on their elks, they had spent much of the journey swapping war stories, told with far too much swagger for Eluse to believe any of them. Half sounded fit for folk ballads, and the other half sounded like cold murder.

Whatever sort these soldiers were, they were not the kind to share in a young elfling's petty fears. Eluse had sixteen summers behind him, coming up on his seventeenth—some of these elves had served the Palace for more than four hundred.

“Move up the pace,” Iridian grunted.

“How long to Marshwater?” Eluse asked.

“Too long, if we slow for idle chat. If you're scared of these woods, boy, then get through them faster.”

Iridian hardly talked unless in cruel remarks. The King's Rosethorne was tired of coddling the little elfling prince any time he left the city limits, and did not let Eluse forget it. *A prince of the realm should be braver than you*, his father had said to him before they'd left, thanks to Iridian's endless reproof. That leech in his ear. Eluse's stomach churned to think of it. He was no coward. Well, at least, he told himself as much, and tried to turn his mind away from what brooded beyond the treeline.

Rusenil, one of the twelve Crownswords and a kinder elf than most, rode up on Iridian. “Night is close,” he said. “The lanterns will benefit us.”

“If you're so keen to be spotted, Rusenil, perhaps you could set yourself aflame and ride into the trees.” Iridian said flatly. “Lanterns will draw anything in these woods to us.”

“In an hour we won't see a thing in front of our faces. We could march headlong into their swords and we wouldn't know until we're skewered.”

“Last I recall, the Rosethorne, not the Crownsword, is the ward of the prince outside of the city.” Iridian's voice was a whip. “No lanterns.”

A while away, a soft howl rang over the trees. The notes of it clung to the hairs on the back of his neck.

“Just a wolf,” Iridian said. “Move.”

A low mist crept through the trees. The Covered Road was marked at each crossroad by great squat oaks on large earthen mounds, older than the road itself. Eluse squinted one out now, where the canopy thinned and the two roads met. Maybe they weren't so far.

From the corner of Eluse's eye, something caught his attention.

“Hold, now,” he called, firmly as he could. “I have something.” He hated the way his voice sounded against Iridian's; boyish and weak.

The Rosethorne gave a disparaging frown and pulled round. “What now?”

“Look here. Footprints.”

They were pattered over the dirt, light as frost. Bare-toed, spread apart. Too far apart for walking. Just right for running.

“Fancy that, Prince, footprints on a path.” The fat Crownsword pushed his way past Iridian. “Let’s call off the journey then; His Highness has been spooked.”

“The gait, you fool. Look at it. This was no traveller.”

The Crownswords gathered, a prickling quiet among them. The footprints stretched away into shadow. Iridian studied them with narrow eyes. “Keep your wits about you,” he said in the end. “Your blades, too. Move.”

The wall of black that surrounded them felt like it crushed Eluse. *They’re out there, somewhere. Waiting in the dark.*

Shanta’s ears twitched. The whitetail stood well short of the Crownsword’s elks, but Eluse loved the little deer. Shanta was quick, kind and clever, and everything that these elves weren’t. He didn’t mind that Eluse was no soldier.

Eluse stroked down his neck. “Easy, boy,” he whispered. “Don’t be afraid.” The deer puffed, indignant, and made his antlers tall. Proud as any Crownsword. Eluse admired him for that. At the very least, he thought, I can be as brave as a deer.

Don’t. Show. Fear.

He couldn’t show it. But he was also not about to run into an Eldergrove ambush for the sake of pride.

“Iridian,” Eluse whispered at last. “We should stop. Turn back. Those footprints—”

“When I require the advice of some tenderfoot whelp, your ear shall be the first I shall burden,” Iridian said crisply. “Until then, keep your mouth shut and move.”

Eluse clenched his jaw. To any other Crownsword, he’d have some clever retort. For Iridian, he had only silence. Until he came of age, Iridian’s word was law beyond the city. Even to a prince.

They rode in single file, just silhouettes now. In the daylight, they had blended well into the woodland, the deep indigo of Iridian’s skin or the sage-green of Ruseníl, or Eluse’s pale violet. Their forest-green tunics beneath their cloaks of grey ironsilk melded into the trees. Now, in the black, they were nearly invisible.

They picked their way carefully into the open. “This is it. South now, and we’ll find it.” Iridian kicked his bull elk forward. Above them, fingers of spindly branches reached across the sky.

Some dark shape slithered across the path.

Instinctively, six of the Crownswords closed in around him. Eluse’s breath sharpened. An animal? Something else?

Iridian jerked Lenduel to a halt. “Cloaks.”

As one, the Crownsword readied their ironsilks. Hot blood rushed in Eluse’s ears as he fumbled his fingers through the glove on the cloak’s left side and raised his hood. With the sound of metal licking leather, each elf unsheathed his weapon. The hair on Eluse’s neck bristled, but he saw no fear on the faces of the Crownswords. How could they be so calm? He felt like a mouse, waiting in the jaws of a cat. He forced his clammy hands to the shaft of his spear, and unstrapped it from Shanta’s flank.

Be strong. Don’t be afraid.

A whisper flicked through the air. He breathed out. Just a sparrow, darting overhead. Behind him, a dull thump rattled, like a branch falling to the floor. Eluse twitched his head back. On the ground lay a cluster of feathers, but in the dark he couldn’t see a bird among them. A slender stalk poked from them.

As he turned his head back, more swishes of air nipped by.

Were they birds?

They sounded almost like...

“Arrowfire!”

It was Iridian who shouted it, and he was already at a gallop before the shapes loomed out of the dusk. Cold air flooded Eluse’s lungs, and he leapt up.

This was it. It was happening. The trees came alive with movement.

A ***clang*** rang out; the scream of an arrow striking ironsilk. “Move on them! Move!” Iridian thundered.

Eluse pressed his body low on Shanta’s hot neck and they charged forward. Ironsilk held high, just like his training, he levelled his spear and barrelled toward the dark shapes emerging from the roadside. He wrestled with the reins, and with the fear that bubbled up inside himself. Surrounded by these hardened Crownswords, Eluse felt his youth. He was no warrior. He had never known battle. Would he die in his first?

On his left, Iridian's bull stampeded two attackers clear off their feet. His massive elk already had an arrow in its hind, but fought on as if it were a splinter. It moved with such destructive purpose, stamping and kicking powerful legs. Eluse couldn't help but gasp, awed. Under him, Shanta's hooves skittered in a panic.

In front, swords clashed with dull peals, and Eluse could hardly separate friend from foe. Two Crownswords drew up on him, Erenil and the fat one, cloaks high between him and the danger.

"They're on all sides! Stand and fight!" Iridian's holler rolled over the crossroads.

A pang of dread hit Eluse; his martial training had taught him to run where he could and let the Crownswords fight for him. A prince's duty was to *live*. Now, there was nowhere to run. Breath short, fingers slick on his reins, he twisted Shanta around. The dark closed in like walls.

A cry rang out close by. An elf fell from a low bough of the oak, shot through by a Crownsword's arrow. His dying howl rattled Eluse; the scream of an animal. One of the guards drew as close to Eluse as he could, covering him with his own cloak. "Stay well clear, Prince!"

The elves clamoured in the trees. "The prince! On the buck, the prince!"

His body turned to ice. They had found him. They were coming. A sickening thud startled him, and an arrow slammed into the throat of the fat Crownsword's steed. It hollered, collapsing.

A scream echoed in the woods. "My leg!" rasped the Crownsword, caught beneath the elk. He scrabbled desperately in the dirt. Erenil brought her elk around, covering Eluse from the arrowfire. Another arrow clanged into her ironsilk, clattering to the ground.

"Help me!" the downed Crownsword cried, reaching for Erenil. "I can't move!"

His voice sounded strange. Wet. Only then did Eluse see the blood that spilled from him, and the shaft of an arrow raised from his gut. Desperate to run, but unable to tear his eyes away, Eluse was frozen. Pity tore at him for this Crownsword he'd felt nothing but disdain for moments ago.

Erenil ignored the wounded elf. "Get yourself back, Prince, for pity's sake! It's you they're here for!" Had Eluse not ridden on deerback, he was sure she would have thrown him over her shoulder and ridden away. But he couldn't move, only stare at the Crownsword. He didn't even know his name. How didn't he know his name?

"Go, Prince!" Erenil shouted again, slapping Shanta's hide. "Get away!"

That was the protocol. Run, while the Crownswords fought. But protocol was one thing, and a dying elf on the ground was another. “Help him!” Eluse urged Erenil, tugging Shanta’s reins.

“Come! Away now!”

A dark-clad elf burst from the undergrowth, sword raised high, rushing for the two of them. Erenil spurred her elk to a gallop and as she passed, slashed down, slicing the cultist under the armpit through his chest. He screamed in agony as he fell, but only for a moment. Eluse churned, revulsed.

His legs twitched under him, desperate to slip from Shanta, to reach for the wounded Crownsword. But more rushed from the trees. Pale shapes under dark cloaks and hoods, the glint of metal in their fingers. The Eldergrove closed in.

“I’m... I’m sorry—” he stuttered. He was powerless. Pathetic. His own words disgusted him.

A golden blast of bright magic erupted against the side of the tree, and the scorch of its heat snapped him back to his senses. Shadows twisted as it shimmered and died, but lights writhed behind his eyes. Shanta bolted.

Eluse’s training abandoned him. He was led more by terror than instinct, and any thought of the Crownsword fell away. Fear snapped at him, chasing him away. In the low light a figure leapt from the shadow clutching a sword, and Eluse swung his spear with such clumsy panic that the wooden shaft glanced off the cultist’s shoulders. Shanta’s legs almost slipped as he skittered between two more, so close Eluse could smell the sweat on them.

Then from the dark, Iridian, crashing over the leaffall. For the first time in his life Eluse felt relief at the sight of him. The Rosethorne hacked down the cultists with his longsword, leaving crumpled heaps at Lenduel’s hooves.

Something snared around Eluse. Fingers gripped at his waist, tangling round his cloak. There, right beside him, desperate eyes of a cultist leered under the hood of his cloak, hands grasping for him. He tried to spin his spear around, and as he did a growl tore from the mouth of the cultist.

“*There’ll be no one remaining to mourn for what was lost!*” he cried, heaving at Eluse, slinging his weight across him, unbalancing him from Shanta.

The cry was the last thing the elf ever did. Lenduel’s iron hoof lashed out, collapsing his chest. That bull elk was almost as fearsome a warrior as its rider.

“Cloak high, boy! Raise it up!”

He did, and though the ironsilk was tougher than armour, it felt like it offered no more protection than a blanket. Ahead, five Crownswords were dismounted and loosing arrows at the elves in the trees, whilst the others encircled Eluse, striking down any elf who got close. One cultist charged, but with a flourish his sword was wrapped up in a cloak, and he was disarmed and dispatched. When Eluse raised his own cloakhand, warm sticky blood glistened back at him. Whether Crownsword or Eldergrove, or his own, he did not know. He choked back bile. Shanta stumbled, and Eluse didn't know which way to lead him.

The Eldergrove fought viciously, desperately, but they were no match for the bronze and ironsilk of the royal guard. The crashing of metal lessened, the screams of fury slowed, and the clamour of the forest died. He tried to hold back panicked breaths, biting his tongue until it bled.

The battle was won.

And I was nothing but a burden.

“Report!” Iridian called.

A quick flurry of Crownsword voices revealed that nine of the twelve had made it through the fray unscathed. One had taken an arrow in the shoulder, and another bore a slash across his arm where he had moved his ironsilk too slow, but both would live. The last, the fat Crownsword that had guarded Eluse, had not risen from beneath his elk. He had been shot twice and run through by a sword.

Eluse's blood clotted in his veins when he heard it, and he approached the fallen elf. He looked at him, dead in the leaves. The dim light could not hide the terror on the face of the elf, still hanging in a silent scream. In life, this Crownsword had never shown a drop of fear. In death, it had all come spilling out at once.

I could have helped him.

A shudder moved him.

And if I had, it might be me on that ground.

He could taste the metal stench of blood in the air. He struggled to stop the writhing of his stomach while the other elves counted up the Eldergrove dead. They got as far as eight, before—

“This one's alive!”

It was Rusenil who called it, heaving a cultist from the bracken. The elf's leg was crushed, and he screamed as others joined to haul him, flailing, over the dirt toward Iridian. A black trail of blood snaked the ground and flecked his pale blue skin.

Watching the thrashing prisoner, Eluse found a strange feeling rise in his chest—not fear, or hate, as he’d expected, but a sort of pity. He knew his father’s stories of the Eldergrove Cult; the murderers who lived in the East. But stories didn’t bleed. They didn’t cry.

Instead of looking to the Rosethorne, the cultist stared wildly at Eluse, eyes wet. “Prince—”

Iridian wrenched him by the hair, stretching his head back, and struck him so hard in the throat that the air whistled from him.

“Do not address the prince.”

Eluse jerked forward, but Rusnıl’s arm held him back. “Best not, boy,” he muttered gravely. Eluse was alarmed at his own feeling. The crumpled frame of the elf stirred in him a cold pity. He had not seen a doomed elf so close before. But why pity? It might have been this cultist who killed the Crownsword, for all he knew.

“He wears a ranger’s cloak,” Eluse murmured. The cultist looked so very much like a person. He tried to harden himself; to see the monster Iridian saw. It didn’t work.

“Stolen from one of our own they’ve slaughtered, no doubt.” Iridian eyed the growing dark. Only a thin sliver of moon hung below the rising stars. Before him, the elf squeaked for breath in faint nips and turned pleading eyes first to Iridian, then to Eluse. “Marshwater is done; we ride for Lenune tonight. We’ll finish him and go. These woods are not safe.”

Rusenıl stepped forward. “*Finish* him? Iridian, this elf is from the Eldergrove. He will have answers.”

“He doesn’t seem in the mood for speech,” sneered Iridian, ragging the cultist around by his hair like a doll. Breath wheezed through the elf’s broken throat.

Corpses lined the crossroads, and Eluse found himself sickened at the thought of making another. “We should bring him to my father,” he said, battling the tremor in his own voice. What *was* this? Perhaps Iridian was right. Perhaps he was a coward. His own panic in the battle made him queasy. He could almost hear Iridian’s words back to his father. *One taste of bloodshed and the boy has no appetite for it.* But, it was true. He didn’t.

Iridian looked at him. “Bring him back? And will he share your deer on the way?” A ripple of sniggering brushed through the Crownswords.

In spite of his better instincts, Eluse stood his ground. “He should not be killed here. This elf is our prisoner. My father would not care for you to kill him; the Palace should decide his fate.” He met the gaze of the Rosethorne, doing his best to hold it. His insides writhed. It felt like picking a fight with a hurricane.

“I am Rosethorne to the King, little prince. In these wilds, I am the Palace.” He looked down Eluse. “Come here.”

Adrenaline made Eluse stubborn. He clenched his fists and didn't move. Iridian strode to him, grabbing the wriggling prince by the neck of his cloak, and yanked him toward the whimpering elf as easily as if he were made of air.

“This is a war they have wrought upon themselves. If you are to rule one day, Chosen Son of the King, then you must learn the cost of power.” He turned to the cultist. “You cultists are right about one thing. There will be none remaining to mourn for you.”

There'll be no one remaining to mourn for what was lost. The battle call of the Eldergrove Cult. A threat to the Royal Family and everyone around them. And this was the end goal of the Cult. Death to the royal family, and all who served them. They had been there to kill him.

This cultist, though, was no more than a wretch now. If there was murder in his eyes, Eluse didn't see it. Only fear. He looked like a child, clawing for breath.

Iridian's hands clamped hard into Eluse's shoulders, fingers burning, so close that he could smell his sweat and the blood that dripped down his cloak. They stood, Iridian towering behind him, staring down at the cultist.

“Kill him.”

Eluse tried to jerk away, but Iridian snatched at him before he could. He cried out, but the Crownswords simply looked on uncomfortably. *Why* did he cry out? What was wrong with him?

“This is war, boy! These murderers did not come here to bargain with you, they came for your life! This is what it is to be King. You must root out those who would destroy the Kingdom, and *snuff them out.*”

“Get... off...” Eluse struggled. Humiliation flushed him red as he caught sight of the Crownswords, staring. They must have thought him so weak. Perhaps they were right. This man was a murderer. Eluse was a prince. It was his duty to put him to death. But the anger he felt right now wasn't for the prisoner, it was for that wretched Rosethorne that clamped down on him.

“Fetch the boy his spear,” Iridian called.

There was a shuffling from the Crownswords. His spear was thrust into his unwilling hand. He tried to steady it, slowing his breaths as much as he could.

“Would you have us release this criminal?” Iridian forced the bronze head of the spear up to the chest of the cultist. Its sharp edge rasped over his overcoat. “Would you have him kill your

own father? Would you allow *treason*?” Two Crownswords held the cultist steady as he struggled. “Would you be so *weak* as to abandon the realm to madness?”

Eluse tried to calm himself. Tried not to vomit, or pass out. He was the one holding the spear, but it may as well have been him on the ground. He was powerless. He didn't want this. He couldn't do it. He must, anyway.

Rusenil stepped forward. “Iridian, leave the boy be. If the cultist must die, I shall do it.”

A sigh of relief had almost left Eluse's mouth before Iridian batted the Crownsword away as if he were a moth. Clutching his cheek, Rusenil fell back into the group.

“This elf's life is forfeit, boy. Do you have the strength to do what you must? Or am I to report to your father that your weakness shall lead to ruin?”

Eluse gritted his teeth. He was *not* weak. He was a prince. He must act like it. He would make his father proud.

He jerked the spear forward.

He was startled at how easily it slid through the elf, and felt every inch of it. A whimper escaped the lips of the cultist which might have masked the one that escaped his own. But the elf did not drop dead. Instead, he scrunched his face and shook with pain. He croaked; the haunted echo of a scream his throat could not make.

“Shadow's curse, boy, give him a clean death, at the very least.” Iridian's lip curled in a mocking grin as the cultist twitched. “It'll take him till dawn to bleed out like that!”

Horrified, Eluse jerked his spear out of the elf's chest, and a gasp of agony rattled his ear. Every snag of the metal on gristle made his arm shudder, and he had to fight against himself not to drop the shaft. He stabbed again, but his eyes were blurry and wet. He couldn't see where to aim, and with a sickening squelch he felt the spear jar through flesh. The cultist could not cry out, only rasp, but still he was not dead; thrashing on the end of Eluse's spear. Rusenil started forward, but Iridian held him back.

“For goodness' sake, Iridian, help the child!” Rusenil shouted. Iridian did nothing.

Eluse was a mess. “I'm sorry, I'm sorry,” he cried quietly at the elf. Blood spurted from him in droves, and Eluse could taste it in his mouth. His panicked fingers slipped on the spear. The cultist had to die, but not like this.

“Stab him in the heart and be done with it, boy!” Iridian scolded with the same dispassionate tone he used when instructing him where to place his feet in a martial drill, or how to hold Shanta's reins. How could he be so at ease with it? Iridian could take a life like cutting meat.

With a final, desperate yell, Eluse dragged the spear out of the cultist once more and plunged it into his heart. The cultist finally stopped wriggling, and slumped forward. The blood slowed to a trickle.

Eluse clenched his eyes shut. Sour bile built on the back of his tongue, and his cheeks were warm with tears. He shook, cold with sweat.

I'm not weak. I did my duty. I had to do it.

Iridian barely acknowledged the kill. He turned to the Crownswords. "Mount up. We ride through the night."

That was it? Not even a word of recognition? Anger blistered beneath his skin; he could do nothing right. Too weak, too stupid, too young, and now, at his first kill, ***nothing?*** The elves started back into their saddles, leaving Eluse dumbfounded before the dead elf. Lightning regret jolted through his flesh and skin and sat on him like hot mud.

I had to do it.

The cavalry pulled around past Eluse, cantering back toward the Covered Road. Shanta stepped quietly forward with sad eyes.

Iridian spoke down from his elk as he passed. "Take back your spear and clean it before you ride. The blood will stink if it rots."

I had to do it.

“Don’t stray too far into the East, Eluse. Nasty things live out in those woods, and I’m not just talking about the Elves.”

- Bronvin, Lenune ranger, in a conversation at the Palace four summers past. Last seen some months ago, journeying East.

CHAPTER 2 - THE KING IN THE WOODS

Obsidian shards cracked beneath his footsteps. They glimmered with the same dark malice with which they were forged. Inside the tower of Udol Aethune, everything did.

He raised a jagged spear of black stone and turned it over in his hands. It glinted with speckles of broken light. When he ran his fingers over it, it sliced the flesh. He did not bleed.

Even a nick of the stone would spell death for lesser men. He, though, did not fear the black curse. Its words were not meant for those who served his god.

He willed it, and the skin on his fingers closed back up.

His narrow eyes looked to the altar before him, hewn from the same glassy obsidian. It was finally complete. After these long years, the time was close. This would be where his god would be raised to life. His old bones shivered at the thought.

First, though, they would deal with the elves. He walked from the tower, and as he did, starlight obsidian twinkled around him. That which would soon rise here would consume even the stars themselves.

* * *

As a child, Eluse had boasted often of his father the King, and took quiet enjoyment in the awe on the faces of the other elflings. When they would come to the Palace of the First Tree to play, he would tell them the stories of his brave father’s noble exploits. One week, he’d tell how the great King Auctoria rode into battle against the Fanatical Dark on his mighty Red Deer and soaked the sands of the Eastern Desert with their blood. The next, he’d tell them how he had ridden with him into the Sunderstone Mountains to meet with a secret coven of halfseers. Some mornings, in his stories, Eluse and his father strolled the top of the Glendil Gate and watched the sunrise, and others they delved deep into the Underwood and hid from scrawbats, searching for the angel of the trees. Some of the stories he made up himself, and others were ones that old

Grenka had told him, sat on her knee at nighttimes, and he put himself and his father in the middle of them. Even now, Eluse liked to think of these stories, because they were a lot kinder than the truth.

His eyes were no longer too young to see what lay beneath the King. In place of the regal, stately vision of his father in his youth, he saw something else. No longer did he see palatial assemblies with virtuous commissaries seeking justice and honour for the Summerlands, but instead false smiles from grovellers, simpering and soliciting, coming and going from the Palace at all hours. Those long stretches of his youth where Eluse had been left without a father—he began to forget them as product of a father who was on urgent business defending the country of Arath' Sayah. Instead he saw a King who had little time for him. No, Eluse boasted less of his father these days.

His father wasn't at fault, Eluse had the sense to know that. He had a Kingdom to rule. No, the blame was laid squarely at the door of the Rosethorne. The constant tales and tattling of Eluse's inferiority; how poorly he had sparred, how shoddily he had performed his martial drills. How he hadn't a king's heart, or even a prince's heart. His immaturity. His weakness. No, Eluse loved his father, but saw the distance that had grown between the two of them, and he hated Iridian for it.

His disillusionment had never been felt quite so much as upon his return to the Palace. They had ridden for a full day and night, and no sooner had they entered the First Tree than Iridian leapt from Lenduel and practically into the arms of the King.

They muttered and grumbled and plotted, and it was some time before King Auctoria had even glanced in Eluse's direction. Eventually, his father spoke to him only to say:

“Eluse, the Rosethorne and I must discuss the attack in private. Await me in the antechamber.”

Eluse had seethed and bubbled, but nodded politely and thanked the King. Then he waited, like a common delegate, for an engagement with his own father, whilst the Rosethorne tore his reputation to ribbons beyond that door.

The antechamber to the King's Hall had a grand feel to it. Like everything else in the First Tree, it was mostly wood and moss. Through careful cultivation and no small amount of magic, the furniture itself grew from the wood of the Tree. Small portways let in a hazy green light from the outdoors, and glass jars filled with fireflies lit the rest. The chamber lifted deep up inside the trunk, twisting into the body of the tree, and the wall was laden with rich mossy tapestries and carvings grown into the bark that covered the room.

Palace attendants flitted to and fro with quiet anxiety. Eluse ignored them, slumped on a bench, eyes closed. He hadn't slept at all, and the weight of the night pulled his eyelids down.

He'd wiped the blood from him now, but still felt sticky from the sweat. All he could think of was drifting away into a hot bath.

He hardly even noticed the bench shift as someone else slid down next to him.

"This doesn't look very princely of you."

His eyes jolted open and his face burst into a grin. He knew that voice well, and it was the one person he wanted to see.

"Consora!" He threw his arms around her. The way she never took anything too seriously and always seemed happy to see him was like a drink of cool water. He lowered his voice. "How did you get into the Palace?"

She hugged him back for a moment then pushed off, standing. "Fluttered my eyelashes at the Crownswords, how do you think?" She twirled round, a mock smile on her face. "I pretended I was reporting to Suscepto for one of his *consequences*. Why do you look so miserable?"

"It's been a long night." He stared ahead flatly. "Why aren't you asleep?"

"I don't know. I couldn't sleep. I saw you come back with the Crownswords so thought I'd snoop. Why aren't you in Marshwater? I thought you'd be gone for a few days." Consora paced up and down like she was trying to exhaust herself.

He sighed. He didn't really want to talk about it. "We were attacked. By the Cult."

Her eyes widened. "No. *Way*." A massive smile split her face in half. "What *happened*?"

"Nice to see you're worried about me."

"Well, if you were dead, I'd be more bothered. But you're not, are you? Not unless they've magicked you back." She peered at him. "You don't *look* like you're dead."

He rolled his eyes and grinned, flexing his arms. "Well, they did their best. You know me. No bringing me down." Maybe if he joked, he wouldn't have to relive what happened in the woods.

"Right, *right*. So I'm sure you didn't run away like a little baby." She rushed up to him and crouched before him, delight in her eyes. "Did you kill anyone?"

"No." The lie tumbled from him before he even knew it was there. It clung to the air like muddy water, and he wished he'd said something else. Strangely, though, he couldn't find the words to correct himself. He glanced at her. She didn't seem to notice.

"Ugh. What did your dad say?"

“Nothing. I’m still waiting to talk to him.”

And that was how easy it was to lie. The feel of it knotted him up almost as much as the memory of the cultist. Why did he say that? It wasn’t like Consora would have been upset. Her own father had been murdered by the Cult three summers past; she’d have liked the story. Everything felt tangled inside. He was ashamed of killing, and ashamed of being ashamed of it.

She frowned, and looked past him to the door. “Your dad’s so strange. I mean, I know it’s such a letdown having *you* for a son, but still...”

He punched her shoulder gently.

She punched his back, hard. It hurt, but he laughed.

“So, what happened? Did you fight them? *Wait!* I bet I know. You used the Eyes of the Spider, right?” She pointed at one of the tapestries—the six ancient kings of Arath’ Sayah carved into the wood, his own father among them. On Auctoria’s head, he wore the Poisonthorn Crown, and in it were nestled the Eyes of the Spider, like a clutch of shimmering eggs.

He snorted. “No. They wouldn’t have done much. We just fought them. Swords and spears.”

Consora shook her head and stood again. “*Wouldn’t have done much.* Yes, I’m sure a sword is going to be much more effective than literal relics from the Spider. The Crownswords are so dull. They never use magic. Why?”

Eluse wondered whether they preferred the feeling of killing with their own hands. The memory of the feeling, spearhead catching on bone, tousled his hands. He sat on them.

“I don’t know. But that’s not how the Eyes work, anyway. And besides, it’s not *real*. If there had ever been a mountain-sized spider that feasted on the wicked, it would at least have stuck around to eat Iridian before it died.”

She sniggered. “Eight thousand years of peace, all except for one annoying Rosethorne.”

Eluse had seen enough politicking to know that peace was an even greater myth than the Spider. Still, Consora liked the talk of legends and magic and stories, so he said nothing. Looking at the tapestry of dead kings and the Poisonthorn Crown on his own father’s head, it was a sobering thought that one day, it would be his head that it sat on.

Though, wiling away the time outside his Hall, he wondered if the Crown would wither and die before he got the chance.

“What do you think your father will say, then?” Consora pressed.

“I don’t know.” A single word of recognition would be plenty. Something to let him know he wasn’t the disappointment Iridian made out. “I’m sure he’ll have something to complain about. Maybe we should leave,” he half-joked.

“Very brave of you,” Consora said, her voice wet with sarcasm, and he didn’t even bother to think of anything snappy to say.

The door opened.

“Eluse,” an attendant said, appearing in the frame. “Your father requests your presence.”

“Ahh—yes, just coming, Suscepto!” Consora called out, to nobody in particular, and disappeared down the hallway. Eluse laughed. Very brave of her, too. Bravery was often in short supply around his father.

Remembering to straighten himself, he entered.

King Auctoria’s enormous frame was a presence that seemed to suck the air out of the room. He was mountainous, daubed in resplendent dyed silks over a figure as solid as iron, crowned with tall dark thorns that rose from his head like horns. He cast a shadow even longer than his frame.

Iridian remained at the central table, and Eluse realised with dismay, but not surprise, that he seemed set to stay. But, even the hulking Rosethorne had withdrawn into himself. He was seated politely toward the back of the room, head down, nibbling on a handful of walnuts. Positively meek before the King.

His father drew around the far end of the table and looked upon Eluse with shimmering golden eyes. “I am apprised of the situation.”

Eluse wasn’t sure he trusted himself to speak.

King Auctoria gestured to a seat at the table, and Eluse seated himself. “I am grieved to hear of your misfortune on the Covered Road,” the King continued. “It seems the Eldergrove Cult grow emboldened.”

“Yes, Father.”

I’m fine, by the way. Thanks.

“The boy performed meagrely,” interjected Iridian, nibbling away. “And with little regard for his combat training.”

Eluse grimaced. *The boy*. None of the other elves of the court would have ever dared speak about the young prince with such disdain, especially in front of his father. But, Eluse had long ago learned that the Rosethorne had impunity with the King.

“A disappointing prospect, Eluse. I had hoped your martial training would have benefitted you. As you cannot be trusted to put your training into practice, I have asked the Rosethorne to increase the regularity of your sessions.”

Well, there it was. Less than a minute in, and his father had arrived at disappointment. Eluse’s insides curled up, but as he opened his mouth to protest, Iridian interrupted.

“Very good, my King.” He gave an unctuous smile.

Auctoria continued. “We were fortunate in this instance. The Cult was weak and disorganised, and no harm befell the Palace.”

No harm? Eluse blinked in disbelief, and looked at Iridian. “A Crownsword died.”

His father waved his hand. “Regardless. The Rosethorne does not believe this incident was an isolated one, nor was it coincidental. It is likely—certain, perhaps—the Eldergrove Cult knew of your journey to Marshwater. We believe they were lying in wait.”

On the long ride home, Eluse had realised this. Every precaution had been taken, and the Cult should not have been so far west. The Cult hadn’t simply stumbled across them. What happened felt too much like a plan—an ambush.

If only there was someone left to ask, Eluse thought to say. ***A shame Iridian had me slaughter him.***

“Spies?” Eluse asked tentatively. The Rosethorne’s manner had unsettled him—the way he’d been so quick to call for the death of the cultist without even a cursory interrogation. Eluse could never stand Iridian, but lately something had been... Different. It was as if a dark cloud hung over him.

“Perhaps. The Rosethorne shall investigate. In the meantime, a cohort of troops ride for Marshwater. If they shelter the Eldergrove there, we shall soon know it.”

Eluse sat up straight. He had a grim idea of what that would mean for the town. His father’s justice was firm and severe. His investigations were much the same.

“That seems unlikely,” Eluse said. “The Cult could have come from the east. There’s no reason to believe those in Marshwater were responsible.”

Behind the King, Iridian raised his eyebrows in amusement. “There are wiser elves than you who will determine the movements of the Cult,” he said derisively. Humiliation pinched Eluse’s violet skin a little redder. “Perhaps we might afford the prince’s insight into another matter. What is your understanding of the purpose of last night’s incursion?”

Eluse gritted his teeth. He hated being tested, but it was especially tedious when it came from Iridian. Still, he put just enough fear in him to keep him on the right side of courtesy.

“They’re separatists,” he shrugged. “They fear the King and the reign of the Poisonthorn Crown, and I expect they wanted me dead.”

Auctoria gave a small nod, and the crown moved grandly on his head. Its thorns had long since driven down deep into the flesh of the King and held it in place. It would not be removed until his death. If it hurt, the King never showed it. On his finger was wound a small wooden ring marked with the King’s Seal - a five-pointed maple leaf. This, too, pierced his flesh with thorns. Eluse tried not to think that some day, it would be his own flesh the Crown and Seal clung to.

Iridian looked like he might have spoken again, but the King cut across him. “As long as you understand the severity of the situation.”

“I do.”

“Do not forget, as Chosen Son of the King, you have as much value to them as I.”

There was that word Eluse had grown to hear so often. *Chosen*. And it was true—Eluse had been chosen. One of the burdens the King took upon receiving the crown was that the venom in the fangs of the crown made it impossible for him to father naturalborn children. Each king of Arath’ Sayah would choose for himself a son, as a young child, to take as his own. This son would be raised as heir to the Crown and the Kingdom. By tradition, Chosen Sons were taken from among the elflings born in Arath’ Sayah during the first century of the King’s reign. Eluse, like every King of Arath’ Sayah before him since Oriothern, would never know his naturalborn parents.

It was the most honoured position in the realm, and yet... In the nights, when Eluse stared at the ceiling of his bedchamber, alone, he couldn’t help but wonder why his father had become so distant to a son he chose himself.

“I understand, Father,” he forced himself to say.

The King swept around the table to look at him. “Then you will obey my next instruction without question or comment. The danger is too great for the Chosen Son to risk his life on sojourns to other settlements beyond Lenune. The Crownsword protected you on this occasion, but the danger from the Eldergrove is too grave. You are to remain within the city limits at all times.”

Eluse jerked a breath in. “Father!” he exclaimed. Those *sojourns* were all that kept him sane. Though sometimes tedious, and always under the contemptful watch of Iridian, the journeys away from Lenune were a welcome break from the monotony of life in the Palace. But more than that; if he was expected to stay and rot in the capital, then those words Iridian had

whispered to his father were all but true. He *was* useless. “I... Are you quite sure this is necessary?”

“Eluse, the Eldergrove do not seek to dominate or destroy our lands as another foe may. To this enemy, a single blade is all they need. They seek one thing; myself and my son, dead and cold. An end to the royal line.”

Eluse’s mouth tasted sour, but the prince knew too well the futility of challenging his father’s decisions. The King was a rising tide. Eluse could get out of his way, or he could drown in him.

“Yes, Father,” he muttered. Iridian should be pleased, he thought, glancing at the Rosethorne. No more tending to the spoilt brat. “What am I to do instead?” His discontent showed far more than he intended.

“The Director of Duties shall manage your schedule as usual. He has kept me abreast of progression with regard to your education and found it lacking. Your studies shall increase until such a time that he sees fit.”

Eluse sighed quietly. How very like Suscepto. The Director of Duties, a title the old elf was so very fond of, took a keen interest in reporting Eluse’s progress—or lack of it—to his father. It wasn’t that Eluse wasn’t able to learn; the lessons came so easily to him that they bored him, and a bored mind was a creative one. Often, what it created was trouble.

“The fact of the matter is this. The Eldergrove have infiltrated our lands and possibly the city itself. The Rosethorne’s investigation will be swift, but in the meantime, there are preparations for you to make. Sorrel informs the Palace that it may befit you to learn magic, to which I have agreed.”

Eluse’s eyes brightened, and for the first time in a while, his heart rose. It had never been a part of Suscepto’s schedule for him to learn magic, much to his chagrin. Typically, a young prince would be expected to have a powerful command of all forms of magic, but so far his father had never deigned to allow him to learn it. If he were to be a great king one day, he’d always thought, it would begin with magic.

“Yes, Father. Thank you.” He tried to conceal the weary smile that tugged his lips. If he seemed too enthusiastic, Iridian would probably find a way to ruin it for him. It still stung that he’d be confined to the city, but his mind was already abuzz with the thought of magic. He didn’t even mind that this would mean more time with Sorrel.

“However, there is a purpose to these magics, Eluse. I caution you this: if you are faced with a Cultist, and you hesitate again to end their life, you will face my fullest fury.”

His heart plunged. Iridian had indeed told his father about the killing in the woods, then.

He looked down. “Yes Father. I understand.”

“No, I do not think you do.” His father’s voice then blazed with quiet intensity. “The Eldergrove move through trickery and deception. They will try to reach you, even here, in the woods of this city. Perhaps I would be wisest to have you confined to the Palace entirely until the threat has been dealt with, under guard at all times.”

No. Not that. He can’t keep me in here.

“But,” the King continued, “against my better judgement, I shall not. You shall take a Crownsword escort when outside the Palace, but for all we know they may lurk in these very halls. The poison of the Eldergrove has tainted many minds. Therefore my command to you is thus: If an elf of the Eldergrove comes to you, either through force or guile, you are to slaughter him where he stands. Do not hesitate, do not allow a word to issue from his mouth. The Eldergrove use dark magic, and they may put a spell on you with even a single word. Swear to me, Eluse, that you will never hesitate again to end the life of an Eldergrove Cultist.”

Eluse tried not to stammer as he spoke. “I swear, Father.” He blinked away the vision of the elf in the woods, gasping desperately on his spear. He swallowed down the nausea. He was a Prince. Not a coward. A Prince. He could do it again. He would do what he must for the Kingdom. For his father.

He found an unwelcome thought in his mind. It wasn’t being hunted by the Cult that struck terror in him, but the thought of standing over another dead elf in the woods.

King Auctoria stared at him for a long time.

“What you will do in the meantime is this: You are to grow in strength, and learn to protect yourself from this threat. When I deem you ready, you may again resume your royal duties beyond Lenune. Do you understand?”

“I do, Father.” ***I will be strong. I will make you proud.***

“Very good. You may take your leave.”

Eluse left with a dark cloud over him. His mind turned with the thought of Cultists, here, in these safe woods. Cultists that could use dark magics with even a single word? The thought sent him shivers. It was such unnatural magic. That must be why Iridian had been so quick to stop the one in the woods from speaking.

Mustn’t it?

A strange chill went through him.

As he left the King's Hall, his mind was on Iridian, and the way he had silenced the cultist.

“Angels don’t just live in the sky, child. That’s where they come from, but now they’re down here, too. My wonder is they found us far too interesting to leave alone.”

- *Old Grenka, after a bedtime story during Eluse’s eighth summer.*

CHAPTER 3 - FAIRY CIRCLES

The sun beat down on his back. His cloak held off its sharpness, but underneath he ran hot. No matter. Fifteen years under the desert blaze, he had learned to endure.

His men stood before him. The tower of Udol Aethune rose behind them, mighty, glorious. A black gash against the sky; a spear driven into the earth. At the base of the tower, strewn like bones, lay disorganised huts and tents where weathered men had long eked out an existence. Everything else in this wasteland was dead. These few hundred men were all that stood with him. All else lacked the conviction for greatness.

He trusted in the words of his god. This small band of weak men would be the genesis of a storm that would subdue the world.

Those Men of Dharia, who wore in mockery the shattered crown of the god they thought they’d slain; well. They would recognise their mistake before the end.

He spoke, his voice the slither of a snake. It slipped across the desert winds and into the ears of his men.

“Leave all that you have known. When next we return, we shall do so as conquerors.”

He mounted his pale horse and turned south. Every man followed.

* * *

On nights like this one, Eluse loved the forest after dusk. The greens and golds and deep rich browns of the daytime gave way to soft silver and blue. It was quiet, too, except for the insects; only the silent birds were out now, and the night animals prowled too secretly to be heard. It felt like the whole forest shifted to reveal places that were hidden away in the daytime. Even the smell was different. When the day was hot and the nights were cool, it had a fresh, earthy scent that wasn’t like anything else.

And people tended to ask fewer questions at night. That was the best part. In the daytime he would have drawn eyes from the city's busybodies. At night, though, when he snuck away from the Palace without his Crownsword escort, he might have been anybody.

One night last winter, he and Consora had stolen away to the mouth of the crystalline caverns. She said it was all that remained of the jaws of the Spider. As their flaming torches shone around the mouth of the cave and watched the stalagmites crackle with light, he told her that that was a stupid idea, and that spiders don't have skulls. But, something about the fang-like rock formations kept him out of there anyway.

Another night, they climbed the rock pillars of the Aerie, all the way above the treeline. It was the hardest thing he'd ever done, and his muscles had screamed at him all the way up. They camped on the top with a fire and ate the eggs they found there. They stayed out nearly all night, because the Palace thought he was asleep and nobody would come looking for Consora. As long as he was back in bed by dawn, they were able to spend a little time *free*.

They both loved to hunt, and there were many nights he would forgo meals at the Palace in favour of meat they'd trapped themselves; fresh grouse dripping in its own grease or flaky trout cooked over an open fire. Eluse was useful with a bow, but Consora was truly fearsome with one. They did not go hungry often.

Consora, of course, was not bound by the Palace and had been given no such rules to break, but Eluse had learned some time back that she had a keen enthusiasm to break rules anyway, and did so vicariously through him. She got him into all sorts of exciting trouble.

Tonight, though, Eluse would be leading the trouble, and it had all the promise to be a bigger sort of trouble than usual. The two elves slipped through the darkening woodland. They found an unmatched joy in their sneaking, and were ever so good at it.

"I always knew there was something off about him," Consora whispered, peering through the gloom. The moon painted the treetops silver, and the glitterbirds which nipped and darted through the trunks cast long shadows that whipped around the forest floor. A noise ahead startled him, and they ducked behind the thick trunk of an elm. He felt like a rabbit, slinking through tall grass between a wolfpack. They held their breath until silence returned, then crept back into motion.

They were headed for the Redwood Quarter, behind the First Tree. On the way, Consora had slathered her arms and face with river mud in the flatlands. '*It hides us better*,' she'd tried to convince Eluse, offering him a scoopful. He had politely declined.

Her long moss-green hair was ragged with leaves and water from the river. Her skin, usually a shady light-blue like a sky in the early evening, was caked in silt. Under all that mud, she was pretty, in a pointed sort of way. She was a wildcat, or a chipmunk, or some other little creature of the woods that would spend its time scabbling around in holes in the ground. Eluse

wasn't really sure what he was, but the Palace tried to turn him into... Well, he didn't know. A heron, maybe. Something stately and dignified.

He wasn't very good at being a heron. The more time that he spent with Consora, mucking around in filth, the more he began to wonder if he was a chipmunk, too.

"Me too," he said, shaking himself from his thoughts. "We've *got* to find out what." Iridian was still in Marshwater, and Eluse was determined to find out more before he was back. It had been nearly a week since the ambush, and he could return any day. "He put on such a show of killing the cultist, and the first thing he did was break his windpipe so he couldn't speak. If there's one person in the entire city I know would kill his own side to keep his cover, it's Iridian."

Consora frowned, prowling forward. "I don't get it, though. If he wanted you and the King dead, he's had plenty of chances. If he really *is* with them, why didn't he just turn on you during the ambush?"

Eluse didn't like to say it, but there was a lot about the thought of Iridian as a spy that didn't make sense either. But the more he dwelled on it, the more certain he was. It festered in him. He *knew* something was off about the Rosethorne. "Maybe he needs to keep his cover. All I know is, we need proof."

"What exactly are you hoping we'll find?"

"Anything. I honestly don't know. But if he is working with the Eldergrove, there might be something here. Come on, we're close."

The towering trees of the Redwood Quarter loomed up around them; great thick trunks, most of them hollow and inhabited by Palace staff. Iridian had chambers in the Palace too, but those were too well-guarded. They'd never get close. In his secondary quarters, they had a chance.

"What do you think he'd do if he caught us?" Consora whispered. Her voice was thick with excitement. She knew very well the kind of thing he'd do, and she had none of the royal status that had offered Eluse some measure of protection. Looking at the grin spread over her face, Eluse envied her confidence. She was fearless.

He ignored the question, eyes scanning the shadowed redwoods. They all looked the same in the low light, dark as blood and impossibly tall. Some flickered with lanternlight from within, but most were dark and silent.

"There," he said at last, pointing. Iridian's redwood was the largest in the Quarter, and his heart sank when he spotted the Crownswords. Two of them, milling outside, right by the hollow. Both dressed proudly in grey ironsilks over their forest-green tunics, maple leaf insignia emblazoned on their chests.

“Don’t worry,” Consora said, with a grin that made his stomach tighten. “That’s what you brought me for, isn’t it? I’ll distract them.” She was already on her toes as she said it.

“Don’t get caught,” he said lightly, but his voice gave away his concern. The thought of what might happen to her made him wince. Still, Consora was fast and almost as sneaky as him. She disappeared into the darkness, and Eluse skirted around a neighbouring redwood, keeping out of sight. Then he waited, watching.

He hardly had to wait for long. The Crownswords were twenty yards away, but even from here he heard the *thwap* of a mudclod slapping into one of them. The elf leapt up into the air as if he’d been struck by an arrow.

“Whosat!?” he screeched, his hand flying to his sword. Eluse smiled. Fine soldiers, indeed.

No answer came, but another clump of mud did. This one smacked wetly into the cloak of the other, splattering the two of them. “Elfings, most like!” the second one cried, and drew his sword too. “Dratted pests!”

“Or an attack?” the first looked at the other, his face long and dumb. There was a crash from the shrubbery, and a howling laugh. “Nah, elflin’s! Let’s gerrum!”

They charged off into the darkness, shouts echoing through the grove. Eluse waited, listening to the thrum of his own heart, and as soon as he was sure they were well away, he made his move.

He darted from behind the tree, sprinting over the ground on light feet toward the hollow. He flung himself with a little too much vigor, scraping his shoulder on the bark, and slipped through the gap in the trunk into the dark.

I’m in.

He stopped, listening, his stomach tight. Had he been seen?

No sounds came. He was safe. He breathed out.

The hollow was pitch black. Eluse pushed back his cloak, awakening the firefly lantern fastened to his belt. Pale, yellow-green light spilled over the walls.

When he’d imagined Iridian’s hollow, he’d pictured it more akin to a bear’s cave than a home. Something primal and almost feral; a heap of blankets in place of a bed, and probably a heap of half-gnawed bones in a corner. He did not expect what he found. He was struck by its orderliness. An ironsilk cloak hung neatly on a hook by the entrance, and further in, a small writing desk stood beside a chair that looked specially-made to fit Iridian’s enormous bulk. Shelves lined one wall, filled with carefully curled scrolls. At the back of the hollow, a modest

kitchen with earthenware clay pots completed the space. Eluse almost laughed at the thought of the Rosethorne cooking anything. He seemed more likely to eat a squirrel raw than season it for stew. This place seemed so strangely domestic. It was not the traitor's den he'd imagined.

His heart pounded as he crept through the hollow, and the sound of blood rushing through his ears filled the silence. He knew he needed to get out as quick as he could, but he found himself with just a tickle of a thought; he felt *alive*. Everything he'd been told to do by the Palace felt meaningless. Now, here, he had a purpose. *He would catch Iridian.*

Briefly, he was minded of a minnow hunting a shark.

The firefly lantern cast strange shadows. Though the hollow was larger than most elves had, it was small compared to Palace chambers. Now that he was in the middle of it, his plan seemed empty. He reached for the hanging cloak, but it had no pockets. The scrolls on the shelves showed nothing either, as far as he could tell; most were wax-sealed with the maple leaf insignia of the Palace, and the few that weren't were nothing but documents relating to expenses for the Crownswords. Not that Eluse had much time to peruse them—he had to work quick. The Crownswords could already be outside, and he wouldn't even know it.

He frantically searched the kitchen, but it was bare. A stack of papers on the writing desk looked interesting at first, all letters, but rifling through them Eluse found only correspondence with an uncle in the Dogswood and various dull-reading missives relating to his duty as Rosethorne. It was only after he tossed them back onto the table that he saw the scratchings under where they had laid.

His eyes widened in the dark.

Light marks in the wood, scraped crudely, without artistry or talent, mostly faded to nothing. With large hands, most like. Eluse held the firefly lantern closely, squinting in the ebbing light of the insects.

Two lines.

THER...L BE NO ONE REM...ING

TO MOU...N FOR WHAT WAS LOST

The mantra of the Eldergrove Cult. *There'll be no one remaining to mourn for what was lost.* Those words he'd heard two nights before in the forest crashed around his head.

Eluse's pace quickened. He felt his cheeks flush hot. *What is this doing in Iridian's home?*

It was their threat. The threat of the Eldergrove. The promise to destroy the Royal line and all those who served them.

But the letters scraped into the wood were old. His brow furrowed as he tried to make sense of it. The Eldergrove Cult had plagued the King for three years, but this... this looked much older. The writing was faded and half-blended with the top of the desk, like it had been there for years more than that.

What was this?

A lump grew in his throat. He knew what it was—proof. Or, something close, at least. A sign of *something*.

His eyes darted around the hollow. Short of dragging the entire desk out with him, there was nothing he could do with it. It was too shallow and faded to take a rubbing, and there was nothing else he could see in the home that looked significant.

The screech of an owl from outside alerted him. How long had he been in here? He had to go. Consora couldn't busy the Crownswords forever.

He ground his teeth, frustration digging into his sides and hemming him in. But what could he do? He gave a last, longing look at the letters in the desk, running his thumb over them. Then he turned, crept back to the entrance to the hollow, and ducked outside.

The Crownswords hadn't returned, and he vanished into the treeline before they could. Racing through the woodland, his head swam. He was dizzy. Convicted. Elated. His mind was skipping. He *knew* something was wrong with Iridian. He always knew it. The ire that the Rosethorne had for him had never made sense; as a younger elfling he'd always put it down to jealousy, perhaps, or a need for superiority.

But now he knew the truth. In one way or another, Iridian was involved with the Cult.

Underneath all the excitement of it, though, other thoughts turned themselves over. Consora was right. Iridian had had a thousand chances to kill him, and the King too, if he'd wanted. And how old that writing was... surely it was older than the Cult. So... What, then? Iridian was there from its inception? A leader, even? Something more? It was strange; although he'd been there to find evidence, he realised that having found it, he hadn't actually *expected* any. Maybe Consora could help make more sense of it.

He shook his head clear and made for the bluebell clearing in the woods, with the little stream that he and Consora always met by. It was quiet when he arrived. He tried to clear his scrambled head.

"Consora?" he called quietly, but there was no reply. He smiled. She would be out there somewhere, leading the Crownswords on a chase through the muddiest parts of the city she could find.

He sat on a rotten mossy log, and waited, and tried not to think too much.

In the clearing before him, between the bluebell clusters, rings of toadstools glowed. In the middle of each fairy circle, the Moon Folk were out. They were a rare sight, and easy to miss—implike things, not much taller than the mushrooms. Small and strange and hairy they stood, dancing and swaying in the breeze. Around them, golden sparks flitted from their mottled green fingertips. Little beetle-wings shook and shimmered along with the sparkling light. The glimmers of light weaved and flickered onto the ground, where they scurried along until they found the toadstools, gathering atop them, sinking in. He lost track of how long he watched them for, transfixed by the little creatures and the magic they used, delicate as a whisper.

“They’re pretty.”

Consora’s voice made him jump almost out of his skin. She liked to do that, to sneak up on him, and she practically doubled over laughing at his yelp.

“You lost them, then?” he managed to say, gathering himself.

“Easily. You should have seen it, I got one of them *right* in the eye with a mudball.”

“You look like you’ve been hit by a mudball yourself.” The silt on her skin had now dried to a flaky crust.

“Well? Did you find anything?” Consora sat next to him, eyes wide.

“Yes! I found the... You know their motto? The one, about nobody being left to mourn for us? Well, I found that, scratched into his desk!” he grinned, triumphant.

Consora’s brow lowered to a frown. “That’s it?”

Her sceptical gaze almost burnt a hole through his forehead. “I... you don’t...? Consora, this is important! It’s a link to the Cult!”

“Mmm. Right. Well, let’s go straight to your father, then, and have him lock up his chief advisor on account of a scraping in a desk. I’m sure he’ll take it seriously. Damning evidence, Eluse, and you *know* how well he likes to listen to you...” Consora’s sarcasm dripped from her words and face.

Frustration pulled at his edges. Surely she could see what this meant. Fine, it wasn’t *perfect*, but short of a signed letter from the leader of the Cult, what did she expect?. “What, then? You think that’s nothing?” He found himself spitting the words a little more than he meant to.

“No, of course not. I just thought you were going to, you know, find some *evidence*. Something we can actually do something with. Not just some repeated motto.”

Eluse braced himself to argue, but let his words fly out as a grumpy sigh instead. She was right. No matter how certain he was about Iridian, he knew his father, too. He'd pay no more attention to an etching in a desk than he would to the buzzing of a fly.

If anything, he'd probably consult Iridian on the matter.

The light, springy feeling he'd had running here now felt heavy and thick. He stared blankly ahead, eyes reflecting the golden glitter of the Moon Folk's magic.

"Look, it's obviously something," Consora said. "But let's not take this to your father right away. We're going to need a lot more than this. I think we should go to Sorrel."

Eluse rolled his eyes. "Sorrel?" he whined, but even as he did, he realised the sense in it. Sorrel was his magic tutor, who had served as a ranger in years past, as stern and solemn as any ranger could be. Three years ago, her whole family had been slaughtered by the Cult in the Everwood, in the same attack as Consora's father. Though she never spoke about it, Eluse supposed she'd not found the stomach to be out in the wilds again. Not that he held that against her. He couldn't imagine losing everything like that.

Now, she taught, and never left the city. She was a battleaxe of a woman, but if any elf in the city had reason to hate the Eldergrove, it was her. It certainly didn't hurt that she cared for Iridian about as much as Eluse. She would know what to do.

"You know I'm right," Consora chided.

"I know. Fine. I've got a lesson with her tomorrow. Will you come? She likes you more than me."

Consora snorted. "Alright. After your lesson, then." She peered at the Moon Folk with thoughtful eyes. "Hey, how close to them do you think we can get?"

Eluse frowned. "Can you focus? This is important."

"It's fine, we'll deal with it tomorrow, with Sorrel. Come on. Let's sneak up on them."

He sighed. Consora was fun, but when she got distracted it frustrated him. "I think if you get any closer, they'll smell you coming. I'm not sure everything you were throwing was *just* mud."

She grinned and elbowed his ribs. "Come on. I'll go first. No sense wasting the opportunity..." She slithered down onto the ground, holding herself up on all fours.

"Don't scare them," Eluse scowled, but she was already away. She prowled away into the dark, further into the clearing, soon a silhouette against the glow of sparkling energy. One hand raised, she beckoned him.

His sigh turned into a smile. All he really wanted to do was talk more about Iridian, but Consora's mind could flit away like a bird. He'd just have to wait until it landed again. In the meantime, there was no harm in another sneak. He slipped onto the ground and lifted himself up from his stomach, beginning to creep on all fours.

He'd never been so close to the creatures before, and had only ever seen them a couple of times. As far as he knew, they weren't dangerous, but he didn't really know for certain.

First a hand, gently placed where there were no dry leaves to crinkle, then a foot, slowly and gently, then the other hand...

"A-ha! I knew that's where you'd be!" A voice cracked through the night. The Moon Folk vanished, darting off into the treeline. The glow of the fairy circles flickered and died.

That stupid elf!

"Suscepto!" cried Eluse, rolling over. "What did you do? You scared them!"

The Director of Duties traipsed his blundering feet through the trees and hauled Eluse upright. He always liked to bumble in specifically where Eluse wished for him not to be, and remind them of his Very Important title. It seemed the main Duty he Directed was that there was as little fun as possible.

"That," he spat, "is not your problem. Sneaking away into the dark again, like a criminal or a thief? And I can only assume that Consora is—oh, yes, very good, there you are!" He glared at her on the ground.

She got to her feet sheepishly. Suscepto was an elf who had many peeves, and chief among them was Consora. "Sorry, Suscepto, we were just trying to see—"

"Just trying to see things that you have no business in seeing!" Suscepto retorted. "You knew that there would be no more warnings, Eluse, that this time, your father will hear about—"

"Oh come on!" Eluse cried. The silly old elf was such a tattletale. "You can't go blathering to my father about every little thing!" The pit in his stomach grew. He was lucky he'd only been caught here. If Suscepto knew why they were *really* out tonight...

"Well, you know how he cares for your antics. And with the Eldergrove after your head, no less! Come. We're going back to the Tree. I daresay the Crownsword will do nightly checks from here on out." He roughly pushed Eluse ahead of him and set off in a march.

Consora hopped forwards. "Suscepto, we're sorry," she whined. "It wasn't meant to be anything harmful. We just wanted to watch the magic."

“Yes, well, you know the rules. I don’t very well care for what you get up to in your time, little she-elf, but Eluse is my responsibility and I will not—”

“We were just trying to study!” she protested.

Suscepto hesitated. His stance softened a little. “Study?”

Heh. Consora could play Suscepto like a fiddle. Eluse watched her work through delighted eyes.

“Yes,” she said. “You know Eluse has been struggling with his magic lessons. We just wanted to see some more of it because we don’t understand it properly yet. Some of us,” she looked tellingly at Eluse, “more than others.”

Eluse snorted. It was true. Unlike the other lessons he’d endured in the Palace, which were mind-numbingly simple, magic had so far eluded him. He’d only been at it a week, but Consora said he took to it “*about as well as a moose takes to needlework*,” and she wasn’t far from the mark. She had learned magic from a young age, and took to it with irritating ease. For now, though, perhaps a good untruth about their magical education could see them out of trouble.

“Yes, we really want to do well tomorrow,” Eluse said with wide, practised eyes. “We just want to do our best...”

The gullible old elf slowed a little. “Well, I can’t say I think much at all of your methods. Whatever am I to do with the pair of you? And running away from me in the woods—it’s hardly expected of a prince, Eluse! What have you to say for yourself?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, not sorry at all. He flicked his eyes towards Consora, who grinned behind Suscepto’s back. He fought the urge to smile back. “We won’t do it again. Just please don’t tell my father.”

Suscepto gave a pained sigh. “I suppose, if I have your word that this is the last time that you’re going to get up to this silliness, then we can keep it between us for now, and—oh, good heavens!” A loud squelch sputtered from the ground, and Suscepto came to an abrupt halt. His foot was stuck in the muddy bank at the side of the stream.

Eluse and Consora, still giddy, burst into laughter again.

“It’s not funny!” Suscepto protested. “Give me your hand, Eluse, help me out.” The poor old elf was far too stately for mud and filth. He was a miserable sight, and one that warmed Eluse’s tired heart.

“Oh no, Suscepto, I’m stuck too!” Consora said. “I can’t move! Neither can Eluse!”

Eluse laughed, but he took a step forward and offered out a hand.

“Eluse, careful! You’re going to knock me!” She took a giant, well-aimed step forward, smacking straight into Suscepto and overbalancing him. He landed face-first in the muddy bank.

The two elflings creased up in laughter. “I’m so sorry, Suscepto, I tripped!” Consora said to the spluttering elf. “But I think you’re right, it is far too late for us to be out! We’ll both get home now! Come on, Eluse!” With that, she was off. Eluse took off after her.

“Yes, you’re right!” he cackled. “I should get some rest for tomorrow, right, Suscepto? I’ll see you back at the Palace!” Maybe tonight wasn’t such a letdown after all. They crowed with delighted hoots, disappearing into the night, leaving Suscepto writhing around in the mud.

Woodland magic is traditionally learned by many young elves, though it is not without its problems. In one recent case in the Royal City, a four-foot tortoise was discovered wandering the streets with a young oak tree sprouting from its shell. One can surmise that this was only the work of elflings with much natural talent and little natural conscience.

-Author unknown, A Missive on Magic.

CHAPTER 4 - MAGIC LESSONS

His pale horse paced the dunes. He thought nothing of the thirst that scratched at his throat, nor the hunger that hollowed him..

Not all of them were so strong. A trail of bodies marked the sands from here back to the tower. Still, those who remained had not grown discouraged. Their prize was close now.

“My lord, we need water.” The voice came from his side; a red-faced man looked up at him, face slick with sweat. He had abandoned his cloak in the desert. “Our waterskins have run dry.”

He turned his head forward. “The forests flow with water. Let us claim it.”

He did not turn around again.

* * *

In the week that had passed since the ambush, Eluse had quietly confided to Consora he didn't mind too badly that the visits to the other parts of Arath' Sayah had stopped, as it had now afforded more time for his keenest passion: mischief.

Mischief had always paired well with the lessons Suscepto had timetabled, and Eluse was quick to put his education to work. In a recent lesson, he had learned that stenchfly mucus was often used in the rural realms as a repellent to ward elflings away from dangerous parts of the forest. He dutifully considered the most practical employment of this knowledge would be to sew a dozen live specimens into the curtain hems in the dining hall before one of Suscepto's meetings, to hurry things along.

Another time, when his alchemics tutor revealed the linder tree's ground bark was an irritant with useful applications in botany, he decided to test the 'irritant' portion of the lesson, and dutifully slipped a handful of powder into the boots of a number of visiting commissaries.

Well, stenchflies were demonstrated to be a very effective repellent indeed (the dining hall had to be evacuated for two days), and the linder bark was heartily confirmed to be an

irritant by some very lively, but thereafter bootless, visitors. *It is not quite so much an irritant as you young master*, Suscepto had ranted, before doling out some punishment or other, ignoring Eluse's protestations that he was simply doing what he could to further his education with practical experimentation.

Despite his misdemeanours, Suscepto made relentless efforts to quash what he referred to as "*the childish nature you have been developing as of late, young sir*," heeding nothing of Eluse's retort of "*Maybe if I wasn't treated in such a childish way, it might do us all some favours.*"

And that was the truth of it. Between the scrutiny of the Crownswords, the looming menace of Iridian, and his father's constant absence, boredom and disillusionment ran rife in him. At least when he undertook journeys to the other settlements he had some purpose; now he hardly knew what to do. So, he turned to Consora. No, it was little matter that they couldn't leave Lenune. The forest city was large, and there was plenty for them to busy themselves with here. But, for all of Eluse's escapades, Suscepto was pleased to note that he was at least attempting to engage with his magic lessons.

Eluse's teacher was the ever-stern Sorrel, who he grumbled at during each of his daily lessons. In truth he liked to dislike her more than he *actually* disliked her. She was a ranger in years past, but rarely spoke of it now, even when pressed. And today was different. His mind wasn't on his lesson at all; instead it stumbled all over what he'd uncovered of Iridian. But, Consora wasn't here yet, and he wasn't going to say anything until she was.

"Eluse! Pay attention!" Sorrel paced across the clearing in the woodland to face him. Her pale blue skin could have been pleasant, but it deepened in anger to a squashed blueberry hue.

"Sorry." Eluse's response was insincere and they both knew it. He glanced at the Crownswords who stood at the treeline, who milled around disinterested.

"This is the last time I will demonstrate," Sorrel said. "And you will do it along with me. If you are able." A flicker of annoyance wandered across her face. She frowned well, and often. On her shoulder alighted Tinlit, her large red flitwing. The insect cleaned its dragonfly wings with its antennae, and watched Eluse along with Sorrel.

The truth was that magic so far had been far more *boring* than he expected. He envisioned conjuring dragons made of living fire or hammering down great tidal waves on the foes of the Kingdom. Instead, Sorrel insisted it was more important that he learn to grow trees.

She drew an acorn from a pouch at her hip, placed it on the ground, and pressed it down into the soil with a slender finger. "Watch closely, and follow along with me. This isn't like the lessons from your other tutors, Eluse. What you *know* will not help you. Only what you *feel*." She knelt at the seed and placed her hands over the mound where the tip of the acorn was jutting upwards.

Eluse took his, and half-heartedly pawed a pile of earth onto it. He didn't think he felt very much at all for the acorn.

Sorrel closed her eyes and focused. “It can be hard, at first. Just remember – you must know the energy in your own body. It is yours to command. Give it to the seed. In all magic is life, and in all life is magic.” Sorrel fell silent, but Eluse placed his hands over the acorn and shut his eyes.

He’d done it all before, but never with any success. It wasn’t that he didn’t understand the theory of it; it was that there didn’t seem to be much theory in the first place. It made no sense to feel without knowing.

In the blackness behind his eyelids, he tried to imagine the energy flowing through his arms, into the acorn like a river, the way Sorrel had told him. All that usually happened was it sloshed around in his fingertips like a puddle.

But this time, something felt different. His hands warmed strangely. That was new. What was going on? He touched the tip of his acorn and sneaked a glance. Miniscule green-gold sparks danced from his wrists and fingertips gracefully down to the acorn, where they melted into it.

Startled, he shut his eyes and concentrated. Weariness began weighing on him like a thick coat, and he grew hot beneath it. ***But it was working.*** It was a hard thing to stay connected to the nature around him when most of his mind was absorbed with the thought of how pleasing it would be to see a little surprise on Sorrel’s judgemental face.

He forced it, felt it, as hard as he could, but frustratingly quickly his energy just... gave up. He fell back in a slump on the grass. Fatigue pulled at his edges, and he was drained to the core, but when he opened his eyes a grin slid across his face.

Before him, a sapling waved back, barely half a foot tall. He had done it! For the first time in, he had made something happen with magic. Excitement radiated from him, and as it did a final spark of gold fluttered from his fingers.

Tinlit lifted from Sorrel’s shoulder, hovered for a moment, and buzzed to the sapling.

“Did you do that, or did it just grow by itself? It’s just, it took so long that I can’t be sure.” Eluse turned to the voice with a grin, and saw Consora sat behind him, watching with a smirk.

Sorrel sat back and said nothing. Normally, the teacher would have scolded her for the interruption, or sent her away, but this time she didn’t. “See?” she said, strangely smiling. “It can be done. It will be tiring at first, but you’re quite capable.”

Eluse felt a burst of pride as he looked down at his little sapling, and up at the approving face of the enchantress. Her smiles were rare, but he’d earned this one. Her own sapling stood far taller and prouder than his, but he ignored that.

“It’s no conjured dragon, but I think I did alright,” he grinned.

“To understand magic, you must first understand nature itself. We take nothing from this world that it does not willingly give us. You gave your energy to the forest here, just as the forest first gave life to you. There is no magic without cost, and we share what we have with the world around us.” She beckoned Consora to come and sit. “Beyond the forests, where the trees are

scarce, magic is weak. Here, where life is strong, magic is strong too. Each of us are fortunate to dwell within these ancient woods. Never forget that. The tree that you have helped sprout today will become a part of the forest that we depend on.”

Consora put a hand on his shoulder. “So now we know *even you* are capable. You had us all worried. I thought you were a defective elf. A dud.”

Eluse rolled his eyes, but he enjoyed the way Consora didn’t take things seriously. *Can we tell her now?* he tried to make his eyes say, but Consora seemed to ignore him.

Sorrel hid another smile. She quite liked Consora, and there weren’t many Palace elves who did. “I’m pleased by your progress today, Eluse. It’s been a slow start, and there is a long way to go, but you have the fundamentals. If you continue to practise, we can move onto more interesting things.”

“Like what?” he asked. When Sorrel didn’t answer immediately, he pressed. “War magic?”

She gave Eluse a long look. “Is that what you’d like to learn?”

“Yes!” they both cried at once.

She raised an eyebrow. “A pity I didn’t see such enthusiasm today.”

“In my defence, Sorrel, there’s a bit of a difference between woodland custodianship and commanding wolfpacks, or summoning a flameshield,” Eluse said.

“Mmm.” Sorrel agreed. “Woodland custodianship is much more important.”

The two elflings groaned. “I’ll remember that when I’m defending the realm from invaders,” Eluse said. “I’ll sprout a peach stone at them. Besides, my father said it was your idea for me to learn magic to protect myself! I’m hardly going to manage that with *this*, am I?” He gestured at the tree in front of him.

A patronising frown crossed Sorrel’s brow. “Without mastering care for the forest, there would be no realm, Eluse. What do you think it is that keeps the dangers out of the city?”

“The fact that our magic would lay them to waste,” he snorted.

Consora looked at his tiny sapling and made a face. “Well, *yours* wouldn’t. But the rest of us would give it a good go.”

“Consora, I’m rather close to remembering that you were not invited to this lesson,” Sorrel replied. “There are other pathways to peace. No; if there is any threat to us, it will come from within.”

“Exactly! Like the Eldergrove!” Eluse said. “And speaking of that—”

“No,” Sorrel said. “What I mean is that we must take care of the woods and indeed our very selves, because we are a greater threat to ourselves than any—”

“They already came for me once,” Eluse announced, and all the things he needed to say bubbled up. “And they have magic of their own. So I need to defend myself if they come again. But Sorrel, listen, we need to talk to you—”

“You will learn what you need.” Sorrel’s eyes flashed. “As I told you. There are other pathways to peace.”

Suddenly, a loud crunch from across the clearing made Eluse look up.

“The boy is right,” Iridian crowed.

Eluse’s heart sank into the ground, and kept going. How long had he been lurking there? He flushed with dread, realising what he’d been about to say. The Rosethorne looked down at the seated elves with a look on his face like he was proud of how much taller he stood than them. “He will doubtless need magic to defend himself when a thousand arrows are loosed at his throat.”

“Iridian.” Sorrel grunted flatly. “Is there something you need?”

“Hardly a greeting fit for your Rosethorne, Sorrel,” he said. “I have come to assess the boy’s learning.”

“My understanding is that that was a role for the Director of Duties.”

“I determine my own duties, and you should not forget it. What have you to show for your lessons, Chosen Son?” He eyed Eluse. “What bright and brilliant magics does the Prince of the Summerlands now wield?”

Normally, the presence of the Rosethorne was something that Eluse merely despised, but now it horrified him. What did he want? How dangerous was he? “I just grew this tree,” he stammered, pointing at the sapling.

The moment he said it he wanted to pull the words back into his mouth and swallow them. Iridian looked at it, then back to Eluse, and callous delight filled his beady eyes.

“Well, hail to the Elven Prince,” he mocked, bowing deeply. “Let us fear and tremble before him.” He snorted. Eluse flushed violet. “What else have you done?”

Sorrel spoke up. She had fire behind her eyes that she seemed loathed to unleash. “Iridian, I must insist that you leave the prince to his lesson—”

Iridian turned to her with a snap. “You must insist?” he said contemptuously. “What must you insist? You, who could not stomach the wildlands. You, who abandoned her ranger’s cloak to take up the garb of a teacher. What must you insist to me, Rosethorne to the Rose of the Summerlands?”

Sorrel lowered her head and closed her eyes. Eluse wasn’t sure if she was defeated, or she dared not look at him any longer for fear of what she might do. In spite of his caution, he found himself gazing at her.

“So, boy? Is this the extent of your abilities?” Iridian gestured to the sapling. “Am I to report that the lessons you have undertaken so far have been as abject a failure as they appear?”

To Eluse’s surprise, Consora spoke. “He’s learned to heal, too. He’s good at it. Very good.” For a moment, Eluse’s heart warmed at Consora’s lie. She showed none of the fear before Iridian that other elves did.

Iridian gave a small, thoughtful frown. “Is that so?”

Eluse nodded slowly, but as he did, he felt a buzz in the air. The Rosethorne was not to be trifled with. What would he do?

“Then I would see this healing magic.”

He pulled Consora to her feet. She grunted in surprise, shouting out at him. Iridian unsheathed a rough bronze knife and held it up.

Eluse gasped, and the air caught in his throat, choking him. Surely not. Not here! His eyes darted to the Crownswords, who lingered on the other side of the clearing.

“Iridian! Enough of this!” Sorrel bellowed, but the Rosethorne did not stop. He held Consora’s arm underneath his own, locking it in place and turning away from them. That monster had her! Eluse leapt to his feet.

Consora thrashed at him like a whirlwind, kicking his shins. “Get off me! Let me go!” She bared her teeth at him. When his hand moved past her, she bit into it, hard. He shook his hand, smacking her face.

Eluse ran forward and pushed on the great muscled mass of his body, striking and punching, but it was as if Iridian was made of solid stone. Consora snarled like a rabid dog, yelping. Eluse couldn’t see her hand as he held it, just the back of the Rosethorne. “Help her!” he cried at the Crownswords, who stood and watched awkwardly. They shuffled uncomfortably, but did not move. “Useless!” he shouted.

He tried to get around the Rosethorne to Consora, who screamed in a red rage. Her cry shuddered through him. He hadn’t felt desperation like this before. When he moved, Iridian simply turned himself too, blocking him. As they turned he saw with horror glistening beads of scarlet drop onto the grass at their feet, which smeared as Iridian trampled them.

“Stop!” Eluse yelled, struggling and thrashing, beating on Iridian’s arm and shoulder. He felt so weak, so childish. The giant elf’s grip only tightened. Eluse finally ducked around him and saw Consora had balled up her fist, which dripped bright with blood, hot and wet, but Iridian crushed it out beneath his own fingers and pressed the knife again into her fingertips, slicing through the skin. Consora headbutted his shoulder and lifted her knees to his stomach, but he stood against her as if she were a buzzing insect.

“*Iridian!*” Sorrel roared, and her voice crackled with a fierce rushing of a mighty wind. Eluse and Iridian were caught up like in a gale. It took Eluse off his feet, and he sailed backwards onto the grass. Consora was held down only by Iridian, who staggered in the wind. Astonished, Iridian dropped her hand.

A quiet moment passed, and Eluse looked between Consora and Sorrel.

THAT was magic.

Then, Consora pulled herself back, and made a wild dive for the Rosethorne, screaming.

Eluse sprang to his feet and caught her before she landed. She struggled, but he held her tight. He couldn't let her back at him. He was so huge, and the two of them were so small before him.

They both fell, and she clawed at the dirt. Her blood coated his hands as she struggled, slippery and bright. Iridian had gashed his serrated knife across three of her fingertips. Her light face had flushed deep red, and he had no doubt that if he let her go, she would try to tear Iridian apart with her bare hands. Her eyes shimmered, wet and red with fury, staring at the Rosethorne.

Eluse held her until her panting slowed, guttural breaths shaking from her throat. "Leave him," he whispered to her. "Leave him." He spoke to himself as much as to her. But it wasn't fear that held him this time. It was that he knew he could not let her be hurt again.

Iridian was shaken, but tried not to show it. "Well then, Chosen Son, let us see how well your lessons have taken. Let us see you heal the girl."

"Eluse, you will do no such thing," Sorrel said, putting herself between Eluse and Iridian. She was a little thing before the mass of the Rosethorne, but he did not move forward. In fact, Eluse thought he took a very small step back.

Break him, Sorrel.

She opened her mouth again, but when she spoke this time, no magic came with it. "Iridian, get back to the Palace. You forget yourself."

Iridian upturned his nose. "Perhaps it is you who forgets herself, Sorrel. I am Rosethorne to the King. You should bow before me."

For any other elf, he would have insisted on it. Forced it. To Sorrel, he said nothing else. Eluse savoured it. He'd been fearless in battle. But here, now, at least his pride was dented.

Iridian looked at Eluse, whose arms still held Consora. The satisfaction quickly evaporated. "Your magic is weak, and you would do well not to forget it. Your royal title will not always earn you protection. Perhaps next time, it will be your blood upon the ground. Let us hope that you grow in strength before the crown is placed upon your head, or stronger things than you shall trample you underfoot."

As he said it, he stamped his boot over Eluse's sapling. The stem cracked and was crushed beneath him.

What a contemptible, vindictive elf.

"Get out," Sorrel snarled. Iridian gave a final nasty smile and left.

They watched him leave the clearing. The Crownswords looked as if they might have followed him for a moment, and Eluse wished they would. Consora clutched her hand, squeezing her fingers to stop the blood.

“Consora,” Eluse let her go as soon as Iridian was gone. “Are you alright? Let me see.” He took her fingers in his hand.

“I’m fine. I’m fine!” She pulled her hand back. Her teeth were clenched and her breathing shallow. “It’s just my fingers. It hardly hurts.” Her pride was wounded deeper than her hand, Eluse knew.

Sorrel raised her eyebrows. “I’m sure.” She looked at her fingers. “It’s a simple fix. Come here.”

“I’m fine!”

“Consora, come here.” Sorrel grasped her hand, who rolled her eyes and relented. She let her hand flop into Sorrel’s. Her fingers touched Consora’s, and golden light shone from them. The light fluttered into her. “It tickles,” Consora squirmed, shrugging away the feeling. “It feels like pins and needles.”

As Sorrel worked, Eluse cursed the Rosethorne. “I hate him,” he growled. “He’s always been so cruel. He’s a viper in a bird’s nest. And I’m so sorry, Consora, his anger is pointed at me but he has taken it out on you. I’m going to find a beehive and leave it in his bed. I swear it. I swear it.” He hadn’t the words for the anger that riled him.

Consora smiled, but he knew she saw through him. He would do nothing. Nobody did anything to Iridian. He looked down at her fingers again, and although blood still stained them, magic had closed the cuts up.

Now. It was time. He couldn’t wait any longer.

“Sorrel, listen to me,” Eluse urged in a quiet voice, wary of the Crownswords who still lurked. “I... Well, I think there’s more to Iridian than there seems. I don’t think he’s serving my father. I know it sounds ridiculous, but I think he’s a traitor. We were ambushed last week and *someone* must have tipped off the Eldergrove. I know that could be anybody, but listen... Last night I sort of... found my way into Iridian’s home, and—”

“What!?” hissed Sorrel, eyes wide.

“I know, I know, and you can punish me later if you like, but *listen!* I only went to try to find some kind of evidence, and... Well I know it sounds stupid, but I found the mantra of the Eldergrove, engraved right there in his desk. Only, it was *old*, Sorrel. Too old. It looked older than the Eldergrove! I think—”

Eluse’s voice nipped off in a yelp as Sorrel grabbed him, and Consora too, by an ear each, yanking them both into her. “Listen to me very carefully,” she said, her voice barely more than breath. “The Rosethorne is an immensely dangerous elf. Do not interfere with him.”

The shock of Sorrel’s powerful grip stunned him for a moment. “But Sorrel... I...”

“Listen to me, and trust me with this,” Sorrel said, her face so close he could smell the sharp tang of her breath. “We do not believe that you are in immediate danger from the Rosethorne. But you *must* leave him be.”

“‘We’?” Eluse gasped. “Who is ‘we’? Do you already know something about him? You do, don’t you!”

Sorrel scrunched her face, and her regret was immediate. Over her shoulder, the Crownswords stirred. Slowly, gently, she released them. “Trust my counsel to the both of you; do not interfere with the Rosethorne.”

“What’s going on?” a Crownsword called, walking slowly toward them.

Sorrel stepped backwards, a little laugh issuing from her mouth. “Oh, nothing. These two spirited elflings were just unhappy with the rough play of the Rosethorne. I was simply telling them it’s best to let bygones be bygones. And,” she turned back to them with fiery eyes, “They’d agreed. Hadn’t you?”

“That’s right,” Eluse grumbled. “We won’t do anything. He isn’t worth it.”

Sorrel smiled a little, saying very quietly, “He isn’t worth very much at all.”

Eluse and Consora laughed. It was an uncharacteristic thing for her to say.

The Crownsword gave a satisfied nod and turned back.

“My sapling,” Eluse remembered with sudden dismay. He looked at the sorry little shattered thing. It had only just come to life, and now it was dead. His first thing. The first thing that he had made, broken in the dirt. The one thing he was proud of. His face grew hot. For some reason, some stupid reason, looking at the broken tree made him want to cry. He clenched his jaw.

“Oh, no.” The fury fell from Consora, and she knelt by it. She picked up the stem ever so gently, but it was too late. It was dead. “I’m sorry, Eluse.”

Sorrel looked at him with sorry eyes. Her sapling stood nearby, waving gently in the breeze. “Death is a part of life in the forest. It grants new life.”

“That’s not very comforting, Sorrel,” Consora said, stroking the little buds. “He tried hard for that.”

Eluse gave her a pained smile.

“Yes,” Sorrel said. She held out one arm to her sapling, and one to his. “You did. It’s such a little thing. And... like I said. Death is a part of life.”

She closed her eyes. Golden light glimmered from her sapling to her fingers in a faint trickle. From her other hand, though, came a burst of light so brilliant that Eluse had to shield his eyes. The light hummed and the air shook, and Eluse jolted with shock. Bright dots flashed in his eyes.

When the light faded, he peeked out. Sorrel was kneeling, breathing hard. Where her sapling had stood, tall and proud, now a withered, dry stick remained. But, before him, in the ground—his own sapling was back!

The same leaves, buds, and branches, like it had never been damaged at all. Tinlit, the little red flitwing, landed by the reborn sapling and nuzzled at it. His hummingbird feathers bristled happily. Consora grinned, stroking both the tree and Tinlit with the tips of her fingers.

“Sorrel!” Eluse exclaimed, and she gave him a weary smile. “How did you do that? *Why* did you do that?”

It took her a moment to answer. “Death,” she breathed, “grants life.” She swallowed. “And it takes an awful lot of power, too.” She laughed a little.

Eluse laughed with her. “Thank you,” he said. He looked at the dry, twisted tree she had drawn the life from. “You didn’t have to do that. It was just a tree.”

“Eluse,” she sighed, regaining her breath. “Nothing is just anything ”

“Well, I’m sure I speak for both of us when I say we have no idea what you mean, but that *was* very impressive,” Consora said, getting to her feet.

Sorrel rose. “We shall pick up again at the next lesson, Eluse.” She looked in the direction that Iridian had left from. “It could be pertinent to move up the timetable a little. Perhaps you shall learn war magic after all.”

His eyes grew broad. Surely, she now saw the danger of the Rosethorne.

But then, she was back to her firm and haughty self, and left with a curt nod. In all the commotion, Eluse had entirely forgotten he usually pretended not to like her.

She left, and Tinlit zipped off after her. The clearing grew quiet. The two of them sat on a moss-strewn log.

“You fight like a wildcat, you know,” Eluse said.

Consora giggled. “Don’t get on the wrong side of me, then.” Her voice fell to a whisper. “Eluse, what do you think Sorrel meant by what she said about Iridian?”

“I wish I knew. But... Was it just me, or did you get the sense that she already knows there’s something about him? Do you think there are people working together on it? I mean, Iridian is a lot of things, but he’s hardly subtle. If we’ve suspected something, maybe others have too? She was a ranger, after all.”

“Mmm. And the way Sorrel talked about it... She was *panicked* that we’d been snooping, too. Oh, he’s such an awful elf. I want to keep searching now more than ever.”

“So do I, but I don’t know if we can. She was so urgent about it.”

“Unless she was the spy. Then she wouldn’t want us looking into it.”

Eluse laughed. “Not a chance. Not after what the Eldergrove did to her family. And, how do you explain the engraving? No, it’s him. It has to be. She knows it, too.”

“She said you’re not in any danger, though. What did that mean?”

“I don’t know. Unless the Eldergrove must want something more than me and my father dead. I think I need to talk to my father about this.”

“Ugh, Eluse!” Consora groaned, thwacking his chest. “Give up with your father. Honestly, I think—and you know how unlike me this is to say this—we need to just leave this be. It sounds like they’ve got it in hand. If we go bumbling about without a clue, we’re more likely to tip him off that we’re onto him.”

Eluse grumbled, but he knew she was right. It was very frustrating when she was right.

“Did anything happen with Suscepto last night?” she asked in the end.

“I’ve not seen him since,” Eluse said with a guilty smile. “You know, I think the more we bother him, the easier it is to get away with. He loses track of what we do. He gets into *all sorts of a fluster*,” he imitated Suscepto’s regal tone.

“I wish he’d relax a little,” Consora said. “I don’t know how you manage with him. He’s more like your father than your father is.” Eluse snorted. He wasn’t sure whether she meant that he was more fussed over Eluse’s behaviour than the King, or that he saw more of Eluse than him, but both were true. “Still, though,” she continued. “I should probably apologise.”

“Probably.”

“I think he just feels sorry for me.”

Eluse didn’t respond. Consora’s father and Suscepto had had a friendship, of sorts. The Palace elf had taken it hard when he died.

The quiet built a little, until a jay swooped close overhead.

“He just thinks you’re a bad influence on me.” Eluse smiled.

Consora shoved him with her shoulder. “That’s half the fun of me.”

She saw him looking and glanced away. She never really wanted to talk about what was bothering her, but it was obvious to him. He could see it behind her eyes; her mind was caught up in her mother again.

Eluse prided himself on reading eyes. Consora always said his own were strange; blue, which was rare for an elf. Rare eyes were common for Kings though, he supposed, thinking of his father’s, gold and glowing. Perhaps Eluse’s eyes were the only echo of his own naturalborn parents that he would ever have.

After a while, they headed back to the city proper, Crownswords following at his heel. Consora’s home was with her mother, under the trunk of a riverside mangrove. They meandered past the giant trees that crawled out of the waters of the Serpent Tongue, where red feathered

tatterwings waded over the black mud hunting for crawdads and thick clouds of mosquitoes hovered. Fat, lazy alligators lingered in the sun.

“I’m going in,” Eluse called back to the Crownswords. “Wait outside.” He had long ago given up any veneer of politeness with them. The two of them skirted down the embankment that led through the roots of the mangrove and into her home.

Eluse was used to the acidic smell in there by now; vomit, and other, worse things.

“Hi, Mum,” Consora said. Consora’s mother was sitting across the other side of the vinelike roots, facing away, feet dangling through the webbed creepers into the water.

Her mother didn’t answer. Her hair was tangled and knotted, and the thready clothes she wore hung loose on her frail frame. At her hand was a glass bottle, half-empty, of distilled lysian. It was a powerful remedy that could soothe the mind in small doses. Her mother did not take it in small doses.

“Eluse is here. He actually *did something* in a magic lesson, if you can believe it. We’ve just been with Sorrel.” Consora waited to see if there would be a response. None came. “How are you? Have you eaten?”

She lifted the lysian to her mouth with a shaking hand and took a sip. Her nose was rankled and eyes scrunched. “I ha—I hadn a drehum,” she grunted. The words meant nothing to Eluse, but somehow the meaning got through to Consora.

“Good, well done.” She squeezed her mother’s shoulder affectionately, then busied herself around the burrow. “I’ll go out in a minute and get you some fruit too.”

Eluse moved over to sit with her. “How are the waters today, Marad?”

She looked up at him like she’d just noticed he was there. “Elusey here,” she gurgled, turning to Consora. Consora nodded. Marad splashed her feet through the river. They were pale and had been in the water so long that the skin was wrinkled. She gripped his knee. “Yalry Elue?”

He nodded, but she was difficult to look at. He remembered how she’d been, just a few summers past, so lively and vibrant. Back when Riváren was with them. The memory plucked at him. He didn’t know how Consora dealt with it. “I’m alright, thanks Marad. I’ve just been at a magic lesson. Consora came too. Oh, and then Iridian turned up, he was—”

“Don’t.” Consora spoke sharply from across the burrow. She softened immediately. “He was just there, that’s all. Dad’s friend. Remember?”

Her mother grunted and nodded. “No message t’day. Not come home yea. I thi—I thi’ no long now.” She pursed her lips and nodded. “I think not long.” She drank another gulp of the lysian.

Eluse swallowed. “Yes.” Consora closed her eyes and breathed in. “Not long now, Mum. He’ll be back soon.” She gently took the bottle from her hand and placed it down at her feet.

Consora's father, Riváren, had been an Everwood ranger, and died several summers past. One of the first to be murdered by the Eldergrove Cult. His title had been Wildroot, and he was chief of all rangers in Arath' Sayah, and strangely enough, he'd been a close friend of Iridian's. Iridian had never cared for Eluse, but since Riváren's death at the hands of the Cult, Iridian's ire had taken a fierce turn. An expedition had found Riváren's body hanging from the trees, along with a band of rangers, all corpses. Since the news, Marad's mind had broken, and the lysian gave her comfort where Riváren could not.

She turned to look at them. "Ye'rea? Back soon?" She managed a quick smile which hurried from her lips. Her face, which could have been beautiful, creased again into frustration.

Consora faced away from Eluse, but he saw her blink away the shine in her eyes. She quickly wiped at her face with her sleeve. Eluse knew he couldn't stay. He offered up a useless smile to Consora, feeling hollow as he did.

"I'll see you soon, Marad. You take care."

"Mmm. No' long now."

"Yeah. Not long now."

Then, she reached again for the lysian bottle, gazing into the waters.

A great bear of the forest spends its life at peace, but its claws and teeth are honed for war. It is only because it can fight that it can also choose not to.

-King Burrick Lamont, One Hundred and Eighty-Fourth King of Dharia: Reflections on Warmongering, held in the Fellstar private collection.

CHAPTER 5 - CATCHING FISH

Grass.

The first blade of green that struggled through the dust. It crumpled to nothing as the hoof of his horse trod into it.

The air that had shimmered with heat over their heads had cooled now as they'd grown closer to the trees. And he could *feel* it; it pulled at him—that power they hid in their woods. Those magics they hoarded for themselves. Like a child grasps at his mother, it grasped at him.

He would split those woods open and take it.

Treetops poked across the dunes before them. Behind him, only two hundred men remained. Two hundred men, to face the thousands in the forests.

He smiled.

* * *

Two days later, Eluse stood in the same clearing, the sapling before him. Tinlit hovered in the air, catching gnats.

“You have performed suitably, Eluse,” Sorrel began, back to her typical terse self. He’d tried asking her more about Iridian when he’d first seen her, but she’d ignored him. “I had my doubts whether you would sprout your acorn at all. Well done.” Eluse felt a sting in her words. “One day, with the right care and attention, your sapling will become a fine oak.”

“Thank you,” he answered. His face betrayed that he was hoping for something more than tree planting today.

“My concern has always been that without a proper affinity for the natural magic of the forest, exploring the powers beyond is a futile effort which could do more harm than good. Magic must not be used solely as a tool at our disposal; you must first understand *why* magic exists within each of us.”

“Of course,” Eluse pinched his chin and nodded. “I understand.” He did not understand.

She clenched her jaw. “That said, Eluse, your situation is unique. I have little doubt that it will serve you well to wield magic greatly, in time.”

Eluse nodded. “The Eldergrove Cult.” He thought of Iridian again, and hoped she’d realise it, too.

The enchantress closed her eyes and breathed in. Sometimes he felt like she’d quite like to pick him up and shake him.

“Not all of the wickedness in the world can be attributed to something so simple as a cult,” she said. “Just watch.” She stretched out her hand before her. Her brow furrowed in concentration.

Then, it began—something, at least. The air shimmered, so faintly he barely noticed, then more. Her hand sparkled and refracted the light, and after a moment it became wet. Droplets of water rose from the ground, and as it lifted, cracks rippled in the dirt where it dried.

“With practice, we can command the land beneath us,” she said, and a violent crack sang through the air. Eluse jerked in surprise, and between them the earth shuddered open; a jagged crevice snapped through the shale.

“And the nature around us, too.” The water around her hand began to bubble thickly, and grew bright. Light danced from her hand and swirled into the water, which boiled and seethed. With a sudden flick she thrust her hand out. The orb she had created burst forward into the open ground with a crash, splintering it further—it was just water, but had a fierce strength to it. Eluse’s mouth hung open.

“Even the air can be commanded when your connection to Anima is strong.” Her mouth turned up at the corners as she met Eluse’s gaze, then she held a steady hand out toward a rotted log in the clearing. Her face strained, and the log shifted and rolled, and lifted itself into the air. Her hand twisted, and the decayed wood of the log splintered apart and collapsed to the ground. “With power like this, we can defend our lands and lives with more than mere weapons. You are adept with your spear. Now you must learn to control that which has given you life itself.”

She flung every part of the dead wood into the hole in the ground, which churned and swallowed it. The hole closed up, sealing an angry scar in the meadow.

Eluse’s eyes widened. This was a far cry from the magic he had seen in his youth; the faint golden sparks and green glimmer of nature gave way to something far more furious here. It was more raw and savage than he had even imagined. Exhilaration shot through him like fire.

“Are you going to teach me how to do that?” he asked. Sorrel’s face was impassive, but he thought he detected a hint of satisfaction.

“As I told you, Eluse, if you can learn to command the Spider’s gift, you can do far greater things than these. Mountains can be moved through the command of the power within. Nature is kind and light as a cloud, and deadly and angry as a viper, and the magic we wield is the same.”

“And this is the magic that the rangers use? Why don’t all Elves learn this?”

“You’re a student of politics. Why do you think?” Sorrel asked.

Eluse cocked his head. “I have to admit... It seems so much more appealing to learn this than what we’ve covered before. And... perhaps that’s a problem.”

Sorrel nodded.

“The more elves trained in war magic, the less we are inclined for peace,” he continued. “And in doing so, we put the kingdom at greater risk.”

“Exactly. You’ve seen what a penchant for violence does to a heart.”

Eluse hardly had to think before he shuddered. “Iridian.”

Sorrel said nothing, but held his gaze. Something was working behind her eyes, but she said nothing.

“I suppose it *is* better to grow a tree than burn one down,” he said. “But I can still learn the magic of the rangers?”

“We will start today with something very simple. But what I hope to teach you will form the basis for a strength that will hold you firm wherever you may go. Keep in mind, this is demanding even for diligent students.”

“So what hope have I got?” Eluse grinned and thought he might have seen a smile flick over Sorrel’s stiff face. Inwardly, though, anticipation gripped him. He *would* get this right. He had to. These last few days, he’d felt a new kind of danger in the air, prickling at him, like the smell of the wind before a thunderstorm. Determination steeled him.

“Put out your hand. Come here, Tinlit,” She lifted up her own hand, and the flitwing came to rest on it. Eluse reached out his own. “Close your eyes.”

He did as she said, and felt her hand clasp around his. Her skin was cold, and Tinlit crawled across his wrist.

“Feel the life in my hand. Can you feel it?”

Eluse gritted his teeth and focused. Colours shifted behind his eyes as he searched his mind. Somewhere, perhaps just at the border of reality and imagination, he felt a soft tingling—like the golden sparks that she could command so well, but a *feeling*.

“I think so,” he murmured.

“And Tinlit, too. Hers will feel different.”

“I think so. I don’t know.”

“Keep feeling it. Don’t let it go.” He felt her hand loosen and drop from his. “Do you still have it?”

Eluse kept focused. “Yes. I think so. Yes.”

“Hold it. Keep it. If you can feel my life, you can feel the life around you. Search for it, you have to seek it out. What can you feel?”

Eluse didn't know whether what he felt was real magic, or his imagination, but seeing the power that Sorrel used, he had to try. He rummaged around his mind to see what else he could find.

“I think... I think I feel something else. Something tingly, but... It sort of *tastes* different.”

“Yes!” Sorrel exclaimed. “You have it! Follow it. Pull on it like a thread. Where does it lead you?”

Eluse hoped that they were still alone in the clearing, because this conversation would have been a strange one to explain. “It tastes... Raw. Like unripe fruit, but inside my head.”

“Good. Feel it not just in your head, but your entire body. Find it there.”

“It feels rough, like sand. Sparks and sand.”

“Now, pull that feeling towards you. Hold onto it and *command* it to come to you. Draw the life, the magic, to you.”

Eluse's mind was lost now, and he realised just how tired he was quickly becoming. Behind his eyes he saw the raw, sandy sparkles and pulled—whatever that meant.

“Concentrate. Don't lose focus. Bring the life that you feel around you into your own life. Let them mix like water.”

“I don't know how...” he said, and the breathless sound of his own voice surprised him.

What Eluse was feeling, seeing, tasting, drifted from his mind into his chest. It felt like holding a fish in water, wriggling loose. Frustration tangled his mind like a net, and it only rattled the magic further away.

“Don't force it—coax it. Soothe it towards yourself.”

Somehow, that helped, and imagining magic as the same wriggling fish, Eluse didn't grab at it—instead, he directed it gently, with the arms inside his mind. He ushered the feeling from his chest to his arm, not unaware of how ridiculous it seemed.

“Eluse,” whispered Sorrel, “Open your eyes.”

He did, and gasped as he looked at his hand. Around it swam golden sparks like fireflies, humming with power. As he reacted, they flickered and faded a little.

“Don't lose it, now,” she encouraged. “Bring them back.”

He saw his fish again, and enticed it back to him. As he did, the glimmers grew stronger and brighter, and more shimmered from the air with a flourish.

“Good—good. Now, look at the crack in the ground that I created, and when you’re ready, direct the power there. Do it with force, if you can.” Eluse looked at the split made by Sorrel’s magic. “Don’t feel it in your hand,” Sorrel said. “Feel it in the deepest parts of you.”

A thought lingered on the edge of his mind that he probably shouldn’t be thinking of life-magic as a flopping, slithering fish, but a larger, more present thought overtook it: *it was working*. With that, he *chased* the feel of the slippery power from his hand to the spot he focused on.

With much less power than he had imagined, the glittering golden orb spun from his hand through the air and sizzled into the ground with a buzz, and electric-blue flames erupted up, just for a moment. Then, it was done, and a wisp of smoke danced into the sky.

Eluse tried to speak, but fell over, exhausted.

Sorrel laughed brightly. “Well done! You have surpassed my expectations.”

“I did well?” he panted.

“You did extremely well.”

“Better than your other students?” he grinned as he lay his head on the ground.

“Not at all. But wonderfully well for you.”

Eluse didn’t even care about the snub. He was too pleased with himself. After another moment he sat up, and Sorrel ironed her face back out into something stern. Tinlit came to rest on his knee.

“I want to practise more.”

“You will. You must. But not now. In time, you will learn to command all the elements of nature, and protect yourself with them accordingly.”

“If you’d started off with this magic, not growing trees, then I’d be your best student. Who else do you teach this to?”

Sorrel was quiet for a moment. She came down to his level and put her face close to his.

“Eluse, yours is a life with greater responsibility—and danger—than most. It is my duty to teach you whatever I must to protect yourself and Anima. And it is your duty to learn it. One day, I am sure, it will mean the difference between life and death. As it has for me, so too will it for you.

“Did it save you when you were a ranger?”

“More than once.” She stood up and moved away. Eluse got to his feet too. His mind buzzed with possibilities.

“How strong can I become?” he blurted.

Sorrel paused. “How strong is the power of the forest?”

“Well, alright—how much can you do?”

She looked at him thoughtfully. For a moment, the air hummed, and became thick. Then with a deafening crash and a light so blinding it whited out his vision, a bolt of lightning burst from the clear sky and blasted the already splintered ground. The grass around it singed and blackened. A flame ignited, then quickly died. The taste of metal cracked through the air. After a breath, while Eluse was still reeling, Sorrel spoke again. Lightning crackled around her, and wind shivered through her hair and robes.

“I can do enough.”

*The rosy flower in the grass
Blooms so brightly, but alas,
When winter comes it droops its head,
It sheds its seed and drops down dead.*

-Third verse of a nursery rhyme sung by the elflings of the Wildflower Valleys.

CHAPTER 6 - THE KING'S COMMAND

In the northeast of the forest lands, just as the trees fall away into the sands of the Eastern Deserts, nestled in the foot of the rolling hills to the north lay the Wildflower Valleys of Arath' Sayah. An eternal carpet of idyllic blossom weaved between fragrant sandy ambergrass; an endless ocean of marigold and heather, cornflower and orchids, rich in delicate colour. The scent of pollen painted the air, and it dripped down through the branches of the trees and glided through the forest, pouring into the Elven burrows and pooling like sweet water inside. In the eveningtime, when the skies turned as gold as the grass and the first twinkling stars began to appear above, the old elf Sanheith sat among the poppies and watched the children play in the dying light. Tonight, however, shapes crested upon the hill.

Coming from the north, they drew nearer, glimmering under the light of blazing torches until she could make them out—Men. One was horsed and the rest followed on foot. There were several hundred in all, and they must have travelled far. She rose from the wildflower bed and hurried over to meet them.

“Greetings!” she announced. “Welcome to the Wildflower Valleys. From where have you travelled?”

The figure on the white horse approached and dismounted. He smiled at her with thin lips, and Sanheith realised that though he was a man there was more to him; he was something she had not seen before. His face was pale-moon white, with eyes pitch black and narrow, like a panther's. He was clothed in tattered leather spaulders set upon robes of dark silk.

“Fair elf,” he spoke in a smooth voice, “We come from the north, seeking the forests of the Elves.” He looked beyond the old elf woman to where the trees grew thick. “I trust we have found them.”

“You have indeed.” Sanheith's smile did not betray her apprehension. “We shall fetch water for your men, and food, should you like it.”

The men that arrived with the horseman continued walking past the elf towards the trees. Around them, the elflings watched and played.

“Kind woman, we have no need of water nor food, but I thank you for your gracious offer. We are humbled by it. Tell me, what is your name?”

“Sanheith,” said the elf, and she bowed her head slightly. “I am very pleased to find you. Oh, but I am nobody. It’ll be the elders you mean to speak to.” There was a commotion behind her. The forest stirred where the men approached, but in the growing dark she saw nothing. “I shall be glad to bring you to them. By what name may I call you?”

“I shall not burden you with my name, dear woman.”

A crash, a shout. Sanheith peered through the gloom behind her and saw the men moving fast through the evening mist. Nearby, elflings scattered like snowflakes. When she spoke again, there was a tremor to her voice. “Who are you?”

“I bid that not concern you.”

Sanheith saw the dying light reflected from twisted weapons in the hands of the men. More cries followed, then screams, and the wet sound of metal hacking into meat. Elves ran from the trees toward the men, but they were cut apart, and the cotton-white orchids were spattered, as if by wine. One, fallen, called for aid, but an iron boot crushed his throat and his cry died with him. Young elflings ran or wept, and those that got near to the men were run through and screamed like sparrows. Sanheith shook, and turned to face the stranger. His eyes glistened.

“What do you want?” she pleaded. “What is this?”

He smiled a pleasant smile. Metal sang against metal behind her as furious elves charged to fight, but it was short lived, and those who landed blows upon the men did not pierce their armour. Great blunt weapons crushed bones and short rugged ones tore through sinew and tendons. The stream which quenched the flowers was fed with sticky blood.

The stranger bellowed with a great voice that sliced the evening air. “Let them run! Cut down any who remain!” He watched with a cold, steady face as dead elves stained the meadow.

“Sanheith,” he said, drawing a thin black sword. “It was very pleasurable to meet you. You will not be remembered.”

Sanheith gazed into the midnight eyes of the stranger as he pushed his sword through her, soft as silk. He withdrew it and held her upright, cleaning the blood on her tunic. When he was done he released her, and she collapsed in a quivering heap. She tried to speak, but could only gurgle as warm scarlet spilled from her lips.

He strode over her fallen body towards the fray. As her vision grew cloudy, the last that she saw was the elves running for the wood, and the men running down those who are too slow or too brave, and she heard the whimper of the dying, and the final terrible call of the stranger.

“Kill them all!” his voice hot against the evening’s gentle hush. “Burn the trees!”

* * *

Spring ripened into summer. Slowly—so slowly he hardly noticed it at all—the thought of Iridian and the Eldergrove slid from his mind. He still had to meet with the Rosethorne for martial training, but in time, Eluse began to consider the Rosethorne more as an irritation than the threat he'd feared him to be. Between duties at the Palace—typically, sitting in meetings with the king and his advisors to listen and learn—Eluse kept up with his magic lessons. He learned well, and was keen to find that as his potential for magic developed, so too did the prospect for rascality. One of the finer joys in recent days was when, one quiet afternoon, Consora and he had scattered ivy berries around Suscepto's quarters and used their magic to bring them to full growth. Tendrils wrapped themselves around every surface and tangled through his belongings. Later that evening, when he'd found their work, Suscepto flew into such a rage that he grabbed the pair of them by their ears, marched them up to his quarters, and jostled them inside.

“What do you *mean* by this?” he screeched with delightful incredulity.

“Suscepto, you really ought to clear up around the place,” Consora tutted, prodding the vines with her foot. “It's looking terribly unkept.”

The sorry old Palace elf sputtered and spurted, but the words he needed to put the girl in her place eluded him.

“Why would you think this was us?” Eluse asked, his eyes as innocent as he could make them.

“Because, young master, this holds all the markings of an impudent pair of elves who spend far more time tyrannising their Director of Duties than they do in their education or betterment of their own discipline!”

“I don't know, Suscepto,” he said, poking some of the leaves aside. “This has taken some real magical ability. Looks like whoever's done this might have been pretty good students after all.”

This did not improve his temper. He ranted and blustered for some amount of time before settling himself down as he always did and doling out their inevitable punishment; this time they would spend their evenings cleaning out the irrigation furrows in the mycelian record chamber. It was hard work, and the stink was the sort that lived in the nose for a while afterwards. But Suscepto's reaction had been so much fun, Eluse made sure to keep a few ivy berries in his pocket from then on, for emergency mischief.

The mycelian records served as a kind of library in Lenune. Having long ago forgotten the written word, they had no language to scribe their history, but no need of one. Across the forest grew all manner of fungi, the spores of which hung in the air at every moment and in every nook. Everything that happened in the forest took place in the presence of these invisible, magical spores, and they would absorb the memories of what took place around them. When they would alight and grow, the mushrooms they formed held the memories of all that their spores had taken on. Curated by the Moon Folk in their fairy circles, the fungus would then be brought into this great chamber by the roots of the First Tree to grow. Mushrooms sprouted on every surface; great purple domes twelve feet tall to tiny white hairs that rippled like caterpillars.

The record keepers studied their entire lives to know and understand these archives. When a record was needed, some of the fungus would be taken, brewed into a tea, and imbibed by the Elves, who would experience such visions of the past as if they were there themselves. The fungus would continue to grow, and in this way this great underground amphitheatre housed living records dating back to the days of Oriothen. This was where Eluse and Consora worked now, digging clean the water channels that ran from the walls of the Tree through the hall. It was their third and final day of their sanction.

“I think,” Consora grumbled as she scooped brown filth from the water furrows, “that the cranky old spoilsport *likes* the fun we have with him.”

Eluse nodded. “He’d miss it if we stopped. Wouldn’t know what to do with himself.” A wet splodge of brown slapped into a bucket beside him. Some way off, a record keeper poked his nose over a toadstool at them.

“He’d get himself into all sorts of trouble without us to keep him busy. The way he gives us punishments together, it’s as if he’s trying to make us think up more ideas.” She eyed the slop pile thoughtfully.

“Last day here, Consora. You’re sure you don’t want to try a little taste of something?” Eluse nodded toward a cluster of tall, thin mushrooms with yellow caps.

“Don’t do it, Eluse. I’m serious. You wouldn’t know *what* you’re biting into.”

“Heh. Sounds a bit like you’re scared.”

“Sounds a bit like I don’t want to end up in bed for three days because I can’t stop having visions of rutting deer. Besides, riling up Suscepto is just a bit of fun. Taking a record without permission would be a proper crime. And aren’t you supposed to be the one that stops those, *Your Royal Highness?*”

“Well,” Eluse said indignantly. “Not quite yet.”

The two elves dug and cleaned for a little while longer, until the roots parted and in strode Suscepto, looking a little more bedraggled than his usual self.

“Finally,” Consora sighed, flicking the muck from her hands. “Let’s go, Eluse.”

The Palace elf held up a firm hand to stop her. He was out of breath.

“Eluse, your father has need of you. Now, young master. Now-now.”

“My father? What does he want?”

“Now, Eluse. Come quickly.”

Eluse frowned, and shot Consora a quizzical glance. She shrugged.

“Lead the way,” he said.

* * *

King Auctoria was at the end of a great polished table which grew like a trunk from the floor. He and several advisors were poring over a series of maps and drawn images, speaking together in hushed tones. Bowls filled with water and slices of mycelia lay on the table, and a number of crystalline aether stones were piled at one end. He glanced up as Eluse entered, and beckoned him closer. "Take a seat." Auctoria indicated to a stump.

He did, and looked around. There was a lump in his throat he hoped his father wouldn't notice. It was unusual for him to be summoned like this without a scheduled meeting, and now an unpleasant anticipation built in him. Iridian was there, eyes following Eluse from under his thick brow. He couldn't tell yet whether or not he was in trouble. Suscepto stood at his shoulder.

"Apprise the boy of the situation." Auctoria nodded to a gangly, sage-skinned elf who was rummaging through the maps. Eluse didn't know his name, but knew he served his father as a tactician. The elf snapped to attention, whilst Auctoria turned and muttered hurriedly with the Rosethorne and a group of older elves.

"Arath' Sayah is under threat!" the tactician announced with aplomb.

Well, thought Eluse, *unless Suscepto has been blowing my mischief well and truly out of proportion, this is probably not my doing.*

"Villagers on the eastern border report a series of attacks. Elf and elflings both have been slaughtered without discrimination or mercy. Scout reports indicate that in no less than four locations, Men have entered the woodlands and set ablaze the trees themselves."

Eluse's eyes widened. Conflict between Man and Elf had been unheard of in living memory. "Men? This is not the work of the Eldergrove?"

"Certainly not. They have no presence so far north and little reason to attack the villages. Survivors report these were Men who came from the north, through the desert."

"Dharians?"

"Accounts indicate the assailants are the last remnants of the Fanatical Dark. Survivors report the invaders came from the Eastern Deserts, and did not wear unified colours. They took no prisoners, and burned much. This is the work of men who follow the Shadow." The advisor spoke grim words, but he moved and spoke so excitedly that he sounded enthused. His eyes gleamed in his crinkled old head.

"The Fanatical Dark? That doesn't make sense. Why attack *us*? Why now?" Eluse rose and grabbed hold of the nearest papers. Sketched pictures of soldiers, and a burned village. Ripped and fallen trees. A swell of rage rose in him when he saw a sketch of dead elflings heaped in a pile. One of the older elves saw his shock, and hurried to him with a waterskin. He didn't take it.

“We don’t have the answers we will, but we suspect desperation. In fifteen summers, the Fanatical Dark has receded from a threat that near-topped the Kingdom of Dharia to a desperate band of rebels at the eastern end of the world. If they have realised they cannot push back against the Dharians, they are like to try the forests instead.”

It made no sense. He knew his history; the Fanatical Dark had been a plague of Dharia since the last Dharian King had slipped into madness over twenty years ago, but they had never come south. The previous king had abandoned the realm and the throne, leaving the Shadowshatter crown for his son, who took the throne after him, and fled east, where he rallied an army.

One of the sketchings was of the crown itself, if it could be called a crown. It was a jagged, twisted scrap of metal with a gemstone in the middle that had been smashed in two—no thing of splendour like the Poisonthorn crown. It was a wreck, and it was intended as such. Torn in half millenia ago, and now banded together by silver, it was, in legend at least, the shattered remains of the very crown that the Shadow himself wore during his tyranny in the Black Age. Now, the splintered prongs of the crown served as a reminder that the lust for power could only ever lead to a rending in two.

The mad Dharian king had given himself over to the Shadow and rejected this insult, casting the crown aside. After he had fled east, to the tower of Udol Aethune, the army he mustered warred with his own kingdom. They fought in the name of the dead Shadow, and the thirst for power that followed. Known now as the Twisted King, he had left his own son to pick up the pieces of Dharia, and by all accounts, near wiped out the Dharian Empire. Now, though, they were beaten back, and the remnant were such a small threat to the Men that its name was rarely heard in Arath’ Sayah. Though, the Twisted King still reigned in the East.

“That’s madness,” Eluse said. “What chance do they have in the forests against our rangers? They cannot fight in the trees!”

“No chance. And they are few in number. The question is not *whether* they will be destroyed, but how much destruction they might rend before they are.”

“Then they must be ended quickly. And surely they will be! Even the Dharians have all but destroyed them,” Eluse said.

“***They have not done enough.***” A voice like swelling thunder rolled around the room. All other voices fell silent, and each elf turned to face King Auctoria. “The Dharians were on their knees before the Fanatical Dark, reduced to plead for Elven aid. It was only through our compassion and the gift of the Grace of Oriothen that the Men were able to reclaim their kingdom, and even that, they have now proven themselves incompetent to do so. The Twisted King still lives, and now threatens our own lands.” Eluse felt very small before his dominating father, whose golden eyes now shined toward him. “What do you know of the Gift of the Grace?”

The young elf breathed in. Another of his father’s tests. His mind scrabbled. He knew the story well, but finding the words to tell it in front of his father was another matter.

“To stop the rebellion against Dharia, the son of the Twisted King, Gabriel, turned to the Elves for help,” he began. “They asked for an alliance. But it is not in our nature to go to war. Instead, we gifted them the Grace of Oriothen, a powerful relic of the Spider. The legend says that it was the greatest of the Spider’s Eyes, uncorrupted by the Shadow, who in his dying breath had conjured a tower wrapped in thorns—the same tower that the Twisted King rallied at. Those thorns pierced the hundred eyes of the Spider—all but one, which became known as the Grace of Oriothen. The Grace grants power to whoever holds it. The Men promised to use the Grace to destroy the Fanatical Dark, and then they would return it to Arath’ Sayah. This would preserve Elven lives and grant the Dharians victory—”

“Is this the sum total of your insight?” Auctoria interrupted. “Base history I could hear from any one of these advisors or scholars?”

“F-Father?”

“You are the Chosen Son of the King. Tell me what you have truly learned about the Gift of the Grace.”

Eluse swallowed. He knew what his father spoke of. It was rare for an elf to speak against the edict of the King, and rarer still in the presence of the young prince, but Eluse had picked up on enough around the Palace to be sure of what he said next. He continued in a quieter voice. “Well, the... The Gift of the Grace did not sit well with all Elves.” He exchanged a look with his father.

“Go on.”

Eluse hesitated.

“It is no secret here, Eluse. Speak freely.”

“Well, there are those that believe that such a powerful relic should not have been gifted outside of Elven borders. Many elves believe that Elven power belongs to the Elves alone. It... It was not a decision that brought you much love.” He braced himself, half-expecting his father’s wrath, but none came. All around the room, Palace elves shuffled and busied themselves, finding excuses to look away.

“Indeed.”

“There is the concern that it could be used against us. And some say—some say that it is the basis for the Eldergrove rebellion, in part at least. The Cult believe that all of the Orbs of Oriothen are sacred, and a gift from the Spider herself.”

“And you?” King Auctoria eyed the little prince. “What do you say?”

Eluse frowned. “Well, I think that’s nonsense. The Dharians have a single Eye of almost a hundred. Even in spite of its power, they could not stand against the combined Elven might. The Gift of the Grace was an act of mercy to the Dharians to help them reclaim their Kingdom, and we will do so when the time is right.”

Auctoria blinked slowly, and as far as Eluse could tell, seemed satisfied.

“And now, Eluse? Tell me, if you are wise, how are we to respond to the threat?” The royal figure glided across the room. The Poisonthorn Crown stood tall upon his head like antlers.

“Respond with force,” he said. He hated the feeling of the eyes of so many advisors on him, and their faces as they examined him. They were not consulting him, they were testing him. “Call upon the rangers in the eastern forests to slow or harass the Fanatical Dark in the woodlands, while an expedition from Lenune crosses under the Sunderstone mountains to destroy them completely. And... And we must be vigilant for a move from the Everwood; the Eldergrove may seize this as an opportunity if we let them.” He felt particularly pleased with himself for remembering to include the Eldergrove in his reply; even if they were not to blame for the incursion, they could absolutely use it to their advantage if the Palace allowed it.

Auctoria was solemn and attentive. “A suitable response. And as for the Dharians?”

Eluse swallowed. “I don’t... What do you mean? You said this wasn’t a Dharian force.”

“The Dharians have failed to contain the threat to their lands. They are weak, and now their weakness has led to the deaths of Elves. Even with the Grace of Oriothen, they have not done in fifteen summers what we would have done in one. And *you*, Eluse, are a study of the kingdom. So I ask you again—how do we respond to the Dharians?”

“I don’t know.”

A moment passed, and the King stared. Eluse felt like the heat from his eyes might burn him alive. After too long, Auctoria moved away. He didn’t show disappointment, but Eluse felt the shame of it all the same.

“The strength of Men has again failed them, and Arath’ Sayah will respond in kind. The Grace of Oriothen was a gift, but though the Spider has gifted Elvenkind with her power forever, we did not deign to do likewise to Men. The Dharians have proven themselves incapable of wielding such power, and their failure has cost us our lives and woodland. Therefore, the Grace of Oriothen will be reclaimed from the Men.”

Iridian and the other elves nodded sagely, but Eluse noticed that behind him, Suscepto stiffened a little.

“War has been brought upon the Elves by the Fanatical Dark, and they are foolish if they think that we shall not answer the call. Armies shall be mustered in the colonies with aether stones, and ravens sent to those without.” The King’s knuckles grew white where he gripped the edge of the table. “We shall crush these servants of the Shadow until there is naught remaining but their blood to sate the trees we shall plant where they fall.”

Eluse watched as the other elves in the room whispered praise, but he knew that these were sycophants and flatterers. Had they been mice, they would have complimented a wildcat on its breath even as they disappeared down its throat.

“You mean to take back the Grace?” he asked.

“I do.”

“But how will the Dharians defend themselves from the Fanatical Dark without it?” The wielder of the Grace would have command over the powers of nature; it had helped King Oriothen to grow the forests, and King Glendor to build the Gate, it could bring forth storms and earthquakes and wildfires, and a deep, intimate knowing of the secrets of the woods. Though, Eluse knew all of this was according to stories and myth, and that the Palace had a penchant for using those to their own ends.

His father answered. “If there is any strength left in Men, they can fend for themselves. Besides, the attention of the Fanatical Dark is now on us, not the Dharians.”

“Do you expect that they will return the Grace while there is still a threat to their Kingdom?”

“I do,” Auctoria said with grave conviction, “for they will not dare stand against a demand levied by the Chosen Son of the King.”

The air in the room tingled. Suscepto’s attentive mouth dropped open and wobbled.

“By me?”

“Your name carries weight, and the son of the King is an extension of the King himself. Eluse, the time has long passed for you to continue to avoid your royal duties. And my command is thus: Come the sunrise, you, with a dozen Crownsword and the Rosethorne, shall leave Lenune for Fal In’Myhra. Once arrived, you shall seek audience with King Gabriel of the Shadowshatter Crown, and reclaim the Grace of Oriothen. You shall go in my stead, and you shall be successful in your task. Upon your return, the Grace of Oriothen shall be spirited to the eastern borders, where it shall be used in the final destruction of the Fanatical Dark. Do this, Eluse, and take on the destiny which I chose you for: To begin an age of true peace in not the South alone, but all of Anima.”

Eluse’s heart beat hard in his chest. He had never felt so powerless as before his royal father, but now, much was asked. And... to leave with Iridian? He’d not thought much of the Rosethorne for some time now, but he’d not been outside of the city with him since the ambush, either. The scratching on his desk wandered back to his mind, and he cursed himself for not asking Sorrel more persistently about him.

“My lord, if I might—do you think the boy is ready?” Suscepto said from behind him. Under the usual circumstances, Eluse would have insisted he was more than capable of whatever Suscepto seemed certain he was not, but in this instance he felt no urge to argue.

Iridian raised his head from the stack of yellowed maps that had engrossed him. “I should hope that the King’s faith in the Director of Duties has been well-placed in readying the boy for as much as the realm requires.”

“I—of course, Iridian, of course. He has learned well, and has my confidence.”

In spite of the severity, Eluse snorted. This would certainly be the first he’d heard of it. Iridian went back to his maps. His face gave nothing away, but if he was an agent for the Eldergrove, Eluse was sure it’d suit him quite nicely to be alone with him, and far from Lenune.

But... This threat wasn't from the Eldergrove. This was quite unexpected altogether. Even Iridian, no matter his involvement with them, could never have foreseen an attack from the Fanatical Dark.

"The Seal of the King shall go with you, and you shall bear the King's authority," Auctoria said. The Elven King reached to his finger for his wooden ring. He wrenched it from his flesh; the thorns that held it into his skin unsnarled themselves and it gave way begrudgingly. "You shall wear this Seal, and the King of the West shall yield to our wants." He held up the ring. "Give me your hand."

Eluse did, but only for lack of knowing what else to do. He hated the stillness that came over his tongue before his father. For Suscepto, and the other elves, he always had a response. For his father, he had nothing but silence.

The King approached and held the ring over his index finger. When he slid it on, the thorns snatched out—greedily, *hungrily*—and bit into his skin.

Eluse cried out. The pain was extraordinary. He whipped his left hand up to tear the ring away, but the King grasped his wrist and held him still as he writhed. His legs gave out beneath him, but the King held him aloft by the scruff of his neck. The thorns buried themselves deep into his flesh, and it felt like they wormed into his bone and pushed up through his arm. "Make it stop!" he screamed.

"There is no power without pain, child." Auctoria's voice was firm against Eluse's cry. "Do not surrender to the pain, but instead the pain shall surrender to you."

The pain did not feel like it was in any mood to surrender. One or two of the advisors shifted uncomfortably. Finally, after longer than he knew, the tendrils seated themselves in his skin and flesh, and lay still.

Auctoria lowered Eluse, who felt so little against his imposing frame, and Eluse sank to his knees. Tears filled his eyes and ran down his face. He angrily wiped them away.

"What was *that?*" he snarled. His wrist bore red welts where his father's fingers had squeezed.

"You now bear the Seal of the King, and you would do right to honour it." Auctoria stepped back to the table with his advisors. "You have been marked as my son, and the torment that you bear will count for nothing in the light of the glory you shall earn for Arath' Sayah."

"Finally, then, you have decided to place a scrap of faith in your son!" Eluse howled, gripping his hand. "I've not been ready to leave the Palace without babysitters for *months*, or even take a step outside the city limits, but now you decide that I am ready to politic with a king!?"

"You are ready for what I deem you ready for."

The words felt like icicles thrust at him. "Well, a refreshing change that makes! I've done no more for this Kingdom than sit in these halls and listen to your stupid advisors drone on about policy and politics, and now you are sending me to make demands from a *king?* These last

months you have not seen fit to send me even to the neighbouring settlements, but now you think I ought to travel to the capital of the Dharians?”

Auctoria thundered up to the little prince, who tried his hardest not to flinch. “You question me when I order you to treaty with a king? You, boy, were born to *reign* as a king!”

Eluse tried to match his father’s dominance. “Last I recalled I was not born for it, I was *chosen* for it! And I think perhaps you chose wrong.” Such was Auctoria’s authority that he felt like a kitten mewling before a mountain lion.

Already Auctoria was back to his maps and stones. He spoke brusquely. “I haven’t the time for your squalling.” He motioned away with his hand. “Suscepto, prepare the boy. The matter is settled, and a raven was sent for Tal In’myhra an hour ago. Eluse, you travel at first light. Iridian shall come for you in the morning. The Crownsword shall keep you. Farewell.”

His mouth opened to protest, but it would have been meaningless. His father’s mind did not change. He thought for a moment about blurting out what he knew of Iridian, but he hadn’t the words to say. A scraping on a desk. It was hardly an accusation he could make here and now, in front of all of these Palace advisors. The sorry little elf got to his feet and turned to the door. He nursed his hand as he limped away. Suscepto hesitated, then walked alongside him, and after a moment rested a sympathetic hand around his shoulder.

“Don’t worry, the King is easy. You watch, I’ll manage him. It’s all about being assertive. You’ve just got to lay the facts out for him. Here we go, let’s go and see him.”

-Selyna, previous Crownsword to the King, speaking to Darion, also previous Crownsword to the King. Current whereabouts unknown.

CHAPTER 7 - MOONLIGHT

It was a long walk out of the Palace.

Suscepto followed the young prince as he left, in such a haste that they’d left the Crownswords behind. Black wind skirled around them as they walked by a stream to the sycamore clearing.

This had been his favourite place. It was somewhere that he and Consora had come since before he could remember. The Palace attendants never came to bother him here. He loved the way that in the daytime the sunlight would stream through the canopy and break off into scattered shafts, and in the dead of night, how beams of moonlight would dance on the shimmering waters, making the whole woodland sway. They were swaying now. Leaves made a dome over the clearing that shut out the whole world, and he felt safe. The thousand sounds of the forest were quiet now.

Now, his fury was so great he would have torn it all down.

Old Grenka was already there, sitting alone on her stump. The old nursemaid liked the place as much as him. In fact, it was her that had brought him here when he was younger, and was where she told him half of her stories. The trees liked the stories, she said, and they liked those patient enough to tell them. Suscepto stood a little way back.

“Hello, Grenka,” Eluse made himself smile. He went across the clearing and sat on the ground beside her. Grenka wasn’t her real name, but it was what they all called her. It was all that Eluse could pronounce of her when he was younger, and he’d said it for so long that he’d forgotten what her name was at all. The Palace staff said Grenka suited her, though, so it stuck.

“Oh, child, there you are,” she cooed. “It’s been a time.” She had a tiny hunched frame and looked like she’d been old forever, with a wrinkled face like the bark of an oak tree. It was more wrinkle than face

“It has.” He stared at the twinkling brook. “It’s late for you to be out, Grenka.”

“Oh, hush, you. They tell me it’s late for me to be anything. Too old. Got to be tucked up in bed, they say.” She held a few sycamore wings in her gnarled fingers, which twisted around them like roots.

Eluse laughed. “You know I didn’t mean that.”

“Right, child. What’s got you down, so?” There was never hiding anything from old Grenka. Her old eyes didn’t see much, but they missed little.

“I’m alright. I just have to go away for a little while. I think I’m a bit nervous about it.”

Grenka gasped. “An adventure, you say?”

He nodded. “An adventure, yes. Quite a big one, I suppose.”

The air rasped over her lips as she hummed. “Ooh, well, well. The biggest adventures are for the biggest stories. Where is it you’re going to?”

He began to answer, but old Grenka kept talking. “No, no, let me think. I can feel it on you.” She peered at him with pale, rheumy eyes, and took his fingers in hers. Her hands were kind, but he could feel her bones beneath the skin. “Dharia,” she said, stretching the word.

Eluse giggled. She had a knack for that. As a child he thought she could read his mind. Even now, he wasn’t sure she couldn’t.

“I knew it, I always do,” she said. “I’ve a way for these things.”

“That’s right,” he grinned. “Dharia, like the stories. The land of heroes and honour and knights and ghosts. Like you used to tell me.”

“And wicked and monsters and shadows and lies,” Grenka warned. “Many of all sorts there, child.”

“I liked the happy stories more,” Eluse said.

“That’s right, that’s right. Always you did. Always wanting more of those cheerful ones. Even when there’s not so many to go around. Are you wanting a story now, child?”

“That’s alright, Grenka,” Eluse stared into the dark. “Let’s do stories another time.”

Grenka placed a hand to her chest in dismay. “Dire tidings! Time was, you couldn’t get enough of my stories. I must be losing my edge. Ah, well. More for the trees. They’re better listeners. And they don’t leave muddy footprints all about.” She continued to fiddle with her sycamore wings. “So what’s a boy like you doing afraid of adventure, do you say?”

“I’m not scared,” he said, more defensively than he meant to. “I just... I don’t understand my father. I feel like I’m an inconvenience to him, and now all of a sudden he’s asked me to do something very important. I don’t understand why.”

“Mmm. You think he keeps a truth from you.” She said it as a fact, not a question.

“I wonder if he might. But not just that. I think... I don’t know what I’ve done wrong, Grenka. I’m his son. He *chose* me, but he doesn’t act like it. And I think maybe, now that he seems to have finally put some trust in me, it might have made me realise all the things I’ve been missing all this time. I... feel silly for only just realising it, but I think I’ve missed out on having a father. I’ve not always been the son I should have, but he’s still supposed to be my father.”

“Not been the son you should have?” Grenka said. “Child, you are the son you are, and that’s all you should be.”

The brook twinkled and chimed, and crickets chirped a chorus. Old Grenka started to hum softly. Eluse closed his eyes and smiled. He’d forgotten. When Grenka could not tell her stories, nothing would stop her singing her songs.

She hummed a sad, mournful melody. It sounded of forgotten things, like the wind whispering along the ancient mountaintops and the groaning of the earth in lonely caverns. She opened her mouth to sing, and her voice was not like that of an old nursemaid’s. Thick and sweet like treacle, weightless as firelight, rich and deep as woodsmoke.

*O, the ancient mountains
The rivers, and the trees,
Know nothing of the secrets
Ere whispered in the breeze.*

*And O, the oldest forest
With roots that run so deep,
Will never know things hidden
In caverns underneath.*

*And O, the greatest ocean
With waves that rage and roar,
Knows not the treasures buried
In sands upon the shore.*

*And O, the bravest heart
That shimmers, clear and true,
Shall never know the wicked
That other hearts may do.*

*I know when shadows fall in
And nights become your dread,
A lonely star will shine down
And light your road ahead.*

*I know when hope is broken
And terror fills your chest,
Soft memories will comfort
Your heart, and bring you rest.*

*I know when you are long gone,
And lost, and all alone,
A melody of my love
Shall lead you back to home.*

The soft notes of the song swirled around the clearing, drifting in and out of the trees. A lump had risen in Eluse's throat.

"Thank you, Grenka," he whispered.

"Sometimes we all need a song, child." The old elf creaked forward, and with a little struggling, rose from her stump. "Maybe in time you'll know you need a story, too."

She shuffled out of the clearing into the dark.

Eluse thought of his father, then, but not for long. He thought also about the stories Grenka had told him about Dharia, in her songs and sweet voice. He had often dreamed of the land. Whenever he'd looked at the maps in the Palace offices he found something about it so enchanting; this land with its unbroken string of over two-hundred kings since the Black Age was so foreign. Rumours of great war machines and the tribes in the North, giants and goblins and everything else that was probably fairy tales, but maybe—*maybe*—wasn't. Arath' Sayah had its own mysteries, but Dharia was the cradle of Men, with fortresses and cities even more ancient than the forests. Consora said her father had seen ghosts in the forgotten cities, but then, Consora would make up things just for the fun of tricking him.

The fact was, Eluse himself *did* feel ready, for this and more besides. He had wanted for a long time to do more for the Kingdom than his father had trusted him. The problem was, despite whatever his father said, the King did not believe that he was able.

Something felt strange about the whole ordeal. He knew his father would act for the good of the realm, but something niggled at him. Trust, he supposed. He didn't know if he trusted his father. And he certainly didn't trust Iridian, but in an entirely different way.

"Your father does love you, you know, young master," Suscepto said, stepping closer.

Eluse grunted and rubbed his finger. He'd almost forgotten Suscepto was there. "You're breaking with your usual routine, aren't you? You don't need to try to be comforting." He heard his own words, so sharp they could have cut his mouth, and wished he hadn't said them.

"He has his particularities, but he does love you."

It didn't feel like it, and certainly not in his finger. The fiercest part of the pain had gone, but thorns knotted under his skin. The wood was dark and oily, twisting round to that maple-leaf crest.

"I don't understand, Suscepto. And don't tell me you do, because I know it makes no sense to you either. Why in the world would he send me for a task like this? Why not one of the commissaries?"

"It does seem a little... unorthodox, I'll grant you. But you must remember, your father holds the wisdom of the Elves in an unbroken line as far back as the Amber King. He knows well his plans." He hesitated a moment. "Though his motives remain his own."

"Well, you know him better than I. Sadly. What do you think they are?"

“I think it’s not out of the question that he believes the responsibility would do you good. It would not be unwise, Eluse, to view this as an opportunity to prove the King’s confidence in you. You have done little to earn his surety.”

He couldn’t say it, of course, but Suscepto was right, and it infuriated Eluse. He decided, right there and then, that he was going to *make* his father proud.

Of course, he couldn’t admit that to the Director of Duties for the sake of his own pride. So all he said was:

“I think he’s been drinking the wrong kind of mushroom tea.” But as he said it, he sat a little taller.

Suscepto raised his eyebrows, but said nothing. A whisperjay shushed across the clearing over the bluebells and a flock of glitterbirds skimmed between the trees, showering them with pink and blue light.

Eluse frowned. “Have you ever left the forest before?”

“No. You know, it’s quite a privilege to do so.”

“I don’t suppose you’d prefer the privilege, would you? You can take this ring, too, if you like,” he said.

Suscepto was not amused. “That is not my privilege. Your father has chosen you to serve.”

“Yep!” Consora announced herself abruptly as she wandered through the thicket, a mouth full of pear. “That’s right, Eluse. I think you’re meant to serve. Go serve me some pine bread, will you, and a herb tea?” Eluse gave a weak smile. “Thought I’d find you here,” she said.

“Oh, Consora, I hardly think this is an appropriate time—and it’s far too late for you to be out anyway! Won’t you leave us alone, please? And besides, Eluse, we ought to be getting back—your father would be beside himself if he knew we were without the Crownsword.” Suscepto jostled irritably.

“No, Suscepto!” Eluse said. “Let her stay. I need to tell her. She needs to know.” He looked at the older elf with large, round eyes with a pitiable gaze he’d been practising as long as he knew how. Suscepto’s countenance cracked; Eluse pressed harder; and then it broke.

“Oh, very well then.”

Eluse beamed. The elf girl sat down, and Eluse told her everything.

“That is *ridiculous!*” Consora exclaimed once he’d finished. “I mean, trusting *you* with the Grace of Oriothen? What is he thinking? He’s a fool.” She slurped the final bite of her pear and tossed the core into the grass.

Though Eluse might have agreed with her an hour before, his newfound resolve stiffened him a little. “I’m going to do it, Consora,” he said. “There’s a lot at stake.”

“All the same, when you get back, hang onto the Grace for a little bit—I bet we can get up to some fun with it.”

Suscepto’s hands fluttered with worry. “Do *not*—”

“She’s only joking,” Eluse said. Consora shrugged.

An owl fluttered down from the branch above and settled on the log where the Elves were sat. It looked at Consora with striking metallic eyes.

“Well,” she said. “When do we leave?”

“We?”

“Well, I’ll be coming with you, of course. I’ve always wanted to see Dharia. Especially the stone city. Somebody’s got to keep you safe.”

Suscepto just about burst a vein in his forehead. “Young lady, you can set the very idea out of your mind! If you think for a single moment that you could defy the will of the King in such a preposterous manner, then I assure you, the—”

“She’s joking again,” Eluse sighed, though he wasn’t sure she was. “Suscepto, would you mind—I can see Consora is in a funny mood and I’d like to talk to her before I leave. Can we speak privately?”

Suscepto huffed and grunted. “Well, I... Very well, young master, but if you think I’m taking my eyes off the pair of you then you’re quite mistaken. Finish up your conversation, and I’ll see you back to the Palace shortly.”

The spindly elf harrumphed across the clearing and stood close by, though thankfully out of earshot.

“*Why* does he take himself so seriously?” Consora said. “He makes it so *easy* for us.”

Eluse smiled, but it was a sad smile. “You know you can’t come, right?”

“I know.”

“And, we’re at war now. More than just the cultists. It would be too dangerous anyway.”

“If it’s too dangerous for me, I think there’s good odds you’ll be killed before you get half a mile out the Gate.” Consora always made jokes when she was sad. Her face was hidden a little behind her long green hair. “I hope you’re taking the Crownswords to hold your hand.”

“And Iridian too,” Eluse sighed. “I guess he’s missed our little trips.”

“Iridian? Aren’t you worried? What about the Eldergrove?”

“Of *course* I’m worried. None of it really makes sense. But whatever else Iridian is, there’s no way this is an Eldergrove plot. It was Men who attacked the Valleys, not the Eldergrove... But whether they’ll make use of the confusion, who’s to say?”

“We should find Sorrel,” Consora said firmly.

“She never talks about him, no matter how much I ask. She ignores me.”

“She will now. If she knows you have to leave with him tomorrow, just you, him and the Crownswords. We *need* to know what she knows.”

Eluse nodded slowly. “Alright. First thing tomorrow, then. Before we leave. Damn the Crownswords, they can wait. We’ll find her. But then I will have to go.”

Consora kicked her foot out where it grazed Eluse’s shin. He felt her sadness. They’d barely spent a day apart since the earliest he could remember.

“I couldn’t leave my mother, anyway. She needs me.” Had the moon shone a little brighter, Eluse might have noticed the wet in her eyes.

He looked up into the charcoal sky where the moon ripened, almost full. The light gleamed softly down onto the world, basking the forest in a silvery light. An intense silence fell over the two of them as they looked up at it together. Eluse could feel his skin tingling.

Consora spoke. “Well. Good luck saving the world, then. And you’d better bring me something nice from Dharia.”

“Will an Orb of Oriothen do?”

“Put it on a bracelet for me.”

The two elves laughed and talked for a little longer. They meandered across the clearing to Suscepto, and the three of them walked back towards the First Tree, with no hurry to get there at all. Usually, Suscepto would have shoed Consora away like a feral cat, but tonight he seemed more subdued. They’d nearly arrived at the Palace before Suscepto spoke up.

“Would you like us to walk you home, Consora?”

“I... yes, actually, that would be nice.” Consora was taken aback by the gesture, and even Suscepto seemed unseated by his own words.

They set back toward the Serpent Tongue, which was some way back the way they’d come. They mostly walked in a peaceful repose; the night air sounded like rustling leaves and soft water trickling.

They’d got close toward the river willows when the feel of the quiet shifted; the soft hush fell away and the cricketsong faded. Pearly light still bathed the woodland, but it seemed a little darker now.

“Wind’s picked up,” Suscepto said. “Or maybe it’s died down. Hmm.”

Eluse wrapped his arms around himself. It had gotten colder. As he walked he kicked his legs through the long grass, but the *shush-shush-shush* of the grass on his boots sounded stranger now—more hollow. He scratched at his ears.

It happened so slowly that he hadn't noticed it all at once, but as they crossed the grasses, he had a feeling that something—perhaps just a small thing—was *wrong*.

He rubbed his hands together. “Do you feel that?”

“Feel what?” Consora’s eyes were downcast.

“I... I don't know.” He looked around, wary.

“Come on, you two. Hurry along.” Suscepto ushered them forward.

But the faster they walked, the faster Eluse found himself embraced in a silence so total that it hurt his ears. The only noise he heard was the three of them, and they sounded so loud, but like all the sounds they made were wrong. They hadn't seen another elf since they'd left the sycamore grove.

“I think we should hurry,” Eluse muttered. There was a thickness to the air like before the Eldergrove attack, but much more noticeable. “Do... Do none of you feel that?”

Consora and Suscepto exchanged glances, and Consora shrugged.

Then a cold came, not like a chill wind but like a shard of ice. Eluse stopped dead in his tracks. He held up his arm to Suscepto’s chest “Hold on,” he whispered. “Do you see that...?”

“Eluse, we haven't the time for your fooler—”

“No, look! There!” Eluse pointed past Suscepto.

Ahead of them, a clump of silverbirch wound out from the grasses, but before it was the silhouette of a figure. Though the moonlight shone straight down, it did not light whoever it was. And, though he could not see its face, Eluse felt with swelling chill that it was looking straight toward them. It stood, as still as they were, watching.

“Now you've said it,” Suscepto said carefully, his voice little more than breath, “there is something of this dark that I dislike. Keep moving,”

Eluse’s skin prickled. Slowly, very slowly, they edged forward.

As they did, the figure edged closer too.

When they saw it move, they stopped, dead still. So did the figure. Whatever it was should have been clear in the moonlight, but it was as if the light avoided it completely.

Again, they inched forward, and the shape moved, but it didn't step—it seemed to glide over the grasses like mist. Eluse saw from the corner of his eye that Suscepto’s hand was on the handle of his shortsword.

“Ho, there!” Suscepto called out, but his voice sounded muffled against such a loud silence. “Who goes there? Come forward, I say!”

The figure was still.

“I say come forward!”

Such a *feeling* came from it, like it was a blazing torch, but instead of heat, it shone with the most profound dread Eluse had ever known.

It sailed like a ship over still waters. It stretched out like a shadow, and Eluse saw the details of it; that it had no details at all. It was simply a hole in the light. A person-shaped crater of nothing. An impossible black.

Eluse’s heart jolted. He gasped and ran, pulling Consora with him, but Suscepto stood fast and held his sword high. The thing did not slow. It made straight for him, and as it reached him, Suscepto swung the blade with a cry.

The silver sword flashed through the figure like it was made of air, and black shards of it flew apart, hanging and twisting in the air, tiny shadows of their own. Then, as quickly as it had come apart, the shards melted together again, a little way off.

It stood still again, watching. The ground it had come over withered; the tall grasses were wilted and dead.

A moment passed, and it drifted forward again.

“Run!” shouted Eluse.

The elves thundered through the undergrowth, away from the pathways. Into the pitch black of the thick parts of the forest they ran, with no sense of where they went. Behind them there was no sound except the rattle of leaves on the forest floor, cracking and dying as the figure chased. They did not look back, but Eluse was certain it was there. He could feel it, like a cold glow. Blinded by the dark of the woods, brambles thrashed at his arms and legs.

“This way!” Consora yelled, running over the top of an embankment. They hurled themselves down. Eluse lost his footing on the way, tumbling down the slope. Consora grabbed him, pulling him up. As he scrambled he looked at the top of the ridge and saw the outline of the figure—watching. Standing quite still.

“There he is, go!” Suscepto shouted.

The woods were pine now, and the needles pricked their feet. Eluse dared to look over his shoulder once, and just for a moment, glimpsed their pursuer again—standing, not running. Not moving. Closer, this time.

“Where are we going?” he panted. His chest burned, but panic kept him running.

“Keep going, not far!”

“He’s still there! He’s right behind us!”

Like frightened rabbits they skittered over leaffall. To their right, the Serpent Tongue appeared. He wanted to try to cross it, but Consora ran with a determination that told him she knew where she was going. One last time, he glanced back, and there he was again—still not moving, but closer than ever.

“How is it doing it?” Eluse cried. The trees were thinning, and spiked gorse bushes sprang up in the undergrowth.

Then, Consora vanished from sight in front of him, and before he even had time to realise what had happened, he was falling.

“The Shadow is gone now. But no shadow is greater than the thing that casts it. And what was that, I wonder?”

-Old Grenka, on a dark night in the woodland.

CHAPTER 8 - THE UNDERWOOD

Eluse hit the ground with a thud and slid down the forest floor. He tried to stop, but rolled and clattered through the undergrowth, rocks and gorse scratching his skin. It was pitch black, but he could hear Consora crashing too. He clawed his fingernails into the ground and skidded to a halt. All around was darkness.

There was only a patch of sky, way up high. His breathing was quick and hollow. The shadowy figure was nowhere to be seen. Nor was Suscepto. Terror gripped a tight claw around his throat and his heart beat so hard he feared the figure would hear it.

He closed his eyes and felt through the magic in the air, fumbling with his own mind as he tried to remember what Sorrel had taught him.

Somewhere, a little way off, he felt a sparkling, warm and red. That was Consora. He knew her well. Further away there was a steely feeling that tasted of bitter orange—that must be Suscepto. They felt still and silent. But what of the figure? Eluse could feel nothing else.

They lay like this for a long while, frozen in place. The patch of sky clouded over. He was lost in the black.

“Consora,” he dared to whisper at last, his voice heavy with dread. “Where are you?”

There was a stirring through the bracken, close. “Here.”

He felt his way through the ferns, slow, crawling his fingers like spiders. He found her crouched low, like a panther ready to pounce.

They hunched in stunted silence. There was not a sound. As his eyes made sense of the dark, he made out where they were; rock sprouted high from the ground, and around it gnarled vines climbed high. They had fallen into a crevasse. “What was that?” Eluse breathed.

Consora didn’t answer. Her wild eyes dug through the undergrowth. The faintest creaking tumbled over the branches, and Suscepto, with surprising grace, prowled to them like a cat.

“Young master, Consora—are you hurt?” His voice was no more than the rustle of a leaf in the air. Both shook their heads. The shimmer of his sword held the pale moonlight. “Remain absolutely still.”

To his surprise, he felt safer with Suscepto. He'd never imagined the haughty Palace elf holding a weapon, but the courage with which he'd stood his ground startled him.

"Is it gone?" Eluse asked.

"I don't know." But Suscepto's voice sounded strange—too loud and too small all at once.

And that was their answer. Something was down here with them. The shadows of the pit paled away behind the living blackness, standing where a moment ago there had been nothing. So close it could touch them.

Eluse's breath stopped in a gasp. The air around him thickened into a crushing, choking smog. Slowly, so slowly, an unseen force pulled him to his feet and pressed him back into the stony side of the canyon. It had him. He desperately tried to thrash free, but his body hung limp, useless to him. He tried to reach for Consora, but his hand felt like it was buried in the ground. Consora shrieked and flung herself with abandon, scrapping at whatever it was with her bare hands. Her blows passed through it as if it were not there at all.

The figure moved closer, inevitable as the night. It had no face, and the edges of it were faded and unclear. Light simply fell into it. Suscepto sprung from the ground and sliced his sword down through the air. With a hiss, the shadow flew apart again, then back together, even quicker this time. It dropped Eluse, and air rushed back into his lungs. He gasped at it like a half-drowned man. It closed in again, and two more slashes separated it anew, but when it did it melted back quicker and nearer each time.

Then, once more, and Suscepto slowed just a fraction. It didn't quite touch him, but the same force that had held Eluse wrenched out his sword-arm, and snapped his wrist with a *crack*. A crazed howl broke the night and the sword dropped to the ground. The figure flung out its dark arms, and Suscepto sailed through the air as it blew forward like a winter wind and towered over the elf.

Eluse had not known terror like this before, but as he watched this unknown foe again grasp Suscepto with its invisible grip, a steely determination took root in him. He scrambled to his feet. Consora hurled herself at it again and again, clawing and biting, but she passed through as if through smoke. Her reckless bravery gave him strength, and he held out a hand, mind scrambling. With desperation driving him, he called the power of the forest to his aid.

Something was different. The magic around him was subdued and dulled, like it was lost under thick mud. He waded through it and pulled into him every scrap of energy he could find, like dragging stones through water.

Green glitter lit up the rocks where they'd fallen, and no sooner had he brought it to his arm he hurled it at the figure. It struck, and the dark shape burst open with a whistling shriek. The light was pulled into it and lost in its core, but the creature was not unscathed; it disappeared for several moments and all around them the rocky walls reverberated with a rasping groan. Consora rushed to Suscepto and flung her arms around his shoulders, heaving him back.

No sooner had she touched him than it was back, manifesting over them.

This time, though, it drifted toward Eluse. His mind in a panicked flutter, he summoned more magical energy and drove it at the blackness. It foresaw the attack and swooped away, then lunged for him, and some invisible force pinned him on the rockface. He raised his ironsilk cloak at the last moment, but its shrouded black arms ignored it entirely and reached through.

It was so close, and so cold, and it held him so still. Desperately, he tried to bring more magic to him, but his mind was like heavy iron, and he felt nothing but jet black—not even a glimmer appeared. His vision dimmed. The creature reached down inside his throat with ice cold fingers into his heart. There was nothing he could do. He was a candle, and this creature was snuffing him out.

“Aetherarath’ mendilara ’so ya! Tal’yd udol ula soth’thurin!”

The cry shattered through Eluse’s ears so loudly he felt his eardrums shake. A piercing shine of white light blistered through the chasm. It blazed from all around, and carved through the black form. The figure screeched and darted away, but as it flew into the air it was like smoke in the wind; the light crumbled it to nothing. It was overcome by pure white-gold, the echo of a scream shaking through the crevasse until the sound, too, dissolved.

The light softened, and became gentle. The elves saw one another’s faces, mouths hanging wide and eyes darting, as it dimmed deeper and became a light golden twinkling which descended onto the ground, and glinted out.

It was gone.

“What was that?” Eluse gasped, panting. Consora shook her head, and Suscepto’s eyes were wide in fear.

“How did you do that?” Consora whispered.

“I didn’t,” Eluse groaned, pulling himself away from the wall. He ached all over. “What was it? Is it gone? What was that light? And where did those words come from?” He gazed around frantically, but the three elves were alone.

Suscepto clutched his wrist and tried not to let the pain show. “I haven’t the faintest... What words?”

“When it had me, right before the light! You didn’t hear it?” Both of the other two shook their heads, too dumbfounded to do much else.

Eluse crawled across the leafy ground toward them. They hardly dared talk any more, and huddled together in the blackness. After so long that they were certain the figure would not return, Consora took Suscepto’s broken wrist and laid her hand on it. She brought forth a shimmering light, faint as a mist, and knit his bones back together with a delicate shimmer. The swelling faded, but the skin was still red where it had broken. Suscepto winced with pain, but he could move his fingers and grasp his shortsword.

“Thank you, Consora,” he said, probably for the first time ever. “You’re very kind.”

“Don’t get used to it,” she said. “This means I get a free pass for something *really* bad.” Suscepto gave her a disdainful smile.

“Where did it go?” Eluse asked. “Where did the light come from? Why didn’t you hear it?”

“I don’t know,” breathed Suscepto. “But I believe, young master, we may not be the only things down here.”

They huddled together until dawn broke.

* * *

When morning came, the crevasse was lit by a little light that wafted down from overhead. To one side was a great slope, too steep to climb. Ahead, the rock shrank to a narrow defile, and they saw that the place they had fallen was not a canyon, as they had thought, but the opening of a great cavern set deep in the forest floor. Vines and ivy hung like spiders’ webs.

“The Underwood,” Consora whispered. “I knew it was somewhere here. We’re quite far from Lenune.”

That set Eluse on edge. The great forest system grew under the earth, though how far, nobody knew. It was not a place that Elven feet trod. “*Older things than we Elves dwell beneath the trees,*” his father would warn with a grim face. “*Elves need never tread where even sunlight fears.*” Old Grenka had told him stories about the Underwood, and all the dark and nasty creatures that wriggled and writhed there, and the Elves that went missing when they went, searching for adventure and the angel of the trees.

“How did you know where to go?” he asked. “I’ve seen you get lost on your way to the Palace, but you know *this*?”

She gave him a withering look. “My father. The rangers would come this way sometimes. He brought me once before when he took me hunting—only to the edge, to look down.”

“Miss Consora, though I appreciate the intention, whyever did you bring us here?” Suscepto asked.

“I thought we could lose him, the... Whatever it was.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it before. It wasn’t a man or elf.” Eluse said.

“No, it most certainly was not,” Suscepto said sourly. “And whatever that magnificent light was—well.” He looked around the Underwood, as if the trees themselves had come to their aid. “I think we owe it our lives.”

“It wasn’t me, but when we’re back, I’m going to tell Sorrel that it was.” Eluse grinned.

“Well *I’m* going to tell Sorrel that you were fiddling around with magic and summoned the thing in the first place,” said Consora, dusting herself off. “Let’s hurry up and get back. I need to get back to my mother.”

“Where *are* we?” Suscepto said.

“And what was that thing?”

“And how do we get home?”

Suscepto, for all his practice at seeming superior, seemed just as lost and confused as the two elflings.

“The magic that thing used,” Eluse said, “was not natural.”

“When I hit it, my arms went straight through it,” Consora said. “They felt so cold, and I felt so... Hopeless. Like I wanted to just give up.” She looked at Eluse. “I *didn’t*, though. I even tried to bite it.”

“I couldn’t even move when it came at me,” Eluse said. “I don’t know how you did that. Didn’t you feel it before it came? And you really didn’t hear the voice?”

“Not your first time hearing voices, is it, Eluse,” Consora said, playfully putting a hand on his shoulder. “What did it say?”

“I’ve got no idea. It was a language I’ve never heard before.”

Suscepto lowered his jaw a little. “Well, whatever it was, we must make for the Palace this instant. A report must be given to the King at once.”

“No argument from me,” Eluse said.

“A refreshing change,” Suscepto replied.

They stood and looked up at the sheer stone walls, and the steep, crumbling slope before them.

“...What exactly did you have in mind, Suscepto?” Eluse asked.

“Terrific question.”

Consora spoke. “There’s a whole network of caves in the Underwood. We can’t get back up here, but there are places where we can.”

“Do you know where?”

She snorted. “I haven’t any idea.”

They stopped talking and stared into the cavernous mouth before them. A loud animal call whirred out through the mouth of the cave, high pitched. Eluse swallowed.

“In there, I suppose.”

“I knew an elf who went down the Underwood before. I don’t know him no more.”

-Blistren the Bold, Crownsword.

CHAPTER 9 - SPIDER BONES

It wasn’t the scrawbats that bothered the elves. They were large and had teeth like needles, and every now and again one would dive from the top of the Underwood and make a try for their flesh, but they were not so dangerous. It was the threat of the bonewyrms that knitted through their minds.

None of them had ever seen one, but you tended not to see bonewyrms. They burrowed deep in the ground and a big one could swallow an elf whole. They were attracted to noises on the surface. The elves trod careful steps.

It was daytime, but they could hardly tell. Above them, sometimes it was the cragged top of the caves and sometimes it was black forest; roots wrestled themselves into a mesh that stretched back beyond what they could see, gloomy and primal. Decayed things in the ground hovered in Eluse’s nose, but whatever made the stink was twisted under blackbriar and fernweed.

It was hard for Eluse to imagine they were under the forest he had grown up in. Up there, where birds sang and smoky light drifted down between a rainbow of canopy leaves. Where rabbits and foxes drank from tinkling streams that swished between crispy brown leaves and soft mossy rocks, disappearing into little holes in the ground.

Well, he had found where the streams ended up.

Water was dribbling down the rocks here, and Eluse reasoned that it must come out somewhere, so they followed a track of it that ran over the slimy rock. They drank from it, and it tasted bitter and metallic. Consora walked slightly apart from them, her head low. Suscepto wandered ahead, swishing his sword like a cane. Eluse and Consora dropped back a little. He noticed her lowered gaze.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“Yes.” She was abrupt.

“Hey. What’s going on?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Eluse, maybe being trapped under the earth with no idea where we are after being hunted by a murderous demon right out of one of old Grenka’s stories has got me all worked up. What do you think?”

A small quiet followed.

“Well, that’s not true.”

“*What?*”

“Sorry, but it isn’t!” Eluse said. He made sure Suscepto was out of earshot. “That’s not what’s bothering you. It’s bothering *me*, but I know you better than that. You’re not scared of anything. You threw yourself at that thing like you could rip it open with your fingernails. You’re the bravest person I’ve ever met. I’ve never seen you scared of anything in your life.”

“Well, you don’t know me very well then, do you?” There was venom to her voice. She knuckled her face and looked away.

“Consora,” he said. “What are you talking about?”

She stopped walking, and stared at him. Suscepto blundered on, oblivious. “I thought you were going to die, Eluse.”

“Heh. So did I.”

“No, I mean it. I thought it was going to kill you right there, and then me, and then my mother would be so alone and never even know what happened.”

Eluse lowered his head. Of course. She had to get back for her mother even more than for herself. Even in their long friendship, it was rare for him to see Consora this vulnerable.

“It’s alright. We are going to get out. You are going to get back to her. I promise.”

“That’s a stupid promise,” she said. “You don’t know that.”

He paused. “Alright, I don’t. We might all die here in these woods. But that’ll *really* annoy Suscepto, and in the end isn’t that all we want?”

Consora laughed. “You’re an idiot.” They started walking again. “Am I really the bravest person you’ve ever met?”

Eluse considered. “Well, you’re definitely the most unhinged in a fight.” She giggled at him. “And you’ve got me into more trouble than anybody else.” He put his arm around her shoulder and gave her a quick squeeze. “But yes. You are.”

The two friends caught up to Suscepto, who had got himself all tangled up in a bramble.

“You know, I bet this goes down well with my father,” Eluse said, helping him out of the thorns. “I don’t know what it was that we fought back there, but we survived it. If we can get out of the Underwood too, he’ll have to at least respect *that*. And, when we reclaim the Grace of Oriothen...”

Suscepto muttered, treading down the thicket. “Eluse, I can’t imagine that your father will still wish for you to undertake the journey in light of last night.”

“You don’t think he’ll let me go?”

“Your life was in grave peril, young master. For your own safety, I’d expect he would insist that you stay at the Palace until we have answers.”

“No!” he cried, alarmed, and then embarrassed, at his reaction. Consora looked at him curiously. “I mean, I can do it. Surely he’ll see that if I can get through this, I can do what he asked of me anyway.”

“Perhaps. But I wouldn’t count on it.”

Eluse bristled with determination. He *would* do it. It had taken him this long to find a chance to prove himself. He didn’t know when he would get another.

“Since when do you care what your father thinks?” asked Consora.

Eluse ignored the question. They walked in silence for a while, until Consora spoke again.

“I’ll be honest, I haven’t the vaguest idea where we are.”

“What about you, young master?” Suscepto asked Eluse. “Your lessons in woodland navigation must have taught you *something*?”

“Funnily enough, we didn’t spend much time covering the uncharted systems of the Underwood.”

Suscepto sighed. “Time well spent, I see.”

“Well what about *you*, Suscepto?” Consora said. “You’re a lot older than us. Surely there’s still *something* rattling around in that old brain of yours. What do you bring to the table?”

He was affronted. “Young lady, an elf of my stature—who, might I add, trained under King Glenethor himself!—is held in high esteem throughout not only Lenune but much of the entire domain, and is far better suited to the Direction of Duties than the ho-hum of woodland craft! Now if you, on the other hand, had turned your mind towards your education, perhaps we might stand something more of a chance of finding our way back to our homes!” He stamped his foot.

“That’s a lot of words for ‘nothing’.”

They walked in stony silence until very faintly, Eluse heard a noise. He stopped, and Consora listened too. A sort of metallic jingling, tinkling through the ferns.

“What is it?” he whispered, so quietly he barely said it at all. Very, very slowly, the two of them crouched down between the brambles and the leaves, and Suscepto readied his sabre. The noise got closer.

It was like somebody tapping their nail on glass. Then, rustling. All around them, now, the soft chiming, and the ferns shifting. And then whispers. Glinting in the undergrowth. Tiny eyes were watching.

Out burst a small greenish creature. Knee high, it looked like a man but had large wings, like a fly’s, wrapped around its body, and thick black hair matted over most of it. Consora yelped, and then realised—it was one of the Moon Folk.

“*Fa’yd esa, thyna?*”, the tiny imp demanded. More movement in the bushes, and more of the little creatures crept out.

“*Thynatos a’solatra!*”

“*Fa’thn esa? Da’we tar?*”

“*La’thn hyatt y’we. Yan’we Tasstra!*”

The little folk chattered and chirruped in a ruckus, waving their hands and stomping. A couple of them carried sharp thorny sticks.

The three elves exchanged bewildered glances. “We don’t know what you’re saying!” Suscepto said, hands on hips. The Moon Folk strutted around haughtily, barking orders. Though Eluse was relieved to see it was only the Moon Folk, they conducted themselves with an authority here that the elves hadn’t seen on the surface.

“They’re speaking Old Arath’,” Consora said quietly.

One of the Moon Folk stepped forward. “*Da’yd sela ji mahksayah, thynatos?*”

A second creature scuttled closer. “What you want in the under-earth, elfs?” it croaked. Its voice clicked and buzzed like the whirring of insects.

They could speak, then. There was a sort of hostility to the way the creature bristled at them; not a dangerous sort, but perturbed, as if the three elves had disturbed the Moon Folk’s afternoon. Consora shuffled forward, squatting down to the level of the little creatures.

“Hello. I’m sorry, we didn’t mean to be here. We fell down from the top. We were running from danger.” She regarded the creature with curious eyes. The little imp that had spoken to them chirped back to the first.

“*Feywah tal esa, thynatos. Noc tal’yd?*” one Moon Creature spoke back to the other, who then spoke to Eluse. “Danger is here, elfs. Who is you?”

Eluse spoke this time. “We’re Elves from Lenune. I’m Eluse, this is Consora, and this is Suscepto. We only want to get back to the surface, but we don’t know the way out. And... I think we’ve seen the danger you speak of.” As he said them, the words felt soft and weak in his mouth. The Moon Creature spoke back to the first again. Among the strange language, he heard their own names. Eluse looked around—they were circled by the creatures; six or seven of them. They were tiny, but their strange green fingertips glimmered with dancing sparks of magic. It unsettled him. He didn’t feel as safe in their presence as he did at the fairy circles.

One of the creatures scooted forward and opened his wings wide; four spindly wings like beetles, covered in tiny scales. “*Hal’yd terr, Eluse.*”

Eluse heard his name and blinked. The other imp, the one who was talking to them, spoke up again. “He saysed you looks scared, elf-man.”

“Now see here,” Suscepto stepped forward, indignant. “We simply wish to leave, so if you could very kindly direct us to the nearest route to the topland, we’ll quite gladly be on our way.”

The creatures clicked their wings together in an excited buzzing. Their faces crinkled into... Laughter?

“Don’t mind him,” Consora smiled at the Moon Folk, waving Suscepto away. “What’s your name?”

The Moon Creature looked wistfully at the elves and considered them. “I Tasstra. That Aestra. Aestra in charge.” He pointed at the imp that seemed to be doing most of the talking in Old Arath’. “He no speakings your common tongues.”

Aestra interrupted. “*La’yd khel undal mahksayah, thynatos.*” He expanded his wings again and puffed out his chest. “*Hisra’thn y’isendré.*”

Tasstra spoke again. “Yous no easy leave da under-earth, elfses. He says that wes take yous to the guarder of the under-earth. Yous gots to come with us now.”

“Oh please, we just need to leave! Lenune is in danger, we need to go!” Suscepto cried.

Aestra’s voice was out of his mouth like a swarm of flies, fast and thick in the air. A twinkle of sparks sprayed from his hands, and Suscepto shrunk back. Eluse noticed he’d sheathed his sword.

“You come with us now, elfens,” warned Tasstra. “He angered when yous say no.”

Eluse looked at Consora, who stared back hopelessly. “Alright, alright, we’ll come,” he said, swallowing hard. “But really, we meant no harm. We don’t want to be here.” Tasstra clicked back to Aestra, who seemed satisfied and withdrew his wings. Slowly, the Moon Folk drew back one by one into the ferns.

“Which way do we go?” Consora asked. “The undergrowth is too thick. We can’t follow through there!”

“Ah, wes no walkens, elfies,” Tasstra said, as he melted into the greenery. “We’s takin da spider bones.”

“Many elves believe that the Moon Folk were so named because they worship the moon, but that is not so. The moon reflects the light of the sun when the night is dark, and lightens the world. The Moon Folk reflect the light of the forest, bringing the deep magics to the surface. That’s where they take their name from.”

-Sorrel, during a lesson that Eluse didn’t pay attention to.

CHAPTER 10 - STARDUST

The Moon Folk led the elves through the ferns; them dancing gracefully through the leaves and the elves stumbling clumsily over them, to a point not far away. One of the creatures knocked away some vines on the ground with its toes revealing a hole barely wider than the elves.

Aestra raised his strange little voice again. *“Nyalto*s in’grabbah.*”*

“Spider bones,” Tasstra said. “This is it.”

One of the Moon Folk hunched at the hole and crawled inside, headfirst. He vanished, swallowed up. Aestra stood watching the elves expectantly.

“Ich’yd.”

“Now you*s.*”

Eluse squinted. “You’re funny, little man. We’re not crawling down a hole in the ground.”

“Yes you are, big elfy.”

“Look at the size of us! We’ll get stuck.”

Tasstra spoke back to the Moon Folk, and they buzzed and rasped in unison. “Theys fink you’re the funny one, elf-man. You*s* don’t get stuck in spidy bones. Spidy bones is more clever than that.”

Suscepto frowned. “It’s a hole.”

*“Nyalto*s in’grabbah tal arath’, thyna. Mahkarath’.*”*

“Spidy bones is magic, elfy. Under-magic.”

Consora peered inside. “That... does not look like fun.”

They watched as another Moon Creature slid into the hole. The creatures didn’t *seem* particularly threatening – except maybe Aestra, who glowered at them like they’d offended him. Maybe they could just leave. But, the hands of the creatures sparked with magic, and there were a lot of them, and deep underground like this—the elves were lost. Where would they even go?

“I don’t know what we can do,” Eluse mumbled. “I mean... They don’t seem like a bad sort, and... I don’t have another plan, do you?”

Consora and Suscepto looked blank.

Aestra slapped hard at Eluse’s knee. It stung like a bee. He winced and stepped forward. “*Ich’yd!*” Aestra chirped.

“Very well, young elflings, I’ll do it.” Suscepto raised his head high. His air of superiority was marred with a disgusted grimace as he looked inside. “Goodness me, it does look rather ominous, doesn’t it. Alright, then, I’ll just... I’ll just get in, will I?”

Aestra hopped with both feet, impatient.

“I’m going, I’m going, don’t get your tendrils in a twist...” Gingerly, Suscepto began to lower his feet into the hole.

“Not like dat, elfy. You gots’ta go with your head in first,” Tasstra said. His lips were curled up in a taut smile.

“Don’t be daft,” he frowned. “I’m a little more dignified than *that*.”

Tasstra and Aestra clutched an ankle each and yanked. The poor old elf flopped onto the ground, head and shoulders vanishing down the hole. He upturned and sank through it like he’d been pulled. With a fading cry of *ma-hoooo*, the rest of him disappeared.

Eluse and Consora exchanged looks of concern. And, perhaps, amusement.

“Suscepto?” Eluse called down the hole. “You... You alright down there?” Nothing replied.

“Now yous,” Tasstra grunted.

“Don’t do it, Eluse,” Consora urged. “I’ll go.”

“No, no it’s okay... I’ll do it. I’ve got it.”

He stared down the hole, smelled the damp earth and felt the ground underneath him, soft and wet. It looked strangely fibrous in there. He recalled learning of pitcher plants in the jungle lands that would lure insects inside and dissolve them whole. Lowering himself to his knees, he wondered if he was any cleverer than an insect.

He turned his head to look at Tasstra one more time, who gave him an encouraging kick. Holding his breath, he crawled inside.

The tunnel was slimy and spongy and stuck to Eluse’s skin. No sooner had he got half of himself inside, he felt himself pushed forward—or was he pulled? The walls were moving! They had hold of him, and were squeezing him through them. He cried out.

In front, he could hear the scuttles and chirps of the Moon Folk, but he was blinded in the pitch black of the tunnel. He reached his arms forward frantically and wiped slimy water from

his face, scrabbling at the walls. Behind him, he heard a scream from Consora. She was close, right behind him.

“Consora!” He kicked his feet. “Go back!”

He heard a muffled call, but didn’t know what—his ears were covered with mucus and the walls squelched as they moved him along. He slithered further down, like into the throat of some colossal creature.

Then, before he knew what was happening, he was spat back up. He collapsed out, grasping at the grasses around him, spitting up bitter water. A moment later Consora emerged, hair slathered to her face. Her arms waved from the hole and Eluse grabbed her, wrenching her away from the tunnel. The two of them crawled away to safer ground, where they found Suscepto retching and trying to pat himself dry with grass.

Through bleary eyes, he saw that they’d emerged somewhere completely new. “What... What was that?” Consora coughed as she held onto Eluse. Around them, the Moon Folk rasped and clucked with glee. From the hole, out hopped Tasstra, Aestra and the others, chattering together in mirth.

“Spider bones, elfens!” Tasstra squeaked. “No good for yous?”

“I think next time I’ll walk,” Eluse choked up more slime. “What *was* that?”

“*Nyaltos in’char lenune grabbah*,” Aestra proudly proclaimed.

“Bones of the great moonlight spider,” Tasstra said. “Big spider, very big. Lived in the old age, many times ago. She gone long times ago, and we go through under-earth in ‘er bones.”

“That,” Suscepto heaved, “was not bones.”

“Is magic bones, elf! Big spider was big magic. Magic still in under-earth. Spider takes you where you need be. We go now. Come see.”

The cavern they had been spat into was lit by mighty toadstools glowing in every colour, some as small as a fingertip, others like trees. From the ceiling colossal roots were hanging down, tickling their way into the cavern. The elves exclaimed in awe.

“Where are we?” Eluse asked.

“*Hjar in’listratos*,” Tasstra said. “Cathedral of da Trees.”

“Those are the roots of the First Tree,” Consora gasped as she realised. “We’re right underneath Lenune!”

“That’s impossible.” Suscepto frowned. “We’re much too far away. We were only in the tunnel for a moment.”

“I told you, elfies! Spidah bones is magic! We under *char listra*, da great tree. Dis where the forest guarder livens. Many powers here.”

Aestra began moving further into the cavern, and the Moon Folk followed.

“What is happening...?” Eluse muttered under his breath. “How did we get here?”

They followed the Moon Folk. There were many more of the creatures in the cavern, and the ferns and bracken on the ground had been replaced by a carpet of moss and grass and lichen. Aestra beckoned them toward the centre of the cavern. Roots arched over the entire cave, but here in the middle many of them reached down to the ground, digging even deeper. Among the rocks, beds of coloured crystal glinted from the ground.

High up, draping between the roots was a vast network of lustrous golden cobwebs, rising all the way to the top of the cathedral. They curved in a spiral, like a wren’s nest.

“What’s that up there?” Consora had spotted something in the webs. She pointed, and Eluse could make out a shape like a chrysalis, with threads hanging from it. As he stared, he realised it wasn’t threads at all—it was hair, dropping down from the delicate form of a woman. A woman, hanging upside down in the webs.

“There’s someone up there,” Eluse gasped.

“Stand back, Eluse,” Suscepto said warily. “Be on your guard.”

Far above, the woman’s eyes opened. She stirred, and the webs encasing her disintegrated like ash, fluttering into the air. She stretched out a pair of brilliant iridescent wings, and softly, like a leaf in the breeze, she began to float to the ground before them.

Eluse’s mind was spinning, but he couldn’t move. The woman was slow and delicate, and something about the way she moved brought with it a strange sense of safety. As she drifted down, golden glittering sparkles of magic wafted after her.

When she touched the ground, she looked at him. Her face shone bright, and all at once seemed made of feathers and webs and light. Eyes were green like jadestone connected with his, and Eluse felt that they were so, so kind. Gazing back into her eyes, for the first time in his life, he felt he knew what it would have been like to be a child staring into the eyes of his mother.

The woman wasn’t Elven, but wasn’t human either. Whatever she was, his fear simply melted away. Threads of gold hair, like spun glass, lay over wings that shimmered and rippled, wrapping her up in feathers so delicate they seemed transparent. She sat down where she alighted, and before her were four walnut shells filled with water.

Aestra scurried to her and tugged on her wrist. “*Isendré, ele’we skar thynatos ji mahksayah. Da sela’yd ke tar’we fyrr thn?*”

The woman replied, speaking the ancient language as easily as the creatures did. “*Aestra, ter’yd ul. Tel’so kyali hu thn.*” Eluse was struck by her voice, soft as snowfall. A far cry from the croaking of the Moon Folk.

Then, she spoke to the elves. “Eluse. Consora. Suscepto. Come and sit.”

The three of them were quite still. Eluse couldn’t find words to say.

“Who are you?” Consora asked. “*What* are you? How do you know our names?”

“Perhaps Aestra told me,” she replied.

She spoke and moved with such authority that he was reminded in a way of his own father, but this was so different. His father’s authority was demanded; every eye in a room would be on him because they dared not be elsewhere. This woman, though—every eye was on her because it wanted to be nowhere else.

The three elves carefully moved closer. They hardly dared to sit, but she beckoned them to her. There was something about this woman that seemed so different. Power radiated from her like Eluse had never felt before.

“*Undol’so*,” she said to Aestra, who flickered his wings a little and turned. The Moon Folk sauntered away.

“Who are you?” asked Eluse, but already he felt that if the answers never came, he wouldn’t really have minded. His eyes on her were like the feeling of sinking into a hot bath. He felt lighter.

She smiled at them again. “You are right to have questions. The Moon Folk call me *Isendré*. In your tongue, it means ‘Forest Guardian’. You are welcome to call me the same. This is my home, under your forest, in a forest of my own.” She handed each of them one of the walnut cups. “Drink,” she said, and took a drink herself. “I know you have been through much to come here.”

“My arm doesn’t hurt any more,” Suscepto mumbled.

“What are you, Isendré?” Eluse asked, and he sensed that she was good. He remembered the stories of the angel of the trees. Did angels live in Cathedrals?

“You have feathers, like a bird,” Suscepto said, looking dumbstruck at her wings.

Isendré laughed, soothing as falling rain. Her wings shimmered and even though they wrapped around her, the elves could see her form through them. “I am *every* bird. And every beetle, and every spider, and worm, and elf. You will come to know me more, in time.”

“You look like a woman, but—you’re not, are you?” Eluse asked. As he spoke, he felt the magic in the air without even trying. It was drifting into him. It was the water, perhaps. Maybe from the woman in front of him. Somewhere.

“You are right, Eluse. This body I wear is just a shape. I have no need of it.”

Isendré began glimmering, glittering. Gold dust shimmered from her, floating up, out and away into the air and ground. The elves gasped as they watched her fade; becoming the sparkling flickers of light around them, until she was no more, and the air was thick with gold.

“You’re a wytch,” Consora gasped as the woman disappeared entirely into the brilliant light.

“That is what you call me,” spoke the voice, reverberating in the air, not from in front of them any longer, but all around them, even inside their own heads. “In the end, I am nothing so simple. I am the *aetherarath*’.”

“She’s made of stardust,” Eluse sighed happily.

Slowly, the golden flecks collected together, and Isendré stood before them again.

“There is a wyitch living under Lenune,” Consora breathed down at the ground. Her eyes were as wide as Eluse’s. Isendré smiled at her.

“What are you? What, really, are you?” Eluse asked. “I’ve never seen anything like you.”

“What I am, Eluse, is not as important as what you are. What are *you*?”

He blinked. “I’m an elf.”

“You are much more than that.”

He considered. “I’m a prince. The son of the king.”

“You are much more than that, too. And you do not need a ring to remind you of it.” Eluse looked at his hand, and the Seal of the King woven tightly to his finger. Her words warmed him.

“I don’t understand.”

“You will. I shall let you rest, for you have travelled far, and have much further still to travel. Sleep tonight, and we shall speak more in the morning.”

She turned and left them before they could say anything else, fluttering up on beautiful wings into the web above them. They gazed at her, transfixed, until a little hand tugged at his sleeve.

“*Ghyol, thyna?*”

Some of the Moon Folk had gathered around, and one was offering up a small up of glowing pieces of mushroom. Tasstra was at his side.

“He asks if you want some mushroomses. Not sure if good for elfens. Maybe no mushrooms for yous.” He spoke to the Moon Creature and waved him away.

“You eat them?” Eluse asked in surprise. He didn’t really care about mushrooms, he wanted to talk about the woman in the webs. But he wasn’t sure what to ask. He wanted to wait until the Moon Folk had gone. Then the three of them could talk.

“Yes, yes, is very good for us. Has moon in them. Lots of magics. Lots of nice. Try if you wants, but maybe is not good for elf.”

“I’ll try one,” Consora said, intrigued, and the Moon Creature with the bowl hurried back. She took a small piece and chewed it.

“What is it like?” Eluse asked.

“Bitter,” she grimaced. “Not too bad though.”

“You wants, elf?” Tasstra asked, and spoke in Old Arath’ to the creature with the bowl.

“I’ll try some. A little bit.” He took a piece from the bowl and chewed it too. It didn’t taste good, but he swallowed it. “There,” he said with a grin, “not too bad for us elfens.”

“Good. Lots of moon magics in the *ghyol*. In the mushroom. We puts it there in the night, when elvens are sleep in your trees.”

“Is that what you’re doing in the fairy circles?” asked Consora sleepily. “We see you sometimes. Up there.”

“We put the, unhhh... *aetherarath*’... uhhh, is, is...” he scrabbled around for the word. “Is big magic, anyway, and put it in mushroom. All these mushrooms same. All part of one,” Tasstra explained. “They take it down to under-earth. Sometimes elfsens take it. Sometimes no.”

“That’s nice. That’s pretty.” She yawned wide and settled back onto the grass. Eluse did the same, and listened to the Moon Folk’s wings. They clinked together like small glass instruments, wind chimes in the night, and they plucked at strange instruments made of wood and fibres from the roots. They set small fires, and the smoke twirled up in chains to the top of the cavern, and they gathered around for warmth. They smelled the sweet smoke and watched as it spiralled up in columns. It was very peaceful here. He looked at the face of Isendré, up in her web, and he wondered all about her. He didn’t wonder for too long, and as he drifted off into sleep he watched the starlight twinkle above him, and quite forgot that down here in the Underwood, there weren’t any stars.

The Constellations are curious things; they've watched down on our world since before the Black Age at least. And they move, too. If you watch, you'll see the Maiden play the Harp, or the Wolf chase the Rabbit across the sky. I think they like to play. And I think they like it when we watch them.

-Thenda, sentry of the Glendil Gate, noted blabbermouth.

CHAPTER 11 - THE SWORD AND THE STONE

Things moved in the night. Ghostly lights, creatures in the skies. Eluse was bodiless, moving like the air. He was in the soil, growing like a tree, and in the same instant was far overhead with ice cold wind rushing through him. Then he *was* the wind. There was nothing above him but a deep, distant black, which shivered with gold and silver stars, moving and swirling in their constellations. A great glittering swan made of light fell like snowflakes, soaring past him, and Eluse recognised it as a constellation. It was followed by a cygnet, paddling starlit legs through the pool of thick blackness. Below him, miles below, he could see the deep green of the forest with the silver-blue trail of the Serpent's Tongue that forked between trees and valleys and spilled into the ocean.

So high above the world, nothing made sense. He could see everything all at once. In one tree he could see fluffy owlets huddling under their moon-faced mother, and in another squirrels nesting in a hollow. But then, when he looked further out, he saw all the way to the beaches and further still, the deep black of the ocean and the white waves that broke against the sand. He looked out to the east, to the Everwood where the Elder grove hid, shrouded in darkness.

Another constellation, a silvery starlight fox, scurried ahead. He soared after it so quickly that he left the forest behind him. He was over the plains of Dharia; the hilltops and ancient fortresses were under him, and warm homes and light, and in the Eastern Deserts he felt a sinister darkness lurk. Then, even further away, to the north of Anima, brilliant snowcapped mountains. There was something out there, in those mountains. It called to him. It pulled him in.

Everything became more unclear. Images came and went, swimming up before his eyes and vanishing just as quickly. Some things he saw clearly, then forgot them as soon as they'd gone. The mountains in the north. He had to get to them. They were well beyond Dharia. Pictures in his mind danced up of a glowing cavern, and a willow tree, and a little skylark made of stars. The skylark wasn't a constellation or a star he'd ever seen before, but it shone more brightly, more golden, than everything else.

It tumbled from his mind.

* * *

The elves woke under the gentle glow of the webs. It felt like it had been a dream—the black figure, the Underwood, the little creatures, and the feathered, enwebbed woman. The deep ache in his legs and side reminded Eluse that it was not. Suscepto was already awake, sitting by himself. He was transfixed by Isendré, who slept in the webs. Consora snored gently nearby.

Moon Folk scampered around the cavern, busying themselves with all sorts of strange tasks. They tended the mushrooms, brought water for the ferns, chipped parts of coloured crystal from where they grew and planted them elsewhere as if they were seeds, and laid hands on the roots of the First Tree, sharing magic. They popped in and out of holes like rabbits. When they noticed Eluse had awoken, one of them bustled over with arms filled with giant blackberries, big as his fist.

“Morning.” Consora blinked the sleep from her eyes.

“Is it?” he asked. He thanked the Moon Creature for the fruit.

“*Iften’yd.*” It skittered a few feet into the air and buzzed away.

“I feel like I’m still dreaming,” Consora mumbled hazily. “But... Eluse, what’s happening? How did we even get here? I mean... I remember what happened, but this just seems so surreal. I... I don’t like it.”

“Why not?” he scoffed. “It feels so peaceful here. What do you think she is? What is a wytch? That word she said, the... The *aetherarath*’. What is that?”

“I only know what I remember from stories my father told. They weren’t supposed to be *real*. They’re made of magic, pure power. The story he told me was that a wytch turned King Oriothen from a man to an elf, and she grew the forest from the First Tree. She lived in the forest with the Elves. But in the story, after Oriothen died and King Glendil built the wall, she left. Nobody knew where she went.”

“Well, I think we might have found her.”

They looked on her, asleep in the webs above them. In a very low voice, Consora spoke. “Do you think we can trust her?”

“I... honestly, I do. I don’t know why, I just... I have a feeling. Do you know what I mean?”

Consora shifted uneasily. “That’s part of it, I guess. The way we fell asleep last night, so quickly, and the feeling of peace down here... I don’t know. I’m not sure I trust it. She has all that power. There’s nothing to say that she’s good.”

That didn’t make a lot of sense to Eluse. The Cathedral of the Trees was beautiful, and there was such a sense of *home* here, and when he looked on Isendré he was overwhelmed by peace. He had faith in his instincts. “Let’s see what Suscepto says.”

They joined him. “Morning, chaps,” he said. He stared at Isendré with puzzled eyes, like he was trying to work her out. Before they could say any more, she unfurled her wings and descended.

“Hello again. Did you sleep well?” she asked.

The elves agreed it was the best sleep they’d had in their lives. Suscepto, though, had a wrinkle of concern across his forehead.

“Isendré, if you please,” he said, bowing deeply. “We must work with full haste. We faced an incursion by an unknown villain in the lands above like nothing we’ve seen before. We must return to the Palace at once.”

“Suscepto, do not worry.” There was a quality to her voice like flowing water. “What you fought was a Shade, and you did well to survive it.”

“You saw it?” Eluse asked.

“I see much.”

“Wait a minute,” Eluse stood. “That light that killed it—that was *you*, wasn’t it?”

“I moved to protect your lives. But the Shade is not dead. It is made of nothing quite so simple.”

“Well I must say, you have a thousand of our thanks,” Suscepto said, bowing again. He didn’t seem to know what to do with himself except bow. “We are ever in your debt. What *was* that monster?”

“The Shade is a vestige of the Shadow, and its appearance here is a dire omen. It is the Shadow’s shadow, a fragment of the *malharath*. If it has appeared in this world, it can not be long before the Shadow himself shall move to overcome the light at last.”

“The Shadow?” Consora frowned. “The Shadow has been dead for thousands of years! He was killed by the Spider in the Black Age!”

“It is made of nothing quite so simple.”

“I don’t understand,” Eluse muttered. “The Spider and the Shadow is just a story.”

“Forgive Eluse, Isendré,” Suscepto tutted, patting him on the arm. “He has all the certainty of a prince, and all the wisdom of one too.”

“It must be comforting to be so sure of the truth,” Isendré said, her eyes meeting his. Eluse was anything but comforted. “Power pulls at the hearts of Men and Elves alike. None who live in Anima are safe.”

“It can’t be real, can it? The Shadow?” Eluse looked at Consora, who stared back with raised eyebrows. She’d always held Elven myth in far greater regard than he. “But even if it was, he was defeated—swallowed whole by the Spider!”

“Defeated, yes,” Isendré said. “But not destroyed. Though he cannot take physical form on Anima, he still lives in the blackest parts of men’s hearts. Though the Shadow is no longer in the world, his will to dominate remains. Many have given themselves in service to him. And Men now use the Shadow’s power for themselves.”

“The Fanatical Dark,” Eluse said. “They attacked the forest just days ago! And that Shade was what—power left by the Shadow?”

Isendré said nothing.

A panicked fury rose up in Eluse. “The Palace believes the Fanatical Dark are nothing but disorganised madmen. Even—even I believed it! But if they’ve found a way to control the power that the Shadow had—even just a piece of it—and they’ve attacked the forests, then Arath’ Sayah faces a far graver peril than we know.”

“We *must* then return at once. Immediately!” Suscepto leapt to his feet, his voice voice grim and resolute.

“Suscepto, be still,” Isendré said, and though her voice was calm, there was a powerful quality to it. “Some things you cannot control.”

Suscepto’s eyes widened, affronted. “I—I must say, I think it is time that we left this place. Isendré, we are grateful that you have rescued us from the Shade, but we must return to the Palace. These elflings are my responsibility.”

“I will not stop you if you turn back now. But there is more for you to do. Much more.”

Eluse felt the pull of her words. “What, then?”

“You already know it. You must face the fears you hold in your hearts, and leave the forests. Do not look back. You must travel to Dharia and reclaim the Grace of Oriothen at once. *All three of you.*” She looked around them, and Consora and Suscepto’s mouths hung open.

“Sorry, you—you want the three of us to travel to Fal In’myhra? Alone? Without the Crownswords?” Suscepto said incredulously.

Isendré nodded. “It is no small thing I ask of you. But it was not by chance that the Shade appeared to you, and it is not by chance that you stand here before me now. Be aware, young ones. For the starlight to shine, darkness must fall.”

Consora had been quiet until now, but she spoke up, her face crossed with disconcertion. “Sorry, but this is all just a bit crazy for me. If the Shadow’s power is at work, then the answer is not *us*. Two nobodies and one dumb prince. I don’t like this. Something isn’t right about the whole thing.”

Consora’s distrust irritated Eluse. He couldn’t say why, but there was something about Isendré that put him at ease. Why couldn’t she trust her? “Consora, Isendré saved our lives. If she says we should go, then I really think we should. And think about it, my father was sending me with Iridian. *Iridian*. Do you really think that’s a good idea? He’s involved with the

Eldergrove, and I know we've been sitting around waiting for somebody else to deal with that, but we can't any more! I think if we need to—”

“No, Eluse. Look, as far as I can tell, this whole thing has happened by accident. And—well, Isendré, you said your name meant Forest Guardian? Sorry to be rude, but the forest is under attack from both the Eldergrove *and* the Fanatical Dark. Do your job a bit better. *And* we were attacked by a Shade!” The frustration built in her voice. Her cheeks began to deepen. “In fact, this whole thing seems ridiculous. The King never should have sent Eluse in the first place, and now some unknown magical entity under the woods is demanding it too, this whole thing just seems stupid to me. We don't know *what* that Shade was—it could have even been you that sent it!”

Isendré let the words echo around her. They seemed to deflect from her. A strange moment of silence fell over the Cathedral. Even the Moon Folk stopped and watched. Isendré looked over them, and Eluse wondered what she would do.

Suscepto interjected, working hard to diffuse the atmosphere. “I must say, Isendré, though I... I do not quite share Consora's concerns, my duty above all else is to see these elflings alive and well, back to the city. This business of starlight shining and dark falling is all well and good, but there are thousands of military elves armed to the teeth for just this kind of incursion. We—”

“What matters to you the most?” Isendré cut him off.

Consora scowled. “Why are you asking that?” she replied. “Eluse, I'm not staying here. I'm going.” She turned.

“Consora, before you leave, answer the question. What is it that matters the most to you?” Isendré's voice was so soft, Eluse couldn't understand how Consora didn't find peace in it.

Consora spun back. “Well if you must know, it's not armies or the Shadow or war! I don't *care* about those things. I care about what's right above my head. I care about my mother.”

“Of course. And that is a good thing. She may yet be well.”

Consora's eyes widened. “What do you mean by that?”

“Your mother's pain will not be forever, Consora. Darkness comes to these woods, but the sun shall rise again.”

The frustration and anger that had sat so well on her face a moment ago fell away. Consora swallowed, and her voice became very quiet. “You know of my mother?”

“I know all who live in the forest, and I would not see them suffer. And you know more than most the cruel suffering she has endured. But she will find her healing, in the end.”

The same wonder that Eluse felt seemed to fill Consora, now.

“Your love for your mother will take you further than you know, Consora. And you need never be apart from her again.”

“Well—I should return to her, then.”

“And I will not stop you, if that is your choice. But if you choose to go further, you should know that she will be safe, and you will play a part in her safety.”

Consora looked as if she had a hundred questions, but no words to put them into. But, instead of saying more, Isendré turned to Suscepto. “As for you? What is it that matters to you?”

“Well, I—the realm, and more to the point, presently, these two young elflings. They are my charges, and I should have them returned safely. Which is precisely the point, I *cannot* venture from the city with the two of them now! It would be a fool’s errand to endanger the two of them. It’s not that I don’t care about all this Shadow business, of course I do, it’s just—I care far more about these two!”

“Even me?” Consora’s voice was still quiet, but she would hardly miss a chance to rib Suscepto.

“At a push.” He gave her a wry smile.

Isendré nodded at him, holding his gaze. “Yes. Your duty and purpose will see you to the end, and the love you hold for those in your care will see you further still.”

“Oh, it’s *love*, is it?” Eluse grinned, but he straightened his face when Isendré looked at him.

“Do not mock it,” she said.

That cut him. It did not feel good to be admonished by her.

She turned to Eluse. “And you, Eluse? What matters the most to you? What drives you forward?”

The answer seemed obvious. “Well, defeating the Shadow, of course. We have to protect the forests. That’s the duty of a prince.”

Even as his words left his mouth, he was surprised to hear how hollow they sounded. They sounded rehearsed, like somebody else’s words. Why, though? Of course he wanted to defeat the Shadow. Of course he wanted the forests safe. So why did his answer feel like it wasn’t finished? He said it like it was a half-truth, only, he didn’t know the other half.

Isendré knew it. He could see it there, in her eyes. “Is that the wrong answer?” he asked. That sounded stupid. He sounded like a child. His insides knotted. Why was it such a hard question? What mattered the most to him—surely it should have been easy.

She touched him on his arm. “Only your own heart knows.” She rose and stretched out her wings. Colours danced around the chamber. “Before you go, whichever way you will, I have gifts for you. Come forward.”

Isendré produced from beneath her wings a faintly-glowing crystal, which shone a blue-violet light. It hung from a slender white chain.

Consora gasped. “An aether stone!”

“Yes. Grown in this Cathedral beneath the First Tree. It is not yet broken, and this, Consora, is my gift to you.”

Her mouth hung open. Aether stones were very rare, and Eluse had never seen one outside of the Palace. He knew a little about the stones; his father or the Seers would use them sometimes. They were always linked with another, and his father was able to use one half to communicate with others who held the other half, no matter where they were in the Kingdom, or even beyond.

“It’s... It’s for my mother?” Consora asked.

“If you wish it to be. I do not demand that you go, Consora, and you may take this stone no matter your answer. But if you journey from here, you shall not go alone. You shall keep her with you, and you with her.”

She was speechless. She stared at the stone, eyes wide. Then, almost imperceptibly, she nodded her head. “Yes,” she whispered.

“Very good,” Isendré smiled. “Now we break this stone, and think of her.” She held out the crystal for Consora, and when she took it in her hand, between them was a soft *crack*. The stone snapped in two.

“This half, Aestra shall leave for your mother. The other, you are to keep ever with you. So long as it is with you, you will know her, and she will know you.”

“Thank you,” Consora said. “I will.” Eluse couldn’t remember ever having seen her cry, but she looked as if she fought tears now. She hung the chain around her neck and held the stone tight.

“Suscepto, come forward,” she said. The older elf stepped toward her. “Draw your sword.”

He held it before her.

“For you, guardian of these little ones, I confirm your mark as their defender, and a sentinel of more besides. I give you this gift freely, but if you choose to leave these woods, you may use it to protect and defend those closest to you. May this sword take you far.” She reached out and stroked down the length of the blade with her fingertips. As she did, a white glow shone from it. “The blade now bears the light of Methir, and shall cleave the darkness apart, as Methir did in the first days. It shall be called *Methirindil*, and before the end you shall come to know it as well as yourself.

“Suscepto, you may take this blade home with you, if you wish. But for light to shine at its fullest, it must shine in the darkness, and it is a darkness I ask you to shine against. Travel for the Grace, and take up your full purpose as a defender of the realm.”

Suscepto’s face was not grand enough to contain his pride, and it burst out at the seams. “I... My lady, though it pains me to say it, if the realm needs me to defend it, I shall.” He

stooped into a bow. Despite the sombre moment, Eluse wondered if the Director of Duties may now start titling himself Defender of the Realm.

“Eluse,” Isendré said. His heart leapt like a rabbit. She studied his face for a moment before she spoke. “For you, Eluse, your gift shall not yet come.”

A moment passed. Eluse felt his insides crease and go hollow. Why? What had he done wrong? He tried not to show it, but his face betrayed his dismay. Isendré saw it, and she allowed it to sit for a short while. This wasn't fair. He hadn't doubted what she'd said. He was ready to go! He *wanted* to journey to Dharia for the Grace!

“We shall meet again, and I don't doubt that I shall have for you a gift when we do, and it shall be precisely what is required. Until then, you must discern for yourself what it is that matters the most.”

His skin prickled. Was that it? His answer wasn't good enough? Humiliation bubbled in his veins and he stared down, hoping that Consora wasn't looking at him.

“Consora, is your gift a good gift?” Isendré asked.

“So very good,” she replied, who had not yet taken her eyes from the stone.

“Suscepto, as for yours?”

“Most wonderful. Most wonderful indeed.”

She doesn't need to rub it in, thought Eluse.

“Eluse, in time you shall come to learn that a gift not given is a gift in itself, and you shall know my purpose that day.”

The elves nodded, pretending to understand. They thanked the wytch, though Eluse with markedly less enthusiasm.

“And so, our time together is ended,” Isendré said. “And you have a choice before you.”

The three of them looked at one another. Eluse was hurting, but there was still something in him that pulled at him. He trusted Isendré's words. And, having been denied a gift like the others... Perhaps it wasn't only his father he needed to prove himself to.

“We will go.” He said the words with finality. They felt hard and heavy.

“Young master, I don't think—”

“Right, let me rephrase. *I* will go. Suscepto, come or stay as you like. The Kingdom needs the Grace of Oriothen, and I will go for it. I *want* to do something good for once in my life. I need to grow up some time, right? How many times have you told me that? I'll walk to Fal In'myhra myself if I have to.”

Suscepto's exasperation was streaked across his face, but it was Consora who spoke next.

“I’ll come with you. And you’re right. If it means travelling without Iridian, that can only be a good thing.”

He smiled at her. Her eyes were fixed on the aether stone.

A beleaguered sigh from Suscepto perked up Eluse’s ears. “You two elves will be the death of me,” he grumbled. “But there’s little chance of me dragging you back to the city myself, and you simply cannot be trusted to go alone. I daresay your father would have my head if I were to let you go, though he may well have it for accompanying you, too. Oh, dear, dear me. Very well. Isendré, we shall trust in you. We shall go.”

“You do well to trust. And where trust seems to fail you, my meaning will come clear at the end of everything.” She beckoned the Moon Folk, who had quietly gathered around. “*Yhal’thn saratos y’nyaltos in ’so.*” The Moon Folk chattered obediently.

“Come on then, elfers. Time we go.” Tasstra and Aestra had both returned.

“Will we see you again, Isendré?” Eluse asked.

Isendré looked up at the roots of the tree. “We will all see each other again.” Peace from her words rustled around them like a warm gentle breeze, and Eluse felt more at home within himself.

Right up until Isendré’s next words.

“Aestra will show you to the spider bones.”

KROBSY'S BEEF AND ALE PIE:

Ingredients

-5 pints ale

-1 lump beef, the fatty stuff, and chop it in big chunks. Or little ones, it's your pie.

-1 onion, chopped rough-like

-1 pocketful carrots, done in circles like what fancy folk have

-1 ball short crust pastry, but have your wife make it, it's tricky stuff and if you're reading this book it's too hard for you to make

-What herbs you've got

Method

1. Drink 1 pint of ale to get your mind right
2. Fry up the onion and the carrots in beef fat
3. Fry up the beef and get it nice and brown on all its bits
4. Drink up another pint of ale because it gets hard frying up those bits. Splosh the dregs on the pan and scrape up the beefy bits. If you've not got any dregs, drink another pint and do the dregs thing this time.
5. Roll out half the dough onto a pie tin. Use a roller pin. Don't just punch it in.
6. Slop the meat and vegetubuls on the top of what you just done. get some herbs in too. If you want you can put a nother sploosh of ale in it.
7. Flop the other bit of pastry on the top and roller pin it on. Proberly roller pin it flat first, its harder once its on the pie.
8. Drink more ale.
9. Put the pie in the oven til its done
10. Drink the rest of the ale.
11. Serve with a nice pint of ale.

-Brian Gunnderblust, *How To Do Good Cooking, popular in rural Dharian communities.*

CHAPTER 12 - THE MERRYGLASS

Although Eluse knew now what to expect of the spider bones, it was no more pleasant than before. He struggled and thrashed, but for all the unpleasantness he was soon out the other side, tangled in humus and blackleaf. Consora was next. As she emerged, he hoped he looked an awful lot more dignified than she did. Suscepto tumbled out last, rather worse for wear.

They blinked in the rosy morning light and looked around.

“Where are the *trees*?”

They turned to a landscape barer than they'd ever seen; not barren, but certainly not forest. Looking into the sunlight, they could make out a row of mountains, and the First Tree

towering over them. Somewhere near the centre of the mountains they dipped into a valley, and stretching across it was—

“The Glendil Gate!” Suscepto gasped at the small grey strip. “We must be so far north!”

It was over three hundred feet tall, but seemed so little from here. From the city, the Gate and wall stretched far across the ravine, so tall and wide and thick, mountain to mountain, it seemed to say *nothing shall cross me*. It felt like the biggest thing that hands could build, but from here it looked like a little step, like it could be hurdled with a running jump. It was all that stood between Arath’ Sayah and the rest of Anima, and Eluse decided that the Elven Kingdom did not seem quite so safe today as it did yesterday.

“Hey, look here!” called Consora, who had wandered a little way down the hillside. “The road is paved.”

“Good starlight, you’re right,” Suscepto said. “That means... This must not be too far from the Dharian border!”

Great plains stretched before them. There were not just fields, but a brook weaving down the sloping hillside, and further down a cobbled stone bridge arched across it. Much further off were little clusters of buildings with tufts of smoke hovering above like wool. There were trees, but they tended to grow in thickets or line the edges of fields, and brown strips which must have been roads criss-crossed in places. Past that, the hills took on a blue haze and faded into nothing.

“I make us out as in the Fartherfields, and as near to Dharia as we might as well be in it already. Goodness, those spider bones have some pep to them!”

Eluse liked the way the Fartherfields looked, and the few times he’d been to the top of the Gate he’d always thought there was something enchanting about them. He liked how flat they were, and with dusty colours not so often found in the forest.

“Alright, so—where now?” Consora asked.

Nobody had an answer other than “North and then west” so they followed the dusty road down the hill. “We’ll find our way soon enough,” Suscepto said merrily, and off they traipsed.

“We have no plan,” Eluse said.

“Not to worry, young prince, the Director of Duties is fine for the job.” Suscepto smiled and gave a knowing tap to the side of his forehead. “King Auctoria has already sent a raven two days ago for Tal In’Myhra to inform King Gabriel of your arrival, so he will be expecting you—though we will be a dozen Crownswords short. Once we arrive in the city, we can meet the King just about on schedule, and send a raven back for Lenune. I have little doubt that your father then shall dispatch half the forces of Arath’ Sayah to collect us!”

They saw many new and strange things, though the folk of Dharia would have thought them ordinary enough. They marvelled as they crossed their first bridge (“*Isn’t it strange that they don’t use treefell!*” remarked Consora), and passed by fields of feathery grain growing from bronze fields (“*Whole great stretches of land all for the same plant!*”). Now and again they saw huts made of stone not too far from the roadside, and some even looked lived-in, with small

gardens of cabbage and sweetpeas curling up wicker trellises. Suscepto warned that they should keep well away unless they had absolutely no other choice.

As Eluse's stomach began to rumble around midday, he began to wonder if they did in fact have Absolutely No Other Choice. Consora, who could always be relied upon when it came to food, produced a handful of pine nuts and even a giant blackberry from breakfast, which they shared together, though Consora got the larger portion. It wasn't much of a meal, but it sated them for the time being, and the thrill of the new road saw them through where their measly meal did not. In particular for Suscepto, who would repeatedly draw and sheathe his sword in a manner he doubtless considered heroic—though to Eluse's mind it was bumbling and clumsy—their minds were on adventure.

“So, about the sword, Suscepto,” Eluse said, on about Suscepto's fifth attempt at disembowelling a handful of leaves that blew their way.

“Magnificent, isn't she? My *Methirindil*.” The name rolled from his tongue like it had been well-practised, which Eluse was sure it had been, under his breath and non-stop since he was given it. “You know, once back to the Palace, I must uncover more about fair Methir. I know little of her story.”

“Come on Suscepto, where's your *education or betterment*?” Consora used the voice she'd been scolded with so many times. Suscepto's jowls wobbled in protest, but she ignored it. “I'll tell you the story. That'll be a second free pass you owe me.”

His jowls wobbled more.

“Methir was a woman in the Black Age. She was one of the first Men to come to the World Spider, a wicked woman; bloodcursed, and was a hunter for a bloodhost brood. She brought many Men under the curse, and killed many more for their blood.”

“Oh, tosh!” scoffed Suscepto. “Methir was a woman of light, Isendré said so herself!”

“I haven't finished yet,” Consora said through gritted teeth. Eluse didn't doubt that if anybody knew the story, it would be her—she held myth and magic in high regard. Her father always did the same, and he'd wondered—but never asked—if she loved stories as her way of remembering him.

“When the World Spider found Methir's bloodhost brood, she stood before them, but didn't kill them. It's like—like she wanted to give them a chance, maybe. But the brood attacked the Spider, maybe from bloodhunger, maybe fear. I don't know. Obviously, they were no threat to her—she was the *Spider*, after all—but she still didn't fight back. Everyone but Methir attacked. Instead, she watched all those blood-raged Men throw themselves at the Spider, and something happened to her heart. The light of the Spider whispered into her, and something inside her was changed. She was disgusted, both with herself and with the rest of the brood, that they could attack something so beautiful, so pure. She saw the lengths the curse had driven them to.

“She took her own sword and killed every last one of them. She was an incredible warrior. When she was done, she knew the Spider would not let a bloodhost live, and was about

to turn her sword on herself. But, the moment before she plunged her sword into her own heart, her eye once again caught the beauty of the Spider, and she stopped herself.

“Then, the Spider just turned, continued on her way. Methir realised she had a choice. She could die there in her brood-pit with the other bloodhosts, or she could follow the Spider—even as a bloodhost, even as an evil woman. She left, and followed the Spider, and promised the Spider to follow wherever it would take her. At that moment, her bloodcurse was broken, and she was her own again.” Consora’s eyes had turned glassy as she told the story.

“Then, instead of killing and infecting others with the bloodcurse, she brought them to the shelter of the World Spider. Through her, many more people came to know the Spider. She was one of the first generals of the Black War, and even led the World Spider’s armies into battle. One of the Men she recruited was Oriothien himself, the fiercest warrior in all of Anima, who would become the first Elven king. After a while, he proved himself even stronger than her, and she became his shieldbearer. She loved him. And when the Shadow advanced on the South, they battled him together, but the Spider and all her armies pressed back and overcome.

“In her final battle, the Spider was far away, and Methir and Oriothien had been ambushed. They were surrounded on all sides, and there was no hope of escape. But she knew that Oriothien had been chosen by the Spider to lead, and it was crucial for Anima for him to live—more crucial, even, than her own life. So she filled her sword and shield with magical light which enraged the Men of the Shadow, and they turned their fury to her. They attacked her and her alone, and while she fought, Oriothien was able to escape and return to the World Spider. The legend says that she was so strong, she fought on even as she was struck by a dozen spears, and two dozen arrows, and only after she knew that Oriothien was safe did she die.”

Suscepto held his softly glowing *Methirindil* in front of him, his eyes wide and his voice hushed. “I shall honour your sacrifice, my lady. Thank you, Consora. It is a beautiful tale.”

“Is it true?” asked Eluse, with a little less reverence.

Consora shook herself. “Hah, I don’t know. I mean, if Oriothien had escaped before she died, then how would anybody know the ending?”

“Well. It’s a nice sword anyway, Suscepto. Do you expect to be doing much fighting with it?”

“Oh, fret not,” he replied with a knowing smile and as much false humility as he could pack into one mouthful. “I shall only fight when necessity calls for it—much, as I am sure, did my lady Methir. *The wise fight battles they’re sure to win.*”

“Mmm. Is that a quote of your own?”

“My mother, actually. Wonderful woman, may her spirit be rested. She died fighting a bear.”

They travelled on, and though they weren’t really sure where they were going, they felt that so long as they kept to the biggest road they could find, and moved generally north-westerly, they couldn’t go too far wrong. Other travellers passed by them on the road, and with excited

“Hello there!”s, each of them realised it was the first time they’d ever seen a human outside of the Palace – and those had always been well-dressed commissaries, not dust-blotched labourers or whatever these Men were. The Men, too, looked just as surprised to see Elves in what surely now must be Dharia.

The owl-light pressed in, and although the landscape dimmed, the yellow lights in the buildings they passed now and then became more obvious. They looked warm and inviting, and Consora said they made her think of food.

“I think we need to find somewhere to stop soon,” Eluse said. “There’s no moon tonight.”

“And I’m hungry,” Consora complained. “Unless you plan on hunting us a rabbit with your shiny new sword, we’re going to need to stop.”

“If only we could be guided to our final destination by your stomach, young lady, we’d reach it in half the time,” Suscepto said. “I suppose the rest would do us good. And ho—look there. A town, perhaps?”

Coming into view were a group of squat stone buildings with thatched roofs and orange lanternlights casting long shadows around them. ‘Town’ was a fairly grandiose word for what it was, but they could see a certain amount of bustle around the place.

Upon arriving, they drew strong stares from the raggedy humans who gazed on with dirty faces, and the elves did a certain amount of staring of their own. Most of the buildings looked shut up, but there was one that seemed to be the focus of the commotion; a low wonky shape with rich woodsmoke pouring from the chimney, and through thick glass windows they could see all manner of folk.

A sign sat on stout timbers over the doorpost.

“What does it say?” Consora asked Eluse.

He concentrated on the Dharian words. He’d learned a little in his lessons at the Palace.

“The Merryglass,” he read. “Do you think we’ll be able to get some food here?”

“Well, we’ll give it a try, but you let me do the talking,” Suscepto said, with all the authority of somebody who had recently been given a magic sword. Eluse’s natural inclination would have been to disregard Suscepto’s instruction as comprehensively as he could, but they were more out of his depth than they’d been before, and in earnest he appreciated having someone there to bear the brunt of the cultural blunders they’d surely make.

Led chiefly by rumbling stomachs, and secondly by curiosity (with caution coming a distant third), they went inside. At once they were pummelled by all manner of new sights, sounds and smells. Thick brown stews slopped into bowls wafting deep brothy flavours into the air; fiddles and lutes were drawn and strummed in a rumpus that seemed quite pleasing to the patrons. Men cheered raucously together in groups, and stank with a sour-sweet tang of musty straw and hard work. Hunks of bread and hard cheese lay about liberally, and were snaffled up by a big-eared hound that left slobber across the floors. Gruff men thumped tabletops and threw down handfuls of cards in a grump, and plump women shrieked like happy gulls over clacking

dice. A portly young barmaid swept past Eluse and knocked into him, spilling a frothy pungent liquid from a hefty glass tankard over him.

“Oh I do be beggin’ my pardon, I—By heck! You’s are Elves!” she exclaimed, and then looked directly in his face and issued a long, strained laugh. Eluse smiled politely and tried to move past. “‘Ere, Elsie! Fetch Glonwyn, ‘e’ll wanna see this! Elves!” Another woman, of similar stature, popped her head up from behind a wooden bar, who had been pumping drinks into flagons. After a quick cackle, Elsie jiggled out of view for a moment, then came back with a taller, dumpy gentleman with so little hair on his top-head he would have been all but bald if it weren’t for the wispy strands brushed over from the sides.

“Elves, is it?” he peered through his spectacles.

The three of them made their way through the throng.

“Good evening, sir,” Suscepto said, with what Eluse considered far more pomp than was required or welcome. “We three travel the road North, and seek victuals and lodging for the night. Are you able to accommodate?”

The barkeep gave a short laugh. “Strewth, you’ve sure got some way about you, aintya? Well I don’t know much about no victuals, but we can sort you for food and ale, and a room for the night. You’ll have to share, mind.”

“Ahh, tremendous. Food sounds terrific, and we’ll be glad of a room. What’s on the menu?”

“Food’s mutton stew and rye, and there’s a few wedges of Farmhouse Greenhorne left if you want it. Three ales, is it?”

“Oh, yes please,” said the elf, without the slightest idea what he was agreeing to.

“Right. Room’s up the stairs dead ahead at the top. That’ll be six knuckles and half, please.”

A blank countenance followed, and an awkward pause. “Beg pardon, sir?”

“Six and half.”

“Sorry, I don’t... Could you repeat...”

“Suscepto,” Eluse muttered. “I think he wants some money.”

“Oh! Money, yes! Oh goodness me, do you know, I hadn’t quite thought that far ahe—Oh blast, do you know, I didn’t...” Suscepto patted around his pockets and made excuses.

Glonwyn the barman worked him out. Stern eyes were affixed behind the spectacles. “Look, if you haven’t the coin, we haven’t the room. Nothin’ personal to you Elves, personally I’ve no problem with the lot of you, but we ‘in’t no breadhouse. We’re a fine establishment. You want to try your chances, you’ll have to try at the Pitchy Lark. Scruffy sort in there, but, you know, beggars ‘n choosers, ‘n all.”

“Ooh, give it a rest, Glonwyn!” the barmaid they’d first bumped into called over the bar, dropping off glasses. “He’s a right misery guts, this one.” She nodded at the barkeep, then jiggled off.

Suscepto fuffed around a bit more. “Well now sir, perhaps surely we can come to some arrangement. You see, my charges and I are on a most urgent assignment, and I... Oh, blow it all, I don’t...”

He embarrassed himself for some time longer, until Eluse skipped up to the counter and with slick fingers whisked his golden Director of Duties pin from his tunic.

“What about this?” he asked Glonwyn. “It’s pure Arath’ gold.”

Glonwyn’s eyes lit up brighter than the pin. “Oh aye, that’s mighty fine trinket... I’m sure this could do, just about, I reckon we can keep you fed and watered for the night... Only just, mind...”

Suscepto stuttered and huffed with all kinds of consternation, but Consora shuffled him out of the way before he could be heard too well. As soon as Glonwyn’s grubby fingers had the pin the deal was done, and they were ushered to a spot on a crowded table by Elsie with her rustic courtesy. Suscepto whinged and scolded the whole way.

“You impudent young elfling, how *dare* you! I am the Director of Duties, and my seal bears witness to such a fact!”

“Oh, Suscepto, one of your Duties is to keep us warm and fed, and that’s just what you’ve done. Now let’s see what that pin has gotten for us, shall we?” Bowls of warm brown sludge were plonked before them, as were mugs of the thick musky drink that had been spilled onto Eluse when they’d come in. They ate first, and the food was fine enough, and went down well with the crusty bread that came in big lumps. Then their attention turned to the stuff in the mugs.

“Ale, did he say it was?”

“Mmm. What’s in it?” Eluse said suspiciously, sniffing. “Smells funny.”

“Yes, well, don’t complain, Eluse. Look around; it’s what the locals drink, so tonight it’s what we drink.” Suscepto took a hearty swig of the stuff. “Eergh!” he grimaced. “Lovely.”

Eluse took a tentative sip. It tasted bitter and the froth got in his nose, and though he could find nothing good whatsoever to say about the taste of it, he did discover that no sooner had he gulped down the mouthful, he found himself ready for another swig. It was cold and refreshing, but the taste itself was about what he’d expect if he scraped the bottom of one of the farmer’s boots into his mug and swirled it about.

“*That* is horrible,” Consora said, taking another drink.

“Well, it’d be rude not to, so see it down you. Needs must in these times,” Suscepto instructed.

But in the end, they found that once they'd reached the bottoms of their mugs, they felt the emptiness rather keenly, and it seemed fitting and proper to get themselves another, especially as the night was still early and it was not yet time for bed. As it turned out, a gold Elven pin could procure a good number of glasses of the stuff, and soon enough they realised that the nasty taste of it seemed to have more or less vanished. In fact it started to go down rather pleasantly. It wasn't long at all before they were having quite a lovely time, and even stuffy old Suscepto had eased up on his rigid temperament.

"I say, these Men do know how to enjoy themselves!" he said, as he rose from the table and gathered around the neighbouring one, where farmhands threw cards about. "I think I shall have a go at this game!"

Jolly cheers erupted from the men at the table, who were all very friendly. And it was all sorts of men, and women too; mountainous rough smiths in singed aprons crushed up on tables with scrawny thatchers, rivermen with stinking fish guts smeared across them nestled in with well-to-do ladies who seemed used to the furore. Every kind of person was here, and every kind of smell, too. Their jovial dispositions rubbed off, and Eluse found himself being particularly sociable too.

"You know, I think I'll have another ale!" he beamed. "Who else is having one?"

More cheers followed, as did more ale, and he found himself having become a little back-to-front, but having too much fun to really mind. Consora began talking very loudly, and made fast friends with a couple of women that sat down on her side of the bench, and all the humans found their Elvish features quite endearing. Eluse found himself taken under wing by a gaggle of amicable farmhands, and conversations soon turned philosophical. Very quickly it was agreed by all that they really must stay in touch, and after they were done at Fal In'myhra Eluse would come by again to visit, and perhaps this could be a new and wonderful start to fresh new relations between the Men and the Elves. When Consora came to join, and asked for an introduction, he found that he'd forgotten their names, but that wasn't too much of a problem, and everybody got on marvellously all the same.

"Hey!" shouted Consora at one point, and her voice sounded a bit funny, like it couldn't quite keep all the words inside her sentences. "Look at what he's doing!"

Eluse followed the direction of her finger (with a little trouble) and there was Suscepto, up on a table, feet trampling through empty stew bowls. He was dancing a jig to the flutes and the fiddles! The two elves were beside themselves with glee, and felt it only proper that they, too, should dance along so that he wasn't the only one. Well, this dancing was thirsty work, and they made sure to keep themselves well hydrated with more ales.

Between drinks they found that they were very fine dancers, though at times their legs struggled to keep up with their sharp minds. A moment later, they were outside admiring a shirehorse in the fresh night air, and had struck up a conversation with another traveller, and then they were back inside again and Consora had made lifelong friends with a dog. Then came the mood for stories, and they found lots of willing ears to listen (some at exceptionally close quarters), and they regaled the Men with tales from the forest, and likewise listened to stories

from all around Dharia, though shortly afterwards Eluse realised he must have not listened too well, because he couldn't recall any of the details.

Some point in the evening that Eluse wasn't really sure of, he had collapsed against a wall on a bench, and Consora came and heaped herself next to him too. Her balance must have been a little off, because she seemed to lean half onto him, and his arm found its way around her to keep her steady.

"Hmm," she sighed, looking at him with a big grin plastered over her face. "You're more fun when we're not in the forest."

Eluse laughed, and a small hiccup escaped with it. "Well, I just think everything's a lot more fun when we're not under my father's thumb." He gestured openly. He seemed to be gesturing quite a bit tonight.

"When we go back," she said, with a frown on her face, and seemed to sort of forget what she was saying half way through saying it, "When we go back, do you think things will be the same?"

"The same as what?"

"I don't know," she sighed happily, nestling down into him. A man with grease stains down his tunic shuffled past, nearly bumping into her feet. He slopped his drink and carried on, looking across at her. "That man there," she giggled, pointing in quite a different direction than she meant to, "he said that Elves and Men should be allowed to get married. *I* think he wanted to marry *me*." She chuckled away to herself.

"Which man?" Eluse said with a pout. He was sure the man had just been there, but things had got a bit blurry.

"Um, I think he's gone now."

Eluse stared into the crowd, irritated. "Well, if you see him again, you tell me. I'll fight him up."

Consora laughed wildly. "No you will *not!*" she snorted. "Why would you fight him up?"

Eluse stuck his lip out. He wasn't sure. "Well, I think because you don't want to marry him, and he might try and marry you anyway." The words made sense when they were in his head, but they didn't seem to once he heard his mouth say them.

She kept laughing, a long silent laugh, leaning harder into him. "Maybe I do," she sputtered eventually. "Maybe I want to marry him."

"Humans smell worse, and can't use magic, and also *look at them*. They look like they all... Make cheese for a living, or something."

She burst into fresh laughter. "Cheese!?" she screeched.

Eluse flushed red. "I don't know. Maybe you should then. Maybe you should marry a human and get kicked out of the forest and become a cheesemaker and... eat sloppy stews,

and... get a dog, and..." He started his sentence grumpy, but by the time he trailed off he had a grin on his face.

She laughed at that, too. Then she settled down again into him. "No," she sighed at last. "I don't think I want to marry a human."

They stayed like that for a while, watching the bustle of the tavern. The music was nice, and the fiddlers and lutenists played well. It made their heads feel like they were sinking into a hot bath. The dog came back in, snuffling around their feet hoping for snacks, and they listened to the chatter of a tableful of rivermen argue passionately about the difficulty of descaling different types of fish. The fire was warm, and by the time Suscepto brought another ale over for the both of them, Consora was snoring gently in the crook of his arm. He took the ale anyway, careful not to wake her, and placed hers down on the bench beside her. He watched as Suscepto scurried away again, eager to chronicle the folk at the nearby tables with stories, and then it was time for another ale...

*

"...light of Methir, and then I'll be the defendrist of the realn!" Suscepto hooted, wafting his glowing blade in the air, to the rapturous adulterations of the nearby patrons. Elsie the barmaid marched over and insisted it was lowered, at which Suscepto protested, informing her that he handled the sword with unmatched grace. As he explained to her that he was, in fact, the defendrist of the realn, he found that somehow the hilt of the blade crashed into a lantern with a crack, so begrudgingly agreed that perhaps he shoul...

* *

...wiped the tears from her red eyes. "No, Consora, she would be so proud of you." His face was very close to hers, as he found it a little tricky to see, most likely on account of tiredness. She clasped the aether stone and sniffled into him.

"It's not the same for you, you never had a mother and your father is hardly a father," she wiped snot from her nose. "Sorry, I didn't mean it like—"

"No it's alright!" he held her face in his hands to steady it from moving around so much. "But you have got me and I have got you I'm so glad that it's you that's come with..."

* * *

...dancing again, and Consora and Suscepto jiggled together, hand in hand, holding onto one another as Eluse doubled over in laughter. Any past squabbles between the two had been put

to rest. Their faces were red with glee and foreheads slick with sweat, and suddenly it was Eluse's turn to dance, even though he wasn't even sure how he'd...

* * * *

...tavern was mostly empty at this point, with a number of slumbering guests around tables at one end, and Suscepto interfering with Elsie's efforts to sweep, manhandling her broom. Consora lay slumped on Eluse's shoulder, and now that the musicians had left it was much...

* * * * *

...brushed her hair out of her face, and he had a feeling that somehow, in the end, everything was going to be alright.

From where the Northern kingdom reaches up into the Outerlands down to the Fartherfields in the south; from the islands of the Sprawl to the Eastern Deserts, travellers abound in Dharia. Merchants and vagabonds, nobles and beggars. There is much to see, and many who wish to see it.

-Briarson and Snooter, Travels in Dharia: An Introduction, Chapter 1.

CHAPTER 13 - THE GUIDE

Over the dunes of the Eastern Desert, the smoke rose in hazy plumes and the morning wind rolled it across the sand. His nose drew in the burnt wood and misery. The Wildflower Valleys, and a dozen other sites like it, were gone.

His army swelled to near eight thousand in just a few days, and more still came. From the mountains, across the rivers, the far North by the Outerlands, the Dharian cities. After weeks of travel, most were tired, but all were eager.

They rode all manner of beasts. In their camp, which now moved westward daily, they hauled wagons filled with wood for siege engines and catapults and flying contraptions and more. He looked at their works with quiet approval through narrow eyes, black as pitch. He relished in the chaos of the woodland just a few miles south, hidden behind the dunes. They were abuzz with rangers and enchanters that scabbled to make sense of the ruin. The Elves did not dare leave their woodland to face them; they were cowards. They had grown fat in their forests. It would be the end of them, he knew. Whole armies must have been assembling in the Eastern woodlands by now. Arath' Sayah will fall, and the Shadow will take the land and power they have hoarded for so long. He would see to that.

Before him, an elf snivelled, tied to a stake. He had been dragged from the woods with a dozen others, but he was all that remained by now. The rest blemished the desert sands with their blood. This one knew his fate too.

Other men moved around the campsite, knocking down tents and loading mules and horses. Nobody guarded the elf. There was nowhere for him to run. War hounds tied to posts close by eyed the prisoner greedily.

He lowered himself to one knee to look the piteous elf in the eyes. His old knees creaked as he did. The elf reared his head back in disgust, but it was the dark figure who felt the greater contempt. He hid it behind his pale face. He kept his voice soft and gentle. That always worked better. He was sure to use the elf's name, too. He liked to use their names.

“It matters little to me if you speak, Landrin. If you do not, we shall take a hundred more like you, and one of you will talk. Think on the time you have left, and how swift you wish your

end to be.” His fingers drummed on the handle of his sword at his waist. “Perhaps one that we take shall be your wife. Perhaps your child. I wonder if they shall speak. You cannot save yourself, but perhaps you can save another.”

The elf glowed with rage. He sputtered some insult, but it went ignored.

“You and your ilk are fighting men, and know well the armies of your land. All I seek is a number of those mustered in exchange for a clean death.”

The elf spat out a laugh. “You know nothing of what you war against,” he sneered. More than a little fear hid behind those eyes.

The man sighed. “If I knew, I would not ask. Would you care to tell me?” Behind the elf, a war hound snarled and strained at his chain. He eyed them. “The dogs would be grateful for your flesh. Do not earn their jaws.”

“Perhaps the dogs have more sense than you,” Landrin growled, not unlike a dog himself. “I cannot tell what I do not know.”

“Perhaps they do have more sense,” the dark figure said. “But they have less mercy, and their mouths are more unkind than my blade. The swords you carried were of the kingswood, and your cloak bears a commander’s sigil. Commander Landrin, you know more than you say.”

“You have lost your mind,” Landrin said. “But, that is the nature of the Twisted King. That is you, isn’t it? The Dharian King, who lost his own mind.”

The man in black stopped and looked at Landrin. He didn’t like that name. He didn’t show it.

“My mind is not lost, elf. My purpose is found.” He paused for a moment.

“I shall not aid you. You will gain nothing from me.”

He rose to his feet. “Very well,” he sighed. He strode to the post that the war hounds were chained to. “You have guts, Landrin. Let us hope they feed the dogs well.”

“Wait,” Landrin yelled. The dark man’s hand hovered over the chain.

He raised an eyebrow. “Something to add?”

Landrin’s voice was faster and more urgent now. A truth would fall from his lips sooner or later. “I really, truly, know nothing. I do not fight for the King. None of us did. Our company were of the Eldergrove.”

He ground his teeth. There was that word again. Eldergrove. The first elf who had said it, he had ignored—it was the desperate ramblings of a doomed man. The second elf to speak the word made him grow curious. This was the third.

“Tell me of it.” His hand lay on the chain. The dogs bared their teeth and yellow eyes peered at Landrin. Three beasts, and too many teeth to count.

“We have rejected the rule of the King. He is not fit to reign. We have seen him for who he is.”

“Oh?” he said. “And who is he?”

Landrin laughed coldly. “No less power-mad than you.”

The black-robed man laughed back. He saw the pointlessness of this elf; he knew nothing. Whatever the inner politics of the Elves, they would matter little shortly. Whatever the Eldergrove were, they would die just as well as the King. From the south, he felt the throb of power from the woods. It was constant, and alluring, and painful. He must have it all.

“I suppose we are done here,” he said. He moved his hand from the chain and pulled back the pin fastening it to the post. The dogs darted forward in a frenzy. If Landrin said anything else, he did not hear it. It was covered by the crunch of bone and tear of clothing and skin. The dogs happily wolfed down chunks of flesh. His mind was already elsewhere.

He watched the camp, all now on the move, leaving great tracks through the desert sands as they marched further west and into Dharia. He mounted his pale horse and joined the throng of moving bodies that were tracking away now. The ignorant Elves knew nothing of the scale of his army, even these few scant miles from their woods. Whatever was left of Commander Landrin lay in the sands behind. Far ahead, they would reach the Gate.

Then, the Elves would truly fear the Twisted King.

* * *

Eluse tried to open his eyes, but only one of them opened all the way, and it felt like it was dragged over sand. He was desperate for water, but couldn't find the strength to go and get any.

Where was he? Grey light illuminated a darkened window in a bare wooden room. Oh, that's right. The Merryglass. *What* had they done to him?

He tried to move, but his arm was numb, and Consora was lying in a sprawled heap across him, snoring into his chest. A pool of dribble had collected on his shirt, which stuck to his

skin. The smell of him was superseded only by the taste in his mouth, like a mouthful of stagnant water. His head swelled like an ocean.

“Consora,” he rasped. “Get... Get up.”

She opened clogged eyes for a moment, frowned hard, and closed them again. “No.”

Before Eluse had summoned the energy to give her another shake, she was snoring again.

“Get up,” he yanked his arm out from under her and she groaned.

“I don’t want to. I’m sick.”

“I don’t think you’re sick, Consora, I think they’ve done something to us.” His eyes hurt, and his head hurt, and there wasn’t very much that didn’t hurt.

“Don’t be so dramatic. I think we’ve done this to ourselves.” She grumbled and stropped and pushed herself away. They were both lying on a very narrow bed, and as she moved she slid off. She hit the floor with a clang, and he thought for a moment she might have been about to cry. Then she sniffed. “Where’s Suscepto?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we should find him.”

“Or maybe we should go back to sleep and he can come and find us.” She flicked strands of hair out of her face, which had got stuck to her cheeks and in her mouth.

He took some breaths in, but felt like the air wasn’t going all the way down. “Come on. We’ve got to go.”

With a head like thunder and a mood to match, Eluse half-dragged the grouchy elf out of the door and down a narrow creaky staircase back into the tavern. He was sticky and hot and his skin felt rubbery. Downstairs, stools and chairs had been put on tabletops, and the tavern was mostly empty except for Glonwyn, who counted coins rather respectably behind the bar, and Suscepto, who slouched not very respectably at all on a stool with a blanket around his shoulders. His sage-green face was much paler now, and he had thick bags under his eyes. His gaze was far-off, and he clutched a mug of something steamy. He barely noticed as they approached and dumped themselves next to him.

“Morning, chaps,” he croaked. They didn’t reply.

An older lady came swooping out of the kitchen, all bright smiles and cheer. “Good morning my lovvies! Did you sleep well?”

Eluse pointed a bloodshot eyeball somewhere in her direction. “Fine, thank you.”

“The sleep was fine,” Consora said. “There just wasn’t enough of it.”

“Oh goody, glad of it. Who’s for tea?”

Eluse and Consora were rather fearful of taking further beverages from their hosts, but once Suscepto had assured them it wasn’t too bad, out came some hot milky mugs.

“Breakfast? We’ve gammon, eggs, toast with butter, mushrooms, fried potatoes, black pudding, venison sausage, and I’ve just got a bit of bubble and squeak on. How’s that sound?”

Eluse could think of nothing worse than food right now, but Consora insisted they’d have the lot. Hot, salty smells drifted from the kitchen, and they did not help his constitution.

“What was in that drink last night?” Eluse grumbled.

“I haven’t the foggiest,” Suscepto said. “Some manner of potion, though. Nothing natural about it. What a marvellous evening, and a terrible, terrible morning.”

“I think yesterday has borrowed all the goodwill from today and taken it for itself.”

The food arrived, and Eluse and Suscepto picked at theirs, but Consora set at hers with fierce abandon. There was very little energy in the room, but Suscepto used all that was remaining to hassle them. “As much as I hate to say it, we’ll have to be off shortly. Danté said he’d be back here first thing.”

“Who?”

“Danté - the traveller.”

“*Who?*”

“The young chap headed for Fal In’Myhra, Eluse! You seemed awfully friendly with him last night, and when I’d told him where we were headed, he said it was very convenient as he was headed that way too, and we agreed that we’d share the road. With it just being the three of us, we have to think about safety in numbers.”

“I don’t remember...” Eluse rubbed his eyes.

“Well, come to think of it, my memory is a little spotty too. Curse that foul brew, I shall never drink it again.”

“I don’t want to travel today,” Consora complained.

Suscepto ruffled himself. “Consora, we are on an urgent mission assigned by not only King Auctoria himself, but Isendré, who—well, I don’t quite know what she is, but very important, I’m sure. If you are not fit for the task, then Eluse and I shall gladly leave you here!”

She huffed, and Eluse, who usually would have argued back, didn’t bother to say anything. “These sausages are making me sick,” she tantrumed, eating another.

Shortly, the doors opened and in came a young man, perhaps sixteen or seventeen summers, who Eluse thought he vaguely recognised from the night before. Perhaps they’d spoken outside the tavern at some point. “Danté!” Suscepto summoned some enthusiasm to his voice. “Good of you to join!”

“You fellas are looking rough,” he said, with a friendly voice that lilted at the vowels. “Are you ready?” He hesitated when he saw Consora. “She looks like she needs a minute.” Her pale blue skin was nearer to green.

“Yes, yes, we’re off when you are!”

Danté hesitated and looked at the sorry group. “Tell you what, why don’t you take a beat, go and wash up, and meet yous here in a quarter hour or so and we’ll be away?”

Thanks were exchanged between them, and the tavern staff too. Glonwyn gave the golden pin a shake and told them they were quite welcome. They excused themselves to the washrooms to make the best that they could of themselves. As they did, Eluse caught Suscepto’s ear.

“Are you sure we can trust him?” he asked. “Seems a little... uncharacteristic of you to arrange a guide that you’ve known for half an hour. What if he’s a robber?” In truth, he doubted it—the man had a friendly face—but he had many groans within him this morning, and he had to let some of them out.

“Well, you know, I’ve been wondering the same thing. But then, last night I had such a sense that he truly was such a fine chap, it had all been arranged before I knew the next thing. Instincts don’t lie, Eluse. We need a guide to the city, and he knows the roads. Besides—we have nothing to rob!”

That much was true. All they had was Suscepto’s sword, and his hand never left its hilt, and Consora’s aether stone, but a single half would be of no use to a thief.

The crisp morning air did a little to liven them up. At Danté’s say-so, they set out on the road.

“You’re travelling a little light, aren’t you fellas?” Danté hoisted up a hefty backpack over his cloaked shoulders as he walked. “Not even coats or nothin’? It’ll get cold where we’re going.”

Eluse explained that they’d left in a bit of a hurry. Danté seemed pleasant enough, and they chatted together as they made their way down the road. While they walked, Consora played with the aether stone around her neck.

Eluse wanted to ask her about it, but she had wandered off a little ahead with Danté and seemed in mid-conversation with him. So, Eluse lied to Suscepto that Danté had been desperate to know the story of Methir, and Suscepto’s eyes lit up and he dashed off to bother the human.

Eluse caught up to Consora. She still fiddled with the stone, a faraway look over her face.

“What’s it like?” he asked, nodding to the stone.

Consora had a small, delighted smile on her face. “She has it. My mother. I can feel her in it. The Moon Folk must have left it for her last night.”

“What is she doing?”

Consora considered her answer. “It doesn’t really work like that. Maybe with a little more practice, but all I can really tell is how she’s feeling. And there are these snippets, like little fragments of a thought.” She seemed to glow as she spoke. “I can tell, just by holding it, that today is a good day. She’s happy. It feels... hopeful, I think. And she’s eaten, too. That’s good.”

“I’m sure she is happy. She can feel you through her stone too, right?”

Consora’s lips pursed as she tried not to smile too hard. “I hope so. I think so. It’s strange, I keep getting these thoughts of my dad flicking into my head, but they’re not my own. They feel like little clouds, they don’t stay long. When she thinks of him, I feel it through the stone.”

“I’m sure. She misses him.”

A brief shadow of sadness crossed Consora’s eyes. Eluse missed him, too. Growing up with the King for a father was close to having no father at all, but Rivären had taken it on himself to fill in where he could. Especially as a younger elfling, he’d had the uncanny ability to make Eluse feel like the only child in the world, even when Consora was right there beside him. All else he had was old Grenka, who was far too old and worn out to play; she would just tell her stories and sing her songs. Rivären was a powerful elf, and could throw Eluse high up into the air and catch him again as if he were made of cotton. He always made time for the young prince, as if he knew the loneliness of growing up in that palace. He certainly made it more bearable, and perhaps without him, he and Consora would not have become such close friends.

The older he had got, Eluse realised how dangerous he was, too. He was a ranger, and so skilled with a bow he could split a reed in two at a hundred paces. For weeks at a time would travel in the Everwood, and sometimes, according to Consora—who often lied about him—the Underwood. When the news came of his death, Eluse grieved only a little less than Consora.

He changed the topic back to the stone. “So what *is* it?”

“Father said they grow like crystals where the magic is strong. Did you see the crystals under the First Tree? They take centuries to become aether stones. While crystals grow, they soak in the qualities of the magic around them, and when they’re taken from the ground, they hold the magic inside them. They’re imbued with it. It’s not possible to break the connection, so that whatever happens to one, happens to the other. Even if they’re on opposite sides of Anima, they’re always connected. That means if one of the stones senses something, the other will sense it, too.”

“So the stone feels what your mother is feeling?”

“And then shares it with this one. And it works the other way, too. It’s incredible. The bond between two connected stones is the strongest link there is; we could be on different sides of the world but we’d know in an instant how the other was feeling, or what we needed—anything.”

“Well, that means you can’t have your usual strops then, or it’ll pass through to her.” Eluse grinned, and Consora swung an arm out at him.

“I just hope she didn’t get the stone while we had all that ale. I don’t know *what* she would have felt then!”

They laughed hard, and Danté, who seemed ready to find an excuse to avoid any more conversation with Suscepto, joined them.

“Aye, you were having a fine night of it last night. I thought he was going to take someone’s head off with that sword!” He pointed at Suscepto. He had a fun laugh, thought Eluse, and he found that he quite liked him.

“I just wish I could remember the rest of it. Was it the same for you?”

“Ahh, I never drink the stuff. Not these days. Cuts right through me.”

Suscepto concurred. “I shan’t touch a drop of it again as long as I live. I felt quite outside myself.”

Danté smiled broadly with his round, boyish face. “Yeah, I feel enough of that even without it. Come on, we’ll cut up this way.” The road split off, one path led to the west and one wound up into the blue mountains. “It’s a bit longer through the hills, but you don’t want to be heading past Old Goan without an army.”

Consora looked down the western road, and they slowed as they passed it. “Why not? What’s down that way?”

“Ahh, all sorts. Bandits and robbers, if you’re lucky. If you’re not, it’s the Fanatics or the bloodhosts. Not the sort you’ll want to cross, believe me.”

Eluse’s ears pricked and Consora’s eyes grew wide. “The Fanatical Dark, you mean?”

“Yeah, they’re the ones.”

“In the West? They’ve been pushed to the East. They’re not here too, surely?”

“Well, whoever it is, you don’t want to be travelling alone through that land. It’s fine enough for the locals, but they don’t take kindly to strangers.”

“But bloodhosts, though?” Consora asked. “They’re not still in this Dharia, are they? I thought there was nothing of them south of the Outerlands.”

“Ahh, you’d better believe it. The other ones, the bandits, the Fanatics, they’re easy. You at least see those ones coming, or you know where they are. The bloodhosts are tricky bastards. You don’t see a thing until their teeth are at your throat. They hide in the wee corners, the dark holes and the old ruins. You think you’re hiding from them and the rock you’ve crawled under turns out to be their nest. It’s the bloodcurse that does it, drives them crazy. Drives them to anything at all. Deceivers and murderers, the lot, they can lie like you’d never believe. They’ll trick you just to get close, pretending to be merchants, or folk needing help.” He gave them a friendly wink. “Or kindly travellers at taverns.”

They laughed, but Consora’s laugh was unsettled. “It’s too early for ghost stories.”

“Ghosts! Now there’s something else to watch for. Maybe we will see some of those on the road come nightfall.”

Consora smirked at him. “You’re messing with us, aren’t you?”

Danté laughed. “Aye, not to worry. You’ll get to know me better. I’m full of old nonsense.”

“None of that was real, then?” Eluse asked. “The Fanatical Dark, the bloodhosts?”

Dante looked around the climbing hills with thoughtful eyes. “Aye, there’s things out here that would love to find you alone.” He breathed in, and seemed to linger on the thought. “That’s why I’m glad of the company.”

Eluse was glad of the company too. They joked and talked more as they walked, and around lunchtime Consora produced some of the venison sausages she’d had loose in her pockets that she’d pilfered from breakfast. She shared one with Eluse, but Danté declined (“*I don’t take food from pockets, as a rule,*”) and Suscepto had soldiered on ahead. Consora decided it wasn’t really worth the bother of chasing him down just to be without another sausage.

Some way up the slope, they saw a crumbled old stone structure in a circle close to the path ahead. “What’s that?” Consora asked Danté.

“A sheepfold. The Men that farmed these lands would have grazed their flocks here once.”

As they neared it, they heard a high squeal, and a thump.

Consora pricked up her ears. “Eluse, listen. A boar, I think.”

Eluse heard something too, but didn’t have the ears for nature that Consora did. She could tell apart the calls of every animal that lived in Lenune, whereas she once told him, with genuine concern, that she was worried he might at some stage mistake a howling wolfpack for a litter of kittens.

They drew up on the sheepfold and the squalling grew louder, and something else too. A kind of groan with it, deep and throaty. As soon as Consora heard it, she stopped dead in her tracks.

“What is it?” Eluse asked. He turned to look at her. She stared straight ahead.

The words were hardly out of his mouth before a furious roar rolled down the hillside at them. There was movement on the other side of the sheep pen. All at once, an enormous bear stood on two feet, claws weighing down on the top of the fold, glaring right at them.

“That,” Consora said.

The hills of the Broad Beacons, or the Blue Mountains, stand proud in the south of Dharia, topped with ancient keeps and fortresses that once kept watch toward the Elven lands. Over the years, the settlements fell into ruin. It is difficult to speculate what perils led to their downfall. It is a little easier to speculate whether such perils remain.

-Briarson and Snooter, Travels in Dharia: An Introduction, Chapter 8.

CHAPTER 14 - THE SHEEPFOLD

“Quickly! Behind me now!” Suscepto rushed forward, his sword waving loosely above his head. “Back, you beast! Back I say!”

A pang of ice jolted Eluse’s spine. He realised that they only had a single weapon between the four of them. The bear, though, stood down, back to the other side of the sheepfold. It did not look at them with hungry eyes, Eluse thought. Not that this deterred Suscepto, who lunged ahead with murderous screaming.

“Suscepto!” Eluse and Consora cried together. “Get back!”

He slowed, holding Methirindil firm. The bear snorted at him and shook its head. It lowered itself back to the other side of the sheepfold, grunting and chuntering.

“What’s it doing?” Consora said.

“I don’t know, but that thing is too close to the road for us to pass,” Danté warned. “Tell your man there to get back, he’s gonna get himself ripped to bits.”

“Get back, Suscepto!” Eluse called again. Suscepto hesitated, but stayed where he was. Eluse gripped him by the shoulder and pulled him backwards. “Come on, you gangly old nuisance. Come and direct some duties over here.”

Reluctantly, Suscepto rejoined the path, pointing the sword straight ahead. The bear’s attention wasn’t fixed on the four of them; rather, it seemed to be trying to get itself into the sheepfold. On the right of the path was the sheepfold and the bear; the left side yawned into a steep tumble down the hill.

“We need to get by it,” Eluse said, furrowing his brow.

“We will. Whatever you do, don’t panic,” Danté said, in particular to Suscepto. “None of yous have come across a bear before?”

Suscepto huffed. “Well, were we in the forest I daresay I’d have made short work of the fellow by now, but—” he faltered when Eluse and Consora rolled their eyes.

Danté pulled at his jacket. “Look, all you have to do is make yourself bigger. He’s not interested in us. We just want to get by. Just don’t panic.”

“I’m *not* panicking,” Consora frowned irritably.

“Come on, stick together, all four of us now. Come on.”

They closed around one another, all the while keeping eyes on the bear, which grunted and strained at something, mostly hidden behind the old stonework. As one, they sidled down the road, turning as they moved so that they faced the creature at all times.

Veering around the sheepfold a powerful scent of it wafted up, thick and musky. “Slowly now,” urged Danté. Their backs were to the steep slope of the hill, heels teetering close to it. The bear continued to paw through the entrance.

The bear caught their eyes again and withdrew from the entrance to the den. It heaved itself back up onto its hind legs and roared.

“Stay. Very. Still.” Dante said.

They stopped, barely daring to breathe. Eluse was stunned, and the air around him felt thick. It was so enormous. Eluse’s heart pounded in his chest.

It was a magnificent animal. Its fur was thick and ropey, tangled with grasses and leaves. Brilliant brown eyes squinted at them over a long snout. At another time, Eluse might have admired its claws, so sharp and slender, thick and brown where they met the paws, tapering into a pale white.

It lowered itself onto all fours, and trod towards them. Danté’s voice was almost lost under its thick breaths. “Do not run. Stay exactly where you are.”

It sniffed them again.

Danté took a large, purposeful step forward. Eluse gasped. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Methirindil flick up as Suscepto instinctively moved.

The human held his arms apart and shoulders broad. The bear eyed him. “*Go away*,” he said in a deep, calm voice. It reminded Eluse of how his father spoke.

The bear furrowed its brow. Its eyes narrowed.

“*Go away*,” he repeated in the same voice.

It sniffed in.

“*Go. Away.*”

The bear huffed out with a great breath and turned its head. Relief washed over Eluse as it hauled its enormous body around and sauntered away from the path. As it went it turned its head to look at them, almost lazily. If it was irritated by them, it didn’t show it. It moved past the sheepfold, and kept on going over the grassland.

When it had moved a little further away, all four of them sighed in relief.

“Danté, that was amazing!” Consora said.

He grinned back at them. “Bears aren’t so bad, see. You just have to show them who’s in charge. You can’t be scared of them.”

“Well, bravo, good man, bravo.” Suscepto nodded. “Glad to see you had it all in hand, it would have been a pity to settle matters with more violent means.” With a haughty smile he spun his sword around his hand, lost control of it, and it clattered to the ground.

“I thought we were going to become bear food.” Eluse grinned.

“**Hey!**” cried Suscepto, stooping for his sword. He shouted toward Consora, who had darted toward the sheepfold.

The bear was already some distance away and didn’t seem to be coming back but Eluse jumped when he saw her run for the entrance. It was a little doorway, big enough for sheep and not much else. As soon as she got to it, she nipped inside.

“Where is she *going?*” Suscepto cried.

Eluse followed. The structure was ancient, and holes had fallen through in places in the roof of the sheepfold. At its entrance was a sludgy puddle and fresh mud torn up by the bear. He ducked in after her.

“Consora?” Darkness swallowed him as he stepped inside. He shivered, looking around. The soggy mud squished under his feet as he continued in. Something crunched underfoot. A rock? It didn’t feel like a rock. It felt like bone. He could hear Suscepto blustering away about something outside, but most of the noise had fallen away. His eyes took a few moments to adjust to the dark, but when they did, he could make out Consora’s shape on the far end of the sheepfold.

She knelt beside another shape. He squinted, and out of the dark he saw the shape of a boar. The pig lay on its side, sludge thick on its matted yellow hair, and it panted for breath in short rasps. Its ragged tusks could have cut her open with a jerk of its head, but there was no fear on her face. The boar was lying still, except for its flank that rose and fell with laboured breathing.

Danté poked his head through the doorway behind them. “What are you doing?”

“Give us a moment, Danté,” Eluse said. The man didn’t come any further in, but watched from the entrance. Eluse turned back to Consora. “That’s a glade boar. They live in the forest. What’s it doing all this way into Dharia?”

“You’re a long way from home,” she breathed, stroking between the boar’s ears. “What’s happened to you?”

The boar gazed at the two elves with milky eyes. It wasn’t panicked, but so fatigued it could barely lift its head.

“It’s hurt?” Eluse asked.

“She. Yes—look at her hind.” Consora tenderly brushed away some of the mud and hair on its rear leg, where a nasty gash had ripped her flesh. It was sticky and yellowed, and pus leaked at the edges over raised red skin. The boar shuddered despite Consora’s gentle touch.

“It’s infected,” Eluse said. “That can’t have been the bear.”

Consora murmured in agreement. “She must have come here and the bear picked up her scent.” The pig grunted and shuffled a little.

Behind Consora came a quiet splash, and over her shoulder Eluse noticed a movement—a small piglet, and then another. They stood together, huddled in the dark of the sheepfold, looking at their mother with quiet concern.

“Poor things,” Consora beckoned them closer. Tentatively, they took a few steps forward, but didn’t come all the way.

Eluse knelt down in the mud. “Come here,” he urged the piglets, holding out his hand. They snuffled toward him, nosing at his fingers with wary snouts. He looked at the mother pig. “She won’t make it, will she?”

“No.”

He swallowed. “Will they?” he nodded at the piglets. They’d come closer now, and he brushed his hand along one of them. It settled into him. He felt its warm breath on the back of his hand, quick and wet.

Consora looked at their little frames as they tried to make sense of the elves. “There would have been more than two. I suppose this is all that’s left.” She stroked the dying boar down its back. “You did well, girl. We’ll take care of them. They’ll be alright.”

As Eluse gazed at the boar, he recalled the cultist who had died at his own hand those months before. He remembered the look of fear. Now, looking at the eyes of the boar, there was enough similarity there to unsettle him.

Danté shuffled at the entrance. Behind him, Suscepto fussed. “Your man here is saying we need to get going,” Danté said. “He’s not very happy.”

“I won’t rush this,” Consora said. “Tell him to be quiet. We’ll help her on her way if we can.” From the entrance, voices exchanged, and then to Eluse’s surprise, quietened down.

Consora lay her hand across the head of the boar, which breathed heavily as it looked on her with wild eyes. As she lay her hand on her head, its eyes softened. “You understand, don’t you, sweet girl?” she whispered. The boar’s breathing slowed.

Golden light rippled across the hair of the boar, then flitted into tiny sparks. They rolled across its skin and gathered at Consora’s fingertips, where they soaked into her skin. One or two, at first, then more. The underside of the ancient ruin shimmered delicately with the glittering light.

Eluse watched as Consora drew the life from the boar, and closed his eyes. He realised this was his first encounter with death since that night in the woods. Behind his eyelids he was there again. He saw the dark of the forest, and felt the slick blood of the dying elf splash against him again. He opened his eyes again, but the man's dying face hung in his vision. His lip had curled at his own memory.

Back in the sheepfold, they were a world apart from the dead elves in the woods. Consora soothed the pig, stroking its cheek as she worked her magic. "Sleep well, now," she whispered. Its eyes were tranquil, and more of its life slipped out like warm light into Consora. Its breathing slowed, and slowed, and stopped.

Velvet quiet fell on the sheepfold.

Consora looked at Eluse. She held her fingers towards the two piglets. "Let them know they're alright, Eluse."

He shook himself and pushed the dead elf from his mind. "I've got you," he reassured, scratching their backs. They loosened themselves from him and waded closer to their still mother. They sniffed at her with small, sad eyes.

Consora held her hand out to them. "I need to help them," she said. "They need to understand." The sparkling reignited, this time starting at her fingers, and the magical embers floated over the air to their little bodies where they settled, then melted away, like snowflakes on skin. Gold and green, the light shone from her to them as she trickled her light into them. "I'm sorry for your mother. Be at peace now." The two piglets gazed at her with transfixed eyes, blinking slowly as the light surrounded them. Eluse found himself absorbed too, as he watched Consora share her light and life with these two young boars. The sparks flickered out, and the stone den was dark again. The piglets looked on with melancholy, trusting eyes.

"Thank you," Eluse breathed.

Consora gazed sadly at the lifeless body of the mother. "She needed it. They understand that, now." She rose and made her way toward the entrance. Danté was still watching, silent. The young boars looked one final time at their mother, then turned and trotted after the elf.

"Hey," Eluse said. "Let's take their mother outside. For the bear."

Consora nodded. "You're right. I'll bring the piglets out, you bring her."

She left the sheepfold, piglets in tow, and Eluse turned back for the boar. She was heavy and awkward to move, but he managed to drag her to the entrance. He squinted as he reemerged into the daylight. The peace of the sheepfold was left behind, and his ears filled with Suscepto's blathering about timings and hurry and the close proximity of bears.

Eluse placed the pig outside the sheepfold and ignored as much of Suscepto's clucking as he could. Even Suscepto seemed moved when he watched the piglets give their mother a final, sad sniff. But, the piglets seemed to understand much more now, thanks to Consora's magic, and tottered away with the elves back to the path.

“What can we do with these?” Eluse asked Consora, nodding at them. “They can hardly follow us to Fal In’Myhra.”

“No,” Consora said. “They can’t.” She gave them a sad scratch. “I’ve shared my memories of the forest with them. They know where it is. Whether they will get back, now—well, I suppose that’s up to them.”

Eluse looked between the piglets, which had already started to shuffle back down the road. The First Tree was still large on the horizon, but mountains lay between it and them. “It’s an awfully long way for two little piglets.”

“It is.”

They stood, watching for quite a while as they wandered away.

Eluse and Consora didn’t speak much after that for a while. A greater elf than either of the pair—Sorrel, perhaps—could have brought the boar back to health with their magics, but the Elves’ relationship with death was a complex one. Eluse knew that if the pig had lived, perhaps a bear would be unable to feed her cubs. Death at the right time would allow for more life. Consora had drawn strength and life from the dying mother boar and shared it with her children, and Eluse supposed that the mother would have been quite alright with that.

Eluse liked to see Consora with animals, even in sombre moments like that one. Nature and magic were about the only two things that Consora held any real reverence for.

As he walked he found the cultist was back in his mind again. He’d watched as Consora had taken the life of a living creature, but it had been a merciful, beautiful thing. The elf who had died in the woods—no, who *he had killed* in the woods—was no such thing. It simmered beneath his skin.

They rose higher up the landscape, and in the early afternoon a mist started to draw in. They could still see much of the country from these hills, and some of the towns were bigger than they expected. Conversation reemerged between them.

Danté was unimpressed. “Ahh, those are just the diddy ones. You’ve not seen the big ones yet. Fal In’Myhra, now *that’s* a city. Just you wait for the Fellstar Keep. You’ve never seen anything like it, I’m telling you. The whole castle is this wild colour, like a rainbow all varnished in black. Shines like lightning under a sunset.”

Eluse had seen sketches, but could hardly wait to see it for himself. “What is it you’re travelling to the city for?”

“Ahh, me? I’m just going home. It’s been a long time.”

“You’re from Fal In’Myhra?”

“Sure. Best city in the world. I miss it...” He trailed off for a moment, then caught himself. “You’ll love it. I’ll show you around when we get there.”

“Thank you, but I don’t think we’ll get much time to explore,” Eluse said.

Consora's mouth was a thin line. "I'm sure we'll have some chance to see the city, at least."

"Maybe. But we have business to attend to."

Danté interrupted. "Ahh yes, this *business* your man was so keen to talk about last night. What *is* that, now?"

The elves looked to one another, unsure of what exactly they could say.

Eluse was the first to speak. "It's a diplomatic assignment. We can't say more than that, I'm afraid."

"Well, your man certainly said more than that last night, and he didn't mention any diplomacy. He was talking about power, and eyes, and the Spider. Says you're on a *quest* for it." His voice rose as he spoke, but stayed light.

Eluse sighed. Suscepto knew better than to share Elven secrets. What had he said? And to whom else? "I... There's nothing else to tell. There's trouble in the Summerlands, and we're to discuss the Elven power to protect the realm. But beyond that, I really cannot say." He wasn't sure whether the pomp he heard in his own words had delivered itself over to the ears of the human.

Danté considered this, giving a small look ahead. "Huh," he mumbled quietly.

"Huh?"

"Well. I'm sorry to hear you've got troubles. It's just... No, nothin'. What do I know?"

"Go on," Consora probed.

"Well, I'd always thought that you Elves didn't really *do* power like the Men."

"How so?" asked Eluse.

"Seems a little strange, that's all, that you'd be on a quest for some magical artefact to give you power to wipe folks out, when it always seemed to me that your Spider's whole thing was to get rid of power. I thought power was much more a Men thing."

"Oh, come on," scoffed Consora. "The World Spider was the most powerful creature that has ever lived. She never wanted to be rid of power. Of course we have to use her strength. It's not like we're starting a war. We were attacked. We're ending one."

"Aye, but it seemed a little different in the stories. It's been a while since I've read 'em, but I thought it was only meant to be her fighting the Shadow, a kind of 'ending of all wars' thing. Sure, you've got the Spider with all the power, but what about the Songbird?"

Consora blinked. "What songbird?"

"Well, they're one and the same, right? The Spider and the Songbird?"

She furrowed her brow. “Well, in some of the stories, the Spider took on the form of a bird just before she died, and she spoke to Oriothen in that shape... What’s that got to do with it?”

Danté frowned. “That’s not the story I read.”

“What did you read?”

“Ahh, I don’t know. That the Spider was always the Songbird, and the Songbird was always the Spider. Not a clue. And it’s been a long time, I’m sure you Elves know your stories better than me. I just always liked how you seemed different from us Dharians. But hey, I ain’t a man of much learning!”

Eluse laughed, but it was a bit of a muddled laugh. Something about Danté’s words sat in his mind. He thought they sounded a little like something old Grenka had once said, but he couldn’t remember what. He looked behind him as they climbed the hill, and he could just about see the First Tree—much smaller now, but it wasn’t the distance that began to hide it. It was the pale mist that rolled in thickly. The hills they were walking grew stony around them, and in places large rocks loomed up. They still climbed.

“How much higher does this road lead?” he asked.

“Quite a bit. There’s somewhere we can rest higher up, but it’s a bit of a ways yet. I see none of yous have got any camping gear, so we’ll find some shelter.”

The sun was just a patch of white behind thick cloud now, and they followed it north as it was on its way down and the wind picked up. It started as an eerie whistle through the piles of dark grey stone, but when they were out of the shelter of the cliffs that the path cut through, it hit them head-on with a vigorous strength, pulling at Eluse’s cloak in sharp gusts. The landscape remained unchanging for a while, until it began to grow darker, and a spitting of rain began.

“You’re sure of the path?” Suscepto raised his voice over the howling wind.

“Aye, quite sure. We’ll reach a shelter before nightfall. An old mountain fort, Flintknock; only travellers use it.” Danté wiped the rain from his face.

The stone path had become more extreme now, ascending sharply as it cut into the flintstone mountain. From the Dharian lowlands earlier in the day they had little idea that the terrain became so taxing. The wind fiddled at his clothing with chilly fingers, worming their way inside. Eluse noticed that Suscepto’s hand rested on his swordhilt again, and his eyes combed the ridges and dips ahead. Eluse caught up to him.

“You don’t trust him, do you?” he said, looking to Danté.

“I trust him just fine,” Suscepto replied. “But it’s something in these hills. They have a dark way about them.”

“Well, happily, you have a sword meant for cutting through the dark,” Eluse said with a smile, but Suscepto hardly responded. And it *was* getting darker now; the skies were thick and gloomy and they couldn’t tell how far off nightfall was. Here and there, the gale dislodged stones

from the crags nearby, and rockfall skittered down. Faces stalwart against the wind, they carried on. The dying light played tricks on their eyes, and more than once Eluse thought he saw a flash of movement overhead, or a shadow dip behind a rock, but when he looked closer, there was nothing at all.

“There it is!” cried Danté as the rain came down in lashes. He pointed to the precipice, and seated proudly on the bluff was a ruined tower, lit up against the last light of the fierce sky. A shudder of thunder rolled in. “Not too soon if you ask me!”

The cobbled road had come away in chunks, and the footwork was not made easy. Up they went, holding onto one another against the wind, and Danté’s earlier words of the cold caught up to them. Eluse had his ironsilk cloak which he wrapped around himself, and it kept off the worst of the rain, but the other two had nothing, and they shivered immensely. By the time they made it to the fort, they could think of nothing but getting dry.

There were no lights in the ruins, but they were glad of that. It was not as solid as the elves had hoped; the walls stood tall but without a roof anywhere, there was no shelter that they could see.

“Where now?” Suscepto called to Danté.

“Down here!” he shouted, and his voice was whipped away by the wind. They followed him and he led them to a staircase cut away into the rock, leading under the ground. He skipped quickly down the steps, and they followed. Eluse hesitated near the top. He didn’t like holes in the ground. The last time he’d been into one, he’d been chased in by a Shade, and he couldn’t remember going into one before that.

Still, though, he’d met Isendré last time. He peered into this one. It didn’t look like any benevolent wytches lived down here.

He stepped in. The air was stale and smelled like dust, and something Eluse hadn’t smelled before. The roar of the weather outside was now just a dull hum. It was solid dark inside, the kind of black that had a weight to it. A slip of light floated down the steps behind them, but there was little of it. Their voices echoed around the bottom, and though they couldn’t see a thing, they could tell by the sounds that they were somewhere very enclosed. Eluse felt something land on his neck, and quickly brushed it away with a shudder. It felt like it had legs.

“Danté? Are you there?” Suscepto called.

“Aye, right here, right here. Careful of the ground, it’s a bit precarious.”

They felt around in front of them, and Suscepto drew his sword. It shone brightly in the dark; it seemed to have more of a glow than before. Dante rubbed his hands together and blew on them. “Hoo, I am glad to be out of that storm.”

“Where *are* we?” asked Consora, looking around them. The swordlight glinted on twisted stone contortions; carved stone walls with images that told stories, and statues of people. Men and women, proud but forgotten.

“Oh, this?” said Danté, shaking his hair dry. “This is the crypt.”

Somewhere, something shifted in the dark.

*Entombed here lies Rosie Flintknock.
May this tomb last longer than her brief life.*

-Inscription on a gravestone in the Flintknock crypt.

CHAPTER 15 - THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

Their eyes accustomed enough to see a deep chamber, each side lined with sarcophaguses of grey stone stretching into the dark. The small noises they made clattered back at them from the immortal dead cast in stone. Blind eyes watched from carved faces.

A shudder prowled through Eluse. The idea of the dead in these caskets sealed underground in the cold dark made him nauseous. In Arath' Sayah the dead would be returned to the forest, or set free on the Serpent's Tongue. Cold stone would not hold him when he died.

He wanted to rip the coffins open. The thought of what he might find inside stopped him.

"Who were these Men?" asked Consora.

"Lords of Flintknock, I suppose. There were half a dozen or so forts in these hills to guard from the south. Each one built and garrisoned by some of the first families of Dharia." Danté looked over the quiet tomb. "Welcome to their home."

"This was all the work of one family"

"No, no. They had workers and servants and farmers to harvest their lands and feed them, and the like. That's what money gets you. It would have been a big place, once." He brushed a thick pile of dust from one of the coffins. "But we're a few thousand years too late for all that."

"And you've been here before?"

"Aye."

"Many times?"

Danté hummed thoughtfully. "Many times, aye."

They moved forward, deeper into the crypt. No torches for warmth, just the glow of the cold steel sword. Consora went first, striding ahead, but the others lingered back. Eluse blinked, the tight sting of dust in his eyes. Soft light danced over dead faces and seemed to breathe life back into them. In parts, there were hollows cut into the wall that stretched back into the black. Eluse peered into one. Chalk-white bone rested in coarse powdery dust. He wondered how long the dead man had lay there.

Danté saw Eluse's restlessness. "I promised you ghosts, didn't I?" he joked.

Ghosts might have been better. They had at least a little life to them. Everything here was dead.

“Why do Men *do* this?” Eluse asked. The words were meant for Consora, but Danté overheard.

“Do what?” he asked.

“Lock the dead away like they’re afraid of them.”

“Ahh, I don’t know if it’s all like that. We just want somewhere to remember them. We need a place to lay down flowers, and say a few words, and weep in peace. We don’t build these places for the dead. They’re made for the living.” He paused at a statue of a woman who held a bouquet of stone lilies. “We don’t like to think we’ll be forgotten when we go.”

“Who was this, then?” asked Eluse, stopping at the foot of a statue of a tall man with a goblet in his hand. His face had crumbled to near nothing.

“I don’t know,” said Danté.

“It sounds pretty enough to have somewhere to lay flowers, but in the forest, the dead became the flowers.”

A low rumble growled through the crypt, but it sounded like it came from outside. “Thunder?” asked Consora.

“I don’t think so...” Suscepto said. The light faded as he strode back toward their entrance. A moment later he hurried back. “The entrance is blocked!”

“What?” Consora gasped, and they dashed back. The top of the steps was sealed completely, a block of cut stone laying across it. Suscepto rushed to it and pushed. “Eluse, Consora! Danté! Come help!”

The elves ran to help, but the stone didn’t even wobble. It felt thick, like it weighed as much as the tomb itself. Eluse pounded on it with his fist. His skin stung as he beat the stone. This must be how the bones felt, he thought, trapped inside their coffins. Consora rammed her small frame into the slab, over and over.

“Danté, help!” Suscepto cried.

“I don’t think you want to be doing that,” said Danté in a quiet voice. Very quiet.

“*What?*”

“Keep quiet, keep calm,” he said. “There’s something out there that’s lifted a great stone against those steps. I wouldn’t be in a hurry to go out there to meet it.”

“Where have you brought us?” Suscepto snapped.

“Out of the rain. Into the dark. Under the earth.” Danté’s voice was soft as the dust in the crypt, and in the glow Eluse could see that he looked at the ground.

“What is *out there?*”

“Nothing so bad as what’s in here.”

From deeper in the undercroft then, a stirring. A crack, and an echo. A scratch as something slithered over rock. Voices. Whispers from the depths.

A shadow fell across Suscepto’s face, despite the bright sword’s light. “What have you done?” he roared, holding his sword high, but the man stepped back into the murk.

“Quick, catch up to him!” Eluse’s voice was cracking. How could they have been so *stupid?* Consora lunged forward to snatch for him, but Danté was gone in the black.

Something glinted in the dark. Stone dragged on stone. Shadows spun away into nothing and danced as the sword moved. More noises, like the scuttle of a scorpion.

Eluse’s heart pounded like a war drum in his head. He was ready, he had to be. He stepped forward on shaking legs and slipped his fingers through the glove on his ironsilk. He must not show his fear. He’d remembered that from the Crownswords. He raised the cloak, holding it so tight the silk cut into his skin. Suscepto stood forward too, sword raised and teeth bared. The stink of the catacombs rushed up in a hot breeze, and then silence fell, and fell, and fell.

A voice crept forward out of the dark like long arms reaching for them. “*Hello.*”

The elves were noiseless and still with dread. Suscepto held his sword high, and Consora pushed alongside Eluse, crouched and ready to fight, fists high.

“*Don’t mind the dark.*”

The voice scraped the air it hung on.

“Eluse,” Consora whispered.

Red eyes flickered ahead of them. “*It isn’t so bad once you’re used to it.*”

Four, five pairs.

Consora whispered again. “Eluse, they live in the tombs...”

“*We find our homes amongst the dead.*”

“...And he lied so well...”

“*Deception is our bedfellow.*”

Her voice wavered. “...And the rock we climbed under is their nest...”

“*These are our catacombs. Welcome to our home.*”

“Eluse,” Consora whispered. “They’re bloodhosts.”

A pale figure stepped out of the gloom. Then another shape, then more. Mottled white skin that hadn't seen sunlight for as long as the bones in the tomb. Robes as tattered and faded as the statues of the dead. Among them, Danté.

"I did tell you I was full of nonsense." His face was down. He did not look at them. Suscepto growled, and had the others not been there, Eluse was certain that he would have torn the man limb from limb.

"What did you *do*, Danté?" Consora growled. Her teeth shone at the man.

"Back, you fiends," Suscepto snarled, jerking the sword forward. The men in robes did not react.

"That's a fine blade," one of them said, and ran a wet tongue over teeth like broken tombstones. "Now *put it down*."

"You'll take it from me dead!" Suscepto cried, and Eluse saw again the bravery that shone from him when the Shade came at them. It rode out of his chest like a knight, and gave Eluse courage. "May the light of Methir cleanse you!"

Suscepto's eyes darted between them. There were six figures, skin stretched and broken in thick robes. They looked a kind of rotten he'd seen before in the forest; like maggots were ready to burst from their skin. The shine of the sword glinted back at them from red eyes, slitted like cats—Danté's, too, were coloured like wine now. None of them held blades, and under their robes they were as gaunt as the bones in the walls. Could they fight them? What choice did they have? Neither side moved.

"You'll see we aren't so bad, I'm sure." The foremost bloodhost spoke, bigger than the others, and his voice was smooth but so old, it felt to Eluse like it was the crypt itself that spoke. "Come into the deep. Sup with us."

"The bloodcurse has you," Consora breathed, fists shaking. "You are lost."

A pause, as the bloodhost studied her with hungry eyes. "Wise elf."

There was a rush of wind and around them the blackness was flung up in their eyes. A force hurtled through Eluse and knocked him sideways, and for a moment he was blind. His arms scraped on a sarcophagus and dirt rushed in, coagulating in his broken skin. Consora yelped, and when he cleared his eyes he saw why. The bloodhost had her.

It had got behind them impossibly quickly. It held her with skeletal arms, clawed at the end, and those claws at her throat. Not Consora. Not her. Eluse could taste bile in his own mouth. Sour and biting. He wanted to spit, but didn't dare move.

"*Put it down*." The bloodhost repeated again.

Suscepto trembled, and Methirindil shook. The sword had an angry light to it, and Eluse thought it seemed to have a mind to leap from Suscepto's hand of its own accord and through the throat of the bloodhost. He wished it would.

The creature stroked a strand of green hair away from Consora's neck with a claw; five curved knives hewn of bone. She panted, eyes wild, and snapped her teeth at him. The bloodhost sniffed at the rush of blood that flushed through her, watching her neck, transfixed. "It would be such a shame to make this tomb your own. Elves are not meant for graves. **Put. It. Down.**"

Consora looked like she tried to speak, but could make no sound. His talons dug into her skin, leaving long scratches raised in red. She reached back and dug her nails into its own arms, but the bloodhost didn't even react.

On the other side, the bloodhosts shifted. Anticipation dug into their grotesque faces. They licked papery lips, staring at the little beads of ruby red that had swelled up on Eluse's arm where he had scraped it.

Magic. Could he use magic? Even if he was as strong as Sorrel, the claws would have ripped Consora's throat from her before he had even raised his hands...

"If I lay down my blade, you will kill us anyway," Suscepto said, with a voice that Eluse knew hid a tremor.

"There are many ways to die, elf. If you think to fight us, you will feel every one of them." He turned his face to Consora, so close that his grey tongue brushed her ear. "So will she."

Anger swelled inside Eluse, such a rage he had never felt before. He longed desperately for his own spear. If they would die here, he wanted to die fighting. He would kill them all if he could. If he could get her back.

Danté finally looked up and spoke. His voice sounded different to the bloodhosts. It still sounded human. "Come on. Put the sword down, there's no need for anybody to be hurt." His words made Eluse sick. He looked at Danté with fire in his eyes. He longed to kill him most of all. "Look, I'm sorry I lied to you. You seem like nice folk, you do. It's just... Well, we hardly get much choice, here. Come on Sylar, you're hurting her." He spoke to the thing holding Consora. It did not loosen its grip.

"Don't do it, Suscepto," snarled Consora. "Fight them. Kill them. If you put down the sword, they'll kill us all." Eluse felt so powerless watching the bloodhost hold her. She was such a little thing in his arms. She was like a little bird, and this thing seemed set to break her. But her eyes were feral, and if the bloodhost had not held her neck so tightly Eluse thought she would have tried to bite his fingers off.

The bloodhosts in the doorway brayed with excitement, but the one who held Consora, whom Danté had called Sylar, looked at her with something close to affection. "Brave girl," he admired. "But you misjudge us. You may yet live." He looked at Suscepto. "Do not play with her life so recklessly."

Methirindil shook, and then lowered. "Don't hurt her," he pleaded. Eluse could only watch, dismayed. But, what would he have done for Consora's sake? Lunged at this creature with his sword? She would be dead in an instant. It should be him in the thing's grasp, not her.

The other bloodhosts moved in and snatched the sword from his hand. The one who took it grasped its handle, then screeched. It flung the sword to the ground with a hiss like boiling water.

“It burns!” it screamed. “It’s fire!”

The bloodhost fell to its knees in a flurry of frayed robes, writhing and yelping. The rest of the group backed away as it thrashed in an invisible blaze. Grim satisfaction crawled through Eluse. The screams increased, until with a final bloodcurdling squeal, his flailing stopped. He fell, and his limbs crinkled up like a dying spider. He was dead.

Sylar, who had seemed so collected a moment ago, almost dropped Consora. “*What was that?*” he hissed.

Consora *laughed* in his arms. Then she kicked him, but he didn’t move.

“The sword! Don’t touch the sword!” several voices shouted from among the bloodhosts.

“Hah! Lady Methir greets you!” Suscepto cried. “The light that cuts through the dark!”

Eluse’s eyes flicked between the bloodhosts and Methirindil. It lay a dozen feet away. In the swirl of confusion, this would be the only chance they would get.

Ignoring the panic in his chest, he lunged. Suscepto moved for it too. A cacophony of savage cries shook the crypt as the bloodhosts fumbled for them both, and Consora struggled too, though Sylar held her. One flung itself for Eluse, but he managed to duck underneath it and slid to the ground. The thought of Consora at the teeth of that creature was the strength he needed. On his stomach, he forced himself between the mass of bodies. Ragged claws scrapped at his back and neck, but he wriggled out of the way. With that power in that sword, one swing would be all it would take. He pushed forward, he felt the cool bronze of the hilt as his fingers brushed it and it slipped away...

He didn’t know what happened next, but he was dragged away. He found himself wrapped in the fetid stench of ancient robes and emaciated arms. He thrashed, but it was too late. One of them had him. Suscepto, too, had been seized. They were held fast, in spindly arms that had no right to be as strong as they were. Despair washed through him, blacker than the tomb. A gasp of anguish moaned from his mouth. He had failed.

His body tensed as he waited for the rage, for Sylar to rip out Consora’s throat and then his own. But it did not come. Sylar looked between Consora and the other two. He smiled, like a scab breaking open. “Admirable. But not a thing you shall do again.” Then, taking care to step well past Methirindil and leave it where it lay, the bloodhosts carried the elves into the dark.

If ever you find yourself facing a bloodhost, remember this: They once were men and women like you or me. Remember it, but don't expect it'll do you any good. Once they have you, that's more or less that.

-R. Glibbs, A Compendium Of Natural Horrors.

CHAPTER 16 - THE ALTAR OF THE WYRM

Scraping.

Constant scraping.

For hours now, nothing but scrape, scrape, scrape, driving him insane.

“Shut up!” Eluse cried, his voice breaking, slamming his hand onto the bars of the cage, then retracting it quickly. He had to be careful.

The bloodhost stared at him through the gaps in the door to his cage and grinned, a vicious row of teeth gleaming back. It might have once been a woman; now it was a shrivelled stick of a thing. For hours she'd stood, doing nothing but watching and scraping her fingernails over the stone of the chamber wall.

Scrape.

They had been taken deep into the bowels of the earth, through a labyrinth of shafts and burrows where carved stone tunnels had given way to rugged rock. The coffins and statues were here no longer, but bones, loose in the earth, lined the path. Down, down, into the cold they had gone, until they had reached a large circular chamber.

Candles issued black smoke and a pungent stink that cloyed Eluse's throat and nose. Pathways descended deeper into the cavern from entrances gaping like mouths. A stone table sat in the centre on an ornate dais, and around it black iron cages turned to rust under the cold water that dripped from the ceiling, spattering his skin. They were small, and the elves had each been forced into different cages, having to squat because of their size. They'd been locked with an old, rusted key, that clinked from a ring in the gnarled fingers of the scraping bloodhost. Metal crumbled under his fingers as he grasped at the bars, but it was strong, and the top so low that his neck hurt from bending it down. Then they had been left.

They had shouted and hollered, but nobody came. The bloodhosts carried the body of the dead one through, into another side tunnel. In and out they came across the passageways, disappearing down one and reappearing in another. Eluse had seen Danté, mostly keeping out of sight, but when he did cross the chamber he looked away. Eluse could sense the shame on him, and hoped it burned him. And now, this infernal creature had come, who scratched at the wall and did little else.

Scrape.

It looked like all she could do was scrape. Horrible clumped hair hung from beneath a frayed brown hood. It stuck to her face and between her broken teeth which smiled in a haunting grin. Occasionally she would twitch, or shudder. There was a wild look in her dim red eyes, like something inside her had broken. Eluse thought of rabid wolves in the forest. They had the same look on, when they'd hang so close to death from the disease they didn't realise that it had destroyed them already. They fight and froth until they roll over dead, killed from the inside out.

Somewhere, in the dark, an insect scuttled over the rocks.

Scrape.

Eluse blistered with anger and revulsion, and his eyes frantically scoured the chamber, but there was *nothing*. Not a jagged stone, no tools, not so much as a splinter of wood within reach. His gaze snagged on the keys, hanging tantalisingly close, glinting through the clawed grasp of the bloodhost standing watch. The creature's sunken eyes bore into him.

He patted himself down for anything useful; his ironsilk might protect him from their claws, but it couldn't get him out of this cage. Methirindil lay somewhere in the upper chambers, and Consora's aether stone could do nothing for them here. His pockets yielded only dust, grit, and the mashed remnants of the ivy berries he'd forgotten about days ago.

The keys caught the candlelight, and a thought stirred.

"Consora," he whispered, low as he could. "Remember in Suscepto's chambers? With the ivy?"

A loud, indignant voice answered instead. "Well I certainly do, you pair of delinquents. And if you think I have the patience now for your winding-ups, you're quite mistaken. This is *not* the time!"

"Shh," Eluse hissed, subtly rolling an ivy seed between his fingers. "Look. It would tangle up *anything*..."

Recognition sparked in Consora's eyes. She glanced warily at the bloodhost. She watched the three of them with hungry interest. "You think...?"

"We've got to try." Eluse scraped together the seeds, not many—eight, maybe nine—clinging to the wet pulp in his pocket. Casually, as though shifting his weight, he flicked a few through the bars onto the chamber floor.

"Hey!" Consora's sudden shout made Eluse freeze. "Hey, help!"

Eluse looked over. A bright smear of blood marked the skin on her arm. Alarmed, he stopped what he was doing.

"Help! I cut myself on the metal cage. It's bleeding a lot. It hurts. I need help." She flicked drops of blood on the ground, her voice pitching higher with feigned panic that Eluse had come to know well.

The bloodhost's nostrils flared, her snakelike tongue tasting the air hungrily. She moved, lumbering closer, claws scraping on stone.

Consora edged back, but let more blood drip between the bars. "Please, help me. I'm scared. Look at all this blood."

The monster moved to the blood like a vulture to a carcass. Her eyes, wild and starving, shone dark red, and her jaw clacked. She sank to her knees, and with a grey, snakelike tongue licked the wet blood from the dusty ground. Consora swallowed and flicked more blood at her, splattering her face. She flung a claw up to her cheek, wiping the blood into her mouth.

It was now or never. Eluse flung the last of the seeds at the bloodhost's feet. He closed his eyes and reached into the black void, searching for tiny threads of green life in the lifeless chamber. There—tiny, fragile, alive. He pushed his power into them, deep and desperate, and the cage was lit by a gentle, twinkling glow. Sprouts cracked from their seeds.

The bloodhost ignored it, done with the drops on the ground. She was crumpled before the cage, clutching at the metal bars with her claws, ravenous eyes on Consora. Consora shuffled backwards quickly, but the cage was tiny.

Fresh green vines wriggled around the rotted ankles of the bloodhost as Eluse tried desperately to guide them. But the strain was immense—without the power of the forest, his magic drained directly from him. His head pounded and limbs trembled. But, as the creature clawed at Consora, the desperation that gripped him flooded him with energy.

"Hey!" shouted Suscepto, reaching out at the bloodhost through the bars. "Hey, come here! Feed on me, you worthless carcass!" He showed his arms, and for a moment the bloodhost stopped reaching at Consora and looked at him, lips peeled back in a sneer.

Eluse ignored it and focused. Green tendrils hardened brown and woody, snaring further along its body, wrapping through robes and along limbs. The thing seemed as if it didn't even feel it at all. Perhaps it *couldn't* feel.

At long last, the thing stumbled, and finally took notice of the vines. She grunted, then shrieked, tearing at the ensnaring ivy, ripping at the weaker coils that knotted her to the stony ground.

Consora lunged forward, snatching the keyring from the creature's hand. "Got it!" The bloodhost was too close to the door of her cage for her to get to the lock. "Eluse! Catch!"

They clattered against Eluse's cage and skidded to the floor. He grappled for them, feeling the cold rusty iron in his fingers. His concentration on the magic snapped. His fingers trembled as he jammed one of the three keys into the lock. Rusted and stubborn, but it turned with a groan.

"Ha!" he cried out as the door swung open. He staggered out, but his relief was short-lived. The bloodhost thrashed on the ground, both arms now free, tearing at the vines. "Suscepto, help!"

Eluse dashed for Suscepto's cage—Consora's was too close to the flailing bloodhost—fumbling with the keys. He tried one of them at the lock, but it wouldn't even fit. The second one went in with a *clank*, and he tried to turn it—

“I think that's quite enough of that.”

Sylar's voice drifted through the chaos, smooth and cold, settling on Eluse like frost. The hairs on the back of his neck sprang up, and he froze. His head snapped around and there stood the shadowed bloodhost, flanked by three more—one of them, Danté.

The captured bloodhost, now free of her vines, dropped to her knees before Sylar, claws twitching. She wiped her bloodstained mouth.

“Oh, dear dear dear,” Sylar crooned. “My dear Erja, have they waylaid you with blood? Clever things.” He tutted at the elves, a smattering of amusement on his face.

Eluse backed away. “Get back,” he said, his voice threatening, though he had no threat to offer.

A cold grin slithered over Sylar's face. “I think not. But you have freed yourself. Very well done. Shall you leave, now?”

Eluse didn't know what to say. The bloodhosts at Sylar's shoulder drifted out around the chamber.

“You may, if you like. I shan't stop you.”

Blood pounded in Eluse's ears. The room felt thick as tar.

“But, if you do, before you leave this chamber, we shall tear out the girl's throat.”

Eluse's world tilted. “Wh...Why?” was all Eluse's feeble voice could manage, the words coming almost as a squeak.

“Go, Eluse,” Consora snarled, thudding the heel of her palm into an iron bar. “Get out!”

“Danté. The keys.” Sylar waved a hand at Eluse. Eluse was paralysed. He couldn't move, or speak, or even think, as Danté stepped forward, almost reluctantly, and plucked the keyring from Eluse's clammy fingers. “You can leave, and perhaps we shall not pursue you, but your companion shall die. Or you can get back into your cage, and the three of you shall live to see another sunrise. Well...” he gestured at the black that surrounded them. “Metaphorically, of course.”

Eluse shivered hot. Four bloodhosts in the chamber, and only him out of his cage. No weapons. Weary from the magic. And Consora's life in the balance.

Sylar sniffed. “Very well, Erja, open the cage. Drink the rest of her.”

“No!” Eluse cried, and Erja, the scraping bloodhost, who had already begun shuffling excitedly toward Danté for the keys, stared at him with a crooked neck. Suddenly his body was his own again. “I'll... I'll get back in the cage.”

Sylar smiled, while Consora screamed. “A wise choice. Very... Noble. Go on then. In you go.” He gestured at the cage.

Eluse dragged his feet, slowly, his mind whirring. Surely there was something, *anything* he could do... A weapon he could get hold of... A plan he could hatch...

But there wasn't. And he was back in the cage before he knew it. And he'd put himself there.

The door swung shut with a final, crushing *clang*. Danté turned the key in the lock, and as Eluse looked at the wretched bloodhost who had pretended to be their friend, his face seemed almost sorry.

Sylar spoke again. “Well, now that's all sorted, I should welcome you to our home, little elves. Please, forgive your modest accommodations. They are, unfortunately, as much as we are able to manage.” He seemed to be probing them, but the elves said nothing. “You did very well to escape your cafe. And to kill a bloodhost... It has been a very long time since anybody has done that.”

“Fetch us the sword and you shall see it again,” Eluse growled. Sylar laughed.

“I don't doubt it. But you have me wrong, I fear. It is not I that demands your blood. I do not wish it. But something *inside me* does.” His voice tore into the words.

“What are you?” demanded Suscepto. He tugged at the bars of his cage. “If we are to die under this earth, we wish to know our killer.”

“She seems to know what we are,” Sylar said, his eyes flicking to Consora.

“Only from the stories,” she spat. “They never mentioned the stink.” Eluse could see the tightness around her mouth, the eyes that were fire.

Sylar smiled. “And what is it that the stories tell you?” he asked.

“That you were once sad and desperate Men who traded your humanity for a long life.”

“Close.”

Anger rattled her. “And now, you hide away under the earth because you fear that you will be found out and slaughtered, too blind to see that what you have is not life. You feed on the blood of people like us, who have done you no harm, and steal away the life that is ours, and take it for yourself. You feel no shame in the lives that you end, because you are so blinded by your own bloodhunger.”

Sylar crept down onto one knee before Consora's cage. His words were slow and deliberate. “You should not fear death, little elf. It is not the worst way that your life could end.”

“I do not fear death as much as I fear your breath.”

Sylar snapped back, a crooked grin on his face. “Ha! There is bravery to you, girl. In truth, the bloodcurse is a sickness. It is not of our own making. There is a wrym in our blood

which eats away at it, little, by little, by little. A fierce and powerful wyrm. And it is never sated. When it has eaten all that it can..." he paused by Eluse's cage and came down to his level. "It demands more."

"A wyrm?" Eluse said. He shrivelled with revulsion.

"Like a poison in our veins. It grows so hungry," Sylar stretched the words. "And its hunger becomes our hunger."

Consora looked like she might spit at him. "You are ruled by a parasite," she said. "You are not men. If there is a wyrm in your blood, then it is a greater thing than you."

"Take gladness that you shall never know it."

"You are *weak!*" cried Consora. "You could starve the wyrm. You've let it rule your body and mind, and you care nothing for what it means for others. Or even for yourself! You are the shell of a man."

Dangerous eyes flashed at her. "Do not presume to know what it means to hunger, girl. You have known nothing like it. When your life ends, we do you a courtesy. You shall *never* know the suffering that makes us."

"*Weak,*" she repeated. She had such courage. Eluse loved her for that.

"We must feed the wyrm," Sylar shrugged, moving away. "Do not think that we do not regret it." Other bloodhosts began to file into the chamber.

"And now?" demanded Suscepto, with a rage to his voice that did not betray his powerlessness. "You are to slaughter us beneath this crypt and hide down here for more centuries, in this rot and filth? For *what?*"

"Do not fear just yet," Sylar smiled. His grey tongue slithered over yellow teeth. "We must keep the life in you for as long as we can. The wyrm likes the blood fresh."

Being eaten from the inside out by a parasite filled Eluse with a dread much greater than death. When he was dead, the maggots and rot could do what they wished with his body. While he was still himself, nothing would touch him.

Sylar seemed to read his mind. "Little elf, do not trouble yourself. The wyrms are our burden alone. Your blood will grace their tongues, but they shall not grace your veins."

The bloodhosts behind him shifted, clutching at one another. Hungry eyes bit at him. Danté's, too. Even then, though, Eluse thought he looked much more human than the rest. There was life in him. And he hated him.

Sylar saw the abhorrence Eluse wore. "You smell the most compelling," he said to him. "I have grown well accustomed to the stink of deception over the years, and it clings to you like skin." He sniffed toward him. "By now, you ought to have learned to smell it too."

"What do you mean?" Eluse asked, disgusted but desperate to keep the bloodhosts talking. For what, he didn't know. There was no way out.

Sylar brushed the question away. “It is time,” he said. He stooped to the door of Eluse’s cage. “Do not fear. We will take only what we need. And I think, as the keenest to be free, it is your blood we shall taste first, young elf.” He stared at Eluse.

“No!” A deafening roar ricocheted around the chamber. It was Suscepto, and he stood as best he could, grasping the bars. “Not him. Not either of them. Let it be me.”

Sylar looked at him with old eyes that did not understand. “You wish to take his place?”

“More than anything.”

Eluse felt a punch in his stomach. This blundering, clumsy, wise, wonderful elf whom Eluse had spent so many years doing little but tormenting now shone with a radiance in his mind like never before. He couldn’t bring himself to speak, but his eyes were wide in awe.

“Suscepto,” breathed Consora.

“It is my duty,” he sniffed proudly. “Let it be me.”

No, no, no, cried Eluse in his mind. But his mouth could not speak. Would not speak. *Let me say something!* He cried to himself.

Sylar considered. “Very well, then. It means little to us.” He unlocked the chain at his cage with a key. At once, the bloodhosts swarmed in and tore him from the cage with greedy arms. They dragged him out on his knees.

“Only, do me this kindness,” Suscepto said, and even the ravenous creatures stopped to listen. “When my life has ended, permit me not to lie in this tomb. I wish to be out under the sky. If not the forests, then some sunny hill. I wish to lie under a willow tree.” His eyes were glassy. “At least tell it to me,” he pleaded. “At least let me hear that I will not spend eternity in this crypt.”

“Aye, we can do that.” It was Danté who spoke. Eluse thought he saw the glint of some far-off pity in his eyes. “You have my word.”

Sylar looked at Danté with what might have been irritation. Nevertheless, he agreed. “It is decided. The hilltop, then.”

The elf bowed his head, and Eluse watched with powerless horror. The bloodhosts hoisted him through the air and laid him onto the stone altar in the centre of the chamber. They pinned him down, arms and legs. Eluse shook the bars of the cage, feeling the skin on his fingers tear as he wrestled at them.

“We shall try to keep you alive for now,” said Sylar.

Then they tore into him.

Broken, yellowed teeth sank into his flesh at his wrists and his ankles. He cried out once, only briefly, stifling it into his own lip. From his wrist, blood sprayed like a mist, but their mouths were at it quick. Sylar placed a clawed hand over his throat, and Eluse thought for a horrifying moment he might tear it out, but then he, too, soaked his mouth at Suscepto’s wrist.

Consora howled like a banshee and spat through the bars, cursing and screaming until she choked, but Eluse could not bear to look, and clenched his eyes shut.

But he could hear. Slurping, gnawing, hungry splutters. His stomach roiled. Pained breathing, the squeak of claw on stone. The squelch of teeth in flesh. Gulps and splatters. A muffled cry, quick, then silenced. Cracking and clicking.

At long, long last, it quieted into nothing. A shuffle of robes. The sound of feet scrape on rock.

“Enough.”

It was Sylar’s voice.

Eluse dared to open his eyes. Reluctantly but obediently, the bloodhosts drew back. Glazed eyes wandered around the chamber, and their jaws hung open, elated. A strange peace crossed their faces, blood dripping from slack mouths. Behind them Eluse could see a quivering heap on the table.

That would have been me. Should have been me.

He knew that Suscepto had stifled his own screams for Consora and he, so that they were not so scared. He was noble in a way that Eluse had never seen.

There was a quiet moment with only little sounds. Consora seethed, Suscepto whimpered quietly, and Eluse breathed hot, angry air through his teeth. The bloodhosts stood, vacant. The female one, the one who had scraped so incessantly, had stopped twitching and was at last still. A lingering calm settled over them, a kind of peace, and Eluse was fearful to break it.

After some time, they roused back into motion. Suscepto was dragged from the table, and torn rags were tied roughly around his wounds to staunch the flow of blood. He was conscious, but only just, and could barely stand without them holding him up. They dragged him back to the cage and dropped him in a heap. Then, without a word, all but one of the bloodhosts filtered out of the room. Their business was done. It was quiet again, and Eluse wanted to curl up and cry.

Scrape.

There are those who say that the sewers, the tombs, the caves and the dark places of the world hold horrors and so-called “bloodhosts”. Tosh, I say! Any such sightings are fantasy and fabrication. I invite any of our readers to explore for themselves these locations, and enjoy the thrill of the adventure with absolute surety of their safety.

-Bryce Glintner, from an opinion article published in the Fal In’myhra Chronicle. A retraction was issued in the subsequent edition along with an apology from the editor after Bryce was revealed to be a bloodhost responsible for the deaths of no less than a dozen citizens.

CHAPTER 17 - BLOODLUST

Under the dulled eye of the bloodhost, who had returned to her scraping, Consora reached out a hand. Magic whispered from her fingertips, dancing between the bars of the cage and tumbling over the ground like leaves in the wind, sinking into Suscepto’s broken skin and knitting it together.

“Save your energy, Consora,” he whispered. His voice was frail.

“No.”

Suscepto laid his head back on the ground with a thin smile.

Eluse reached into the magic, too. There was so little to draw on here. Only the ivy, which withered and died, and then his own life force. He spun it up like a thread and pushed it toward the wounded elf. Exhaustion overtook him much quicker than he expected.

Why hadn’t he paid more attention to Sorrel when they’d practised? *Stupid, stupid Eluse.* He should have learned enough magic to rip through the bars of this cage, and rip through their captors too.

The sound of footfalls came, and Eluse looked up. Eluse’s eyes darkened. Danté.

He approached the scraping bloodhost. “Go.”

She looked at him with sharp, jagged movements, then hobbled from the chamber like a wild dog. Dante shuffled toward the cages hesitantly and slid to the ground.

Even looking at him was like pouring oil onto the furnace of his rage. This was *his* fault. If anything happened to them, to her... He wished the pitiful bloodhost man was close enough to reach. He would have made him sorry.

Danté spoke meekly, staring at the ground. “Whatever hate you hold for me, you ought to know I hold more.”

Eluse spat out a sharp laugh. “Come closer. Find out what hate I hold for you.” The vitriol in his voice was like nothing he’d heard in himself before.

Danté’s mouth was a thin line, jaw tightly set. “Whatever else I have lied to you, this is the truth. I know you don’t deserve it, and I’m sorry.” It was strange, Eluse thought. His voice still spoke in a rhythmic, lilting way. It did not match what he was.

Consora spoke, with a surprising gentleness. “Danté, if you are sorry, you would let us go.”

Eluse looked at her. This wildcat of a girl, who had tried to rip Iridian apart with her fingernails, who had gnashed her teeth and spat at Sylar, looked at Danté as calmly as if he was a child.

He looked at them with pity, and for a moment, Eluse wondered if he might do it. His fingers stroked the keys. “I can’t. You know I can’t. I am sorry, but it doesn’t change what I am. I have to feed.”

“Feed the wyrm, you mean,” Eluse said.

“Aye.”

He snorted angrily. “What kind of thing are you? So small, even to these creatures, that they send you out to find more blood for them? You are a slave.”

Danté looked down again. “Aye.”

“What good is it to hate yourself for doing these things, but you do them anyway?” Consora asked.

His mouth twitched. “No good at all.”

Eluse was surprised by the man’s candidness, but his teeth were clenched and hackles raised. How dare Danté come to confess his sins, then slaughter them anyway? “Your contrition is self-serving. It will do no good to try to absolve yourself of your evil while my friend lies bleeding in a cage.”

Danté sniffed. “No. No it won’t.” He leaned against the wall. “I’m just passing the time.”

“Is that all there is for you?” Consora asked. “Hiding in this hole, passing the time between one kill and the next?”

“Withering away to nothing until you have to feed your disgusting little wyrm,” Eluse added. He didn’t understand where Consora’s anger had gone. He felt so much of it writhe inside himself.

Danté swallowed. “It—it used to be more than that. I was a man, once. In the city. I used to be more than the blood made me. I had a life of my own, you know. I was a... I was a smith’s apprentice, I think. I had a family. A brother. A girl I was sweet on, she was... I don’t... I don’t remember her name.” He frowned at himself, gazing into his hands as if they were a stranger’s.

“Why don’t I remember her name? I think she had red hair. I think she had freckles. I don’t know...”

“And now?” asked Consora. “What do you live for now?”

Danté looked at her, and for a moment it wasn’t a cruel or pained creature Eluse saw, but the boyish face of the man they’d met in the Merryglass. Was that what she saw? Eluse would have liked to have dug down into him, dragged out the human parts, and thrown him into this cage instead.

“You don’t understand what the wyrm makes us taste.” His eyes were less red now. “That first drop of blood after so long; there’s nothing else like it. The relief of it. The warmth. Suddenly I’m not hungry for the first time in forever. The pain is gone and I’m floating.” He put his arms out, and held them like little wings, fingers pointing like feathers. “My head is quiet and I can feel... I feel warm again.” A smile crossed his lips. “I’m not in this crypt any more. I’m in the city. The woods. My home. Anywhere else.” He held himself for a few moments more, until the smile left his face and his eyes cracked open. “And then I am back.”

“And the hunger returns?”

“Aye. A little while later, the hunger returns. And it is ravenous and hurting and consumes everything. When it hungers, it is agony. But when it feeds, the joy is like nothing else.”

Eluse studied the man. “Are our lives worth the blood?”

“No,” he said. “They never have been. But that’s the cruel joke of the wyrm, isn’t it? I could set you free right now and take you away from here. But I can’t. I can but I can’t. I want to but I won’t.” He reached his hand up toward the door of the cage and hovered it, holding the keys, moving them forward and backward. His movements were janky and erratic, like the scraping bloodhost.

“So you will become like them.” Consora pointed through the space in the chamber wall where the other bloodhosts had vanished.

“I already am like them. They’re just a little older, is all.”

“Danté,” croaked Suscepto, who until now Eluse had thought was asleep. Everybody looked at him.

“Ahh, I’m sorry, Suscepto. For what happened. Truly, I am. And if it’s anything to you, I’m glad your sword killed Tharis. I wish it had been me that had picked it up, in truth.”

“Danté,” Suscepto continued breathlessly. “When I was in my youth, there was a landslide in the forest a day’s ride from the village I grew up in. Trees and rocks and earth and everything else. Two friends and I were caught up in it...” He took a long, deep breath. He was struggling to speak. “One of them was killed right then. As for me, I was lucky. A pine tree fell on me, pinning me into the mud. I could not move and could hardly breathe.” He shuffled. His voice grew softer as he spoke.

“Go on,” urged Danté.

“My other friend was unhurt, and ran for help.” He chuckled quietly to himself. “It was a day before he found it. It was another day before the help found me. I lay in the dirt for two days, with the weight of a tree pressing into me. If I moved to breathe, I thought I might die. Each moment I felt like I was closer to suffocating. I didn’t know if I would suffocate or die of thirst first. It was agony.

“After two long days of torment, everything was numb. I had faded to near nothing. But, to my mercy, help arrived. No sooner had they got to me than they lifted the tree from me. The instant it was away from me, that first breath was the best breath of my entire life. It felt like air hit my chest in a way it never had before. It was over three hundred summers ago, and I still feel the blood filling my legs again, and the sensation rushing back, chasing the pain away. That water I was given... I swear I felt it flood through me to places water had never reached before. When they lifted the weight from me it was the most wonderful thing I had felt.”

Danté nodded. “Then you understand me, at least in part. That’s what the wyrm does. It lifts a weight you can hardly breathe under.”

Suscepto’s face wilted. “Danté, now it is you who does not understand. You do not feel joy. You feel relief. You feel the relief of the weight removed, the hunger sated, but it is like the relief of a monster passing you by in the night. It is no joy. It is just that, for a short while, you do not feel destroyed by it. The weight of the tree robbed me of the power to breathe. To even feel my own body. The relief I felt when the tree was lifted was not joy. It was that a terrible pain had been quieted. It was the weight that caused the pain, not the weight that relieved it.”

Danté looked at Suscepto curiously.

“You did not feel a pleasure when you drank my blood any more than I felt a pleasure when the weight was lifted from me. You only felt what you have been robbed of returning to you. Under that tree, I was deprived of breath, feeling, freedom. Slave to this wyrm, you are robbed of the same. When the tree was lifted from me, I was back to myself again. And so it is for you, with your wyrm.

“You are trapped beneath the weight of it, and all you can do is quiet it by feeding it until it calls for blood again. You feel, for a time, free.” He looked right at the man. “Danté, you are meant to live with that freedom your whole life. You are meant to live under the spell of this wyrm no more than I am meant to crawl back underneath that tree.”

Danté’s eyes were wet. “I cannot live without it.”

“You cannot live *with* it.”

Let us out. Open the cages. Let us go. Let us go, so I can kill you.

Danté looked at the ground. His eyes were a little less dark. His fingers trembled. “I hate it.”

Suscepto gave a slow shake of his head. “I do not think you hate it, Danté. Not truly. I think sometimes, when you taste the blood for it, you love it. You love that little wyrm that crushes life from you.”

Danté tried to say something, but stammered. There was a soft light in his eyes as he wrestled with himself. Surely something, one word from Suscepto, had reached the man beneath the curse. All he needed was a moment of weakness. One moment to release the doors of this cage.

He rose from against the wall, and Eluse’s heart leapt.

Reach for the cage. Unlock the door.

“I’m sorry,” Danté said bitterly. “I’m lost.”

Then, he left the chamber.

Grief and despair punched him like a fist. Consora exclaimed, and lowered her head. It had seemed so close. He had really, truly thought something Suscepto had said had moved Danté.

Eluse and Consora crumpled to the bottom of their cages. Suscepto, though, stayed unchanged.

“Suscepto,” Eluse said quietly, and Suscepto murmured. “I’m beginning to think that you might be one of the most remarkable elves I’ve ever met.”

Suscepto was quiet for a moment, and breathed heavily. “Young master. If we are to somehow escape our misfortune, I shall see to it that your words are known by every elf in the Palace.”

The three of them laughed together and thought of home. Before long, one of the other bloodhosts came and took Danté’s place. Something about it seemed somehow less frightening now, though, and more pitiful. Eluse was certain he would die soon, but he saw that these were not the monsters he had first feared. They were pathetic, each weaker than a wyrm that ruled them. Though fear crept in, Eluse looked to Suscepto and took courage from him.

“Leaving Lenune was a hard thing,” Eluse admitted to Consora, once Suscepto fell asleep.

“It was. But the choice wasn’t our own.”

“It’s funny that it never felt much like home to me there. But now we’re going to die here, I’d give anything to see it again.” He wondered if his father would miss him, in his own way. Perhaps the bitterest part of this death was that he would die with his father still believing he had achieved nothing. And perhaps he was right. He had been too weak to prove his worth.

“I’d like to be home again.” Consora’s voice was void of emotion. Eluse pretended not to notice her aether stone, which had turned a cloudy grey, that she played with between her fingers. He didn’t know if he could bear talking about her mother.

“I’ve got to say, I think Isendré was hoping for a little more from us than to be dinner for bloodhosts the moment we stepped into Dharia. She’ll be very disappointed.”

Consora laughed darkly. “She’s welcome to save us again.”

Eluse lay back on the floor of the cage, staring at the blackness above him. A long time passed. He had almost fallen asleep when he felt the glimmer of magic nearby, and opened his eyes. Consora was reaching through the bars of her cage to Suscepto, using magic again.

“Rest, Consora,” he whispered to her. “He’ll be okay.”

“You don’t know that,” she said, straining. “I can do it.”

He watched her focus for a while longer, until she could go no longer. She stopped, panting. “Stop now. Please.”

She closed her eyes. “Eluse?”

“Yeah?”

“Where do you think those piglets are now?”

Lining the belly of that bear, he thought. “I don’t know,” he said.

“Two little things like that, so far away from home. Do you think they’ll make it back to the forest?”

No. “They might. You helped them. Your magic showed them the way.” *They’re already dead.*

“I wonder how they got all that way, just them and their mother. And now they don’t even have her. They’ll have to be strong.”

“They will.” Eluse turned his head. The bloodhost watched him with hungry eyes. “I’m sure they’ll be alright.”

They talked a little more, and tried not to let their grotesque guardian bother them much. Suscepto roused later, but stayed quiet while Eluse and Consora spoke of the forest and of the stream that ran by the First Tree that they would sit by, and the sycamore grove that grew thick with bluebells. They talked loudly of the time that they released the clatterbugs into Suscepto’s quarters (“*I knew it was the pair of you*”), and of anything that would come to mind that was out in the sunshine or the moonlight, and not under this dead earth. And they talked so much that they nearly did not notice the slight scuttle of legs across the chamber, and the quick zip of dragonfly wings.

It was Consora who noticed the little red thing first, but it was not red like the blood or the eyes of the monsters around them. It was pretty red; a kind of red that did not fit this underground chamber at all, like a raspberry, or a rose.

“Eluse,” she whispered. “Eluse, look.” She pointed with her head.

Standing across the chamber from them, perched on a rock, was something else that should not have been in the underground. In fact, it shouldn't have even been in Dharia. It belonged in the forest.

It was a large red flitwing.

Eluse gasped quietly.

“Tinlit!”

“Elfens got clumsy feet, but not Skyllaria. She a quiet one. She a sneaky. Much about that one can be hiding.”

-Tasstra, to the Moon Folk.

CHAPTER 18 - THE HUNT

Sorrel

The prince had been gone for two days. The Palace was in turmoil. Crownswords tore up and down the pathways ceaselessly. Troops had been dispatched for the Everwood; in the King’s mind the Eldergrove were to blame. Sorrel smiled a dry smile. She knew better.

The talents of a ranger went a long way in the procurement of information. Her centuries in the far reaches of the Summerlands, where the wilder things prowl and play, had taught her how to disguise her footfalls in the sound of the wind. She had learned to use the slightest, most subtle magic to distract. She liked the trickery. She could dance across the treetops like a squirrel, or steal through the undergrowth like a panther. The little creatures of the wood, she could entice to go where she willed, and they would share their eyes with her. So many secrets lurked in the tunnels and rootways of the First Tree that she might never learn them all. But, she had learned enough for now.

She missed the wild. The freedom of a ranger was like nothing else; she longed again for the danger of the starless nights at Bitterleaf, or hunting among the wisplights of the Pale Waste. The sweet smoke of woodburnt boar she’d shot herself lingered in her nostrils and tempted her back. Her name in those wilds was *Skyllaria*, a word more ancient even than the forestlands. It was given to her by secret friends as old as the word itself. It was Old Arath’s language, meaning ‘hidden knife’, and it was the name she knew herself by. She was a born huntress, and it had been far too long since she had prey to stalk.

Still, though, her purpose in this city was the greatest way she could serve now, and it was a sacrifice she made with gladness. And, for her, there was no lack of danger in Lenune.

The morning of the young prince’s disappearance, she had sensed a tension in the Palace, but it hadn’t been until the afternoon that she had learned the cause. Hiding in a borehole atop the King’s Hall she’d heard everything of Eluse’s task, and the lies they’d fed the little elf. The Rosethorne and the King spoke of their plans boldly, and did not expect hidden ears to listen. They would have sickened her, had she not known by now what to expect. The plans and schemes that tumbled from their mouths appalled her, and for the last years she’d had to do nothing but keep her mouth shut, play nicely, and pretend not to know a thing.

To begin with, they had considered whether Eluse had fled into hiding. The King did not know the son he had chosen well, she thought. If Eluse had gone missing, it was not because he was a coward. In the end, when the Director of Duties' disappearance was reported too, they decided that their enemies in the Everwood were to blame, and plans were made to tear the east anew with force. But Sorrel knew what they did not, and they were looking in the wrong direction.

She was ahead of the Palace in her search, and knew to seek out Consora. If any elf in Lenune knew where the prince would be, it was her. When Sorrel met Marad at her home, she'd sensed at once that Consora was missing too, and almost left again before she noticed Tinlit buzzing at the small, violet-blue stone that her mother clutched.

"Marad," she had asked with tenderness. "May I see it?"

Consora's mother had opened her hand to the aether stone, and Sorrel knew before she had even touched it that Consora held the other half. When she had felt through it, she sensed Consora, happy and well, and with Eluse.

She wondered for a moment—only a brief one—whether she should take the stone, but a look at Marad's happy eyes stopped that thought before it was even full-formed.

Though Marad would not speak, there was only one way she had gotten an aether stone, and Sorrel knew it well. By the time the dark fell, and the glimmer of the moonlight had ignited the fairy circles, and the Moon Folk poked out of their little holes, she was already there, sitting cross-legged in the fairy circles, waiting for them.

"*Saycha, Aestra,*" she greeted Aestra as he appeared. He looked at his old friend with curious eyes. More Moon Folk came to join them.

"She thought you would be's coming, Skyllaria," Tasstra grinned, who had appeared with him. "She not much wrong."

"Not much, is she." She looked at the funny little creatures fondly. "You know why I am here?"

"*Rilé,*" Aestra nodded.

Sorrel didn't speak Old Arath' as well as some she knew, but it was a courtesy she knew to offer where she could. Few in the Palace spoke it at all, and the Moon Folk liked it when she tried. She told them what she needed. "*Yan'so ela thos thynatos ke del'thn y'mahksayah. Eluse it Consora.*"

"*Racher'thn y'wyhl. Isendré prer'thn y'fal in'myhra.*"

"North?" Sorrel asked. Uncertainty streaked her face. The elves were on their way to the Dharian capital. It didn't make sense. The Moon Folk, and the deeper things, knew the truth, even if the young elves did not. Why had they let the prince go? Surely the danger now was too great.

Aestra spoke again with somber eyes. “*Tal shuntos glissanili ke la’yd ynda. Malharath’ wurt ryntaral sint aetherarath’ tal aetilia.*” Sorrel didn’t know every word, but even if she had not understood a single one she would have known his meaning from his expression. There was a dark ahead, and it would grow darker yet.

More questions were asked and answered, in the cryptic way that the Moon Folk liked to do, and she knew she had to leave. Before she did, she slunk back into the Palace, to the mycelian records this time. She knew exactly what she needed. She sent Tinlit in ahead of her to distract the record keepers and share her eyes, and in no time at all Sorrel was in and out, with an unremarkable flat whitecapped mushroom. It held a truth that must finally be shared.

Then, at last, it was time to leave. She stopped at the milkgrass meadows first, where the mounts of the Palace grazed, and the dawn was near broken before she found her own steed. She was a beautiful, soft-furred female red deer called Rucca, who was swift and could move almost as quietly as she. Taking only her spear and elmwood bow with a quiver of arrows at her thigh, she saddled Rucca lightly. They were almost out of the meadows before Rucca was stopped by a proud-headed whitetail. She recognised it as Eluse’s own royal mount. Shanta pawed the ground and breathed hot mist into the fresh dawn air.

Sorrel laughed. “Sorry, Shanta, but you won’t keep up.”

Shanta dipped his head and flicked his antlers forward, as if to say, *it’s you who won’t keep up with me.*

“I’ll leave you behind if you’re slow,” she warned. The whitetail raised his head firmly. *Very well.*

Then they were off. She rode fast and hard to the west and then north, keeping well clear of the main pathways. They rode not for the Glendil Gate, where she would be seen, but the Sunderstone mountains. Shanta matched her speed easily. Tinlit, too, rushed with her, sometimes landing on Rucca’s head, sometimes tearing through the air. They raced the sunlight north, and were in the stony pathways of the mountains quickly.

The deer negotiated the rocks with graceful feet, bounding down forgotten overgrowths tangled with ferns and bramble. The cracks and crags of the mountains loomed up like they might have swallowed them all whole, but she navigated the land well, snaking through the labyrinthian passageways with ease. Before midday they were out, and though Shanta had started to look a little tattered, Sorrel urged the buck on. She slowed their ride, but only by a hair. Rucca was used to the ferocity with which Sorrel would ride, but Eluse’s whitetail was not quite so strong.

It was raining by the time they crossed the Fartherfields, and when she was sure she was well out of sight of the gateguards she rejoined the path. It was much harder to track on a path, especially paved like the Dharians made them, but if Eluse had left Lenune, this would be the road he had taken. If they had come this way, then they must have passed through Thinnerton, and with some luck, they would have been spotted.

Sorrel knew the danger the Men posed, but it was not these Men that she feared. These were too dense to be any threat. It wasn't until further into Dharia that they would be at real risk, and she must catch up to them before then.

Riding into Thinnerton she drew gasps and wide eyes from the ranchers and crofters. Shanta kept his head raised prominently and seemed to relish the attention. Outside the Merryglass, she slipped from Rucca and walked inside. If they'd been seen anywhere, it would have been here.

"Oh! An elf!" exclaimed the man behind the bar, pushing his spectacles up his nose. "Another one, is it?"

Sorrel gave a cordial smile, and her quick eyes noticed him slip the small golden pin into his pocket. "Well, I think I'm in the right place."

* * *

The road forked. To the west, the most direct road to Fal In'myhra, winding around the Goan and through the hollowstone pass. To the north, the Broad Beacons, and beyond that the Deadland. It would make little sense to travel that way, but the way the innkeep had described the traveller—the young man who came every few weeks, and always left with folk bound for further places—set her teeth on edge. She hated tracking on pathways, and roads like this, far from the wilds, made it nearly impossible. She would have to rely on intuition. Her gut told her north, and it was seldom wrong. Still, she could not afford to make a mistake with so much at stake.

Tinlit came to rest on her wrist.

With the small, witless creatures of the forest, Sorrel was adept at farseeing; her mind could leave her own body and crawl into theirs. The creature was shut away, and she became them. They would go where she commanded, and she would see what they saw. She had crept through the palace as snails and butterflies, centipedes and bluejays.

Tinlit, though, was far too clever for all that. With her, Sorrel was able to halfsee. Instead of taking hold of the mind of a creature, Sorrel and Tinlit would share their own minds, each half in control of the other. Each would see what the other saw, and unlike farseeing, where Sorrel's mind would leave her own body, with halfseeing she remained alert.

"Tinlit, I need your eyes," she said.

Obedient, Tinlit's little red mouth nipped around her fingers.

Sorrel placed a finger gently on the top of the flitwing's head and opened her mind. It was as if a gate opened up between them where there had once been a wall, and the lifeforce between them flowed freely, mingling like water. Sorrel was in the mind of the flitwing, and she was also on Rucca, riding well but conserving a little strength for the Broad Beacons. It had taken years to learn to halfsee, and it felt a little like writing with one hand while drawing with the other. But, she had grown to master it, and she knew Tinlit's body well now.

Straight down the path Tinlit shot like an arrow, her dragonfly wings making nothing of her dainty frame. She outstripped the riders on the ground behind until they were specks of dust. Her oily eyes spied around for the prince. He was somewhere in these hills.

The clouds were low, and growing lower. The mist drew wet droplets on her wings and scales. She slicked it away with her back legs and pressed on. Though she zipped along the pathway with Sorrel far behind, the ranger missed nothing. She loved to fly with Tinlit, whose eyes were keener than her own. Time moved slower for the flitwing, so she could weave and dive with reactions she never could in her own body.

The flitwing flew fast and low down the path, rising for a clearer view when a gap in the cloud allowed it. Her little eyes could pick out the warmth of bodies in the cold air, and she'd been flying only a short time before she saw figures climbing up the path ahead—four of them. Three elves, and a human. They were soaked through, and heading for the top of the hill. A dilapidated tower protruded from the stone on the hill's crest, half-crumbled.

With urgency she pressed on, and Sorrel spurred Rucca. Shanta, whose breathing was laboured and shallow now, seemed to understand, and rallied. They were so close. If the elves took shelter at the tower, Sorrel would be with them in under an hour.

Tinlit closed in on them, but didn't let them see her. Something about the human looked wrong. Her powerful flitwing eyes could pick out colours that shone from each person that Elves and Men could not see, like an aurora. The man's colours were dulled and grey, not lively and vibrant like the others. It was as if he was sick, but he moved with the form of a man in good health. She didn't like it at all.

She hovered over them, nipping across the peaks of the valley they travelled through, keeping a close eye and hiding between rocks where she could. Sorrel was near, but the group was almost at the tower. The prince and the older elf were talking. They seemed as unsettled as she was.

Tinlit darted ahead to the ruins. She waited there, beady eyes on the travellers, as they came upon the decayed fort. The rain covered her like a sheet of ice, but she weathered it, hiding on a stone crest. Below, the elves stumbled around looking for shelter, but the human went straight for a gap in the stonework leading down. They shouted at one another, then the elves followed him in.

Two miles away, Sorrel's heart pounded. Her heels dug harder into Rucca's sides.

Follow them, Tinlit.

Down into the dark they went, and Tinlit leapt from her hiding spot, dropping through the air with her wings folded like a dart. She whisked in the hole after them. Even her strong eyes, as efficacious in the night as the day, struggled here. She spun out her wings and slowed just in time, crashing onto the back of the boy prince's neck. He panicked, and thrashed his hand back to where she clung on. He brushed her as she buzzed back into the dark, where she perched on a statue by the stairway. They would not see her now.

Stay with them. I'm close.

Rucca was at full gallop, thundering across the trackway. Sorrel stalwart atop her . Strands of her hair fell around her face and stuck there, shrouding her vision. Shanta, shining with rain and sweat, managed to barely keep up. Bellowing breaths thundered from him in puffs of white mist. They rounded a bend and Rucca's hooves nearly slipped out from under her, but they were upon the fort now. And there, ahead of them, above ground even though she knew the elves were beneath—movement!

Rucca skittered to a stop, and Shanta too. Sorrel slipped from Rucca's back and landed on silent feet. The three of them tucked themselves away behind a fold in the land.

“Wait here,” she instructed the deer, who stamped obediently. In Tinlit's eyes, she saw the elves moving down the underground chamber.

Thank you, Tinlit. Keep watch over them.

She severed the connection. She would need her full mind for this. Padding across the grass to the cleft of earth they were hidden by, she slipped an arrow from the quiver at her thigh and nocked it to her bow.

Rain and mist hampered the hilltop, but her hunter's eyes cut through it. Two robed and hooded figures approached the stairwell to the crypt. Sorrel nearly strode forward before her mind stilled her; patience was the most important part of a hunt. If they meant the elves any harm, she must know it first. If this was an ambush, she must not become part of it.

They looked for a moment like they were going to descend after the elves, but at the top of the stairs they stopped and turned to a large stone tablet. It looked different to the rest of the ruins, like newer stone. They took hold of it and heaved it forward so that it fell right over the pit to the stairwell. It sealed it completely.

Sorrel cursed herself. She had hesitated, and now Eluse and the others were sealed off. She sprang to her feet, almost flying from the grass, and tore toward the two robed figures. As she moved, she let loose an arrow at one of them.

She didn't intend for it to kill. If she had, they would never have seen her. It ripped through the figure's calf and into the ground; she nocked another arrow and aimed at the throat of the second.

There was no howl of pain. There was always a howl of pain. She blinked and looked back.

The robed man looked down at his leg, not agonised, but irritated. They both scowled and cast fierce eyes at her. Their faces looked more like skulls than men, with cracked brown skin stretched across them. The arrow, where it had burst from his leg, was not coated in blood but a thick black mucus.

What were they? The wounded man moved his leg forward and the arrow snapped.

No weapons, either. No trapper lays an ambush without weapons.

They raised jagged claws in front of themselves.

Ahh. Those were the weapons.

She loosed another arrow, which burst through the throat of the second man. When it hit him, he wobbled, but stayed standing. He grunted. That was all. Where blood should have spurted from him, only a thick sludge oozed from the wound. The shaft and fletchings pointed from him like a branch. He reached with a claw and tugged the arrow out, dragging flesh and fluid with the broadhead. As he did, he flung his head back, terrible teeth bared. Torn flesh and wet, slimy mucus squirmed in a gaping hole in his neck. A small moment passed as they stared at one another; Sorrel's eyes darting between the two. Their lipless mouths curled into grins. "What *are* you?" she whispered. The rain fell.

Then, they were upon her. They whirled like a hurricane, faster than any man or elf she'd fought before. Centuries of eluding death in the forest kicked in. She sidestepped left, out of reach of the first and cracking the limb of her bow above her where a talon swept down. She spun back on them, launching another arrow, rupturing one's stomach. It did not seem to notice. They were back at her. She leapt backwards to escape a gnarled claw, then put a little distance between them and raised a hand, summoning magic from the storm around her.

In a moment an electric-blue bolt blazed from her hand and struck one. It screeched like scraping metal, and its robes were blackened by the force.

It was staggered, but that blast would have killed any other man. Whatever these things were, they were fierce and like nothing she had encountered in the forest. She felt blind, fighting against an enemy she did not know. What did they want? Could they reason? Could they speak? Could they be killed? She almost smiled at the last. Everything could be killed.

"You didn't like that, did you?" she taunted. *Speak*, she thought to herself. *Let me see what you are.*

The one which still had a throat cried back, "You won't like this."

It hurled itself forward, a nightmare of rags and bone. Foul fingers gripped her bow and tore it from her. Her hand slammed downwards and she used the magic in the air to spring far back the instant before serrated teeth snapped at where she had been. Up she sprang, letting the air carry her up, up and onto a ledge—the old hole of a window from a crumbled tower. She clung on the cold brickwork and dug her boots in. The wind threatened to pull her off. She *must* fight on. She *must* free Eluse.

Below, the creatures thrashed and snapped, not knowing what to do. Sorrel pulled to herself a powerful ball of flame, swirling around her fist like a tornado. The rain hammered down on it, but she turned it away. She unleashed it faster than an arrow, where it battered into one of them with such fury that it took it off its feet. Flame spat from it in tongues and the monster slammed into the ground. It hissed and writhed and died.

The other turned in a frenzy of robes. With cries and hollers it ran from her. She launched herself, diving from the tower, bringing forward the air beneath her which glowed and cushioned her fall, where she landed on her toes at a full sprint. The magic she'd used had drained her more than she'd been used to in the forest, but adrenaline carried her forward. She twisted her spear from over her shoulder and gained on the fleeing creature. A crunch jolted her shoulder as she

swept its legs from under it. It tripped and hit the grass. She kicked it over and stabbed her spear down through its chest, pinning it to the ground, and stamped her boot into its throat. It screamed a pitiful cry, and more black sludge dribbled from it. *Don't die just yet.* She twisted the spear into its chest.

“Stop!” it squealed.

“What are you?” a fighting roar burst from her chest. She turned down her knee and crushed her weight down onto its chest, where she felt the crack of its sternum. Its hideous face was inches from hers.

“Sick,” it wheezed. It clacked its teeth toward her a few times.

“You’re a vampire?”

It almost laughed. “Nothing so quaint.”

She didn’t have time for this. “What’s down there? Why did you trap them?” she bellowed. It gave a wry smile, but didn’t answer. “What do you want with them?”

It wobbled its head back and forth a few times, like it was considering, or playing with her. “To *eat* them,” it grinned, and flung back its head in a full laugh.

Sorrel twisted the spear from the creature and slammed it down again, straight through its heart. It sputtered a final cry, and hunched its arms and legs up in the air. Stale air croaked from its foul mouth in a last breath, and this one was gone too.

Without a moment to waste, she was up again. She slung her spear over her back on its strap and grabbed her bow from the grass. She pushed her wet hair back with her fingers and ran.

At the fallen stone tablet, she heaved it for all she was worth, struggling at it until her muscles felt like they would burst. It was far heavier than she could manage, and even her magic could not move it. She took back her spear again and dug it into the ground at its edge, levering it up. It shifted slightly, but was so solid it barely budged. She was so determined she hardly noticed the two deer coming up on her, until Shanta wedged his antlers under the gap she’d raised.

“Thought you’d let me have all the fun to myself, did you?” she grunted, heaving on her spear. Shanta huffed. Rucca knocked her head against her arm affectionately.

The whitetail had surprising power, and there was the grating of rock and stone as it gave way a little. The spear wedged it further, and Sorrel, who was tiring now, used a little more of her magic to pull at it. As soon as there was space, Rucca forced her forehead onto the tablet and shoved too. The three of them together made the smallest movement, but it was enough. A gap appeared, small enough for Sorrel to slip down.

“I have to go,” she panted, giving Rucca a stroke on the side of her face, but not wasting a moment. She slipped down into the dark.

“The trick to any battle is confidence. If you believe you’re already victorious, you will be. That’s a mantra that’s taken me this far, and it’ll take me the rest of the way. Alright, here they come. Watch this.”

-Last words of Brick Runders, knight of Dharia.

CHAPTER 19 - A TRICK OF THE LIGHT

The air shimmered in the chamber just above the altar, like light dancing in the reflection on a stream. It glowed and twisted, gold and green. There was something of magic to it. Ripples of light shone around the gloom and caught the dulled eyes of the bloodhost. Its head snapped toward it, and it watched it like a raptor watches a mouse. Its eyes were inquisitive and hungry.

It stepped away from the cages toward the table, transfixed. Eluse, too, watched it as the lights danced. Was this Tinlit, somehow? Was it Isendré again? Consora’s mouth hung open. Lightning hope buzzed through him.

The bloodhost dragged itself to the altar and held out a hand. It swished it through the rippling air. Something that might have been a laugh groaned from its mouth. It looked like a child. It was playing.

Then, from the gloom, Sorrel. She was a ghost in the shadows. Eluse could have fallen over with glee, but he could not risk the noise. They had never been more quiet in their lives. Sorrel held Methirindil, and the glow of the sword was hidden in the shimmering room. With the bloodhost distracted, she trod softly toward it and, its back to her, she thrust the blade into its heart.

It flapped and wriggled, but Sorrel threw her strong hands around it and held its jaw shut. It only twitched for a moment before the life left it, dropping down with a clumsy thud. The twinkling in the air faded. The corpse was hunched in the dim candlelight, more animal than human.

It took everything in him not to shout and jump for joy. As soon as she was certain the bloodhost was dead, Sorrel crept across the chamber for the cages.

“Sorrel!” Eluse cried in a whispered hush. He had so many questions, but dared not ask them.

“Tinlit, go,” she directed, hardly acknowledging the elves. The obedient flitwing zipped from the room down a deeper passageway to keep watch. “Where is the key?”

Eluse balanced on the balls of his feet, gripping the bars. “One of them took it.”

A loud cracking interrupted him as Sorrel forced her spear between Consora's cage and the metal bars, levering it and straining. There was a creak, then a pop, and the rusted lock gave way. The gate swung open.

"Who needs a key?" Consora muttered, crawling from her cage, her breath ragged. "Suscepto is hurt. They took his blood. They..." Her words trailed off, weak and distant.

"Quickly now. Take my bow and quiver. We shan't be alone for long." Sorrel said, pressing the weapon into her hand. Consora gripped it, nodding, but she stumbled. Sorrel came to Eluse's cage and shattered the lock in a swift, practiced motion. He ducked out, and moments later she had Suscepto's open too. The three of them were free.

Suscepto didn't stir.

"Suscepto?" Consora's voice barely registered, a whisper on the air as she knelt beside him. She wrapped his fingers into hers.

"Mmm?" His mumbled response was weak, but Eluse breathed a sigh of relief.

"We have to go, now. Quick. Get up." Her voice cracked with urgency, but Suscepto remained motionless. She clutched at Sorrel. "Can't you do something? I couldn't heal him properly. I'll... I'll try again." Her words slurred, her energy fading.

She lifted a trembling hand, but only a weak shimmer of light flickered before it died.

"The magic is weak down here," Sorrel muttered. "We'll have to carry him to the surface. I'm going to need every scrap of power I can find in this place."

Eluse frowned. He turned to Consora. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." Her eyelids fluttered. She swayed, her legs buckling beneath her.

"Consora? What's wrong?" Sorrel rushed to her as she collapsed. "Did they hurt her?"

"No!" Eluse hissed, clenching his fists. "What is it, Consora?"

"I tried... I tried my best," Consora mumbled, her body going limp. "He just... he kept bleeding. I couldn't stop it."

"Consora! How much have you been trying to heal him?" Sorrel shook her. "Shadow's curse, she's half killed herself. There isn't the magic down here to help her..." Her eyes darted around the chamber.

Eluse's face hardened. "What can I do? Tell me!"

"I... I don't know."

A screaming buzz announced Tinlit, racing back into the chamber. Sorrel closed her eyes and whispered with a chill voice.

"They're coming."

The words shook him like two strong hands. Sorrel laid Consora down, who shifted uneasily. She readied herself.

“How long do we have?” Eluse panicked.

“A minute. Maybe less. Take my spear.” She tossed it to him.

He caught it. One minute. That spear may as well have been kindling. Eluse and Sorrel, alone against a bloodhost brood. One elven ranger and a little prince who had seen one battle in his life, and spent most of it running. They were going to die.

“We have to go.”

Sorrel’s words were iced water over him.

“*What?*”

“Eluse, there is nothing we can do. In less than a minute, this chamber will be swarming with bloodhosts. At least six remain. You and I cannot fight them. We must run.”

“What? No! There must be something we can do! You have to heal her! Both of them!”

Sorrel grasped him with both arms, her voice soft but insistent. “Eluse, I cannot. Neither can you. The power it would take to bring them back to fight or run is beyond what exists down here, and without our full strength you and I will not make it out. We must go. *Now.*”

She gripped his wrist, but he tore free. “No, I won’t leave them! Get off me!” He shoved her aside and ran to Consora, dropping his spear. His heart hammered in his chest.

“Get up, Consora,” he begged, his eyes welling. “Please get up.” His hands trembled as he tried to lift her, but there was no way he could run with her. “Get up!” he shouted, jerking her back and forth.

Her eyes flicked open, but she was barely focused. “My mum...” she whispered, her hand reaching for the aether stone.

Eluse’s heart caught in his throat. The aether stone. The stone that connected her to her mother. The stone that connected her to the forest.

The stone that could save her.

“Now, Eluse!” Sorrel grabbed his shoulders and pulled him, shockingly powerful. But Eluse wouldn’t let go. His eyes focused on the stone that shimmered faintly in Consora’s grasp.

“Wait!” he shouted. He wouldn’t leave without her.

He gripped the stone tight, closing his eyes. He felt into the magic, not in the air around him, but in the stone.

This wasn’t like anything he’d felt before. No lesson had prepared him for this. He reached for it, not forcefully, but gently. He coaxed it into his grasp. He went fishing for it.

The fear of the bloodhosts faded from his mind. He focused on the stone, on the thread that connected Consora to her mother. The line was faint, like a whisper in his mind, but he could feel it. He could *taste* it.

Lemon juice. Fresh herbs. Metal. The forest.

He reached through the connection, urging it to respond. He felt Marad through it; a grey shape that tasted acidic and like lavender. Around her, the magic of the forest swirled, like the wind in a storm. He could feel the power of it, a light breeze on his skin. He could not demand it come to him. He could only coax it.

Come to me. Come to her.

And then, it did. It surged from the stone, pouring into her body. Light flooded the room, catching Eluse and Sorrel up in it. Bright, brilliant white it shone, as if the power of the whole forest shone through. It shone through her, and her whole body glowed from the inside out. Energy filled her.

Consora's eyes fluttered open as the glow began to fade. Clear eyes, bright. "Well how about that, Sorrel," she groaned. "Eluse isn't as dumb as you said."

Eluse's heart skipped. He grabbed her into his arms and hugged her like he'd never let go.

She rolled over. "That... That feels a *lot* better." She stretched her arms, testing them, and shook herself. She got to her feet, widening her eyes, looking a little dizzy.

Eluse helped her steady herself. "Are you okay?" Sorrel glanced at him with a hard, steely gaze, but even she could not hide the nod of approval in her eyes. He felt lighter inside. The power from the forest had given him power, too. He stretched his arms out, testing his strength.

"I'm fine. Where are they?" Consora snatched the bow from the ground.

Sorrel looked her up and down. "Consora, you're in no condition to—"

"I can do what I must." Her body was still a little weak, but the strength in her words was clear. "We're not leaving without Suscepto. Isn't that right, Eluse?"

Eluse nodded. She made him brave. He picked up his spear and readied his ironsilk.

Sorrel sighed, exasperated. "Well, elflings, I hope you've been paying attention to your lessons, because we've a challenge ahead of us." Her voice was solemn, but it barely concealed an anticipation. "Pierce them through the heart. Your time is wasted on anything else. They are fast. Do not give them time to move on you."

From further down the passageway, into the deep, footsteps came tramping. As the noise bore down on them, so did their dread. Eluse raised his spear high. His fingers dug into the wood so hard they hurt. Beside him, Consora raised her bow and anchored an arrow. Sorrel twirled Methirindil in one hand, and powerful magic shimmered through her other. Though adrenaline

rushed through him, Eluse felt safer now than he had with an entire company of Crownswords. The three of them would fight together until the last.

Consora looked at him.

“You alright?” he mouthed.

“Bravest person you’ve ever met,” she said with determination.

Looking at her, holding the fletchings of the arrow against her cheek, he didn’t doubt it for a moment. The footsteps drew closer. The bloodhosts were almost upon them. Tramping down that corridor.

Any. Second. Now.

Just as he prepared to pounce—nothing. The footsteps stopped, just out of sight. Right around that corner. Right around that sickening corner.

“We smell you in there.” Sylar’s hideous voice drifted in. “You thing, that has slain two more of us. Have you come to finish us all?”

Sylar’s grotesque face peeked around the corner, and Consora released an arrow at it with a grunt. He ducked back as quick as he had appeared. The arrow clattered into the tunnel, and a laugh wheezed from the bloodhost.

“You know, most of us would welcome it.” The voice reverberated around the cold walls. It seemed to stir the bones of the dead.

“Come forward, then,” shouted Sorrel. “Face your end like the men you once were.”

A tapping rapped out; the sound of fingernails on teeth. Sylar tutted. “I’m afraid we must feed. I should thank you for bringing yourself to us, you new thing. Your blood smells delicious. We hear it rush through your veins.”

“I fear I may get stuck in your throat.” Sorrel spun Methirindil gently around her hand.

“A chance I think I shall take.”

“You shall try.” Sorrel’s face was straight.

There was a small noise. A laugh, perhaps. Then a few grim words. “Let me show you the strength of the bloodhunger.”

A shift from the back of the chamber, over Eluse’s shoulder. A slight move of stone. They were behind them! Eluse spun and saw as three of them flashed from the dark. Gnarled fingers twisted over worn rock, hungry eyes fixed on them. They had come up from the other tunnels, so soft and silent, while Sylar spoke. The elves were surrounded. No, not three—a fourth, Danté, lurked at the back.

“Turn and fight!” Sorrel commanded with the cry of a general, as Sylar and another bloodhost rounded the corner of the tunnel. The room erupted into the same chaos that had rung

through the woods near Marshwater. Only now, Eluse did not panic and run. He could not; Consora and the others stood beside him. They depended on him, and he on them. He *must* fight.

He swung his spear low at one of the monsters as it flurried at him, and knocked its legs out. It skittered to the floor, but as it fell it flung out one arm like a whip. He was quick, and swung up his ironsilk, and its claws deflected from the solid cloak with a metallic bang. It scuffled on the ground, trying to right itself. Tinlit nipped down into its face, flustering it more. Consora loosed an arrow at a second one. It hit, piercing straight through the heart, and before it had even clattered to the ground she already had another arrow drawn. Behind them, Sorrel lit up the cavern with a great wall of flame, a shield which Sylar and the other could not pass. The back of Eluse's neck seared. The bloodhosts before them reared back, talons raised, their eyes pierced by the sudden bright in the dark. Eluse stabbed his spear forward into the one on the ground—he missed its heart, but withdrew and stabbed again, extinguishing its pained cry.

Just one was left in front of them now, but behind them the flameshield petered out. As it faded, Sorrel leapt from behind it in a graceful arc and slashed Methirindil at the creature that fought with Sylar, slicing deep through its torso and shoulders, almost down to its waist. It screeched with a gasp and fell to the ground in a writhing mound. Consora loosed an arrow at the last bloodhost on their side, but it streaked sideways as the arrow was airborne and it struck it in the shoulder. Eluse recognised it as the hideous thing that had stood over them, scraping on the rock for so long. With a deathly wail, she launched herself at Consora, claws razing toward her neck.

Eluse had no time to think. He threw himself between the fiend and his friend. He jugged his spear as hard as he could. It struck flesh, skewering macerated body. She snarled. Eluse had missed the heart.

The bloodhost grasped the shaft of the spear that stuck through it and pulled itself forward, closer to him, walking up the spear. Fearful claws lashed at Eluse. He moved his ironsilk too slow, and its stone-sharpened nails caught his arm. They ripped through his flesh with a white-hot splash of pain like boiling water. Gasping in shock, his hands loosened on the spear and it fell from his hands. The bloodhost turned her eyes to Consora, and that was all it took to snap Eluse back to his senses—he kicked out, hard, into the bloodhost's waist. The blow staggered the creature and it slipped back onto the spearhead and tripped. By now Consora had another arrow drawn, and as the bloodhost fell, the arrow burst through her chest and into its black heart.

She lay, its back on the ground, gazing up at the top of the chamber with blind eyes, scraping the rock on the ground with trembling claws. She scraped, and scraped, and then didn't.

Behind them, Sorrel and Sylar tussled. She was clearly ailing, and the lack of magic down here had meant she exhausted herself. Suscepto, too, had crawled from his cage.

But before Eluse, Danté. He lurked on a rock in the dark like a snake.

"You help Sorrel," Eluse growled to Consora. "I will deal with him." Eluse's combat inexperience mattered nothing. He could have cut down an army of bloodhost if they had stood between Danté and himself. He was a predator, and Danté was his prey.

He flew forward, wrenching his spear from the dead bloodhost. Blood flowed down his arm, but he barely noticed. The pain that had stunned him a moment ago was gone; now fury remained.

“Eluse, I don’t—” Danté began to speak, but Eluse screamed out and swung his spear at him wildly. Danté recoiled and thrashed out of the way. Eluse stabbed again, glancing a blow from his arm. Then, Danté turned and fled.

Eluse chased. Up one of the black tunnels they ran, so close he could smell the sweat on him. He thrust his spear again, but it scraped on a rock. His rage blazed red. The traitor would die. The pathway straightened a little, Danté was right ahead, and Eluse raised his spear and flung it as hard as he could.

It sailed through the air and tore through Dante’s side. With a cry, he hit the ground and the momentum dragged him over the rock. Eluse barely stopped running, diving across him and tearing the spear from his body as he did. “Please!” Danté cried, flinging his hands up in front of him like a child.

“Die like the man you pretend to be, Danté,” Eluse hollered, his eyes flashing.

“I’m sorry,” choked the pathetic creature in front of him. “Whatever else I lied to you, I am sorry. That is the truth.”

Eluse glared down at the pitiful bloodhost. The clash of the fight in the chamber echoed down the tunnel, but it sounded damp and muffled here.

He jerked back his spear to strike, but as he moved, he felt within him the smallest trickle of hesitation. It was as subtle as the glint of magic when he’d had to feel for it—just enough to let him know it was there, and just as easy to ignore. It wasn’t the words that Danté said—they were surely lies—it was the look of this deplorable thing on its knees before him, entirely at his mercy, and it reminded him of something. The look in his eyes was a lot like the Eldergrove cultist, all those months before.

Danté shook. “Truly, I am sorry. I know you must end me, but I wish you to know this one thing; I was a better man than this once. I so deeply wish that I could have been again.”

“You’re a liar,” Eluse snarled. “You would have killed her.” He tried hard to strike this time, but something even harder held him back.

Danté gave what might have been a sob. “I know. I have been made a wretch by a wrym.”

“You would have killed us all! Thrown our bones in these tunnels and never thought of us again. Your time is ended.”

The broken bloodhost sniffed a little, and almost laughed. “Well, I would have killed you. That’s true. But truly, I’d not have left you in these tunnels. None of you. I’d have taken you to the hills, in the sunlight. That was real.”

Eluse gritted his teeth. He imagined the feel of the spear in his flesh. It felt good. And bitter.

Danté kept talking. Eluse wished he would stop. “And don’t ever believe I’d never have thought of you again. The truth is, I’d never have stopped thinking of you. I think of all of them. Every one of them, every moment. I see their faces before me, even now, and the look in their eyes when they realised I had killed them.” He did not show fear now. Only melancholy. “There are ghosts in this crypt, but they live inside my head. And I have put them there myself.”

Everything Danté said brought Eluse more anger. He didn’t deserve to speak one more word.

So why did he keep letting him talk?

“You would say anything to make me hesitate if you thought it would bring you blood.” Eluse growled. “Your lies will not spare you my spear.”

“They shouldn’t. Please, do it quick. Finish the rest of us too.”

Why did it feel so hard to move? He was so close to him, he wanted so deeply to kill this murderer and leave his body here in the dark. He *would* do it. His spear-arm shook. Blood ran down from where the bloodhost had slashed him, bright red and fresh. It ran down the shaft and dripped off, close to Danté.

What if...

Eluse, keeping his spear at Danté’s heart, moved over him. Blood sprinkled over his face and clothes, soaking into the bloodhost.

“Drink one last time, Danté. Feed your wyrm.” He sneered, but it was not a good sneer. It was a sneer that felt wrong.

Danté sobbed. “Please. I don’t want to.” He spat the blood away from his lips.

What?

“I don’t want to die feeding it. I want to die as me. The wyrm beat me in my life. At least let me have this in my death.”

There may as well have been a solid wall between Eluse’s spear and Danté’s heart. Eluse burned and raged, but something greater stirred inside him. He saw the bloodhost in Danté, but he saw the young man underneath it too. They were both in there. He raised the spear at Danté’s chest. He could rid Anima of this threat right now. ***He. Could. Kill. This. Killer.***

He remembered Consora, held by Sylar, slick claws at her throat, ready to rip her apart. Lured into a trap by Danté, who would have let him slaughter her in front of them, then drunk her dry. He was cold with rage. It froze his heart solid. But something slight thawed it again.

Why wouldn’t Danté drink the blood?

He moved his arm back, away from Danté, and his blood trickled slowly into the floor. Maybe the blood loss was affecting his mind. His head felt light. It swam.

He spoke a single word, which stuck in his throat and felt like it might have been the heaviest word he had spoken in his life. It could only come out as a whisper.

“Go.”

Danté looked up, and wiped the blood from his face. “What?”

Eluse didn’t think he’d have the control to say it again.

“Please, no. Please, let me die like this. Don’t let me go. I can’t feed it again. Don’t make me go and do it again.”

“Get *out!*” Eluse screamed like he’d never screamed before, and his throat stung. He flung his spear to the ground, and stood forward over Danté, grasping him by both shoulders, fingers digging into flesh. He pressed his face against Danté’s, his violet forehead on Dante’s sweating bloodstained one, their eyes barely apart. He could smell his own blood on the man. A low voice growled from Eluse, so deep and dark that it shocked himself to hear it.

“Get out of this crypt and go and starve your wyrm to death. If you have to starve yourself to death first, so be it.”

Danté froze, then gave a very small nod. Eluse flung him backwards, and the wordless man scabbled to his feet. He stared at Eluse, mouth open in shock. He didn’t say another thing, but nodded once more, turned around, and ran away into the dark.

Eluse didn’t know why he did that.

The murderer had tried to kill them all. Suscepto was badly wounded. Consora came so close to death. The thought of it made his blood like ice. What would they say if they knew he had let him go?

He didn’t need to wait to find out. He turned around. Consora was there.

“Consora,” he gasped. Her mouth was open slightly, and her eyes met with his. He tried to step toward her, to explain with words he didn’t have, but found he couldn’t move. She came to him. She reached out and took his trembling hand, and squeezed it gently.

“It’s alright.”

She wrapped her arms around him, and they stood holding one another for a while. He was shaking through his whole body. The sounds from the chamber were quiet now. He could not speak or move, and none of his thoughts made sense. Her body warmed him just enough to remind him he was still alive.

When she finally pulled away, Eluse realised that he had tears on his cheeks. He didn’t know how they got there.

“Come on,” Consora said softly. “Sorrel has a surprise for you.”

Slowly, with Eluse hardly able to walk, she led him back to the chamber by his hand. Tinlit zipped gleefully through the air as they entered, and Sorrel leaned against the altar with a small, pleased smile on her face. Emaciated corpses of the bloodhosts littered the room, and among them, on the ground by the cages was Suscepto, breathing heavily. And in one of the three cages...

“Hello, Sylar,” Eluse stuttered. Sylar’s vicious eyes flashed back. Danté fell from his mind. This fearsome, murderous creature who had gloated so profoundly of his strength now looked like little more than a caged monkey. He hissed and shrieked.

“That was... quite a fight,” Sorrel said blithely.

“How did you get him in there?” Eluse asked, grinning hard.

Sorrel had a sincere look on her face. “Remember, Eluse, I told you, with mastery over nature and the energy around us, there is nothing that cannot be accomplished.”

“I tripped over the ivy,” Suscepto said with a very proud grin. “And then he tripped over me.”

Eluse and Consora stooped over in laughter. “And you thought it was all pranks and silliness,” Consora grinned, looking at the ridiculous robed creature in the cage next to the lanky Director of Duties, who looked ever so pleased with himself.

A chill voice hissed from Sylar. “Do not think that because you have bested me this day, you have defeated the—”

“Oh, shut up,” Suscepto said, rapping on the bars of the cage with Methirindil. Sylar jerked away from the blade. “We weren’t talking to you.”

Sylar reached out a clawed hand at Eluse, scratching at the ground in the direction of the blood that still seeped from him. His tongue flailed at him, trying to taste it on the air. Eluse looked away.

“There are six of them here, including the one in the cage,” Sorrel said. “But Tinlit saw seven. Where is the last?” She looked at Eluse.

He stammered. “I—”

“Eluse killed him in the tunnels. He tried to run.” Consora cut in. Sorrel nodded curtly.

“Very good, Eluse. Very good indeed.” She turned away for a moment, and Consora’s eyes glinted at him, with the little curl at the corner of her mouth that he’d known for so long. “I am very impressed by the both of you.”

“You should have seen Suscepto!” Eluse exclaimed, changing the subject. “He’s the bravest of us all.”

Suscepto’s face beamed brightly.

“Definitely the bravest trip hazard I’ve ever seen.” Consora nodded sagely.

“So, what are we going to do with this one?” Eluse pointed at Sylar, who hissed like a snake.

“We could just leave him in there and let him starve,” suggested Suscepto, which Eluse recognised as a joke, but immediately it panicked the bloodhost.

“Do not leave me here,” it pleaded, clutching the bars of the cage. “What if I got free? What if I kill again? Better to give me a clean death.”

Sorrel frowned and hopped away from the altar to study him. “What *are* you? Why do you fear the cage more than death?”

Sylar’s eyes were blazing daggers, but he spat out an answer. “The Hunger,” he rumbled. “I could not bear the Hunger. You will not free me, so you must kill me. Do not leave me with the Hunger. You could not. It would be too cruel.”

“Could... Could you starve the wyrm?” Eluse asked, with as much nonchalance as he could muster. “If we left you in here, without blood, would it die, and you would live again?”

The bloodhost howled. “I prefer to die!” he screamed up at the darkness above.

Sorrel shrugged, and looked at Suscepto. “Well. Give him what he wants.”

Suscepto nodded dispassionately and struggled to his feet, then made his way to the cage.

“Suscepto, do you need—” Consora began.

“No no, Miss Consora. You leave this nasty business to me.” He prodded Methirindil through the bars of the cage, where Sylar shied away from it, suddenly not quite so keen to die as he had said. Awkwardly, Suscepto swung the sword down, flicking it back and forth toward him until it found its mark, where, without ceremony or theatrics, it cleaved through the scrawny neck of the bloodhost, and his head hit the floor with a clunk.

Thick black slime oozed from his head and neck.

“I suppose that’s the end of that,” Suscepto stood up a little taller. “I think it’s about time we got out of here. Oh, master Eluse, you’re bleeding badly. We need to get that fixed up. Sorrel, could you...?”

“We need to return to the surface,” she said. “It will take time. It took me hours to find you down here. Try not to bleed to death before then, either of you.”

Eluse wrapped his ironsilk around his arm, but the bloodflow was slowing by now. He would live. Just as they had turned to leave, Consora called out, who was a little way behind, still over by the cages.

“Come and look at this!” They walked back to her, where she was crouched down, looking at the grotesque fluid that seeped from the dead Sylar. “Look there. In the slime.”

Wriggling around in the tar-like blood was a little white maggot, no longer than a thumbnail. It rolled around in the filth.

“Is that it?” Eluse asked . “Is that the wyrm?” He prodded at it with his spear, and managed to get it seated on the spearhead. He brought it out of the cage, careful to keep it at arms’ length. He dropped it to the ground, and the four elves peered at it.

It didn’t look like very much at all. It was disgusting, but looked as pathetic as Sylar did in his cage.

“That’s it,” breathed Consora. “This is what drove them to such depravity.”

It was such an insignificant thing; it wriggled like a newborn baby. Eluse was fascinated by it. The idea that it could have caused such ruin for so long both sickened and excited him. These things that were once men and women had given themselves over to it completely, and now they had nothing to show for it but their own broken bodies, which would lie beneath the earth forever.

“Were they truly a slave to such a little thing?” asked Eluse.

Sorrel’s boot stomped down onto the wyrm with finality. “Let us leave this pit.”

Nobody argued with that.

“It’s strange, looking up at the sky at night. There’s a lot more darkness than there is light. But, it’s never the dark that you notice. It’s always the light that catches your eye.”

-Grynn, astronomer of Bay Holme, Eastern Arath’ Sayah.

CHAPTER 20 - IN THE SILVERBIRCH TREES

The deserts lay behind him. They had hardly stopped for rest. Before the Twisted King rolled the fresh green grassland of the Dharian Empire.

A hunting hawk circled above them, brooding. It was one of their own, and hundreds more were south, slaughtering every flitwing, raven, or other creature that might serve as an Elven spy. The Twisted King needed no eyes on him now.

But down the road on the grasslands, eyes did come. Eyes under cold metallic visors and strong thick helmets, riding atop warhorses. A company of soldiers wore the red and silver Dharian colours, carrying a Dharian banner; that shattered silver crown laid on red. Twenty men or more. The sun glinted from their shining silver armour. Knights. To the hunting hawks, they would have been specks before the Twisted King’s army of thousands.

The Twisted King rode at the front of his horde. The knights cantered at him, flinging dust in the air in a little brown patch under the blue sky. As they neared, both sides slowed. By the time they met, the Twisted King’s horse was at a trot, and so were the Dharians. The Twisted King’s hand rested on the handle of his black blade.

The knight with the banner shouted to the Twisted King. “You ride through Dharian country.” He looked at the advancing line of men behind the King. There were too many to count.

“We do,” the Twisted King called back. “Do you mean to stand in our way?”

“No.”

The knight threw his banner into the dirt and tore the Dharian colours from himself. The rest of the knights followed suit. They tossed their ripped tabards onto the dusty road.

The Twisted King gave a small nod, and proceeded. The knights turned their horses and joined his procession. Horsemen rode, wagons rolled, beasts prowled and infantry trampled the Dharian colours into the ground.

* * *

“Shanta!” Eluse flung his arms around the young buck’s neck, who grunted happily. Shanta licked at the wounds on his arms and looked him over with big, worried eyes. Behind him, Sorrel helped Suscepto from the hole.

The evening sky was a dull orange. They’d been underground for nearly a whole day and night, but none of them had slept. The adrenaline that had kept Eluse running wore off quickly. His shoulders slumped, and his eyes struggled to stay open.

“You need to heal,” Sorrel said to him and Suscepto. Eluse had almost forgotten, but his cloak was soaked through with blood. Now they were above the ground, the life was brighter and the magic stronger. Nothing like the forest, but enough to draw on. Sorrel lay a hand on Suscepto and a bright glow shone from her into him. His eyes widened in surprise, and he giggled.

“It tickles,” squirmed the usually dignified elf.

Consora came to Eluse, and rested her hand on his arm where the wound was worst. “My turn to save you, now,” she said. There was a little colour to her cheeks. She unwrapped his cloak, and he watched her face as she concentrated. Nothing as bright or sudden as Sorrel, but green-gold sparks fluttered from her fingers and melted into his skin. It felt warm and refreshing, and a shiver ran through his whole body. There was a sort of pain, but a satisfying kind that he didn’t mind, like a scab being torn away. The golden sparkles knitted his skin back together, and little white lines formed over the top.

Sorrel looked over Consora and nodded approvingly. “That’s going to leave a scar,” she said.

“Something to remember them by,” Eluse said with a half-smile. His skin was still red and a little swollen, and he was sure Sorrel could have healed it more fully, but he didn’t mind. He wiped away the dried blood and admired his new scar. Three distinct flashes of white on his violet skin.

“We should find somewhere to rest,” Sorrel said, eyeing the dying orange sky.

“And something to eat,” Consora said.

“We must get off this road,” Sorrel said. “We’ll travel the rest of the way in the wilds.”

Eluse suddenly remembered. The rest of the way! Were they still supposed to travel to the city? And, more to the point, *how was Sorrel here at all?* Would she bring them home, or was it more important to continue to Tal In’myhra, and seek the Grace of Oriothen? Did she have news of the invasion? Did she know about the Shade?

He opened his mouth and all his questions poured out at once.

“There will be time to talk,” was all she said, “but that time is not now.”

Eluse thought that the time was indeed now, and pestered her further and harder, but now she had adopted the stern manner of his tutor from Lenune, not their noble rescuer they’d known moments ago.

She pointed out a thicket on a plateau halfway down the hill, about two miles away, with little stream winding through. It was well off the path, and they would be sheltered from the worst of the wind there, and it was the only place they'd find before nightfall. In the far, far distance, lights had started to shine from homesteads and farmhouses. Some were in clusters. Perhaps one of those clusters, far away, was the city. They climbed onto the deer, their legs too weary to carry them further. Consora rode Shanta with Eluse, holding onto him from behind, and Suscepto on Rucca with Sorrel.

They followed the stream, and the deer stopped to drink heartily from it. Eluse jumped down too and plunged his head into the frigid water, slurping it up in huge gulps.

Inside half an hour, they'd arrived at a cluster of silverbirch trees. The mood was happy but tired, and Eluse saw Sorrel and Suscepto talking urgently in quiet voices a little ahead of them. Suscepto seemed disturbed, but whenever Shanta moved up closer, they stopped talking. Consora was too sleepy to notice, and rested her head on Eluse's shoulder until they rode into the trees.

Once in, the stream opened up into a pond, and crickets chirped in the evening air.

"Look here!" called Consora, rubbing her eyes and jumping from Shanta. She ran to some big stone boulders that lay in piles by the waterside.

Suscepto sighed wearily. "What trouble have you foraged for us now, Consora?"

"Look! This used to be somewhere. These stones fit together, and that's the bottom of a pillar. I think this used to be an archway. It looks even older than the Flintknock fort."

"Not more ruins," complained Eluse. "I'm not sure I can manage any more bloodhosts." He wasn't sure whether he was joking or not. But this place was not like the ruins at Flintknock. Little green moths shimmered over the water like spirits, glowing softly, and fireflies twirled in and out of the silverbirch trees. Tinlit crossed in and out of them, hunting mosquitos. There was nobody else here, and Sorrel said it would make a fine spot to camp.

They dismounted, and Suscepto and Eluse got to work gathering firewood. They piled it in a spot by the mossy boulders that Consora found, and by the time they'd started a fire, Sorrel had already returned with a brace of rabbits. Consora, who had a fine nose for food, found shrubs thick with loganberries. Before it was dark they had meat roasting over the fire stuffed with juicy berries, and a couple of fernleaf shelters against the rocks. The fire warmed their bodies, and the crackle of the wood and the smell of the food warmed their hearts.

"Eluse," Sorrel asked as they ate. "May I see the seal on your finger?"

Eluse had almost forgotten it; it didn't hurt any more. He showed it to her, and she gripped his hand with perhaps a little more intensity than she'd intended. Her quick eyes looked it over on all sides, and she studied where it sank into his skin.

"Thank you," she said at last, and didn't say any more about it. She was quiet for a little while after that.

Suscepto turned to Consora, his brow furrowed. “Miss Consora, I owe you my most sincere thanks. What you did in the crypt is the reason I am here with you now.”

“That’s fine, Suscepto. We’ll just chalk that up as another one you owe me.” She beamed at him. “Though, I suppose we owe you as well. You took our place, down there. You didn’t need to do that.

“Well, as grateful as I am, I find myself rather... disturbed, if you’ll excuse my saying.” His voice took on a more serious edge. “You gave so much of yourself to me that you brought yourself quite to the point of peril. It very nearly cost you your life.”

“Right.” Consora leaned back against a tree, gnawing on a rabbit bone. “You can make me a medal when we’re back, if you like. What’s your point?”

“It’s just that... Miss Consora, it is my duty to protect you and Eluse, it is *not* your duty to me. You are young, and quite frankly if it comes down to it, I would far rather you and Eluse are safe, not I. It’s by all means a noble deed to help others, but not to the cost of your own life. Not for one so young. You must not be reckless with yourself.”

Consora stopped chewing the bone. “Mmm. Well. That’s dumb.”

“Pardon?”

“I just did the right thing. You don’t need to thank me, but you don’t need to tell me I’m wrong, either. You needed help. So I helped. It doesn’t matter if I’m young or not. How is that any different to what you did?”

Suscepto’s jaw tightened. “Yes, I did my duty. And all I ask is that you do yours—keep yourself safe. Don’t concern yourself with me. You cannot sacrifice yourself for the sake of—”

“Other people? Yeah, I get it.” Consora cut him off, her voice flat. “But sometimes, Suscepto, people just need help. It’s just what you do. Even when it’s big dumb Directors of Duties with double standards. If I’m in the middle of something, I don’t think about ‘what if’ or ‘hmm, better not go too far’. I just... do it.”

His expression softened, but his voice stayed firm. “And if you go on as you are, you’ll get yourself killed. And then who will you help? I simply ask that you put your own safety first—not that you won’t help others, but that you look after yourself first. Do I have your agreement?”

Consora rolled her head thoughtfully. “No.”

Suscepto let out a long, exasperated sigh, muttering under his breath, and rose to leave. “Well that was a waste of time.” Eluse heard him chunter to himself as he stropped off.

Consora watched him go, a satisfied smirk on her lips. She returned to picking at the bone.

Eluse got up and followed Suscepto. Once they were out of earshot, he spoke to him. “You’re a hypocrite, you know?”

Suscepto gave him a scathing look. But, before he said anything, his countenance broke and he threw up his hands, chuckling. “Oh, I know. I am. But, it is my duty to keep the two of you safe, and if either of you goes flinging yourselves into danger on my account, what sort of job have I done?”

“Well. I’d say a pretty good job, Suscepto. You can hardly expect to set an example and for us not to follow it, no matter what you say with your words. If you’re selfless and sacrificial, you can’t be surprised if that rubs off onto people.”

A pink blush crept up Suscepto’s neck, making him look uncharacteristically sheepish. “Master Eluse, it sounds *almost* as if you paid me a compliment just then.”

“Mmm. And I’ll deny it if you tell anybody.”

“I’d expect nothing less. And your words are kind and well-heard. Very well. Shall we return? This cold is biting.”

They made their way back to the fire, and over the last of the rabbit Suscepto offered a fairly contrite apology and some sincere thanks to Consora, which were returned, to everybody’s surprise. When they’d eaten their fill, Eluse and Consora sat a little distance back from the water, leaning languidly against one of the ruined rocks, watching the moths. A rustle from the branches announced a little brown nightingale tucking itself in for the night. It watched them. There was a comfortable quiet between the two elves.

Consora was deep in thought. “What made you let him go?” she asked, after a while.

Eluse had been dreading the question. He let a long pause stretch out. “I don’t know.”

“I’m glad you did.”

“Why?”

There was another long pause. A moth came to rest on Consora’s boot. “I don’t know either.”

It meant a lot to him, that. “When we were down there, you seemed so... not yourself with them. They nearly killed us all, but you just *talked* to him. I’ve never seen you that calm before. Why?”

She moved her boot, and the moth took wing. “It... It’s hard to explain. It wasn’t really him, you know? The wurm was in him, but the man was too. I just hoped that the man was stronger.”

“Why did you lie to Sorrel? You told her I’d killed him.”

Consora was thoughtful before she answered. “I don’t think she’d have understood. I’m not sure I understand either, if I’m honest. But I think I do a little better than her.”

“Do you think he’ll kill again?” he asked her.

She exhaled sharply. “I don’t want to think about it.”

Once more, the face of the cultist in the woods rose before his eyes. He'd never told Consora about that. He felt a flush of shame when he thought of it, and wouldn't have known what to say anyway. It was the cultists that had killed Consora's father, so perhaps she'd have been glad, but... Well, either way, he had to do it. For the good of Arath' Sayah and the Kingdom.

If that was true, why did he think of it so often?

Letting Danté go felt harder than killing him. He was *so sure* when he'd been trapped in that cage that he'd have killed him in an instant if he'd had the chance. And if Danté did go on to kill again, would Eluse be to blame for the deaths of his victims?

He blinked away the image seared in his mind; Danté's face, wet with blood, spitting it out of his mouth. Refusing to drink the blood. Wanting to die as a man, not a vessel for a parasite.

It would have made so much sense to kill him. But something had found a way into Eluse's mind, and it lay like an egg in a nest, wanting to hatch. It was hope. *He didn't drink the blood.*

In the silverbirch tree above, the nightingale flitted away.

"Do you remember Grenka's story about what the silverbirch trees are?" Consora asked suddenly. Eluse smiled. If there was a myth in the forest, Consora would know it.

"I don't. What did she say?"

"That where each one grows, a life was ended by the Shadow. When the World Spider died and the first magic broke out over Anima, she raised up trees across the world. But where Men had been killed in the Shadow's name, a little memory of his power clung to the earth there. So the trees still grew, but they took on a little of that memory. That's why their bark is silver; robbed of all its colour." She looked around the silvertree grove. "They're like the gravestones in Flintknock. A little link between the living and the dead."

Eluse felt a chill, in the midst of all those trees, but scoffed. "That's stupid. These trees are no more than a hundred years old. They've not been growing since the Spider died."

"I didn't say it was true, Eluse. I just said it was the story."

If it were true, there must have been a terrible battle here. There were hundreds of trees. Thousands. Perhaps the ruins Consora had found were even old enough to be from the Black Age.

Consora saw the trepidation in his eyes. "I wonder if the dead can hear us," she whispered, as eerily as she could, wiggling her fingers.

"Shut up." He laughed. They didn't talk about the dead any more.

After a while, Suscepto and Sorrel, who had been talking very intently, made some excuse or other, and found a reason to separate themselves from Eluse and Consora. Eluse

thought they probably imagined they were being terribly discrete, but it was clear that there were things they meant to discuss that were not for their ears. The problem was, Eluse and Consora liked little more than things not meant for their ears.

The secret to a good sneak is not only to be unheard and unseen, but to make the subject of the sneak believe that a sneak is entirely impossible in the first place. So as the two older elves wandered off, Eluse and Consora very loudly made a fuss about how they were absolutely exhausted and going to bed at once. “Goodnight,” they called out after them, yawning theatrically. In fact, they found themselves enlivened by this opportunity for sneakery, and their tiredness was forgotten.

Waiting just long enough for the older elves to get out of sight, they set off, padding quickly over the earth. They rounded the pond and hopped the stream, and got closer to Suscepto and Sorrel. They matched their footsteps together, because Sorrel’s senses were irritatingly keen and they didn’t want to be heard, even at this distance. When the older elves got far enough away from the camp that they thought they were alone little did they know, they stopped on the other side of a bramble.

Eluse and Consora lay prone in the long grass and watched them. They shuffled closer, and could pick up odd words that weren’t caught up by the gentle wind.

“...*treasonous, and the idea that...*” they heard from Suscepto.

“...*never known the truth, because if...*” Sorrel said, among some other things.

“...*got to tell them... Eluse should...*”

“...*bigger than any of...*”

“...*cannot remove the Seal unless...*”

Eluse and Consora exchanged glances. This looked like it would take an even bigger sneak than they had thought. Their voices were strange, and it didn’t sound quite like they were arguing, but close to it. Suscepto, most of all, sounded antagonised. After a while, though, the voices quieted. The two elves peeped over the grass.

Suscepto was lying down, and looked like he might have been sleeping, but that didn’t make much sense. Sorrel sat beside him, watching over him. And beside them...

“Is that mycelia?” Consora whispered. Next to Sorrel was a little wooden bowl with steam rising from it. It was hard to tell from here, but that was how the mycelia was taken.

“I think it is!” he gasped. “She’s showing him something from the mycelian record! Yes, look at him, he’s dreaming.”

“Why not us?” Consora muttered, looking rather put out. The words weren’t even out of her mouth before Eluse knew what had to happen next.

“We’ve got to get that bowl,” he whispered urgently. “We need to see that vision too.”

“Eluse! No, we don’t know what that is. It could be anything.”

He rolled his eyes. “Stop being so scared of mushrooms, Consora. She’s brought it for Suscepto to see something, and whatever it is, we need to see it too. I mean,” he said gesturing around him, “we’re a little beyond the pale here.”

She considered, twitching her cheek. “Fine,” she sighed at last. “But you’re doing it. I’m not touching the stuff.”

“Deal,” he grinned, and looked again at how close the bowl was to Sorrel. “I’ll drink some, but I’ll only have a couple of minutes before it knocks me out. I might need a little help getting to it, though,” he needed. “Do you mind...?”

“Whatever. Fine.” Consora knew what Eluse needed, and skulked off through the trees.

He gave her a minute or two, then began prowling toward Sorrel. He got as close as he dared in the low grass, then waited. Some distance away in the thicket, a loud crashing of branches came. Sorrel’s head snapped up with alarm.

He’d wanted Sorrel to get up and investigate, but no such luck. But her attention was pinpointed on the trees, and the more Consora floundered around and made a scene, the more of Sorrel’s attention would not be on the little elf that was creeping up behind her. Timing his movements with Consora’s crashes and the soft swishing of the wind, he slunk nearer. Suscepto was mumbling incoherently, with unseeing eyes half-open. Eluse carefully came close enough to touch Sorrel, whose alert ears were alert in completely the wrong direction. With his very best sneak, he reached over to the bowl that was at her side, picked it up, and took a large swig.

The water tasted bitter and earthy, and broken chunks of whitecap floated in it. He swilled it down and put the bowl back as softly as a gnat landing on a leaf. Then, as quickly as he dared, he fled back across the grass, extremely pleased with himself and their ruse, and how he’d outsmarted not just any old ranger, but the one who had pestered him so often about the importance of being aware of his surroundings.

Very quickly he was back at the campfire, and shortly after that Consora joined him.

“Well?” she said impatiently.

“Got it,” he grinned. “I don’t think it’ll take long to work. A few minutes, maybe.”

“Honestly, Eluse, I don’t know what we’re meant to expect here.”

“That’s fine,” he said with a dreary look in his eyes. A little silence went by. “I’m trying to concentrate, actually. Can you stop talking please?”

Consora gave him a puzzled look. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Come on, Thenda. Just... Shhhh.” He pressed a finger out, as if to her lips, but missed and slipped forward.

“Alright then.” She rolled her eyes. “How about you have a little lie down here.” She shuffled him onto the grass by the fire.

“Huh, that’s strange,” he said. “The sun’s coming up. I thought it just went down.”

“That’s the campfire,” she sighed.

“No, there. In the south. The sun. I can see it. I can see a lot of things, now. It’s very peaceful up here. As long as you stop talking.” He giggled to himself.

Eluse wasn’t really there much any more. He was back in Arath’ Sayah, on the wall, a long time ago.

The Twin Crowns are one of the many curiosities of the Amber Age; each 8,000 years old and both forged from dead gods. Those who worship the Spider wear the very thorns that killed her, and those who reject the Shadow wear the very crown that he did. The Shadowshatter crown is a ruined reminder that to dominate leads to death, and the Poisonthorn crown is a reminder of the sacrifice of leadership. The crowns are symbols of an age that was, and ought not to be again.

Learnéd Nyas, On Kings And Crowns, II Edition.

CHAPTER 21 - THE TWIN KINGS

“Well, here we are again, Miles!” Thenda crowed like a cockerel, with much more enthusiasm that was welcome at this hour. “Another glorious sun-up!”

Miles grunted. Chipper spirits had not been divvied out equally this morning. He leant on his spear, bleary eyes staring at the sunrise from the top of the wall. The light glinted from their bronze armour, drawing pretty sparkles in his eyes. And, watching the golden rays light up the treetops of Lenune from all the way at the top of the Glendil Gate was a treat that almost made up for Thenda’s chattering.

“Cor blimey, look at her go. Those colours! Best job in the world, this. I says this to my Darra last night, I says ‘*bet tomorrow’s a good ‘un.*’ I told him, and what did we get? A good ‘un. I don’t get tired of it, do you?”

Miles got plenty tired of it, and of much more besides. “I do like the quiet of the dawn,” he said with hope. It was to no avail.

“Don’t much fancy those steps, though! Good for the body but I don’t know much about the spirit, har har!” Thenda described herself as a dawn lark, but Miles thought she was more like a woodpecker. “Still, we’re here now, we’ll settle in. Unless one of us has forgotten something!”

Thenda bustled away, and Miles tuned her out as best he could. He watched the sun in the south slip higher into the sky and light up the everwood as far as he could see. The rosy leaves of the First Tree lit up in every colour, all the way up to the top, where miles from the forest floor it hid its head in a ring of icy clouds. Springtime had splashed colour across the treetops beneath, and as long as he worked hard to shut his ears off, it was peaceful up here.

“Gosh, I’m just going to perch down for a moment too,” Thenda’s voice pried its way back into Miles’ mind as she scooted a wooden chair over to the southern side of the guard tower. “I’ll keep a spot over the woods for a bit, get some sun on my cheeks, you don’t mind keeping an eye northways do you?” Miles agreed nonchalantly. “Thanks, chick.” She sat down with a *clank*, untying the clasps on her armour. She set down her helmet and shook out her hair away from her face.

Miles moved over to the north side of the tower, where the lands it overlooked were much more sparse. Though it was still Arath' Sayah country, the forest was missing. The shadow of the First Tree stretched well out over the country, further than he could see. With him here and Thenda on the far side of the tower, perhaps she would quiet down a bi—

“Phoar, makes you wonder, doesn't it?” She blathered on at twice the volume. “All those lights up there, them stars.” She peered at the fading stars. “There's just so many, and there they go, twinkling away, and if tonight they come out again and some of them are missing, do you think anyone would notice?”

Sometimes, Miles would offer her back some conversation. “I imagine the astronomers might have something to say for it.”

“Har! Now there's a thought. But all I'm meaning for is that with all of them up *there*, and all of us down *here*, I've just got to wonder if anything would notice if we twinkled out. Now my Darra, of course, I'd notice if he were missing of a morn! And I dare say he'd notice if I were gone too.”

“I think I'd notice if you went missing, too, Thenda.”

“Aww!” she chuckled. “What a sweetiepie. Well, but all I'm meaning is if there's any folk up in them stars looking back at us like we're looking at them, and we suddenly wasn't there one of their nighttimes, I wonder if they'd think even think a second thought of it.”

“Thenda,” spoke Miles as politely as he could. “I'm finding it a little hard to concentrate with all the conversation. Do you think perhaps we could have a little quiet?”

“Oh! Yes, quite right, quite right, I'll hush up.” Her blue cheeks blushed purple. “You know me, I do get carried away! My Darra says my mouth will be the ruin of me, he says—you know sometimes he I should have been a commissary, and been up visiting all them other folks, he says I'd talk them into anything! Now fancy that. But then, I'd miss the wall, so I don't ever see that I...” she carried on jabbering as Miles sighed, defeated. He turned back to the north.

Past the jagged mountains to the east and west of the wall, the hills were much smoother, but mostly browns and yellows, not the deep greens of the forest or the peacock-blue of the Serpent Tongue that flowed through. There was little to see, as the Elves almost never crossed the wall or mountains, and the lands of Dharia were still a day's ride. As the sun crept up further and its feathery rays spun further into the north, Miles squinted into the distance. His brow furrowed.

Thenda wittered on. “...And that was the last we saw of the figs! Now, my ma says I've always been thick as a short stump, but I couldn't for the life of me—”

“Thenda, stop talking for a moment,” said Miles, and mercifully, she did. “Come and look at this.” She rose and shuffled herself over the tower.

“What've you got, hon?”

“Take a look. There. Just this side of the Fartherfields.”

They both peered out, where against the dim backdrop they could just about make out a number of darker shapes; a dozen or so. They were too far off to be certain, but they moved at a speed that suggested horseback.

“Men?” Thenda said.

“Must be, we’ve no scouts due back. They’re moving quickly, look at them!”

The little brown specks thundered across the earth, flinging up dust behind them. “Dharians, as like as not,” she said.

It became clear they were headed right for the Glendil Gate. “Sound the horn, Thenda.”

“Right you are! Strange, you know, a few like that—you don’t see that much these days, not with all the goings on.” She tottered over to a great ox horn at the rim of the tower and used her well-practised breath to blow a mighty blast from it. The blare glided out over the calm morning air that had settled over the city.

In the other guard towers along the wall, commotion, and then a creaking. Far below, the wicket gate heaved open. Thenda was busy re-strapping her armour; Miles checked again whether there were any followers to the riders, and when he saw there was not, they made for the stairway.

They were both fleet of foot to reach the bottom, though Thenda was slightly more foot than fleet. In the stairwell they were met with more sentries, each of whom held bronze spears and were in varying states of armament. A cohort of sentries were gathered at the bottom of the wall before the open gate, and the riders rode in.

“Halt!” cried several voices at once, and the horses skittered to a stop. “Dismount!” There were thirteen riders; twelve well-armoured and one dressed much finer, with a shining silver breastplate. All of the horses were of good stock, and the men stood well short of them when they alighted.

The humans were no threat, but the elves stood with spears ready all the same. The man with the breastplate stepped forward, but he was resisted by two of the other sentries who stood closer by. His face was grim and weary, and several days of stubble collected about his jaw. On his head, though, was—

“The Shadowshatter crown!” exclaimed Thenda. “Well, bless my stars!” A ripple of excitement flushed through the guards.

The man tried to push through, but an apologetic-looking sentry stood before him. “Your Majesty, sir, my apologies, but current protocol—I’m afraid I have to ask you to disarm.”

The crowned man nodded. “Of course. Remove your weapons,” he instructed his cohort, and the Elven sentry moved forward to relieve them of their swords, shields, knives, bows, maces, warhammers, lances, glaives—the humans were nothing if not well-armed. The man in the crown bore only a longsword, which he handed to Miles.

“My thanks, King Gabriel,” he spoke, avoiding looking him in the eyes. He tried not to notice Thenda’s excited squeal. This, certainly, would give her plenty of firepower for the inevitable conversations.

A flustered elf in a green and gold tunic hurried down the path from the city to meet them. “My lord!” he said. “You are well received! Well received indeed. Won’t you accompany me at once to the Palace?”

Miles watched as the King wasted no time, and he and his men strode with firm purpose. Once the King had disappeared down the path, he turned back to the tower, where Thenda would take oblivious delight in holding him hostage with her soliloquies for the rest of this day, and many more besides.

Somewhere, invisible, the spores of a little mushroom hung on the wind, and the magic and memory of the woodland drew it toward this crowned arrival. This King felt like toil and stress, and teeth blunted from grinding them together. His cares weighed on him heavier than his armour, and though he would not show it, the little green specks that clung to the air around him felt the urgency and frustration with which he moved. *A change was about to happen.* The wind drifted, and the spores followed the King.

The King knew the waking streets of Lenune well. This was his first visit since his coronation. As he walked, he felt the eyes of the resident elves peering from their trees and holes. Folk looked down from walkways between the trees like balconies. The air in the city stilled as he passed. The Gate told him all that needed to be said about the Elves. They were not overfond of visitors, and that came clear in the eyes of those who watched.

Through gaps in the canopy he could see their destination; the First Tree. Dawn mist hung to the bottom and trailed the contours of the tree. Up, up, into the clouds. By the time they arrived a sizeable following had accumulated behind him; plenty of elflings but some older ones too. Most were curious, but he heard grumbling among them. They entered the Tree.

The inside of it washed over him as if it was his first visit. Every inch was crafted with engravings and reliefs so fine that even the master craftsmen of the Farrow could not come close in their skill. It did not seem to be carved, but grown: mosses and lichens and ivy embellishments. Here and there leaves sprouted—every kind of leaf, from this one Tree. The thought of how the Elves bent nature to their whims disquieted him.

Through a labyrinth of tunnels and rootways they went, and his firm expression was tested when they were led past a mother deer guiding a fawn along a passageway. In the castle at Fal In’myhra, the creature would have been promptly herded into the kitchens and prepared for dinner, no doubt with the fawn for starters, but the elves hardly seemed to notice. Eventually, after ascending a series of steps grown from the Tree itself, the Crownsword stood apart and they strode into the Throne Room.

The hall was fantastic; like everything else in the castle it was all wood and moss. In the rafters, flitwings dived and swooped in and out of small holes. Golden light flecked with green streamed in past the creatures in a dewy haze. A long carpet of green moss stretched itself out at their feet, leading up to the throne.

The throne grew, like everything else, from the Tree, made of gnarled blackwood and thorns the size of swords. It dripped with power and menace, but not so much as the figure who occupied the chair.

The King of the Elves. His golden eyes shone into Gabriel's and seemed to root around inside his head. He was draped in a dark green cloth. From his head jutted the deadly-spined Poisonthorn Crown, and among its spines were nestled the shimmering orbs of Oriothen. Eight of them lay there, but the Elves held many more.

In a single sweeping motion the Elven King melted away from the chair and was across the hall to greet him. "King Gabriel," he said. "And how fine it is to use the title King, not Prince. I shall have the milkweed vapours prepared at once."

His voice was warm and inviting as a summer stream, but Gabriel had known men who had drowned in streams.

Elves around the room scurried off to make preparations. "Had I been made aware of your arrival earlier I would have had a welcome reception prepared."

Gabriel levied the elf a courtly smile. Both man and elf were sharp and deadly, but Gabriel knew how this game was played. They would dance their stately dance, and cover their meaning with courtesy, all the while trying to peer underneath each other's words. "My apologies, King Auctoria," he said. "I had not sent word ahead of my intentions to ride to Lenune. My journey was an urgent one. Perhaps we might speak more privately." His eyes flicked to the Crownswords. He hadn't the time for decorum if he could help it. Better to speak plainly.

"No need, Gabriel." The Elven King smiled back. "We are quite safe here."

King Gabriel hesitated. "Yes. Yes. Well, the forces in Dharia are braced for another assault, and it is better that I not make my absence known. The siege at Fal In'Myhra was broken, but the battle cost us much."

"I see," Auctoria nodded. "The commencement of your reign has not begun easily."

Gabriel did not care for the derision with which the Elven King spoke. "Nor did my regency. Auctoria, we have much to discuss. You know it is imperative for—"

"Oh, now, there is time for that later!" exclaimed Auctoria. "You are my guest, and the politics can wait. Let us not do away with etiquette just for the moment." An elf who had hurried from the room reappeared, holding a hefty wooden bowl filled with steaming water. Auctoria waved him over, and he placed the bowl on the ground between the two of them. Auctoria knelt at the bowl, and his eyes insisted that Gabriel do the same. Reluctantly, the human lowered himself to his knees.

"Ahh, but first," the elf stopped him, "let us exchange the Mercies."

Of course. Gabriel had quite forgotten. It would not do to meet as the Twin Kings without the Mercies, and they had not exchanged them before as equal Kings. It had been done by his

father, King Torvia, before he abandoned the crown, though in those later visits it became an exceptionally tense ordeal.

Auctoria began. “I welcome you, King Gabriel Lamont, two-hundred and twenty-eighth king of Dharia and the Sprawl, Lord of the Fellstar Keep and Sentinel of Fal In’Myhra, guardian of the Pass of Thunder and the Outerland, and keeper and protector of the Shadowshatter Crown, to our hallowed halls.” He extended his elegant fingers, and there, growing from his index finger, was a delicate wooden ring. Gabriel knew he was expected to kiss it.

Tentatively, he moved his lips towards it. Only a formality, he thought to himself. The Elven King could, by his will alone, suffuse a poison through its wood so deadly that when his lips touched it, it would kill him before his head hit the ground. If he was lucky. It might take a lot longer.

“If you should will it, you may take my life.” Gingerly, he kissed the top of the ring, and felt nothing. Unsurprised, but with a small breath of relief, he pulled back.

“All is past,” said the Elven King. Then it was his turn.

“I receive your welcome King Auctoria, sixth king of Arath’ Sayah, Lord of the Summerlands and warden of the Eyes of the World Spider, conservator of the Poisonthorn Crown.”

In a blink, Gabriel had his hands on a dagger, concealed beneath his cloak, and unsheathed it. He pressed it to the skin at Auctoria’s throat. They locked eyes and he thought, just for a twinkling, he saw alarm in the Elven King. The blade was blackest obsidian, cursed and death-breathed. The smallest nick would spell death. There he held it, and neither breathed.

“If you should will it, you may take my life.”

“All is past,” Gabriel whispered.

A moment trickled by.

“Wonderful!” beamed Auctoria, pulling back. “That concludes the Mercies. Now, do breathe deeply, Gabriel.” He began to inhale the steam from the bowl. In the bowl were grassy milkweed cuttings, and their vapours lifted gently into the air, stinging his eyes. Gabriel sheathed his dagger, then closed his eyes and breathed in. He felt them open up his nostrils and they felt like they burrowed deeper, into his skull. They stayed like this for a moment, lingering on the fumes.

“Tell me of your journey,” Auctoria said.

“It was long, and the ride was hard. The dangers in the north give us cause for haste, but do all they can to rob us of it. Reports of activity at the hollowstone pass in the Nether had us take caution, and we thought it a likely spot for an ambush. We felt it best to ride further east, though it added two days to our journey.”

“What’s this? Surely the King of Men fears no ambush.”

Gabriel didn't rise to the bait. "The King of Men's priority is with his people, and not with his pride." He eyed the Elven King through the vapours.

Auctoria considered himself. "A wise decision, I am sure."

"Nor is his priority with convention and amenities. Auctoria, you will forgive me if I insist we dispense with the formalities." He sat back from the bowl. The vapours had misted his face.

Auctoria gave a small nod. "Proceed, then."

"I shall speak with you as one king to another. The security of both our realms depends upon what we do next. I trust we can put aside past grievances in this dark time."

The Elven lord stared at the human through the haze. "That," he said, "remains to be seen. You are not your father, Gabriel, but nor are you my kin."

A moment of silence fell over the two Kings. The elf dismissed his Crownswords, which hurried out of the room. Gabriel's cohort remained, standing uncomfortably by the entrance to the room.

"My lord, King Auctoria," Gabriel spoke at last. There was a slight wobble to his voice that he wished wasn't there. "You ought to know that during the siege, an assassin infiltrated the Keep. He sought my life, but did not find it. But he... he found Rachael's." He gritted his teeth. "He found the Queen's."

Auctoria gazed down. There might have been pity in his eyes. There might not, too. Gabriel thought for a moment about his wife. So young, and filled with life. So vibrant. She had a bright laugh, and always wore rich clothing that caught his eye; she was the first person he saw in any room. Gold always shone at her wrists and fingers, and her voice was like the birds in the hedgerows. But since she had gone, every time he thought of her, her laugh was a little softer, and her colours a little duller, and voice a little quieter. She was fading from his mind like she'd faded in his arms.

"You have the condolences of myself, and of all the Summerlands." King Auctoria's face was as stiff as a wooden mask.

"He came for my Micah, too," said Gabriel, and found that his eyes were a little wetter than he meant for them to be. "Had the guards been a moment slower, we would have grieved him also. He slept as his mother was murdered. And as I looked at his little face, asleep in his bed, not knowing that he had lost his own dear mother, I... Something in me changed. I know that I must end this war, now, and I am prepared to pay the cost. The Twisted King has shown me his hand, and he has shown what he will do to have Dharia. So I must do more to save not only the land, but those dear to me too."

"And we wish you well in your plight, King Gabriel Lamont of Dharia."

Gabriel paused for a moment. He was struck by the passionless words that fell from the elf's mouth like curated objects in some museum.

“Good *King*,” he spat out, and the decorum was gone. Convention be damned, they would talk properly. “Every day we lose more land and lives to the evil inside our borders, and—”

“*Your* borders,” interrupted Auctoria. “And your evil too. The Twisted King has done fierce work against your own.”

“He is king no more,” growled Gabriel. “As well you know, even before he struck against us, he laid down the crown. Lives are lost, homes are burned, my people slaughtered, my own wife, and for what? They murder their own kind and fight with a ferocity like we have never seen. The Kingdom of Dharia is at its knees, and my people cry out.” He stopped, and his tone softened. “Must they be condemned to die to this rebellion?”

“Is it indeed a rebellion?” pondered the Elven King, tapping his fingers on his chin, “When a king abandons his reason and Kingdom to fight for the cause of a dead god?”

“I know well the sins of my father, Auctoria. I seek only to right them.”

The elf-King’s golden eyes gazed pitifully down. “And so you petition the Elves for aid.”

“We petition the Elves to protect themselves, as much as us. When the Fanatical Dark are done with Dharia, where do you think the eyes of the Twisted King will next turn? Your forests are a stone’s throw from our borders, and you know as well as I the disdain they have for your kind. Where will he then march his armies of Fanatical Dark?”

“How many times is it now? Six, or perhaps seven? You have had your diplomats and your messengers come to face me, and each time be turned away with the answer I now give.”

Gabriel looked down. He already knew.

“Gabriel,” the elven King spoke clearly. “Not one elf will aid you in battle. We will not wage war with the Fanatical Dark and the Twisted King. This is your own burden to bear, and Elven lives shall not be laid to waste.” The Elven lord rose from the table and swept around behind his seat. His voice rolled around the chamber. “Did you assume that by gracing me with your royal presence, you could change our answer? We do not war with the Men, neither to cross blades nor stand together.”

Gabriel gritted his teeth. With a trembling hand, he reached to his jagged crown and removed it from his head. “Perhaps—”

“Not you, though!” continued the elf. “You Men are only too keen to wage war, spilling destruction and blood wherever you may, growing your Kingdom even as it shrinks away before you. I regret that you have paid the price for your war, but it is just that. Your war.”

“No!” Gabriel cried, his knuckles white as he gripped the crown. The silver cut into his fingers. “You know as well as I that this was not my doing!” A dribble of blood appeared where the crown cut him. Maddened, he flung the crown back onto his head and shot to his feet to match Auctoria. At full height the man was perhaps two-thirds that of the elf. “We were driven to war by a madness that infected my father, but that madness is his alone.”

“Nevertheless.” Auctoria blinked slowly. “The enemy, also, is yours alone. We cannot fight. We will not fight.”

Gabriel’s stature diminished, defeated. Something inside him crumbled away.

Auctoria’s voice was gentler now. It was back to that summer stream again. “Why did you come, King? Why did you not send another in your place?”

Gabriel stared ahead, blank. “I knew. I knew your answer would be the same. Always the same. Like the Elves, never changing.” His words were solid and hard as stones.

Auctoria waited.

“I must ask one thing of you, King in the Woods, and in this, I insist your answer be yes.”

“If I judge—”

“If you condemn us to fight alone, King, then you will do me this.” His voice sputtered and faltered. He was losing control of himself. That seemed to happen more, lately.

“Speak, Gabriel,” Auctoria assured him.

Gabriel drew breath, and suddenly, was not like a king anymore. He was a wretched man. “I feel a pull at me, Auctoria.” His voice was as soft and watery as his eyes. “The obsidian in the East grows restless. The Fanatical Dark frenzy more than ever. I fear for my kingdom, and I fear also for my very soul. But beyond that, I fear for my—”

“Gabriel, I—” Auctoria interrupted.

“It’s *real*, Elf!” he exploded. “Don’t you tell me again that it isn’t, because it is, my father knew it, and the dead Shadow he serves regrows even in his own heart.”

King Auctoria struck the human King sharply across the face with an open hand. Gabriel barely flinched. The crown on his head became dislodged, hanging at an angle. Sweat-laden hair stuck to his face.

“The Fanatical Dark serve a dead god,” Auctoria snarled. “And their power is dead too. They are naught but Men, hungry for power, as Men are! What you feel is the falter of a kingdom that is long past due. King Torvia gave in to his basest desires.” He stood tall. “See to it that you do not do likewise.”

Gabriel’s voice hovered just above a whisper. His eyes glistened in a dark way, reaching into the elf. “Auctoria, something else is at work now. I feel it, plucking at me like a lyre—like I am but one of an orchestra. Something is ready to play the same music on us all. Even...” he breathed, “You.”

“Gabriel,” the Elven King said like grinding stone. “I have entertained this long enough. Stop this madness. You will not speak of it in my halls.”

“Can the King of the Hundred Eyes truly be so blind?” Gabriel said.

“I fear the King of the Shadowshatter Crown has let madness reign in his mind, and not only his Kingdom,” Auctoria thundered. “Do not let the ruined mind of a lost king so ruin your own. If you have a request of me that will not cost me the lives of my men, speak it. If not, I fear you have wasted a journey.”

Gabriel held himself for a moment, and something ticked over inside him. He must have looked a fine sight before the resplendent Woodland King; the diminished human, here to beg for the sake of a collapsing kingdom.

“Auctoria,” he murmured. “You must do me this one mercy, if you will not take up arms for us. We seek just a fraction of Elven power. A single Orb of Oriothen. The Grace itself. If you will not stand with us in battle, it must suffice.”

Auctoria spoke, incredulous and affronted. “Never in eight thousand years—”

“I know, King, I know,” Gabriel waved a dismissive hand. “But I have a proposition that you must entertain. A guarantee that will both protect that which is dearest to me, and grant you surety of my intention only to end this blight.” His eyes were sunken, but his words were quick. “Though it breaks my heart to say it, I am forced to realise that I cannot hold my Kingdom alone. This tyranny overcomes us, and and worse yet, I cannot protect the ones I love. And truly, I could not bear to lose that which I hold dearest.” He looked at Auctoria. The elf could see his weakness, he knew, and looked to use it against him. Well, to hell with it. “I will stake the safe return of the Grace of Oriothen on my Kingdom itself. I can grant for you a way to take hold of the full power of all of Dharia if we were to cross the Elves. You must hear my proposal.”

The elf king could not hide that his ears pricked up.

“Go on.”

There are things held within the mycelia that ought not be revealed for the good of the Kingdom. Truth is better when we can control it.

-King Auctoria, overheard by Sorrel in the palace, years prior.

CHAPTER 22 - CHAMOMILE TEA

“Reckless, impudent boy!” barked Suscepto, shaking Eluse in a fit of rage. Eluse opened his eyes in the light of the low fire.

“Hello, Suscepto,” he croaked, senses returning to him. He gave a guilty smile. Behind him, a restless Sorrel paced. Consora sat by the fire, awkward and apologetic. How much trouble was he in this time? How much *could* he be in, given the circumstances?

“How *dare* you think to meddle in the affairs of state which do not concern you, *should* not concern you! The implications of your thoughtlessness could—”

“How much did you see?” Sorrel interrupted. Bafflingly, she wasn’t angry. She was urgent and severe.

“I, uh... I don’t know? I was on a wall. For a little bit I was a guard. Then I went to the Palace. My father was there.” He could remember everything clearly, but he wasn’t sure *what* he’d seen. Nothing for Suscepto to make such a fuss over, at any rate.

She cocked her head. “Your father?”

“Yes. And the Dharian King. The one we’re going to meet with. King Gabriel.” He tried to study Sorrel for her reaction.

She breathed out. “What else happened?”

“The Dharian King wanted an alliance, but my father refused. Then he asked for the Grace of Oriothen. He asked for a deal, but...” Eluse trailed off. “That wasn’t how I was told of the Gift of the Grace. I thought it was a gift from the Elves, not a bargain.” It had been told many times in his lessons; the compassion of the Elves had saved the Men. He’d never doubted it before, but now that seemed stupid. Legend in the Summerlands was saturated with Elven compassion; history found it lacking. If his father had given a gift, something was given in return.

Sorrel kept her firm eyes on him and gave a little nod that could have meant anything. “You saw no more than that?”

“No.” Eluse’s mouth furrowed. He sighed. “There’s a lot that I don’t know, isn’t there?”

Sorrel raised her eyebrows and gave another little nod.

He was tired of it all. Tired of the relentless narrative that he was the Chosen Son and that in time he would inherit the Poisonthorn Crown and reign as Rose of the Summerlands. Tired of the secrets held firstly by his father and the Palace, and now by even Sorrel. Time and again it was impressed on him that he *must* learn to obey his father, study politics and history of diplomatic relations, and fall in line as an extension of the throne, but over and over he felt like he was nothing but a tool to the Palace. Perhaps he was Chosen, but he did not feel like a Son.

He groaned and fell back. “Why does nobody tell me anything?” The disappointment swelled into irritation, then anger. “We nearly died out here. We still might. I ought to at least know for what!”

Sorrel knelt by him, placing a hand on his shoulder, and it took him a moment to realise that she was trying to be comforting. “You are not a child any longer, Eluse. You ought to know the truth. But it is not my truth to tell.”

Eluse scowled and pulled himself away. “Then how are you any better than the Palace? You *clearly* know more about this, and Iridian and the Eldergrove. Why won’t you just tell me?”

“Eluse, look at me.” He did, and her eyes examined him like two hazel moons. “You ought to know the truth, and you will, but a truth at the wrong time can be more damaging than a lie. Through no fault of your own, the roots you have grown with have become rotten, but they will be uprooted. You will grow stronger for it.”

Eluse sighed. More of her metaphors.

“But the time is close. I promise you this, when we return to Arath’ Sayah, you and I shall ride into the woodland and you will see for yourself a truth you should have known long ago. I will not lie to you, but that does not mean I can speak freely yet. Though I would much like to give you the mycelia and allow you to finish your dream, it is for your own good, and I dare say good much greater than your own, that there are some secrets left unknown for now.”

He shifted, discontent. “You’ll tell me everything?”

“I will. And Consora, there are truths for you to learn, too.”

Consora looked at her happily.

Eluse was still grumpy, but he had built an irritating kind of trust in Sorrel. He supposed that happened to someone when their life was saved. “How will we ride into the woodland?” he asked. “I have to take the Crownsword and Rosethorne with me wherever I go. They won’t let me leave without them. Though maybe once I’ve shown that I can be trusted to bring home the Grace of Oriothen...”

“Young master,” Suscepto spoke up. “You know that your penchant for misdemeanours has brought me no small manner of distress in days past.” Eluse snickered. “Yes. Well. Even I have learned that in some instances, it is for the best that some orders are better left unheeded.” He exchanged a glance with Sorrel. “We will get you away from Lenune, one way or another.”

Consora chipped in. “Sorrel, how have you managed in one evening to make Suscepto here care a bit less about the rules? We’ve been trying our entire lives to do that.”

Suscepto smiled dryly.

“How are you even *here*, though, Sorrel? Did my father send you?”

She looked away, drumming her fingers at her side. “It was the Moon Folk.”

“You’ve met them!” Consora gasped. “We didn’t even tell you! We were in the Underwood, and were chased by a Shade, and found the Moon Folk, and they took us to a wytch, and—”

“Isendré is not a wytch.”

Consora’s mouth hung open even wider, then turned to delight. “You’ve met Isendré too?”

Sorrel gave a nod with wise eyes. “Wytches are from stories for children. What Isendré is is far more than that.”

“When did you meet her?” Eluse asked urgently. “What is she?”

Whatever impatience Eluse had was countered by Sorrel’s slow, deliberate words. “I don’t think I’ll ever really know what she truly is. You and I are not the only elves of Arath’ Sayah to have met with her, and she has given us guidance for a long time. But, you will know more in time, Eluse. When we can share with you the truth.”

This truth felt like it would take a very long time in coming.

“What do you *think* she is, then?” Consora asked. “If you’re sure she’s not a wytch.”

Sorrel considered her answer. “In the legend of the Shadow and the Spider, at the Shadow’s defeat, the Spider looked on those who remained faithful to her, and fought with her, and she saw the loss they had endured. So few of them remained, and they had been robbed of so much, slaughtered by the armies of the Shadow. All the evil that was done was done in the Shadow’s name, in their pursuit of the power that he had promised them. But the Spider did not only pity the Men who fought for her—she looked out also at the armies of the Shadow, as they lay down their arms in defeat, and saw the loss that they had endured; brought on only by their own greed and lust for power and domination. They had fought so desperately for the power wielded by a crown that was now shattered before them. And to see such greed and desperation reign in the hearts of Men, and the devastation it had caused, her heart broke.”

The story was familiar to Eluse; it was on a mural in the King’s Hall. The details, though, Sorrel knew much better than he.

“I believe that Isendré is a piece of the World Spider’s heart that lives on after the death of the Spider itself. Wrapped up in her is the essence of the Spider that guarded the Men of Anima at the dawning of the Amber Age, and in some way, incomprehensible to you and I, the Spider lives with us through her.”

A week ago, Eluse would have scoffed at the idea. Now, he kept his mouth shut.

Consora’s eyes were misty with myth. “You believe that the Spider is not truly dead?”

“Nothing truly dies, Consora.”

“Then—surely you must know too—Isendré said that the Shadow was not dead either. That the Fanatical Dark had found a way to harness its power. They raised a Shade, it tried to kill us!”

Sorrel looked on with solemnity. “The Shadow was defeated, but not destroyed. He is made of the darkness and can never die. As I believe the Spider’s heart lives on, so too must the Shadow’s. He has been sealed away forever, but remnants remain.”

“Like the silverbirch trees?” Consora asked.

“Far greater than that, I fear.”

“The tower of Udol Aethune,” Eluse said.

Sorrel nodded. “We have known since the Black Age that the obsidian of the tower in the east contains fierce magic, but not how. It burst from the ground at the Shadow’s defeat, and wounded the Spider—the only time the Spider was ever harmed. It is the purest form of the Shadow’s malice. The Twisted King, when he abandoned his crown, fled to the tower and the Fanatical Dark were rallied to it. He was drawn to it. The power of the Shadow is locked away with the Shadow himself, but if they have found a way to unleash it, the threat is grave indeed.”

“So the Shadow is sealed in the tower?”

“No—at least, not as far as the Moon Folk know. And believe me when I say they would. They were there with the Spider herself in the last battle. The Shadow was sealed away in another world entirely—a void of wild nothing. But in his final act of vengeance, not only did the tower wound the Spider, but I believe it acts like a window between our world and the void. Though the Shadow himself cannot escape, it may be that his power can be drawn out through this window.”

“Well, then, we must hurry for Fal In’Myhra as quickly as we can,” announced Eluse, rising to his feet. The dawn was near breaking.

She gave a wry smile. “Yes, it is curious that Isendré has sent you for the Grace. It is not my place to question it. But Isendré’s ways are not our ways. Remember that.”

Though they could have talked for hours more, there was an urgency to them that only built. They ate a meagre breakfast of berries before setting off. There ought to have been a little leftover rabbit, but it couldn’t be found, and Consora insisted with a little too much persistence that she hadn’t seen it, so that was that.

They would keep away from the roads for now, Sorrel told them. Though she said most Men were not such bad folk, the elves would draw unwanted attention, and they could afford no further delays to their journey, or danger to themselves. By the north road the city should have

been four days, and though the journey through the wilds was more straightforward, the ground was harder, so she reckoned they'd arrive on the fifth or sixth day.

Eluse knew the Dharian maps well in theory, but half a day away from the roads had him convinced that they'd been made up entirely. Where he'd expected rolling moorland they cut through thick, old woods, and where he was sure sparse desert lay they forded rivers. Here and there they came within a stone's throw of a little village or road, but they kept out of view. When they found farms, they ate what they scavenged; melons and lettuce and rhubarb were in season. Blackbirds and robins nested in the hedgerows and cheeped as they passed. Water wheels hung onto stone mills in the distance, and more than once they chanced on great windmills on hilltops churning grain to flour.

Even away from the roads, they were never as far from other people as Sorrel would have liked. The first night they camped in a patch of scrub at the end of a farmyard and ate speckled pheasant that Consora shot mid-flight, hot from the spit with charred onions. The next night they slept on the open ground on rough sandstone that was tumbled up in strange formations in view of a castle near a hill. They stayed in a more or less straight path as far as they could tell, and rode the deer for most of the day.

Their clothing was becoming ragged and dusty, and Suscepto at one point mentioned "*something of a powerful smell to you, Eluse*", but he was in no better state himself. They were tattered and tired, but it was an adventure that excited him and Consora more than they said. Now and again he caught Sorrel watching him in a way he couldn't quite explain, like she was trying to work him out. In truth he hadn't a clue what it was that he didn't know, but his imagination ran riot with ideas and theories, and when he pestered Sorrel with them, she gave nothing away.

Though he'd have been grateful for a warm bath and comfortable bed, Consora took to the journey much better and didn't once complain. She was at home in the filth, so much so that it barely even showed on her. She could happily slop through muddy river silts with scraped knees and tangled hair while the rest of them tried carefully not to dirty their boots on the bank, but half an hour later seemed in a better state than any of them. Suscepto fared worst of all; dust and grime leapt to his stately clothing with reckless abandon, which upset him no end. "*This tabard is quite ruined,*" he whined, trying to rub the grass stains out, and though Eluse had a deep and newfound respect for the old elf, he found that taking satisfaction in Suscepto's misfortunes was a tough habit to break. He did his best, though, and kept his comments largely to himself.

Somewhere along the route, Eluse realised that they couldn't see the First Tree any more. He wasn't sure why, but felt a little guilty for having not thought of it sooner. Isendré's words wandered back to him, about goodness appearing smaller depending on where they stood. The Tree was still there, over the horizon. Home was south. But they looked away, and went north.

On the third night, when the clouds were lower and the pinching cold had them build a larger fire than usual, Eluse sat after dinner tossing chamomile petals into a tin water pot on the embers they'd found by the side of the road to make tea. Sorrel and Suscepto had gone to pick more. He was ready to sleep.

“Approval from your father.”

Eluse looked up at the voice. It was Consora, studying him with clever eyes. He paused, ripping more petals from the flowerheads. “What?”

“I think that’s what matters to you the most. You couldn’t answer Isendré, but I think it’s that. Approval from your father.”

He wasn’t sure if she was being serious or just making fun of him. Either way, it annoyed him.

“That’s not true,” he frowned.

“I think it is.” She toyed with the aether stone that rarely left her fingers. “I’m not judging you for it. Family is complicated. I should know.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just not true.” Petals hit the water.

“Really? So this urgency you have to get the Grace—that’s all you, then?” She came and sat on a log across from him.

“Yes,” he said irritably. “There are lives at stake. Maybe more than we know. My father has nothing to do with it.”

“Sure. But I think you’re proud that it’s you he’s asked to fetch it.”

“Consora,” he sighed, “I’m enjoying being out from under his thumb. I like the travel. I do *not* need him to give me a pat on the back and tell me I’ve done a good job.” More petals hit the water, in bigger clumps this time.

“He’s the King as well as your father, Eluse. It would be normal to hope for him to recognise the things you do.”

He tried to think of a witty response, but nothing came. He glowered into the fire instead.

“I just think it might be helpful to think a little bit about what you want when you’re back.”

She was jibing him now. She must be doing this on purpose. “So you’re saying if I’d have told Isendré that my deepest desire was to keep my dear old daddy happy, she’d have flung a gift my way? Very good idea, Consora. Perhaps she’d have given me a feather duster so I could

sweep his throne. Or maybe she could have made me into a whole new person. He'd like that very much, I expect." Whole torn flowerheads hit the pan now. They looked a little blurry. Small bubbles popped at the surface of the heating water.

"I'm not saying that, Eluse." Her voice was gentler, but it was under his skin. "I'm saying you don't have to prove anything to anybody."

"I'm not!" He flung the rest of the chamomile at the pan. Most of it missed and curled up in the fire with a crackle. "What do you know about my father? Or the Palace? Or any of it, for that matter?"

"Is everything alright?" Suscepto said.

Eluse hadn't heard him return. Suscepto stood there gawping with an armful of chamomile stalks and a stupid look on his face. Eluse realised that he had been shouting. Suscepto repeated the question.

"I'm *fine*," Eluse snapped hotly. "I'm going to bed." The water pan was boiling with the flowers now, and he stepped forward, meaning to take it from the fire, but in his frustration he knocked it, spilling the entire thing over the fire. The flames hissed and frothed down to hot cinders, and smoke spewed into his face. He picked up the empty pan and flung it back down into the embers with an angry shout and the last of his dignity. Too humiliated to look around, he stormed away from the fire and threw himself onto a fernbed a little way off.

He didn't sleep for a long time. His skin prickled with shame, more uncomfortable than the thorns curled on his finger. He could hear Consora, Suscepto and Sorrel talking around the fire, which they'd re-stoked. He faced away, and couldn't tell what they were saying. At first he was sure they were talking about him, which made him bristle, but then when he heard their voices sounded light and happy, and they laughed together, he realised they probably hadn't talked about him at all, which made him bristle even more. After a while, he settled into a grumpy sleep.

The next morning, he was groggy when he awoke. Consora sat by the fire eating a roast woodpigeon leg, and the other two busied themselves taking down the camp nearby.

It took some doing, but he went and sat next to her. "I'm sorry." He looked at the ground, not at her.

"It's fine," she said, with a mouthful of pigeon, and put one arm around his shoulder. She gave him a brisk hug and went back to her food.

Eluse didn't like the quiet. "I think you might have been right." He wanted to close his eyes as soon as he said it, but stared straight forward.

She put her arm back around him and lay her head on his shoulder, and hugged him for a little longer. “I know,” she said, squeezing gently. She felt warm in the cold morning air. It was nice. “Also, I ate your breakfast. Sorry.” She was not sorry at all, her grin told him.

Eluse laughed. “I hate pigeon anyway,” he said, which wasn’t true.

“You can hunt dinner for tonight, then. We’d better hope we find a mammoth, though. You can’t really hit anything smaller.”

He feigned offence, they joked on, and shortly they’d left and were on their way. He appreciated that. The two of them had rarely argued since they’d known one another, but when they did, she was quick to forgive. She had an easy way about letting things go with him.

They’d been set for another day of quietly making their way through the countryside, but the more they walked, the more they found roads criss-crossing, and they were busier now. They were packed with rattling carts and loud groups of travellers; horses laden with tents and banners and food. All sorts of them; roughshod ragamuffins hoisted burlap sacks of dubious origin on the same road as well-dressed servants carrying grand white litters that reminded Eluse of the officials that would sometimes visit the Palace. As much as Sorrel wanted to keep from the roads, they found it became an impossibility, so they reluctantly joined them.

Though some eyes fell their way, they were more or less undisturbed, and melded in among the other foreign travellers. It became apparent that many of the people here were *not* Dharian; they passed a gaggle of very wealthy-looking women in floral finery with rich brown skin, and as they drew closer Eluse smelled a pleasing aroma of warm spices. Fat squat men with whiskers under their noses longer than their hair gave stout nods, awkwardly returned by the elves. One man, travelling alone, appeared grey and with faint scales, though Suscepto said it might have been some foreign disease. Often the groups of travellers were not all of a single kind, but a menagerie of all types; men and women, children and the old, tall, short, rich, poor, and more. He had expected that their skin—Eluse’s violet, Suscepto’s sage-green, and Consora and Sorrel’s pale blue—would stand them out, but they blended with ease into the sundry folk, though he didn’t see another elf among them.

They marvelled at the things they saw, too; wagons that smelled of spices, some they recognised and others they didn’t; great frilled fruits, and once a cartload filled with brightly feathered caged birds that reminded Eluse of the south of the Summerlands, where the jungle was thick and the creatures bright and tropical. One hefty armoured gentleman, almost as big as Iridian, rode a wolf the size of a horse, which sniffed curiously at Shanta’s antlers as he passed. Eluse felt its hot breath on his face as he passed and avoided eye contact, and was pleasantly surprised when they passed by uneaten. Then, on the roadside, wooden signs and banners began to appear. A symbol was graven into each one of them that he knew well—a three-pronged crown, cracked down the centre. The sigil of the Shadowshatter crown, and a sure sign that they were not far from Fal In’Myhra.

Then it appeared. They saw the Fellstar Keep first, sparkling in the sunlight like a peacock feather, proud against the rest of the city lying below, stubby and grey. It caught the light at every angle, and shimmered both black and coloured all at once. Eluse's heart rose to see it. He'd seen sketches of it since he was just a few summers old and it had captured his attention always; the centre of the Dharian empire, two hundred and twenty-eight kings old, and the seat of power for King Gabriel Lamont, son of Torvia Lamont, the Twisted King in the East. To see the city here, on such a pretty afternoon as this, and all the excitement and hubbub of the roads around, it was easy to forget the threat that had once near-crushed this land now loomed over their own. It looked like the sort of city that you could lose yourself in, thought Eluse. An arrogant mound of stone and tunnels and glory. And now he would have the chance to see it for himself.

“First time I came to the city, I was here half a day before I had my coinpurse nicked. By the end of the next half, my spectacles and silver snuffbox had gone. Stayed in a tavern that night, I slept in my boots. Woke up, they’d gone too. Went downstairs, there was the innkeep, wearing them. Looked me dead in the eyes and told me they weren’t mine. Blighter charged me nine knuckles for breakfast. I ate the whole thing before I realised I still hadn’t got my coinpurse. And it’s a lot harder to run away when you’ve no boots on. Well, I didn’t get those boots back, but I got some lovely prints of their soles on my arse when the innkeep caught me. City is full of criminals. And, if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em, I say.”

-Scally Jack, notable cutpurse.

CHAPTER 23 - FAL IN’MYHRA

The city of Lenune received so few visitors through the Glendil Gate that it was a grand occasion when they did. It was the only way into Arath’ Sayah from the north, other than cutting through the mountains or crossing the Eastern Desert, but it was still so rarely travelled that the Gate remained shut. Eluse hadn’t imagined anything like the gates at Fal In’Myhra.

Queues of people buzzed noisily outside the city walls, thick as flies, and the gates looked as if they might never have closed. Gatehouses were dotted every few hundred metres around each wall with fat round towers overtopping the walls and clusters of travellers at each one. The walls were deep and stalwart; nothing so mighty as the Glendil Gate but deep and impenetrable. Dozens of guards policed each gate, uniformed in red and silver, and held up the townsfolk entering and leaving, making notes in thick leatherbound ledgers. They did not seem to be men to be trifled with, and though the thronging crowd was raucous further from the gate, where folk neared the soldiers their manner calmed. The guards inspected carts and wagons, and checked through horses to note what they carried. Money changed hands, and whether taxes or something more illicit was not apparent.

Eluse and the others joined the queue at the nearest gate, and soon learned that the queue was not a queue in the the sense that he traditionally understood it, meaning ‘place you wait for your turn to enter’, but in a more abstract sense, meaning ‘place you start shoving and sneaking your way forward until somebody bigger and scarier pushes in front’. They were a lot less experienced in the mechanics of this type of queuing than the people around them, and found that everybody else seemed to move forward a lot faster. At the sides, vendors flogged flatbreads and juices from makeshift stalls, but the elves had no money to buy anything. **“One knuckle each,”** shouted one of the men, wagging a big cup of sloshing juice. **“Come on, eight nails,**

then! Special price just for you, pretty lady!” he called to Consora. When they offered up sorry shrugs, he scowled and went to harass a group behind them.

They were all impatient to enter, but mainly kept their restlessness to themselves; except for Shanta who stomped forward wherever he could and used his antlers to stop too much pushing around him. All of them were sore, hungry, dreaming of proper food and a bed and a wash. Whether or not they would get one remained to be seen. It was late afternoon when they joined the line, and early evening when they finally got to the gate. A guard shouted them forwards, who stood by another, seated at a big desk with the ledger. These guards looked quite different from the sentries at Lenune; they slouched and talked among themselves, spitting and sniffing and scratching themselves wherever the urge took them, and Eluse thought it was a funny way for guards to behave before so many visitors.

“First name?” asked the one with the book, with a round, simple voice. “*Eluse*,” said Eluse. The guard wrote down *Eluse*.

“Last name?” Eluse didn’t really understand the question. *Eluse*, he said again. The guard wrote down *Eluse Eluse*. The process followed likewise for the others with him. The guard at the table didn’t seem happy with these twice-named arrivals, but appeared to be at the end of a long shift and just shook his head and didn’t ask any more about it. They stood aside as a cart loaded with manure wheeled out of the city. It was leaking a trail.

“And what is you—Elfs?” he asked. He wrote down “*Elfs*”.

They waited politely.

“Purpose or occasion of visit?” he read out.

They looked at one another. In truth, Eluse hadn’t actually thought about what he was supposed to say, to the guard, or the King or anybody else. With his own father, he practised his conversations in his mind; they were tense but at least usually predictable. With the Men, he hadn’t any idea where to even begin. When his father had arranged for the journey, he would at least have been accompanied by Iridian, who, despite his unpleasantness, had experience with foreign dignitaries that went beyond having simply sat in a meeting with them from time to time. Suscepto hung back too, much more out of place around the Men than Eluse had expected.

Eluse spoke uncertainly. “We’re, uh—we’re here to see the King.”

The guard eyed the scruffy sight of them and snorted. “Aye, right. I’ll have ‘im pop down then, will I? Where’s your visitation papers?”

“Our what?”

The guard sighed and spoke slower. “Your visitation papers. For visitationing the Keep.”

“I’m not sure what they are,” Eluse said uncertainly.

“A raven should have arrived near on a week past,” Suscepto added. “We are expected.”

The guard held the bridge of his nose in a pinch and closed his eyes. “I din’t ask about no raven. I asked about the”—he paused to read again—“purpose or occasion of visit.”

“Yes,” Eluse said with a sideways look to the others. “We told you. To see the King.”

“If you’re here to visitation the King, you need your visitation papers. But you don’t look like the visitation sort. You look like the time-wasting sort. So I’ll ask one more time.

Purpose or occasion of visit.” Expectant eyebrows were raised at them.

“Sir, I think there’s perhaps an error in communication,” Suscepto hopped forward with a look on his face that made Eluse think he was prepared to embarrass himself. “We four are delegates from the Elven city of Lenune, of Arath’ Sayah. We serve as ambassadors on behalf of King Auctoria himself. We’ve arrived hither on urgent business of unprecedented significance and I must emphatically insist we are received forthwith.”

The guard gave Suscepto a rankled look as if he might have understood one or two of the words. He looked down at his ***purpose or occasion of visit*** section with a muddled frown. Mercifully, at that moment, another man, standing taller than the rest, in the same sort of livery as the guards but a little finer dressed and quite a bit older, came sweeping forwards. The elves had caught his eye, and he hadn’t wasted a moment. Eluse reckoned from his dress that he must have been in charge.

“Sirs,” he called out through the crowds, pushing through, all smiles. The other guards made way. “Sirs and madams. Am I to take it that you’re the royal party from Lenune?” He had a long white beard which he held close to his chest as he moved through.

“We are,” Eluse said, puffing out his chest.

The guard at the ledger interrupted. “These folks was just saying they ain’t got no visitation papers,” he explained to the new arrival. “So they ain’t ‘ere to visitation the King, which is what they’re saying under ***purpose or occasion of visit.*** So I ain’t sure.”

The head guardsman gave the seated guard a disparaging look. “Terribly sorry, ladies and gentlemen,” he said to the elves with an apologetic smile. “Please, do come this way.” He ushered them through.

““Ang on,” grumbled the guard with the ledger. “What am I to put for ***purpose or occasion of visit?*** I in’t meant ter leave it blank!”

The older man sighed and made a series of apologies. “Ignore them, they’re buffoons,” he mumbled to the elves.

“I don’t know what to put!” the guard yelled after them one final time, rising from his chair. He waited a moment, then when he saw that nobody looked back, sank back with a defeated sigh. *Tourism*, he wrote, in his best handwriting.

The bearded guardsman hurried them past the gates onto a long flat road. Eluse marvelled at the city. Here on the main road it was modern and well-kept, but just aside he caught glimpses into the skeleton of the city. Crooked streets so narrow that Shanta could not have stepped there for his antlers, ramshackle old buildings stacked atop the carcasses of even older ones. Stone steps descended into tunnels and sewers that ran through the heart of the place like roots; every place held nooks and hideaways and secrets.

And the people—they bustled and blared and crept and snuck in every direction, scurrying in and out of alleyways like rats. The lamplighters were out in preparation for the evening, and they held up wicks of fire to the oil on tall wrought lamps, which seemed to brighten the bright spots but darken the hidden parts.

“Come on through, please follow me,” the guardsman said, ushering them this way and that, and away from all of the things that the elves wanted to stop and explore. “The King expects your arrival.”

From a side street, two children ran in front of them duelling with sticks, which the guardsman cursed at but ragged women laughed and encouraged. Men in market stalls called out from the sideroads, shouting about onions and parsnips and the very best prices, but here on the main road they saw little of them. Even the manure from the city’s horses had been shovelled off into the smaller streets. The elves fell into the shadow of the Fellstar Keep, and Eluse was made breathless by it. It looked like it was set deep with garnet, amethyst, sapphire and emerald, all caught up and hidden in thick tar, made like a black rainbow. It was a place only a King could live.

“Whatever you do, don’t you go exploring,” warned Suscepto, eyeing the sidestreets. He spoke chiefly to Consora, but made sure Eluse overheard too. Consora made a face.

They took a few turns, staying on the big roads. Eluse’s feet hurt through his boots at the hard walking on the paved ground, he could think of nothing better than taking them off and resting. After a while they arrived at a polished white set of marble steps with braziers crackling either side. The stairs ascended sharply to the bottom of the Keep. The guards here looked different from those at the gate; smartly-dressed in the same red and silver but stood tall to attention and with spears twice the height of the tallest of them. They stared dead ahead, hardly blinking.

“We shall see to your steeds, sirs and ladies,” the guardsman said, directing the nearest guards towards the deer. “They shall be brushed and put up in the stables of the Keep.”

Shanta did not take kindly to the idea of stables, and shook his antlers when the guards approached, but Eluse shushed him and told him to go. Rucca was less dramatic and followed them without a fuss.

The guardsman led the elves up the stairway. Cruel iron gates had been dropped down for the night across the main entrance, but the guard led them through a postern door into a small corridor. Everything here was built of the same black and coloured stone. It was no less spectacular by the torchlight indoors than it was in the setting sun.

They were taken up endless stairs into a wide corridor lit with torches. The guardsman announced that they must be tired from their journey, and it would be fitting to bathe and be properly dressed before an audience with the King. They were shown into rooms coming from the corridor, a different room for each of them, and when Eluse entered the one he was directed to he laughed at the outrageous opulence of it. A four-poster bed in one corner with thick furs and goosedown pillows was lit by chandeliers and candles that made the room warm but not bright; piles of rugs lay strewn over the floors and the setting sun made gold an ornate glass window. In one corner a bath steamed, and serving girls hurried in and out of the room, adding oils and perfumes to the water, apologising as they went for the bother of being in the way. Fruit was stacked up on a table and the walls were daubed in very serious oil paintings.

A manservant in all black bustled in and produced a rack of clothing with a theatrical flourish, laying it across the bed. "Perhaps sir would prefer a change of clothes before he meets His Majesty," he said with a firm smile, looking disparagingly at Eluse's muddy rags.

Eluse turned to the others to comment that sir was happy enough in his own clothing, but they'd been whisked into rooms of their own. Feeling a little unsure of himself, but very grateful for the surroundings, he closed the door and undressed himself. He sank into the bath, which was so hot it scorched his skin. The heat melted the strain of the travel away, sinking deeper into his bones as the scents and perfumes curled up from the water and soaked into his aching muscles and weary mind.

He could have fallen asleep had the door not burst open and another serving girl hurried in with a jug of hot water, came straight to the bath, and poured it in over him. Startled and embarrassed, he jumped up and leaned forward to cover himself. The girl acted as if it were nothing.

"Would you like to be bathed?" she asked, with a smile that had been practised many times.

"Oh, no thank you," he said, turning red. "I usually do that myself."

"Of course—ring the bell if you need anything." She gestured to a small brass chime on the bedside.

He made a polite grunt of agreement and waited for her to leave. She did, but scooped up his clothes on the way out.

Much more on edge, but wondering if that was just the custom of Dharia, he finished his bath and got out. The water, which was rosy and delicate when he'd got in, was brown and soupy now, and he towelled himself and went to the clothes on the bed.

Though the clothes he'd had to wear at royal events in the Palace had been beautiful, they were always simple—plain silks or tunics. What was laid out before him here was like nothing he'd worn before; exquisite linens and silks stitched with golden thread and intricate patterns, and with undershirts and middle layers and waistcoats all in an order it took him some time to figure out. When he did, though, he felt sublime—everything was clean and starched and as well-fitted as anything he'd ever worn. Fine velvet trousers pinched in at him in ways they were supposed to; his shirt and waistcoat clung to him and defined his body far better than the baggy tunics he usually wore. A fine silken half-cape hung from his shoulder. Now he looked fit for a king.

Once dressed, he waited. Looking over the window, he admired the western side of the city, now sinking into darkness and ablaze with a million scintillating lights. It looked like a forest of fireflies from up here. Further out, in the lilac haze over the city's walls he noticed the ocean a little distance away, and beyond that were the islands of the Sprawl fading away into the distance. Even from here he could see the waves crash into the cliffs under a proud lighthouse, and thought he could smell the sea air. He sat and watched the ocean until it grew too dark to see.

By then, the tiredness had set well in. His head was heavy with the sleep he hadn't had, and though he knew he could be called in to see the King any moment, he thought he'd help himself to a little lie down. So he did, and nearly drowned in the mattress and furs he sank into, and almost instantly fell asleep.

It felt like one of those sleeps that had only just taken hold when there was a rap at the door and the man in all black entered. It was the kind of very brief sleep that makes you more tired when you wake up and it would have been better to have not slept at all. He grunted and bolted up and tried to pretend he hadn't been sleeping as the new entrant spoke.

“His Majesty King Gabriel Lamont invites you to his council chambers.”

Eluse nodded and hopped up blearily, following the man from the room. His heart beat faster.

Consora, Suscepto and Sorrel were already in the corridor. Suscepto, though dressed in Dharian finery, looked more or less the same as the figure that Eluse had grown up with; smartly done up in a similar sort of livery as Eluse. Sorrel wore a dress that was nice and well, with Tinlit sat quietly on her shoulder, but he hardly noticed her next to Consora, whom he nearly didn't

recognise at all. She had been trussed up in a long lilac dress with elaborate decorative stitching at all sides; sleek shapes and patterns at her waist and bodice. Her hair had been tied up in braids with thin ribbons fastened with a golden clasp that looked like the wings of a butterfly, except for a strand that fell in a rebellious curl at her face. Eluse realised he had never seen her hair anything other than loose before. Long lace sleeves trailed down her arms. She shifted uncomfortably and made a face at Eluse.

“Don’t say anything clever. They forced me into it.” She grimaced.

He wasn’t going to say anything anyway, because he wasn’t really sure what he would say. He tried not to look, and wasn’t quite sure why he found it so difficult to look away. She’d kept her aether stone around her neck and it sat on top of the dress, softly glowing the same pale blue as her skin.

Suscepto stood between them. “This is it, Eluse. It’s time to meet the King.”

Anticipation built several times over as they were led through more corridors and covered bridges and doors through the shimmering Keep. They arrived at a set of wrought iron doors with guards outside, and the black-dressed servant pushed them open. Inside they went, and there, alone in the room, sat on the other side of a plain wooden table, was King Gabriel Lamont.

His sudden appearance, and the relative plainness of him, shocked Eluse. The Elven King Auctoria would always make the grandest impression he could on visitors. Eluse had witnessed the histrionics that went into such moments, waiting posed for long periods until his audience had entered the room, or deliberately delaying himself to allow them to stew. Here, though, this human King sat reclined on his chair, in clothing that was fine but not ornate, relaxed. His eyes were fixed firmly on Eluse from the moment the doors opened.

“Welcome,” he smiled. “Come in, take a seat.”

His voice was rich and smoky. The King was a man of about fifty years, but they had been hard years, and they showed through the cracks in his face. His eyes hung across dark circles and looked like they had seen many more things since Eluse had seen him in the vision. His beard was greyer, like an iron brush, and the creases in his face were deepest in his forehead, and shallowest at his mouth where he smiled at them. The Shadowshatter crown clung to his head, broken in half but kept in place by a silver band that clutched around his hair tightly. The silver of the crown was so dark it was almost black, and the red gemstone in what had been its centre glittered in the candlelight, and caught the glimmer of the flames even brighter against its broken ruby edge. Looking at the crown that at one time had sat on the head of the Shadow himself unsettled Eluse to see it now, cresting this worn-out old man.

Suscepto gave a deep and profound bow, and Eluse remembered he should do likewise. Sorrel gave a brief curtsy, and Consora seemed not to notice the bows at all. The King, though,

dismissed all of that with a wave of a hand. “Ahh, no, enough. Come. Sit.” He gestured at the seats around his table.

They did sit, feeling awkward. “Hello.” Eluse smiled politely. From the corner of his eye he noticed that neither Consora nor Sorrel seemed sure of what to do with themselves, and in particular Consora looked as if she didn’t know why she was there at all.

“That will be all, Adie,” Gabriel directed the servant to the door, who nodded and left. “Welcome to the council chambers. Well, what little council I am left with,” he chuckled to himself. “Your journey must have been hard.” He eyed the unlikely four. “And not as expected.”

“No, Your Grace.” Eluse offered an apologetic smile. “I ought to have arrived with the Crownswords, but... Well, our plans changed.” He was a little terse, having seen enough meetings between his father and the Dharian delegates to know they were typically difficult affairs. Beside him, Suscepto rustled around. Eluse knew his mind was already on the raven they must ask the King to send to Lenune.

The King stretched back. “I understand.” Eluse wondered if he really did. He eyed the thorned seal on Eluse’s finger. “I believe I know why you have come.”

“Ahh, yes, Your Majesty. Well, the King Auc-”

“But first, we must exchange a ritual,” Gabriel interrupted. “You are familiar with the Mercies?”

Eluse was, both from court and the mycelian vision. When the Dharian delegates came to his father, they would kiss his Seal, but in the vision, King Gabriel had also placed a knife to his father’s throat. Eluse had never seen that before.

“I... I think so,” Eluse said, uncertainly.

“It is the duty of the Twin Kings to ensure that peace continues,” Gabriel explained. “We offer a symbolic gesture that though one might harm the other, we choose peace instead.” There was something strange in his voice. Eluse couldn’t place it. “Usually, only the Kings themselves extend the double mercies, wherein they are conducted to one another—it would be usual for a delegate from Lenune to receive our mercy here, but not to offer it unless it were your father himself. However,” he said, his eyes firmly fixed on the ring, “I believe that as your father has sent you with his Seal, it is his wish for us to conduct the Mercies as the Twin Kings.”

It was all a bit of a jumble to Eluse, but he nodded along.

“You have nothing to fear, my boy,” he said with a slow blink. “Rise, and I shall show you.” He rose from his seat, and indicated to Eluse to do the same. The eyes of the other elves in the room were on him. He felt them on his skin.

“Look here,” he said, drawing a dagger, and Eluse recognised it as the same obsidian blade he’d seen from King Gabriel’s meeting with his father. “Do not fear. I shall simply place it at your neck, and you say to me, ‘*If you should will it, you may take my life.*’ Then I shall tell you that all is past. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Eluse swallowed the lump in his throat. This was such a stupid ritual.

“Very well. Do not fear,” he repeated, very gently holding the dagger up with both hands to Eluse’s neck. He moved with far more care and precision than he had in the mycelian vision. Eluse tried not to think about what would happen if the obsidian nicked his skin. “Go ahead.” Gabriel told him.

“If you should will it, you may take my life.” He spoke as firmly as his voice would allow.

“All is past,” said Gabriel, and lowered his knife with a half-smile. Then his blue eyes turned grey, and his voice was much more solemn. “And now, I must accept your mercy. Eluse, stretch out your hand.”

Eluse didn’t remember telling the King his name. He supposed it was his business to know the name of the Elven prince. Stretching out his hand, he was surprised to see the King sink to his knees before him. He grasped Eluse’s hand firmly, his face close to the ring, staring at it hard, like it hurt his eyes to see it. This was strange. The King did not act like a king, now.

“If you should will it,” he grunted, with far more gravity to his voice than Eluse expected, “You may take *my life. My life.*” He repeated it twice. Why was that? He held Eluse’s hand in both of his, then pressed the ring at his forehead, and his lips moved as if in silent prayer. Then he pressed his lips to the ring on his finger and held them there for a moment. Eluse looked sideways at the others in the room, whose faces told him they felt as awkward as he. Consora offered him a baffled shrug. This was different to what he had been expecting. He almost forgot to say his part.

“All is past.”

The King moved backwards and rose in a swift motion. Something was masked beneath his face that nearly came out, but then was hidden away again. He spoke quickly, and Eluse wondered what had just happened.

“Tell me, young prince, why you are here.” He seated himself at the table again. Eluse, unclear on what to do with himself, did likewise.

“I, uhh... My father sends me to reclaim the Grace of Oriothen,” he blurted.

“And you shall have it returned to you.”

A long pause followed. Eyes looked between Eluse and King Gabriel. Surely it was not as easy as *that*.

Eluse continued slowly. “We are to return to Arath’ Sayah with it at once.”

“Of course. And it is returned with the thanks of all Dharia.”

Was there no resistance? No questions? No unleashed fury of a King? Eluse didn’t know what else to say. Gabriel looked back at him with a very simple smile on his face. Either his father was right, and the Dharian King respected the King’s Seal and Chosen Son far more than he had expected, or this was a simple matter that could have been resolved with a commissary or a raven. The room felt confusing and tangled. He had no idea what he had been expecting, but somehow it wasn’t this.

“Your Grace,” Suscepto interjected, giving another bow, very awkwardly because he seemed to forget he was sitting down, “We were waylaid in our travel to Fal In’myhra, and require the use of a raven to Lenune. Might we scribe a note to the Palace? I am confident that King Auctoria will send a company of Crownswords for Fal In’Myhra the moment it is received to aid us in our return.”

“Arrangements shall be made,” the King nodded. “And you shall be welcome guests at the Fellstar Keep so long as you wish. I shall arrange for the Grace to be returned to you this very evening. I shall not keep you any longer than I absolutely must.” He called out to the manservant who he’d dismissed earlier. “Adie!”

Adie opened the door with the immediacy of someone who had been listening at it.

“Adie, perhaps you might show our guests back to their quarters. All but for our young prince Eluse here. I shall receive him in my own chambers, where I shall arrange for the Grace of Oriothen to be returned to him.”

“Very good, Your Grace.” Adie nodded fervently. He beckoned the elves to follow him. They rose tentatively, feeling like they didn’t have much of a grasp on what was happening, and followed him from the room. Eluse looked behind him as he left. King Gabriel sat at the table, staring straight at the prince.

I have forged within the Gate such magics, such wild and untameable magics, as to ensure that it shall never be overcome. Forever we shall live in peace and harmony in our forests, and never again shall we know the fear of Men.

-King Glendil, second King of Arath' Sayah.

CHAPTER 24 - THREE FOR WAR

It had been over a week since the prince had disappeared, and the atmosphere in Lenune was frantic. The attacks to the east had stopped, and the Fanatical Dark had simply disappeared. Lenune's garrison was mostly emptied now—the soldiers had gone east. Those that didn't secure the northeastern border from the Fanatical Dark hunted out the Eldergrove Cult, though if they'd had any success, the sentries on the Gate knew nothing of it. They were safe behind the Gate, but it felt eerie when it was quiet. There was a bitter feeling on the top of the wall, and though Miles and Thenda typically watched to the south, these days they found themselves looking northwards more often than they ever had before. The evening birds twittered as the sun sank, but they did not twitter quite so much as Thenda. She was just rounding up an anecdote about her ducks.

“...and the foxes had got them all! Every last one, right down to the feathers. Well, as you can imagine, my Darra was livid, that's no more eggs for us! Mind you, I don't suppose Linty would mind if we had some of hers, but I always find hers are a bit fishy for me.”

Miles gave a polite “Hmm.” He was getting much better at knowing when and where to inject the right noises into her ramblings. He could often distract her with little tasks, too, which would afford him a few moments respite. “Thenda, I must just go and check the helmets. Perhaps you could keep the north watch.”

“Righto, Miles.” She shuffled over, clanking in her armour. “Blimey, it's a right old time. What with all the business at the Palace and those poor folks in the east, I shan't be surprised if we'll need every last helmet we can get our hands on! It's not a bad thing to think...” she kept on prattling while Miles descended the stairs to the armoury, out of sight and, cheerily, out of earshot.

Down the stairs, he savoured the quiet. Bronze armour and helmets glowed warm, lit by braziers. *Check the helmets*, he chuckled to himself. Yes, they were still helmets. Still, he could spend a good ten minutes making absolutely sure. Thenda was nice, but there was a lot of her, and she was best dealt with in small doses. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the quiet crackle of the fire. He sat down next to it. Peace.

“Miles!” Thenda’s moan floated down the steps. He sighed. He could ignore it. It was fine.

“Miles!”

He couldn’t hear down here. He was busy with the helmets. He’d be back soon.

“Miles!”

She’d give up. She’d go away.

Footsteps started clunking their way down the stairs. Oh well. Peace over. Back to it.

He hopped to his feet and wiped clean a helmet of imaginary smudges as Thenda rounded the corner. “Miles!” she moped again.

“Oh, were you calling?” he blinked. “It’s ever so hard to hear from down here.”

“Miles! Come and see. Quick.”

Begrudgingly he ascended the stairs, with Thenda moving a bit quicker than she usually did. She’d probably spotted a lizard she wanted him to see.

By the time he got to the top, she was already over at the northern edge of the wall, pointing out. She flapped her hands and beckoned him. “Look, quick! There’s a light out there.”

A light was something they ought to take notice of. But when he got to the parapet, he saw that it wasn’t a light—it was several lights, some way off, across the Fartherfields. Maybe a dozen. Maybe more.

“There was only one a moment ago,” Thenda gasped. “What do you think? Not scouts?”

“No, not scouts,” Miles said in a low voice. “Too many.” A spark of concern ignited in him. It grew to a flame as the lights kept appearing over the hill. What was a dozen was now two dozen. Then three dozen. It was too dark to see properly, but they had the blaze of torchlights.

In fact, the air over the hill grew orange with flame. More and more torches spilled across its crest, and they headed straight for the Glendil Gate. They moved in a thick band of fire, like a dragon or a snake threading down the hill, toward the valley beneath the gate. There were over a hundred now.

“Quick, Thenda. Blow the horn. Two blasts.”

Two blasts. It was always one. One, to open the gate. Two, to call the sentries to post. He didn’t remember it being blown twice before.

Thenda hurried to the ox horn and did as she was told. The deep-throated cry of the horn rolled out like a wounded animal. It was not used to being blown twice. The second blow was aching and angry. Up and down the wall, frenzy. But Miles didn't look to the wall—he looked north. By the time the second blast had sounded, there were five hundred torchlights advancing on the wall, and more still rolling over the hill. And there was a sound, now, Miles swore—just there, when the wind was quiet, from all that distance away. Drums.

“Blow it again, Thenda,” he commanded with fierce eyes. He must steel himself. He must do his duty.

“Again?”

“Two blasts. Make it clear.”

She did. Miles moved purposefully to the southern parapet and looked over, and all across Lenune lanternlights were flickering and moving in a dash. By the time he'd turned around to the north again, more guards were marching up the stairwell. He and Thenda stared on as they advanced more; well over a thousand now. Still more. Still more. His mind had never been so loud in his head, and Thenda had never been so quiet. A low murmur of the sentries was rippling across the top of the wall.

By the time there were two thousand torchlights, tacticians and advisors were arriving breathless at the top. By four thousand, the Seers were filtering in, and the top of the wall, wide as it was, became clustered. They brought with them servants with boxes and chests filled with ornaments and elixirs and glimmering stones. Imperious commanders issued shouts and orders in a flurry of contradictory instructions as they grappled for order. By the time there were eight thousand, the line of lights had gotten much closer, and there was as much noise from north of the wall as there was on its top. Shouts, cries, and jeers with the drums. And finally, when Miles reckoned about twelve thousand lights below, King Auctoria arrived.

He stood head and shoulders taller than the next tallest, and then some. His golden eyes pierced the dark and he shone, a spectre in the gloom. He was like a vision to Miles. He'd only seen him twice before, and as the King passed him on the wall, he felt his insides shrivel away inside. The King's face was stoic and macabre. At his heel was that Rosethorne, Iridian. The crush of soldiers and other elves parted before him like reeds in the wind, and he soared across the wall to the front of the parapets. Miles watched from a distance. A thick quiet surrounded the King that dampened even the furore below. He glared at the tongues of fire below.

Miles was tense, waiting. Rolling thunder came when the King opened his mouth, and filled his ear to its fullest.

“Report.”

A number of uncertain voices started up from around Miles. “We know they came from Dharia,” said one. “Five thousand horses or more,” said another. “They don’t wear the Dharian colours,” said a third.

He held up a mighty hand.

“*The Fanatical Dark.*”

Miles wasn’t sure if it was a question. It wasn’t delivered as one. A ripple of whispers coiled around the wall. “Yes, my King,” one voice said despairingly.

“*How many?*”

A greying elf with spectacles and papers and a long, thin telescope shuffled forwards. “The dark conceals, Your Grace. But no less than fifteen thousand.”

Quiet gasps hurried around the wall. Fifteen thousand. There was no force in the world so large.

The King closed his eyes for a moment, and as the shimmer from his eyes blinked out and Miles fell into darkness, the noise rose. Drums and raucous shouts from below shook back up to the walls, bringing with it a chill. Around him, soldiers shouted out.

“They cannot mean to take the city!”

“The Glendil Gate will hold! A hundred soldiers could hold it against ten thousand!”

“Let them dash themselves to pieces against the wall!”

“Let us show them the strength of the Elves!”

Miles wished he had something brave to call, but he did not. Looking at the sombre faces of those around, he wished courage would come.

King Auctoria’s eyes snapped open again, and the quiet fell once more. Everybody waited.

“*The Dharians knew.*”

Of course. Fifteen thousand men or more. Even if they came from beyond Dharia, the North or the East, they had marched through Dharian lands unhindered. The Fanatical Dark, which had supposedly been razed to a remnant of a few hundred Men at the far East of the world, now thundered here on chariots and horses and with dogs and men and steel, a hundred times the size it was meant to be. They had received no warning. They were misled.

Iridian spoke. “Your Grace, it is all but a certainty. No force of this size could have gone undetected.”

The King stood quietly, his glowing eyes in deep thought.

“Send the ravens. Ready yourselves for war.”

Around Miles, all the wall erupted into commotion. Elves from the Palace scurried back down the stairwells to the rookery, soldiers with greatbows formed lines across the parapets, and engineers heaved forgotten wooden machinery from alcoves deep in the walls to build up catapults and other war equipment. The King stood, eyes fixed on the enemy below, exchanging unheard words with the Rosethorne. Miles watched the entire thing with trepidation, standing awkwardly, holding his spear. He was a sentry. His role was to guard the Glendil Gate. He would do it until he died.

The whole night passed, but it felt like minutes. The skies lightened and revealed the army before them.

Easily fifteen thousand, and more besides. A quarter mile from the Gate, tents had been thrown together and they had worked through the night erecting war machines of their own; trebuchets were assembled and great heaving battering rams twenty feet high and thirty long. Huge unknown contraptions with sails like ships billowed in the wind. Every type of weapon could be seen; pikes four times the length of a man, clubs and bows and axes. Dogs and horses ran amok, and there was chaos. They held a position behind a line of stakes that they had hammered into the ground, facing the Gate to prevent a cavalry charge. No person thought to stop for rest, on the wall or below it. And every elf on the wall seemed to have a role, but Miles and Thenda’s was simply to watch. The spear felt useless in his hands.

He knew the truth of it, and he suspected every elf on the wall did too: Lenune stood empty. The armies were at least two days’ east, and even the full might of the Elves could not defeat a force of this size in open battle. They had perhaps five thousand soldiers, if they called on every ranger and soldier from Arath’ Sayah, but now Lenune’s protection was a tenth of that. They could swell their numbers to the thousands if they put a sword in the hands of every untrained elf that was still able to hold one, but the King would be a fool to do that. Novice, undisciplined soldiers were just as likely to run themselves through with a blade as an enemy on the battlefield. And what would they even do from behind the Gate?

Still, the reason that Lenune was so confidently ungarrisoned *was* the Gate. It could not be breached. Miles told himself as much, with a lump in his throat, as he watched the Fanatical Dark wheel their trebuchets up to the stakeline, a thousand feet from the wall. The wall was thirty feet thick, held together with vast roots and vines, and enchanted with magic as ancient as the forest. There was a triple iron gate beneath, solid and heavy and easy to defend.

And all of that meant absolutely nothing for what happened next.

Without warning, the trebuchets let loose, all at once. Every elf on the wall took cover, shouting and hollering. The non-combatants fled to the stairwell, and Miles watched in horror as great pieces of shot sailed through the air at them. He threw himself behind a battlement and hunched down, eyes clenched, waiting for the crash of stone which would either miss its mark or turn him to gristle.

Only, the crash did not come. The wall was not struck at all. He peeked his eyes open and watched in awe as half a dozen objects sailed right overhead in a great arc. Every one of them had missed.

It was a moment or two later when he realised why. Dull thunder erupted beyond the wall, and the city of Lenune was lit up with flickers of light. There was a moment of silence atop the wall—and then the most dreadful screaming from beyond it. With a gasp, he ran to the southern parapet.

The city was ablaze. They had launched not rocks to break the walls of the city, but huge barrels of thickly burning tar, to scorch what lay beyond. Already, the men on the trebuchets loaded more barrels.

“Archers!” came a fierce cry, and a thin line of elves rushed up to the northern parapets. “Loose!”

Arrows were loosed, but Miles watched with despair as they fell short of the trebuchets. They were much too far. Another barrage of firebarrels sailed overhead, bursting in treacle-like flame below.

“Seers! Call for the Seers!”

A handful of Seers were on the walls already, each with a different Orb of Oriothen. They held them high, chanting and calling to the sky. He watched one nearby, a purple-skinned elf holding his orb high as it glowed white, calling forth power.

From it, a pale mist streamed out and thickened over the army below, shrouding their vision. It did little, and was scant, but was something. Darker clouds gathered above the city, and rain began to spit down onto the burning woodland; the effect of another orb. From another, a brilliant white light glinted into the eyes of the men below, obscuring the top of the wall a little. But Miles agonised. This was weak magic.

“The cavalry! Look at the cavalry!” a voice cried.

Cavalry? This made no sense. They could not mean to charge the wall on horseback. Miles rushed to the north, and there he saw them—horses in lines a dozen long, preparing to charge.

“The archers will shoot them down before they even reach the Gate,” he shouted out to Thenda. “What are they up to?” Another tar barrel spun overhead.

“I don’t know, but my Darra’s in there!” she cried, gripping her spear with a snarl. “We keep them out!”

One of the cavalry squadrons began to charge. Archers on the wall drew back bowstrings, waiting for them to reach range. But something stirred beyond the horsemen; large and shifting. He squinted at it, out there in the mist.

Each rider carried with him a thick rope, and each rope was attached to some large contraption that lay on the ground behind them. Fabric billowed from wooden beams, catching in the air as the horsemen dragged it forward. They moved faster, and wooden wheels spun over the ground. The sails caught the wind, and it lifted off. It was like a gigantic kite, so large it took a dozen horses to lift it airborne.

“What is that?” Thenda’s panicked voice shouted.

As the horses drew closer and faster, the mechanism soared higher, and Miles saw a man in it, somehow attached. The ropes grew longer, and the kite flew higher, and quickly it was as high from the ground as Miles was. Then, higher still.

“Loose arrows!” came a cry, and a volley of arrows whistled toward the horsemen. Many struck their targets, which had ridden into range, but by now, the kiterider had severed the ropes attaching himself to them. Horses cried out and crunched to the ground, and any men atop them who still alive retreated back. Behind them, though, the kite soared ever upwards. It was just a hundred feet from the Gate, and well above them.

“Arrows ready! Loose!”

The air shook as arrows were loosed, but none found their mark—wooden plaques shielded the man in the contraption, and they bounced away or stuck in the wood. Worse—behind him, more horses had begun a charge. More kites lifted off.

A shadow fell across Miles. The kiterider blocked the sun. From where he hung in the air little black baubles fell, the size of pomegranates.

They crashed into the wall with a furious explosion. Miles was rocked by it, and fell to his feet, dropping his spear. Black flame and burning fluid spat from the explosion, twisting up in a frenzy. A cluster of spearmen were engulfed, thrashing and hollering in a blaze. “Bring it down!” he heard his own mouth shout at the kiterider. “They have Shadowfire!”

He knew some of those elves in that blaze. He watched, powerless, as their movements stilled and cries quietened under the ferocious black fire. His eyes blurred, but he wiped them clear.

The kiterider sailed onwards, and by the time the archers had shot him down, another half-dozen black satchels had fallen into the city. Shadowfire rampaged across the streets and trees. The glider drifted lazily into the canopy a great distance off, and burst into flame.

“They don’t mean to take the Gate,” Thenda cried out, crouched behind a parapet. “They mean to burn the city!”

This was his home. Miles would defend it until he died. Not because of the King’s orders—he did not care what the King said. Everything he knew and loved lay beyond this Gate. Whatever he could do, he would.

Miles looked north again, face dark in the shadow of the incoming kiteriders. Over the din of the cries of the elves and the blasts below, he heard the blare of the ox horn once more. Three slow, furious bellows this time. Three for war.

Very usually, grapes used for icewines grow best in the hilltop regions where the air is colder, and are fantastic accompaniments to fish. Sweeter wines grow well in the sun to the south, and should be served on their own. On the Sprawl each island is known for its different bouquets of wines; some rich and chocolatey and others bristling with vanilla or rose. The best grapes for orange wine grow nearer the Eastern Desert, which pair pleasantly with desserts, and if you find a wine from the north, toward the Outerlands, those go very nicely down the drain.

Learnéd sommelier Augustus Vittorias, Wining And Dining: How To Drink When You Don't.

CHAPTER 25 - FIRE AND WINE

The King's chambers were warmly lit and quite simple. The scent of firesmoke and rose gathered in the air, and the sparkle of the Fellstar stone glistened as the flames in the fireplace licked the logs. What caught Eluse's eye first was the long table set with silver platters thick with delicate pastries and jams and fruits with cheeses, all arranged in patterns. Everything looked too good to eat. He found a way anyway. Consora would have been wild with envy. Adie had told him to eat anything he liked, and he liked it all.

Adie had shuffled out of the chambers a while ago. Eluse wasn't sure how long, but long enough for him to stuff himself sick. Now, unable to force down another bite, but still not ready to stop, he prodded a fork at the flakes of pastry on a silver platter, moving them around. A window was open, allowing the chilly night air to move through in cold breaths, but the fire blazed merrily and kept the place warm.

Back in Lenune, he ate by himself most of the time. He didn't care; it was better that way than with the Palace staff. Whenever he could, he'd get out into the city and find Consora, but she'd hardly ever been allowed into the Palace.

Several times a year, his father would host stately banquets; fine affairs with delegates from all across Arath' Sayah and even further afield, once or twice with Men in the halls. There could be a thousand guests at the largest banquets, laid out in the Great Hall, and Eluse would always eat at his father's table. He would be expected to applaud his speeches, or smile politely when honours were given. The King would even, on occasion, honour Eluse himself before all those guests, and outwardly he would turn red and feign humility, but inwardly would writhe and twist as his father said kind words and great things about the Chosen Son that neither of them believed.

When the guests were gone and the tables cleared, Eluse would eat alone again.

He had memories, much younger, of eating with his father in the King's own chambers, just the two of them, or with a friend or two of his father's. They were small meals, intimate, but looking back, Eluse wondered if his father had even then been judging and weighing him as a child. Those meals were a long time past. The memories were cold.

These chambers felt like they held warm memories. Soft couches sat at one end, with little tables with flowers. At the larger table, there was a tall chair with a smaller seat, like for a child.

On one of the walls hung a huge oil painting; the only one in the room. It showed the King, much younger, with none of the weight under his eyes that the man Eluse met had carried. He wore an elegant black suit trimmed in red, like a military suit, and his red-gold hair flowed long like a mane, without the silver that threaded through it now, and unencumbered by the Shadowshatter crown. Beside him stood a woman; beautiful auburn hair fell in ringlets over her shoulders, and she wore a wedding dress. The dress was striking, like it was made from the spray of the sea frozen into lace and silk, and dressed up with soft white seafoam. The King and the woman looked at one another in the painting, very much in love.

“My Rachael.”

Eluse hadn't heard King Gabriel enter. He turned to face him. His eyes seemed so tired and heavy, the weight of them pressed down onto Eluse.

“She's beautiful,” Eluse said. It was the truth. He knew from history that King Gabriel had lost his wife and child, but he'd learned it as a dispassionate fact. Now he saw the truth of it. The love he had lost shone like sunshine in that painting.

“Yes. She certainly was.” The King walked around the table to a bottle rack, and took a bottle from it. He came back to the table, slammed it down, and took a slice of rolled pastry. “But that was a time past. I see you have eaten your fill.”

Eluse's cheeks reddened.

“Don't be ashamed, whatever you do,” laughed the King. “You should eat well.” He bit into the pastry, spraying crumbs. “I always thought we did better for food in Dharia than you get down in the Summerlands. It's all a bit raw down there for me.”

Eluse smiled politely.

“How do you find it there? The food?” the King asked.

“Oh. I like it. We hunt game in the woods a lot, Consora and I—”

“Consora's the girl?” he chewed.

“Yes. It’s different here, though. We almost never have pastry or cheese. And one of the drinks I had, ale... We... We don’t have that in Arath’ Sayah.”

“Hah!” The King slammed his hand down on the table, laughing and chewing. “No. No you don’t. Hell’s teeth, you must have had the stuff down in the south, too. That’s swill. Real swill. No, we’ve got better drink here in the capital.” He lifted the bottle with a cheerful waggle and uncorked it with a knife. “This one’s sweet, it’s a summerwine. The grapes grow down south, in the Fartherfields. My old sommelier used to say they’d soak up the magic from the forest.” He poured the bottle into two silver goblets and handed one to Eluse.

Eluse thanked him and looked into it. It was a deep, thick red, darker than blood and smelled like fruit and old wood. He took a sip and coughed a little.

“This is sweet?” he asked, with watery eyes.

King Gabriel grinned a big, toothy grin, and his cheeks flushed red. “Hah ha! Sweet enough, at any rate. Come on, come on. Let’s sit by the fire. I’ve had enough of the cold.” He pushed back and directed Eluse to the seats by the hearth. They were deep red leather armchairs, studded with brass. “Will you have anything else to eat?”

“Oh, no, thank you. Thank you very much.”

“Yes. Auctoria never cared for the food here either.” He heaved himself into the armchair with a sigh. Eluse joined, sitting across from him, a low table between them.

“Oh, no, it’s not that. I’ve just had so much already. What did my father think of the food?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he sighed. “Your *father*. What did he think of it all?” He chuckled to himself, then breathed in a long, contemplative breath. “I don’t know what he thought about much. Ah. But that reminds me.” He took another drink of wine and rummaged in his pocket. From it he drew a white stone shaped like a teardrop, the size of a fist. He dropped it down onto the table. “There it is.”

Eluse looked at it. “That’s the Grace of Oriothen?”

“That’s it.” King Gabriel watched Eluse carefully.

He wasn’t sure how to react. It was so... Plain. An unassuming white blob of rock. A little pearlescent, perhaps. That was all.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” he said at last.

“Ahh, forget the ‘Your Grace’,” sighed the King, rolling his head back onto the armchair. “Now, you have what you came for. I’d hoped we could talk a little. I want to hear of the Summerlands.”

The King was friendly, but Eluse was disarmed by him. His own father had made a point of concluding business with the foreign dignitaries as quickly as possible. The idea of keeping them for common chatter would have been preposterous. “What would you like to know?”

“Whatever you wish to tell. Tell me how life is in that Palace of yours. Your lives are long, but mine is short, and more than half done. I’d like to know the things in the south. I’d like to know the life of a prince in our twin Kingdom. I’d like to know all of the things I have missed, sitting up here in my castle.”

“Perhaps you could visit,” Eluse said lightly, but King Gabriel’s face darkened somewhat. “I am sure you’d be received warmly.” Even as the words left his mouth, Eluse remembered how his father spoke of the Dharians. Then he remembered the Grace of Oriothen lying on the table; the Dharian’s strongest means of defence, and that he was to ride home with it. He wondered if he was robbing them of it. Then he wished he hadn’t spoken at all.

He brushed off his own words while the King brooded. “Life in the Palace is good,” he lied. “The forest is a wonderful place. I learn, most of the time, and—”

“What do you learn?” the King interrupted.

“Everything. History, politics, statecraft, nature—”

“Statecraft!” exclaimed the King. He drained his goblet and poured another. “So. The King expects you to rule.”

“Well,” Eluse said coyly, “I am the Chosen Son.”

“You are.” The King stared into his goblet, swirling the contents. Eluse took another sip. Though the taste was strong and wild, it suited the hall. It was a drink made for fireplaces and late nights and deep leather chairs and kings.

“I had a son, you know. Did you know that?” The King spoke into his cup.

“I did, Your Grace.”

“Don’t call me that,” he warned. He looked between Eluse and the wine. “Yes. Micah. My Micah.” He breathed in. “You remind me of him, you know.” He looked at Eluse with eyes that burned.

“Oh?” Eluse was taken aback. “How so?”

The King studied him, but did not answer. “He treats you well, King Auctoria?”

Slowly, gently, the hair on the back of Eluse's neck began to rise. These were strange questions indeed from a foreign king. "Very well." Another lie, but Eluse would change that. That white stone on the table would see to it.

"Good. Very good. I fear I was... not the father I ought to have been when I had the chance." His eyes were distant, the firelight danced in them. Golden flames skipping over blue rings. He rubbed at the crown on his head. The broken gemstone at its heart held the fire in it, too.

Eluse made an uncomfortable noise meant as a condolence.

"Still though," he said, leaning forward. "The past ought not be dwelled in. Will you have more wine?"

The King had finished his second cup, and Eluse just his first. Eluse held his goblet out politely, and the King refilled it. "You'd have cupbearers for this sort of thing at your Palace, I imagine." The King smiled.

"We would," Eluse admitted. It made him uncomfortable to have the most powerful Man in Dharia serve him drinks. He didn't understand it. The King was a strange sort of man. "But our wines are not so nice."

"Hah! Good man. Good man." He held out a hand as if to clap Eluse on the arm, but he was too far over the table. Instead, he rose from the armchair and moved toward the open window. "Come and look, Eluse. You should see."

The King beckoned. Eluse pushed back from the chair and joined him, bringing his wine.

"That's where she lies now. My Rachael. Beneath the peach tree. On that lonely hill."

Beneath the window was a long tumble down the side of the Keep to the rocks. But a little across from them, and down, was a quiet hill clinging to the Keep. On it grew a small peach tree. Around the trunk lay flowers, both cut and growing from the earth, and it was lit by firefly lamps and candles in coloured glass jars.

A reverent quiet washed over them, and the night air caressed them. The cool of it was soft on his skin, which had been warmed by the fire and wine. "It is a beautiful spot," Eluse said finally.

"So they tell me," the King said with a pained chuckle. "Every time they bring flowers to it. And they keep the lanterns lit, so I must see it every damned night."

"You don't bring the flowers?" Eluse wondered aloud. He immediately stopped himself. He'd probably been rude.

Gabriel blinked slowly. “I could cut flowers for her, and all it would mean is that there are more dead flowers in Dharia. The dead don’t care.”

Eluse felt a little awkward. This was not how he had seen Kings behave. “You know,” he offered, “We believe that in death, the life of the person returns to nature. They become the flowers and trees. And everything else besides.” He’d have liked to go on, to say that Rachael was in the peach tree, and she had come from the earth and returning to it was where she was meant to be, but he didn’t know what was appropriate. His head swirled a little, like the wine in his cup. He thought back to the dead men in the tombs at Flintknock.

The King gave a soft laugh. “My boy, when you have seen death as I have, perhaps you shall think differently.” He put a firm, solid hand on Eluse’s shoulder. It made him jump. He had a powerful feel, like he could easily throw him from the window. “No, Rachael does not live on in Anima. Anything under that tree is just rot. She is lost to me.”

An excruciating moment dragged by as they continued to look on the hill. The King’s hand felt heavy on his shoulder.

“Does Micah rest there, too?” asked Eluse, for want of anything else to say.

The King’s hand tightened to a squeeze. Not painful, but firm. “No,” he said. “He does not.” He gave a last longing look at the hilltop, then released Eluse’s shoulder and moved back to the fireside. Eluse looked on a little longer, watching the moths dance around the lanterns, then joined him again.

Away from the cool window, the heat of the room held the scent of woodsmoke and jam and wine. Over the fireplace, Eluse noticed the head of a dead stag, staring straight ahead. They sat and drank some more in silence for a while.

“He asked you to wear that, did he?” the King said at last. He raised a finger to Eluse’s hand. “That Seal.”

“Oh.” Eluse lifted his hand up. “Yes. Yes, he asked.”

“Did he say why?”

“Ahh—not much of why.” The wine felt like it was loosening his tongue a little. He sat forward and looked into the old, wise face of the King. “I have not learned as much of statecraft as my father would have preferred,” he said with a guilty smile. “He said the Seal carries his authority, and... And that it would mean that I am as respected by the Dharians as if he were here himself.”

The King gave a low laugh. “I suppose that is one way to put it.”

Eluse rubbed the oily wood. He tried to twist it on his finger, but the thorns held it fast. It hurt a little when he tried to move it. “It means something else?”

King Gabriel gave him a long, flat stare. “It means something else.”

The fire crackled in the hearth, and that was the only sound.

“What *does* it mean?” Eluse asked quietly.

The King looked at him with kindly eyes. “You are as green as summer grass, my boy. Your father shall tell you in time, I am sure.”

More secrets. More hidden things. Eluse’s skin crawled as he realised there were as many secrets in this man, and in this castle, as there were in Lenune.

“I’m not a child,” he said as cordially as he could. He wanted to shout, or throw his goblet and demand to know all of the things that were kept away from him. He felt like he was in the centre of a hurricane, with things he could not control spinning around him, but all out of his reach. Instead, he stayed quiet and polite, as he always did.

The King gave him a look as if he might have responded, but suddenly his eyes looked away. A noise came from outside the door; a muffled shout and a bang. Then the door swung open, and there stood...

“Consora?”

Her hair was a mess, and her face flushed and tear-streaked. She was out of breath, and her eyes were red and angry. At her throat the aether stone swung on its chain.

“Sorry, Your Grace,” Adie burst through the door after her. “She got by me.”

The King held up a hand. “Let her pass. What’s the matter, girl?”

She panted, bent double with her hands on her knees. Eluse rose from his chair, knocking the goblet of wine as he did, and it spilled over the floor, bleeding out into a red pool.

“What’s wrong, Consora?” He saw her grasp the glinting aether stone as she tried to speak. “What is it? What do you see?”

She panted. She held the aether stone up with trembling fingers, dread across her face. It was a deep flame red. She said a single breathless word, staring into the stone with wild eyes.

“Burning.”

“I bought a raven a while back. Got it from some merchant in the Farrow. My boy loved the little thing for some reason. Anyway, I kept it inside for a week or two, then thought I’d test it out. Stuck a note on its leg saying “Hullo there”, and tried to send him off down the street to my boy. Well, up he went into the air, flapping as hard as his little wings could get him—right off in the direction of the Farrow again. I’ve no doubt made that merchant a little richer, and sent him a note as greetings all at once.

-Overheard in a tavern in Fal In’myhra.

CHAPTER 26 - RAVENS

Before it was morning, the ravens came. A handful at first, but very quickly there were enough to darken the skies. They cawed and croaked on rafters and rooftops across the city, each with a little paper curl tucked onto a leg. The Keep’s lornsmen had not collected them all, or even half, but those that they had all bore some variant of the same message. Something was happening now that had not happened since the Black Age. ***The Elves were at war.***

The King had not rested. The King had paled and left them, promising to return. Consora paced anxiously, and at some point before the sun had risen, Sorrel and Suscepto had both come to join them. They sat in pointed silence, waiting. That was the worst part. A horrible pit grew in Eluse’s stomach. In the dawning light, Eluse watched as ravens left the Keep, dashing off across all Dharia, the south, and beyond. The Keep was abuzz with commanders of the guard, lornsmen, commissaries, messengers, and more.

Not long after the sun rose, Sorrel had stood by the open window with her hand outstretched. With what Eluse was sure was some ranger trick (but may have just been a lump of meat), she beckoned a raven to her that had been circling overhead. The rookeries were full, and they had nowhere else to go. It landed on her wrist, and she took the note, turning pale when she read it.

“The largest army of this age has advanced upon Lenune,” she read to them. ***“Auctoria calls the upon the Dharians for aid.”***

The news crashed over them like an avalanche.

“How dire must the situation have become for King Auctoria to have sent for Dharian aid?” Suscepto said ponderously.

“And what chance is there that they would ever stand with the Elves in battle?” Eluse replied with despair.

“It would be a stroke of good fortune.” Suscepto rubbed his chin. “And not very likely.”

Eluse thought of the Dharians of old Grenka’s stories and songs. Sometimes noble, sometimes dangerous, sometimes selfish, often fractured. They warred one another, and sometimes the Men in the Outerlands to the north, but never the Elves. A peace had existed since the dawning of the Amber Age. At times it was a thin peace; so thin it threatened to snap—most recently when King Torvia Lamont had lost his mind to the fanaticism of the Shadow—but the Elves kept to the South of Anima, and the Dharians to the West.

Yet they had never stood together in battle.

The Elves never had cause for allies; their conflicts had only ever been with one another, south of the Sunderstone Mountains and well out of human affairs. Eluse thought back to King Gabriel’s exhausted countenance in the vision. That furious, desperate, devastated King who had pleaded with his father for aid. He thought also of the cold detachment with which his father had turned away his pleas.

Now, with the Elves at their knees, he could only imagine that the Dharians would respond in turn. Thick, heavy gloom filled the room and lay heavy on them like ringmail. The King’s return could not come soon enough.

The morning was still young when King Gabriel entered again. He was sweating and ragged, flanked by military men in steel plate and boiled leather. Eluse sat up from where he had slouched on the couch in front of the embers, and he realised he had somehow dozed off. Consora looked up from her aether stone nervously.

“Dharia will ride to the aid of the Elves.”

The knotted ropes of fear that had tightened around Eluse snapped. Relief filled the room so thickly he felt he could swim in it. Before they could say anything more, the King began to bark instructions at his own men.

They were hurried to their chambers and told to take what they needed. They would ride today. Eluse took only his ironsilk cloak, which had been cleaned, pressed, and folded neatly on the bedside. Consora changed from her dress into her own clothes, which had been cleaned too, but remained tattered and ragged. Sorrel had done the same the night before, and Suscepto kept his Dharian finery. Within minutes they were ushered downstairs by Adie.

“The King commands that you’re to ride in his cohort,” he told them on the way. “You’re to keep well clear of the battle.”

“The King himself will ride?” Consora asked, wide-eyed.

“He will.”

He brought them out the curtain wall into the city and down to the stables, which were raucous with clashing metal and shouts. “The King and his riders will meet you here, and you’ll ride with them to the riders outside the wall.”

Adie handed them off to a lornsman who was bringing horses out from the stables. “Your horses are by the smith,” he said, ushering them brusquely to four brown mares and turning back toward the stables.

“These aren’t ours,” Sorrel retorted. “Where’s Rucca?”

The lornsman sighed lengthily. “I suppose you’d be the ones who brought the deer, then.”

“Yes.”

“The King’s orders are for you to ride with him. These are your horses. They will not wait. Take them and go.” He flung up his hands and kept walking.

“I am not the King’s subject, and not beholden to his orders.” Sorrel pushed past him into the stables. They were crowded and noisy and filled with armed soldiers coming and going, but a moment later she returned, riding Rucca, with Shanta in tow.

The lornsman looked far too busy to care.

“Well, *I’m* taking a horse,” Consora said haughtily, and mounted up the stirrup of a mare. Eluse beckoned Shanta, who bounded over happily and allowed Eluse to climb atop. Suscepto shuffled awkwardly, and Sorrel insisted that he ride with her, which he gratefully accepted.

They stood and waited whilst the royal stables arranged themselves into some kind of order, with knights and soldiers in varying degrees of armament lined up, waiting. The King appeared suddenly, flanked by a host of royal knights in fine red and silver armour. The King was magnificent in brightly shining silver. He wore no helmet, unlike his knights, but his hair fluttered beneath the Shadowshatter crown. Their horses were already out and waiting, and very quickly the King and his knights were mounted on swift white coursers.

Then, with a holler from the King’s master at arms, a gruff man with the thickest moustache Eluse had ever seen, the order was given to move out. With the King and his knights at the helm, the riders swept through the city. The elves followed, moving as fast as they could in the midst of the swift royal horses. Out they rode, onto the golden fields that lay before Fal In’Myhra. They were empty of travellers now, but all about them were horses and men; some hundreds or thousands waited before the city and readied themselves, and even now dozens more were spotted riding closer from the horizon.

The King drew himself in front of rabble, looking little more than a shimmering speck in the morning sun. But then, he held his horse still and slipped from its stirrups. He raised himself to his feet, stood clear and tall on the back and saddle of the horse; holding himself proud and straight. His voice burst forth like a loud crack of thunder.

“Great Men of Dharia! This day you were summoned, and you stand before me as warriors. The strength of Men is called upon, and we shall answer!”

A thousand times over, sword crashed on shield. The gold grass rumbled beneath them.

“In this hour of need, I ride the long road to Arath’ Sayah, and you brave thousands with me. The road is long, and we shall ride it hard. Not every man shall ride it back. Therefore, have your peace made, and your hearts sure. We shall not tarry! We shall not delay! Keep your blades sharp and your swordarms strong, for before we see the city again, we fight!”

Knights with the King raised trumpets and horns, and their calls rang for many miles across the low Dharian country. Even their great blares were covered by the shouts of the men; whooping and crying out, each one as eager to die for his King as the one beside him. King Gabriel returned to his saddle, and with a final trumpet sound, the horsemen of Dharia set off in a charge south.

Eluse did all he could to ride with them; and though their horses were mighty and strong, they carried huge men with weighty armour, and many horses were clad in steel themselves. The elves had no armour but for Eluse’s ironsilk, and they rode lighter and faster. Consora rode well, some distance ahead on a fiery mare that bucked and jostled, but she knew how to manage the horse’s temper and turn it to speed. Eluse rode with Sorrel and Suscepto.

“So many riders!” he called out, the wind snatching at his words.

“And more will come, certainly,” Suscepto replied. “Summons have been sent across all Dharia. Far more will join these ranks; you watch.”

And they did; all morning the hilltops glittered silver and white with armour and dappled horses riding to meet them. Eluse admired the firm order with which the ride was conducted; every man rode in a company of ten to twenty, and between each company rode quick, light scouts, shouting commands that had come from the mouth of the King. There were some among them who were not soldiers; wagons of provisions rolled with them pulled by stallions four abreast. One wagon rose tall above the others, in a spire dotted with holes in the wood. Eluse realised that it was an entire rookery, moving with them! A dozen times or more before the sun had passed its height, men on the wagon released ravens into the clear summer skies with messages upon them. They flew every direction, and some returned later on with messages sent back, and the means by which the birds found the rookery again in a fresh new part of Dharia was unknown to Eluse. By noon, there were three thousand men with them, and by early evening

there were four thousand. Ravens arrived from the south, too, that he supposed must have been sent from the Elven Palace. He longed to stop one and read the message it carried.

The King rode with a fierce intensity, and the horses were beginning to tire before nightfall. As the sky turned orange, he slowed a little and rode with Eluse.

“My boy, have you the Grace of Oriothen?” He knew the answer; he had watched Eluse take it before they left his chambers. It was tucked safely inside a pocket of his ironsilk.

“I do, Your Grace.” Eluse put his hand up to his cloak and felt it there.

“Again I must ask you not to use that title, as if you were some Dharian subject,” the King said. “We ride south, now, on good road through fair country. The Hollowstone pass makes for a quick ride to the Glendil Gate, and we shall arrive by daybreak the day after tomorrow. The battle shall be fierce, and our numbers are far less than our foe. Make no mistake, the Grace of Oriothen is yours. But, if you would return it to the stewardship of Dharia one final time, we shall shatter them like glass, and they shall flee before us.” He looked to Eluse with wise eyes. “I do not demand it from you, as a King. Rather, I ask. The choice is yours to make.”

Eluse’s hand moved up to his cloak again and felt the cold stone in his pocket. He had almost withdrawn it before his throat tightened. The stiff face of his father floated up before him. To again give away this most powerful relic of the Elves, reclaimed because of the failure of the Dharians, would not be dealt with lightly. His hand moved away.

“What does it *do*?” Eluse asked. “I have only heard stories and rumours.” He laughed at himself a little. All this distance, and he still did not know.

The King gave a faraway look. “Perhaps stories and rumours are all there are for it. You may as soon ask me what the wind does. It whispers, it caresses, it blows, it blusters, and breezes, and howls, and rages, and ruins. The Spider’s Eye holds an ancient power stronger than any in the Kingdom of Dharia. Unleashed in battle, it does what it wills. There is little controlling it, any more than the wind can be bridled or saddled and ridden like a horse.”

Around him, Eluse saw the stout hearts of so many brave men who rode to the aid of the Elves. Nearly five thousand now. He wondered how many would return.

“More will live if we may use the Grace in battle,” the King said, reading Eluse as clearly as a raven’s missive. And it was true; to Eluse the Grace was a chunk of white stone sitting in his pocket. To these men who rode with him, it could be the difference between returning to their wives and children with an armful of fresh-cut flowers, or their wives and children laying the flowers on some stone slab in the city, while their bodies mouldered in the Glendil Valley.

King Auctoria’s face loomed over Eluse.

Eluse closed his eyes to it. “You may take the Grace,” he said, withdrawing it from his pocket and thrusting it toward King Gabriel quickly. He worried he might change his mind.

The King took it and tucked it into a pouch on his courser. “Dharia owes you its thanks,” he said. “And though I did not command you regarding the Grace, on this I do command: when we arrive at the Gate, you must keep well clear of the battle. You are to remain in the Fartherfields, with a number of my own guard.” He gave a grim smile. “It would not do for the son of the King to fall in battle before his time in the crown.”

“That may not please my father,” Eluse agreed with a smile himself, equally grim.

“No, it would not.” The King gave him a long look. “A father’s joy is in his children.”

My father’s must be hidden somewhere deep, thought Eluse.

King Gabriel noticed the look on his face. “I might remind you,” he said with an eyebrow raised, “that we ride to battle to face my own father. I expect either he or I shall not survive.”

Eluse didn’t know what to say to that.

“King Gabriel, I must know,” Eluse said after a while, emboldened by his defiance of his father’s will. “And forgive me if I speak out of turn, but I know that a deal was made for the Grace between my father and yourself.” A little of the colour left the Dharian King’s face as Eluse spoke. Eluse could see that he should not have asked.

He turned to Eluse. “What do you know of a bargain?” he asked. His eyes had turned to dark circles. “No, no,” he stopped himself, fixing his gaze on the road ahead. “Say nothing. All you ought know is that the Grace was given, and that was that.”

Eluse opened his mouth to speak again.

“And *that was that*,” the King snapped. No sooner had the words left his mouth than his eyes softened again. “Forgive my abruptness, my boy. Some things are better left unsaid.”

Eluse wondered whether it was commonplace for a Dharian King to ask forgiveness. He would sooner not be in a King’s debt. He nodded his head politely, and wrestled again with the frustration that wriggled inside him. More secrets. Even in Dharia he could not escape them.

“I am sorry I asked,” he said with a smile that was a little more curt than he meant. The King nodded, and he fumbled with his crown. He moved it as if it would not seat comfortably on his head. Eluse had never seen the King without it. It was not driven into his head with thorns, like his own father’s, but it may as well have been.

“Will you wear that even into battle?” he asked, changing the conversation.

“I will,” the King said evenly. “What do you know of the Shadowshatter Crown?”

It was strange, hearing the King ask like this. Had it been a question asked by his own father, or Iridian, it would have been a test. From the mouth of this King, it sounded sincere.

“Is it true that it was once worn by the Shadow?”

“It is. It was forged for it by the first Men who served it, from silver that fell from the stars, and a crimson gemstone cut deep from the heart of the earth. It was torn apart when the Shadow was sealed away.”

“And that is why you wear it now?” Eluse asked. “My father said it was as a reminder of the past—that a lust for domination and power will rip the Kingdom apart like the crown was ripped apart.”

The King looked sideways at Eluse. “And if that is what the Elven Palace has taught you, perhaps they ought to learn a little from their own words.”

A small silence passed between them, in the midst of the thousands of thundering hooves.

“What do you mean?” Eluse asked at last.

“All I will say is this: The Elves are quick to judge the Dharian thirst for power, but slow to examine their own.”

Eluse snorted. Did he mean that the Elves were as power hungry as the Men? Though he had witnessed firsthand the severity that his father could display, the Elves were a different sort to the Men.

“How so? The Elves do not warmonger. We have not strayed beyond the Gate since it was built by Glendil after Oriothern’s death. The Elves have no thirst for power, we have kept to ourselves for eight thousand years.” Eluse felt strange listening to the words that left his own mouth. It felt sometimes, between this ride and the night before, that with King Gabriel they did not talk like a prince and a King from foreign nations, but two friends.

“Perhaps the Elves have not sought war,” Gabriel nodded sagely. “But have they not intended to hoard their power and magic behind that Gate since the Black Age?”

Eluse blinked. Was this what the King thought of them? A people greedy for power who had locked themselves away behind a wall?

“Is this why you ride to the aid of Arath’ Sayah?” Eluse asked. “I know that once my father turned away the aid of the Elves when you came to him.”

King Gabriel looked up at Eluse, but Eluse went on.

“But you wear a crown forged by a dark force who cared for nothing but power, and your ancestors saw the ruin that the grapple for dominance brings. So, you do what the Elves did not

when they should have, because you've seen the price that is paid for self-interest and when subjugation is allowed. The Shadow fought only for himself, and was ruined by it. You ride to fight for Elves because it is the right thing to do."

The King had a small smile curled across his lips.

"That's right, isn't it?" Eluse asked again.

King Gabriel did not answer, but, with reins in one hand, withdrew the crown from his head. He held it, staring into the burnished metal and gemstone. His eyes seemed faded and far away.

"It is a very heavy thing."

“Strange thing, the night before a battle. You look around and you know that half of the men you’re looking at won’t be coming home. And you think, I wonder which half I’m in. Every man thinks he’s in the half that’s coming home. And half of us are always wrong.”

-Gloomy Brandon, knight of Dharia.

CHAPTER 27 - FIRE AND FLAME

So much of the city had burned.

The kiteriders that had spilled over the Gate had seemed unstoppable; and when they were brought down they shattered into shards of burning wood and flame, and the fire burned so hot and sticky that even the rains brought by the Spider’s Eyes could not quench it. Not one of the riders lived when they landed, but it mattered not. Their crafts were shielded enough for them to make it across the wall and they flung themselves to their deaths with abandon, raining down Shadowfire as they went.

There was little the Elves could do; by now two thousand elves had rejoined from the eastern everwood, and some small number more from the south, but the army of the Fanatical Dark had seven men for each of theirs. The citizens that had not fled Lenune worked day and night to throw water from the Serpent’s Tongue onto the fires, but there were few inhabitants remaining. Most had deserted the city for the southern Wispwoods of Dhune, though some had burned in their trees.

But even fifteen thousand men could not breach the Gate, though it was not for lack of trying. Yesterday evening, they had marched gigantic battering rams as far as the first gate of the three. The archers on the wall had been of no use; great waves of bronze-tipped arrows hailed down upon them but the men on the rams were covered by thick wooden shelters. It wasn’t until the rams reached the gate, and blazing oil had been poured from machicolations above, that they were stopped. King Auctoria watched from the wall’s precipice with a dread satisfaction as the men below had burned and thrashed in the oil’s hot breath, dropping their machines and fleeing back to their lines like fireflies, flaming all the way, and now were dropped in smouldering heaps between both armies.

“Loose arrows!” a commander had cried as the men below fled.

“**No,**” Auctoria’s voice rolled out. “***Let the men burn.***”

Now the smoking wreckage of the rams lay before the Gate, but surely they could not have hoped to breach with those alone. What Elven stone and iron did not repel, then the magic of the Gate would. The army before them seemed set only on causing all the destruction they were able, and whether they took the Gate or not seemed of little importance to them.

The Elven King had stood day and night atop the wall, watching the flames lick high against the black night, and the smoke that had risen in columns for two days blotted the moon. The Rosethorne had given up urging him to move to safety; he would not have it. His golden eyes glittered through the night like two jewels.

The darkness provided the Elves an opportunity to strike, for what little good it would do them. No sooner had the sun crept down over the Dharian horizon than the soldiers were mobilised, and a thousand Elves stole into the mountains east of the Gate, and a thousand west. They were led by rangers who knew those mountain paths, and they cut through keenly where the invading army could not tread. They were fast about it, but the first clues of dawn were already threatening the sky before the farseer at the King's side broke out of his vision and returned from the dove he had been watching their elves through.

“They're ready,” he breathed.

King Auctoria looked to the Rosethorne. “Let us see the mettle of these Men when our arrows fall like rain. Give the order.”

With a hard look and a steady hand, Iridian lit a torch from the brazier on the guard tower. He did not need to ask if the King was certain; he always was.

He looked to the thousands of fiery torches before him that writhed and churned.

“For the Elves!” he bellowed, and hurled the torch over the crest of the wall.

* * *

Eluse had seen the First Tree before the second nightfall, and the haze of thick smoke that rose before it. The Dharians rode faster, then, and they did not stop to rest as they had the evening earlier. No man dared ask his King for respite, and no man seemed to need it either. The horses were bred for this, Eluse supposed, and though he was grateful for the King's urgency, he did wonder how well his men would fight if they were spent. As for himself, he was bruised and blistered from two days hard ride, and Shanta's pace had slowed.

The King did not seem preoccupied by such considerations, and spurred his horse harder than ever. He rode like a man fighting for his own Kingdom, not a foreign land.

When the first horses rode upon the Fatherfields, and the scouts could see the red glow before them, the King finally called a halt. The order was given for every man in the King's riders to put out their lamps and torches, and keep absolute silence. The stars watched over them with interest. The invaders lay before them, and the two armies were separated by a stretch of a mile and the thick blanket of the night. Though the Fanatical Dark were lit up clear by their own torches, braziers, and the sounding of drums, the Dharians were invisible to all but themselves. The horses that galloped and whinnied the whole way here were soft and careful now. Over the army in the valley, the Glendil Gate stood tall, lit by fires that burned at its battlements and base. Eluse wasn't sure from here whether it appeared great and grand, or much too small.

The men took what precious little rest they could. Tents were not erected, but a few men stole a little sleep on their packs, or sat to eat cold meat and hard bread in the dark. Scouts were sent ahead to get as close as they dared, and returned to the King with reports of soldiers, troops, and movements. The King muttered commands to a network of commanders, and Eluse stood close enough to hear. Consora was with him. There was a grim tension over them.

"The Elves are in the mountains," he heard the King say, reading a note from a raven. "Their numbers are few. The light shall reveal us. Before dawn, we shall go."

And that was it. Messengers scurried between companies of soldiers and gave the order. Had the dark not been so dense, Eluse would have seen the colour leave the faces of the Dharians just as it left his own. Eluse sat with the elves, their deer among them, and Tinlit resting on Shanta's antlers. It was a long night, drawn longer by fear. Little was said between them. The only light they had was a very faint glow from the aether stone around Consora's neck. It was a dull grey, now, and on the ride Consora had told Eluse that she could feel only a cloud of distress. Her mother was safe, but troubled.

"When the charge is called, Rucca and I will fight," Sorrel said, partway through the night. All Eluse could see of her was her silhouette, black against the sky.

"I thought you would," Consora's voice replied from somewhere. "It wouldn't be like you to let anybody else have all the fun."

"It is the place of a ranger to serve her Kingdom."

Suscepto grunted. It sounded like he would have argued, if it had been likely to make a jot of difference.

"I suppose this means you'll want your bow back," Consora said grumpily. She had ridden with it, having kept it since Flintknock.

"Keep it," Sorrel said, flexing her fingers as a dusting of sparks rippled from them. "I have all I need."

“Will you stay with me?” whispered Eluse to Suscepto.

“I will,” Suscepto said. “I’m no soldier. It is the place of a Director of Duties to serve his Kingdom too, but for me that means staying by your side.” His words were puffed up, but Eluse let him have them.

“I thought you’d be anxious to put that sword to use,” Consora joked. “Won’t our girl Methir be disappointed that she doesn’t get to cut down a few more of the wicked?”

“***Our girl Methir,***” Suscepto huffed with indignation, “will do a fine job out of the battle, protecting the two of you from whatever missteps you doubtless make.” A small moment passed. “But aside from jokes, Eluse, Consora, you must promise me this. We may be in more danger now than ever before. Do not take liberties with your lives. We are to stay clear of the fighting, and trust in the combined strength of the Elves and the Dharians. Do I have your agreement?”

“Men of my own guard will stay with the prince too,” King Gabriel’s voice rolled quietly through the dark. Eluse looked up and saw his outline against the sky. “As I have already made clear to him.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Suscepto replied. “And the thanks of all Arath’ Sayah.”

“What’s that?” Consora asked. “Over there, at the Gate. That light.”

They looked and watched as a little firelight fell from the top of the wall, all the way to the ground. A moment passed, and nothing more.

“It doesn’t seem to have been anything,” Suscepto said. “One flame among a thousand.”

He hadn’t finished speaking before the entire Glendil Valley lit up on the hilltops at either side; great swathes of flame all appearing at once, like twin serpents either side of their prey. They formed brilliant orange lines, then shot forth in bright arcs into the valley below, raining on the army of men in the valley like hot coals from the heavens.

“Arrowfire!” cried the King, leaping to his feet. “The Elves have struck!”

All around them, commotion among the Dharians, and Eluse watched with awe as more lights appeared at the valley’s ridges. Flaming arrows set afire to tents, machines, and men in the valley.

The King clattered before them, already ahorse his rearing courser. His voice roared across the fields, and he wore a face then not like the regal presence Eluse had ridden with, but the mighty warrior King that the Dharians followed to their deaths. He was lit up from the new fires that swirled behind him, as volleys of flaming arrows burst forth from the ridges.

“Men of Dharia! Mount up! Gather well your swords and spears!”

*The night draws to an end, and with it our foes.
A new dawn shall break over Anima,
And as it breaks, so shall the enemy!*

*Here shall we clash with our kin! Here the grass shall grow red with blood!
Where Dharia meets the Summerlands; now death!
Where the great wall rises; now doom!
Ride to the Elves, and let us ride home victorious, or let us not ride home at all!”*

Horns cried out for all they were worth, and men crashed sword against shield. Horses reared, and five thousand torches blazed anew, and with great shouts for death and glory, the horde of Dharia surged forward.

* * *

From the wall's crest, King Auctoria looked on the arrival of the horsemen, wreathed in flame.

Iridian spoke. “Hope arrives not a moment too soon.”

Auctoria replied with a hard face cut against the night. “We shall see if hope is enough.”

*May the sun never set on your face,
And may you be ready for when it does.*

-Ancient Elven proverb.

CHAPTER 28 - THE BATTLE FOR THE GLENDIL GATE

Sorrel

The knights of Dharia charged in a shining silver string crowned with flame. In the chaos and ruin of the flaming Fanatical Dark encampment, fifteen thousand pairs of eyes turned to face them with wild fury. They had expected no attack from the north. The riders drew together as a wedge. A fearsome spearhead of horse and man and armour and blades, with Gabriel at the helm. He bellowed orders at all sides, and every man knew his place. Sorrel knew hers too, and it was on the other side of that wall. She would cut clear a path to it herself if she must. She sank her fingers into Rucca's fur and soared with the rest of the riders.

A wail of jubilant horns hailed in chorus, crying for victory over the wails of the men before them. Horse crashed into man at once; a wall of death. Bloodied mist flung up, black in the night and fire. Sorrel felt the wet of it on her skin, lost in the swarm of man and horse, and the stink of fresh blood was ripe in her nose.

The northern defence was in such disarray that there was no line of men for the Dharians to break. The Dharian knights rampaged across the smattering of men, and those they did not carve down with swords, they trampled beneath desperate horses. The cries of anguish and agony did not slow her. Hoof crunched on broken body as she went.

Under the blackness arose another volley of arrowfire, and Sorrel could see the field a little under its light. A blaze sprang up over the tents and machinery, and all across the battlefield barrels of shadowfire ignited with booms, springing up twirling spires of black flame and tearing the earth asunder. She felt the scorch of it on her skin, and her lungs burned from the acrid smoke. Her eyes lit up in the chaos. A ranger like her was made for this.

Men of the Fanatical Dark had already begun to charge for the valleysides, and climbed steep slopes to overwhelm the archers. Behind them, the cavalry moved in like a storm. Metal screeched on metal like a terrible thunder.

Ahead of Sorrel, Gabriel drew the Grace of Oriothen and held it clear above his head. In a great blast she saw stars, and it shimmered and burst with a mighty silver light. All about the King, the Fanatical Dark crackled and tore at themselves in unseen agony, hurled onto the ground with thrashing limbs. They dropped down dead before him without so much as a blow from a sword.

The onslaught of the riders slowed as more men ran up to meet them, a mountain of flesh and armour, but the tide of horsemen overcame it. Sorrel curved away on Rucca, not bound by the King's orders. A rabble of pikemen swung out their weapons like thorns, fearful red in the firelight, and she called forward a brilliant sphere of flame and swirled it into the mass of them. They burst apart with screams. She would not be stopped.

The dark was too thick, and the firelight danced too wildly, to see if the battle went in their favour. Around the enchantress swarmed the red and silver Dharian colours, and if she saw a man who did not wear them, she unleashed powerful magic at him. Golds and greens and the orange lick of fire flowed from her, and she summoned a brilliant shard of blue lightning from the heavens, bursting onto the field of battle into a glitter of white light. The Dharians held their formation as well as they could, but its edges began to fray as horse and man were slain by spears and pikes, and the Fanatical Dark closed in. Arrows whistled overhead, invisible in the night, and all around Sorrel men were slain atop their horses, or horses shot from under their men. She raised her hand and brought over them a golden dome of light, thickening the air and slowing the arrows. They dropped, spinning uselessly from the skies. Sword and armour glinted like starlight under magic and flame.

From the valleysides magic began to rain down with the fiery arrows; rangers with the archers hurled spheres of flame or stormy bolts wherever they could. The ground grew thick with dead men on both sides of the battle, and on the hilltops the arrowfire waned a little. Black-armoured men had reached them, and cut down the elves where they stood. Around her, Dharian knights began to panic, too, but Sorrel steeled her resolve. She fought for her home. This night would be long.

Auctoria

The great Elven King watched the butchery from the wall. Flames from the new fires that raged flickered against his deathly indigo face. His elves were killing and dying as best they could, but the sheer mass of the invading army before him was scarcely dented.

If this was the night the Elves ended, he would see they ended well.

Without a word to the Rosethorne, he threw himself from the peak of the wall. He fell, graceful as a swan, three hundred feet, but before the ground rushed up to meet him he sent out his arms and caught himself in a wall of soft air. He landed on deft feet.

He strode alone across the battlefield, past the wreckage of the onslaught and the ruined bodies of dead men. The gnarled thorns on his head seemed to grow taller and sharper in the shadows of the flames, and his shadow poured over the battlefield. A lone figure before the Gate, but the armies of the Fanatical Dark could not help but notice as he advanced, such was his menace. He loomed over them like a thundercloud.

He swirled his arms before him, and where he willed it the ground opened up in huge fissures, crumbling in on itself with all the men that stood upon it, where they were lost beneath the earth with cries like children. His fingers shot toward clusters of others, who rushed at him with swords high. Some, he cracked their bones under their flesh with wild magic and left them to crumple in screaming heaps. Others, he drew their lives from their bodies like a golden rope, turning it to flame and rending the skin from the bones of yet more. Their howls stirred no pity in him, and his countenance was as grim and death-stirred as a demon of the Black Age. He would not be stopped. He would assert his Will upon them. He would dominate.

Where arrows were loosed at him, he crumbled them to dust. Where pikes and spears were lowered to him, he turned them to molten metal in men's hands. Where warhounds tore towards him, only hunks of flesh and hair remained. The men and metal that stood against him were levelled to ash and dust, blood and screams. He was a juggernaut of destruction.

And there at last, before him, stood the Twisted King. Auctoria had sought him out, drawn to his dark power and driven by hatred for it. The Twisted King would be purified.

The dark-robed King lurked before some monstrous contraption of wood and metal, like a hundred small cages. His men were hardly with him; they had either turned to fight the elves or the Dharians, or had fled before Auctoria, or lay in broken heaps behind him. With no armour or shield, and naught but a thin black sword to arm him, the gleam of glee on the Twisted King's pale face gave Auctoria a moment of pause. The power with which Auctoria had ruined the battlefield had taken much from him, and weariness nibbled his edges. The air stank, thick with seared flesh and spilled viscera, but the magic that hung in it would strengthen him. He would give this fell creature no chance to speak.

He raised his arms toward the dark visage and shined to himself a grand golden light; the life and light of the forest came upon him in all its splendour. From the earth and skies and forests it came, and it shone so hotly that for a moment every eye on the battlefield turned to see it.

Then he unleashed it, straight at the dark man before him, in a piercing stream of divine golden light, so bright and glorious it could have erupted from the Spider herself. A long, aureate

beam that incinerated the grass beneath it blistered Auctoria's own hands, and could have melted the very air that held it.

The Twisted King did not move.

Instead, the man smiled with wicked eyes and perilous teeth under the beam of destruction that fell upon him. His face gleamed then not only with glee, but also power and malice, and all of the light that Auctoria thundered at him. The bolt of golden light petered out, and Auctoria lowered his exhausted arms. There the dark figure stood, unscathed. The Twisted King showed his teeth with a sinister smile.

Then he opened his mouth, and with a bloodcurdling shriek, he fired it all back.

Auctoria had hardly a moment to move and, at the very end of his strength, tore from the earth and air a shield of magical protection. A wall of solid golden light to hold back the power that burst toward him; now silver, not gold. He held it hard, unable to do anything but cover himself. He held it over himself as long as he could, and the beam of pure silver that echoed from the Twisted King seemed impossibly long, and impossibly strong. When the last of it sputtered from the mouth of the wicked figure, Auctoria had not a drop of strength left to him. He collapsed to his knees.

The Twisted King moved his black blade in a slow sweep before him. It whispered through the night like a ghost.

"The foolishness of Auctoria," smiled the Twisted King. "It is a fabled thing. You did not think you could kill me with magic, surely?"

Auctoria was panting in the grass. His hands and feet were stained with blood.

The Twisted King sheathed his sword, and turned from Auctoria. All across the field, the cries and clash of dying men grew dull to the Elf King's ears.

"Torvia," Auctoria growled with a faded snarl. "You did not think you could breach the Gate."

"Oh, no no no," the black-robed man tutted. "You mistake me, Auctoria. I do not need to breach the Gate." He looked back at the piteous elf. "It's good to see you again, my friend. You do not look so fearsome now as once you did."

He was doing something with the cages behind him. Auctoria could not see. He tried to rise to his feet, but Torvia held a gentle hand out and a dark and heavy magic pressed him back to his knees. Auctoria had never been powerless like this before. It did not suit him.

"There will be time to flee later," Torvia assured him. "For now, you can wait. You have no allies here, Auctoria." He looked up, past the contraption, where the fighting was thick to the

north of the gate. Between the King and the Dharian army stood many thousands of dark men. “It seems they are preoccupied. Where are your Crownswords, I wonder?”

Past the Twisted King, silver flashes lit up the battlefield. The sky was lighter now. Threads of pastel blue appeared in the south. The sun would rise soon.

“You know,” the Twisted King went on, speaking quiet and calm, as if to a friend over supper, “They say my mind was twisted by the Shadow. And it’s true, of course; I serve him and him alone. All power and strength flows to him. He cannot be resisted any more than the night can cease to come. He lends me his might, but everything returns to him in the end. You cannot escape him. You see that, now, I hope.”

The Twisted King still fiddled with some mechanism in the wood behind him. His men, with swords and hard armour, were either side of him now, but they paid Auctoria no heed. The grand Elven King was like a child before them.

Perhaps the Twisted King spoke truth. He had absorbed into himself the full power of all the magic of the fearsome Elven King, and shrugged it off without a scratch. Then he turned it back against him. What kind of power was this?

“But what they do not say in their songs and stories is the work that the Shadow has done in the mind of the great grand Elven King.” Torvia turned to Auctoria and approached him. He bent over and looked into his golden eyes. He was an old man, but did not move like one. He brought a hand before Auctoria’s face, and tapped his forehead with a black-gloved fingertip. “He’s been needling around in there, I think. Do you feel him?”

Auctoria rasped, and his oft-thunderous voice was shallow and weak. “Whatever the Shadow has done in your decayed mind, Torvia, he has done no such thing to me. Hand me a spear, and I shall show you how the Shadow is cleansed from our lands.”

The Twisted King smiled. “Yes, there he is. I see him, too.” He turned back again. “You live in a lie. The Shadow moves in the minds of all Men, and all Elves too. There is no denying him. There is no stopping him. There is only accepting him. I have, and you have not.” He looked back at Auctoria with dark eyes. “But he will make use of you anyway.”

The sky had begun to light. The cages Torvia meddled with were filled with birds—ravens, crows, pigeons, all sorts. Each cage held a dozen at least, and in rows behind him there were many hundreds of cages, all rattling, clawing, scratching, shrieking. Between each row of cages ran a small wooden channel, and joining the channel with the cages were little ropes of fabric. Men at Torvia’s side now moved to pour oil into the channel, where it soaked into the fabric.

“What is this, Torvia?” Auctoria demanded. “You seek the domination of the Elves, and for what?”

“I do only as the Shadow directs, Auctoria. That is all.” He stepped back from the cages. “Now. There we are. All finished. Are you ready?”

He clicked his fingers, and where he did, a little magical flame appeared. He had a slick smile across his white face.

“I do like to watch things burn,” he said pleasantly.

He placed the flame at the channel of oil, where it ignited, and the blaze ran down the full length of it. The strips of fabric, now soaked in oil, caught fire too, and red fingers of flame ran up them. Then Torvia dropped down a wooden lever, and all of the cages flung open at once.

Hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of birds erupted from the cages in a single mass like a cloud. Each bird had a length of fabric tied to it, and each strand of fabric blazed like candlewick. For some, the fire burned up the entire fabric to the bird, and they were caught in a ball of screams and flame. Others soared away with the fabric hanging limp like a fiery dead tongue beneath them. They gushed from the cages in a swirling mass of feather and flame, rising like a blazing hurricane above the battlefield. The fire caused hysteria among them, and they dashed in every direction; some alight in their feathers, others flapping desperately to escape the fire that climbed to meet them. Terrified bundles of feathers and heat crashed forward, upward and down like a frenzy of meteors. Up, up they rose, scorching the grass as the oil dripped down, and as a single black and burnt mass their panicked minds saw across the wall the thick, sheltering trees of the forest. So many thousand birds whirled toward the trees, croaking and crying and screeching and cawing, over the wall in flashes of horror and flame, and into the trees of the forest. As they soared, they burned, and where they died in the air they crashed down, each one an oiled mess that burned the woodland more. They flew and fell like a ghastly waterfall of flame and death, all across every tree a mile into the forest. Beyond the wall, the fires raged harder and higher than ever. The flames were a living thing, screaming and raging at the home of the Elves, and the city came under a terror like never before.

The Twisted King watched, eyes brimming, delighted, until the last of the birds had fled their cages. Screaming bundles rained around Auctoria. He breathed in the smoke and ruin, and savoured it.

“Very well, Auctoria. You may go now.”

The Elven King rose from the ground, and fled without a word, alone, to the burning city.

Eluse

As the light returned to the sky, even from this distance Eluse saw the ruination wrought before the Gate. From under the hooves of the horsemen were hundreds or thousands slain, and they could not tell which colours they wore. The knights pulled back and charged again, and again, each time crunching further through the bloodied men in the field, but now they were caught up in a tangle of man and horse, and the Fanatical Dark had risen up to meet the cavalry. The arrowfire from the elves at the tops of the valley had diminished, and at the valley's peaks they saw dark figures grappling, and crashes of magical light.

The company of silver-clad men guarding Eluse looked at the battle with longing stares, eyes that wished for wet swords and proud hearts. Instead they were here, babysitting elflings.

When they saw the swirling black mass of birds take flight before the Gate like a fiery cloud from a volcano, their own hearts clouded too. Consora stirred with panic as the birds crested the Gate and poured into the city, but it wasn't until moments later, when the aether stone at her neck glowed orange, that she almost burst with rage.

"My mother is in there!" she cried, her dirt-smeared face streaked with tears. "The city is burning!"

Eluse's heart dropped as he watched her run for her horse and mount it in a single movement. She kicked into its flank, and before he had the chance to say a thing, she was gone in a streak towards the battle, without purpose or plan.

"Consora!" Eluse screamed. Suscepto cried too, and their voices carried far over the field. But she could not be stopped. She would not be. And she rode, with only a bow on her back, toward an army of fifteen thousand.

Eluse was governed by instinct, not thought. He leapt for Shanta, who stamped on the ground. "Go!" he cried. "Get after her!" Shanta's legs whirled.

The three armies before him fought for his home, but that was not where his mind lay. She was his home. He would fight for her.

"Eluse! Stop!" Suscepto dived in front of the deer, grabbing hold of its antlers. Shanta bucked and scuffled to a rough stop.

"I'm going, Suscepto! I'm going after her!" Eluse cried words braver than his heart felt; he did not feel courageous as he watched his friend become a speck against the battle. He felt desperate. "Get out of the way!"

Suscepto only struggled harder. "Eluse, I do not mean to stop you!" he grunted. He turned and threw himself onto Shanta's back, gripping Eluse's shoulders. "I'm coming with you!"

Eluse's heart skipped, and Shanta broke into a gallop. The King's knights gave chase, but as Eluse kept his head down and hands tucked into Shanta's fur, Suscepto called back to them.

“Come if you must, and fight if you will, but we shall not stop!”

And so they charged. Consora on her mare was already just a tiny blue-green dot against the mad thrash of the battle. As they bolted to her, the fray enveloped her, and she was lost like under the breaking of a wave. Behind him, Suscepto drew Methirindil, and Eluse gripped his spear. He lifted the hood of his ironsilk and put his fingers through the cloak’s glove.

“Young master,” Suscepto breathed into Eluse’s ear as they jerked across the hard ground. “Perhaps we ought not tell your father of this.”

For a surreal moment, Eluse laughed, but the humour fell from him as they approached the battle. Shanta’s quick feet bounded between grim marks of death; the ground was muddy with blood and littered with broken armour and men. Some men howled, impaled and forgotten in dying agony, and others gathered up their shattered limbs and spilled viscera, but mostly they lay cold and still. The smell of death was already heavy on them, clinging to the ground like a fog. His blood ran cold when he looked upon the dead. In beaten armour and trampled colours, it could not be told for whom they fought. All dead men looked the same.

“There! Ahead!” shouted Suscepto, spotting Consora, calling after her. Eluse nudged Shanta forward, but the whitetail was already on it.

This was lunacy. What had she hoped to do? But then, Eluse had seen the frantic look in her eyes as she clutched the aether stone. It did not *matter* that she could do nothing. She would do it anyway. She was guided by love for her mother, and for love, she would fling herself against any odds. And what could he do for her now? Nothing. But he would do it anyway.

He saw her loose an arrow from her bow as she rode, into a crowd of jostling armour. Around them were mostly the King’s knights, but the formation had broken now into smaller squadrons, and many of their banners lay broken on the ground.

Two men rushed at Shanta together; one in iron ringmail and an ill-fitting helmet, the other in a thick gambeson and little else. Shanta ducked and swung his antlers at one, clouting him about the head, and as he did Eluse thrust his spear forward. It caught the helmeted man in the throat with a sickening squelch. He squirmed and dropped dead, and as Shanta ducked past the other man who still reeled, Suscepto gave a clumsy blow from his sword onto his shoulder and cut through the padded armour into the flesh below. He yelped and dropped to his knees, and was lost behind them in the fray. Eluse did not think about the fight, or the men they killed. He only thought about her.

Consora was faster than Shanta, but she slowed now, forced to rear and leap between men who tried to kill her. Some of them she brought down with her bow, but most she raced past, riding like a maniac.

“I think she might have gotten us all killed,” Eluse said grimly, but with strange affection.

“It seems likely,” Suscepto replied. “Yet let us do what we can to die together.”

So chaotic and disorganised were the Fanatical Dark’s forces that the Dharians had cut a path halfway through the encampment. Most of the Fanatical Dark ignored them; Eluse and Suscepto did not ride in Dharian colours, nor on great warhorses, and seemed far less of a threat than the rest of the men. Eluse used this to his advantage, and managed to skewer a number more on their way.

“Eluse! Look!” Suscepto bellowed in a frightened panic. He pointed Methirindil out before him at a group of men with long pikes. One of them had buried his weapon deep in the throat of Consora’s horse. She was close now, but the Fanatical Dark were thick around her.

“Go, Shanta! Go!” He kicked the whitetail, who needed no encouragement. Shanta bucked forth, clattering aside two men with a crunch that rattled through the deer and its riders. As Consora fell, she jumped clear and rolled in the mud. Arrows spilled from the quiver at her thigh and scattered away like insects, but she snatched them up and drew her bow, planting an arrow squarely in the chest of the man who had slain her horse. The other pikemen moved on her, steering their weapons around, but with their eyes on her they did not see Shanta. With no regard for himself or the elves atop him, the buck threw himself into them with a flail of antlers and hooves.

Eluse was flung from the buck, but Suscepto managed to stay atop him, and plunged his sword down into a man who had been struck, then another. Eluse, winded where he fell, righted himself and tried to steady his balance with the spear handle. He swirled his ironsilk around him and as he did it clattered, announcing an enemy pike. With a panicked flail, he tangled up the pikehead in the cloak and counterattacked with his own spear. It was a poor swing but a lucky one, and the wide arc of the spearhead raked the face of the pike’s owner. Red rain flew from his spearhead. The man hollered and fell down, not dead, but writhing in the dirt.

Two men closed in on Consora, one at each side. She was pinned, her back to a broken wagon. An angry cry issued from her as she yanked back her bowstring, loosing an arrow into the stomach of one without even aiming. She was too slow, though—on her other side, the second man raised his sword.

Eluse gripped the wet shaft of his spear and hurled it for all he was worth.

It hurtled into the chest of the man, straight through and into the side of the wagon. He did not seem to realise he was dead at first. Cries and blood fell from his mouth when he did, and the sword dropped from his raised hands. He fell, hanging from the spear, fluttering like a limp flag in a low wind.

“Consora!” Eluse managed to scabble his way to her, with Suscepto not far behind. She loosed more arrows overhead. The wagon sheltered them from the sight of the men to the south, and most of those north found other, stronger men to fight.

“Good of you boys to show up,” she yelled. She loosed an arrow over them and into an archer who readied his own bow. Eluse and Suscepto ducked behind the wagon with her.

“Consora, we’ve got to get out of here! Now!” Eluse grabbed at her, but she shrugged him away. “This is madness!” He gripped his spear and kicked into the side of the wagon, wrenching it free. The dead man slithered loose.

“*I will not do nothing!*” she screamed, loosing another arrow into a crowd of distant black-clad figures.

“Miss Consora, you are nothing to your mother dead!” Suscepto shouted. He brandished Methirindil menacingly at a lone swordsman who rounded the corner, who suddenly remembered he had other things to do and ran south. “The Dharians and Lenune shall fight the battle—make sure you are here to see her when it is done!”

The rage and fury that drove her buckled slightly. Angry tears streaked the ash on her face. They ran down her, cutting blue tracks over her skin like rivers in the earth.

“She needs me!” she howled, firing up another arrow, almost skyward, and even she must not have known where it was intended to land.

“She does, Consora,” Eluse said to her, his voice quiet beneath the cries of the dying. “Don’t let her hear that you died here.” The aether stone still throbbed a fierce red.

Consora cried a broken, feral scream into the battle. She fell to her knees so hard Eluse panicked that she had been struck by an arrow.

“We need to get you out of here.” Eluse knelt and whispered to her. His tone lightened a little. “If nothing else, I need to get out of here, and I’m useless alone. I need your protection.”

Consora snorted a snotty laugh. She nodded her head slightly. “You’ll get yourself killed before you even get on Shanta’s back.”

“You’ll come with me, then?”

Consora gave a tearful nod. Eluse flung his arms around her, briefly, then Suscepto butted in.

“Go, both of you. Shanta can carry two. I shall remain here.”

“Suscepto!” Consora cried. “We can’t leave you!”

“Oh, don’t worry about me, Consora,” he said, twirling his sword clumsily. “Lady Methir and I have fierce work to do.”

He spoke bravely, but Eluse knew the meaning behind his words. “The battle is brutal,” he continued gravely. “It is no place for elflings. You must retreat. Do not think of me. Think of one another.”

Shanta nudged Eluse with his antlers. Around them, the fighting closed in. They had to go.

“Suscepto...” Eluse said, but had no words left after that. The two of them threw their arms to him, in as long an embrace as they dared, then made to move.

They rushed for the whitetail, who stood just aside the wagon, but as soon as they rounded the corner, a most dreadful fear overcame them. A presence, thick and dark, shone at them as darkly as a thing could shine, from the field to the south. It was something they felt before they saw it, like they were hollowed from the inside out.

There, before them, stood the Twisted King.

He strode across the battlefield with an aura like dark lightning, bright and black all at once. He was flanked by many men in silver plate, like the knights of Dharia but without their colours. The battle that raged seemed to slow, and all the world grew grey to Eluse’s eyes.

He pointed his slim black blade directly at Eluse. There was no mistaking it; the Twisted King’s eyes were fixed upon him like a panther on his prey. His mouth moved, and words fell out, but they were torn away by the battle. Sound tumbled away. Bitter silence crashed over them, and all around, the shadows that the fires cast flickered and moved. His own shadow stretched out, longer and blacker than it had any right to be. It heaved itself into the air and took shape, coming together with the other shadows on the field, until they were in the figure of a man.

It was the Shade.

Icy chill flooded Eluse’s veins. Consora, though, burned so hot with rage that she was not bound by it; she nocked an arrow to her bow and loosed it straight for the Shade. The Shade did not crack apart as it had in the forest, but a hole opened up in where its chest should have been, and the arrow passed through. The hole flashed black again the instant it had passed through, and the arrow flew onward to the Twisted King, who slashed his wicked sword upwards, cleaving it in two.

“Eluse! Go!” screamed Consora, in a voice that sounded so far away, but he found his legs again. She had already nocked not one arrow this time but two, and shot them both; one passed through the Shade again but the other sailed wide. The two of them ran for Shanta as fast

as they could, who trembled before the Shade and the Twisted King. They were fast, but the Shade moved faster. Like a black streak across the field it whirled, and as it approached the fear of annihilation overwhelmed every part of him.

It sailed directly for Eluse. The Twisted King's eyes, as black as the demon he had wrought, never left him either. He could not outrun the Shade—it was so much faster than before. The power that emanated darkly from it broke him.

He choked and fell even before it reached him. He could not breathe. He wrestled with his lungs, but breath did not come; his strength was gone. It was at him, its spectral arms reaching into him like tendrils.

Consora loosed another arrow, and when that, too, passed through without effect, she flung her entire body right through the Shade with a battle cry. It barely shimmered, and as she touched it she gasped with terror, crashing through it with a hideous scream. She hit the ground on the other side like a limp doll, unable to move. It had sapped everything from her.

Eluse's vision went dark. He saw only shapes, and the great black figure of doom before him. There was nothing left in him to fight with. His arms flopped to his sides, limp.

A great brightness erupted. Shining and gold, just as before. A figure appeared, slicing through the dark, in a mighty golden glow. The Shade screeched and thrashed and exploded into a thousand fragments. Eluse collapsed and fell backwards, facing the sky. His eyes were clouded. He turned his head to the glimmering golden vision before him.

“Isendré?” he sputtered, choking for air. He could hardly believe the wytch had returned.

“Would that it were!” came Suscepto's reply, and the elf came into focus. His sword glowed hard in his hand. He swung it roundly. “You'll have to settle for me. Eluse, rise now! You must run!”

He held out a hand for Eluse, who took it and struggled to his feet. Behind Suscepto, the Twisted King advanced.

“Well, I didn't expect that,” came the Twisted King's cool voice. “What a wonderful sword you hold.”

Suscepto turned to face him. Consora was still stunned on the ground, forcing down shallow breaths. Eluse ran to her.

“Back, you devil!” cried Suscepto, raising Methirindil before him. “Eluse, Consora, make haste! Get away!”

Eluse grabbed Consora by the shoulders and dragged her toward Shanta. “Run, Suscepto! Get away from him!” he cried.

Suscepto either didn't hear, or pretended not to. He jerked the sword forward. "You shall not have them!" he hollered. The Twisted King was just a few feet ahead. He stopped there, eyeing Suscepto.

"The boy dies today," the Twisted King said. His face was like a pale moon set against the night sky. His presence was like the night. "You can die with him, if you like."

"I don't even have the Grace!" Eluse blurted out. "There is nothing you want with me!"

The Twisted King ignored him. He swung his sword in a huge, lazy arc at Suscepto. The elf raised Methirindil high, deflecting the blow. Glittering light sparked from the two swords as black and white metal clashed.

The Twisted King whistled. "That is a very lovely blade. I suspect it has come from somewhere deep."

He swung again, and once more Suscepto parried the strike, and then pounced for the Twisted King. The man sidestepped his swordstrike with such ease, and sent such a powerful strike ricocheting back through the length of Suscepto's sword, that Eluse realised the full power of him. These long, loose strikes were not to kill Suscepto. The Twisted King was toying with him. Suscepto was no soldier; he was fierce and brave and loyal, but not made for battle.

"Suscepto!" Eluse cried again. "Run! Leave him!" He dragged Consora to her feet, who stood clumsily now. Her bow was lying in the mud where she had fallen. Shanta stamped at the two of them angrily, nudging them with urgent antlers. *They had to go.*

"Help us!" cried Eluse into the fray, at whatever knights might have still been near enough to hear. "Somebody, help us!"

If any heard the call, none came.

"Flee now, young master," Suscepto said. "I shall hold him back. You go. You go." His voice was calm; too calm. He must run! He must get clear of the Twisted King!

Before Eluse could call again, Suscepto burst at the Twisted King. Flailing rough strikes, the dark man deflected every one of them easily, holding his sword in a single hand. Suscepto shouted out with an angry swell, and the metal of his sword screamed against the black of the Twisted King's. The dignified Director of Duties was in the dust now; a thrashing, whirling creature took his place, fighting desperately to slow or stop the Twisted King. He fought without grace or elegance or skill, but made up for it with brutal fury. Where Methirindil could not strike, his hands clawed and his legs kicked at the dark robes. He had no regard for himself or his safety. He fought like a madman, and cried out like one too.

Then he lunged once more, and his footing was off, and the Twisted King swept forward and thrust his blade through Suscepto's heart.

Suscepto staggered, and his hand rose up to grip the black metal. It sliced into his fingers, and blood spilled from his chest, and then his mouth. He cried with a guttural shout. Even now, he tried to tear the sword from the Twisted King's grasp as it jutted from his chest. He waved Methirindil, but the Twisted King was out of reach. He choked, and the blood that coated the blade caused his hand to slip. Methirindil tumbled from his other hand, and its point pierced the earth and stood tall. A small gasp whispered on his lips, and he spoke silent words. He looked back at Eluse and Consora with love.

Then, the look fell away from him, and he dropped from the blade, dead.

"Suscepto!" Consora screamed for all she was worth, and she leaped towards him. She might have managed had Eluse not wrapped his arms around her waist and hauled her back. She sobbed at the crumpled elf, snarling with a savage fury at the Twisted King, who stood over him like a phantom. She beat at Eluse's arms with her own, but he held her fast. She screamed out for help, for Sorrel to come with healing magic, or Isendré to come out from beneath the earth and save him, but it was too late. The life had gone from him.

"Consora, run!" Eluse urged, pulling her hard. He heard his own voice break as he said it. He scrabbled for Shanta and hauled Consora onto him. Before them, the Twisted King moved closer, slowly. Leisurely. He trod across Suscepto's fallen body without a thought, and the same dread that shone from the Shade seemed to shine from him.

"It is time, boy. This is ended for you."

Just as he was swinging his legs over Shanta, Eluse felt himself heaved up and lifted back, dragged by unseen hands up and through the air. Though he tried to grasp onto the whitetail's fur, it was as if his hands were not there at all, and the deer was torn out from under him. He hung in the air, and every fibre of him was still and unmoving. Not a part of him would move. His mind screamed at his body to obey, to run, flee, to take Consora and ride, but he was pressed in, as if buried by the weight of the earth. Slowly, and not by his own doing, he was rolled over to face the Twisted King.

Eluse heard nothing but silence. The Twisted King's pale face was old and crooked, and in his eyes Eluse could see an ancient, fell darkness like nothing else on or under Anima.

"Your part in this is over." The Twisted King raised his shadow sword high.

Like thunder from the heavens, a mighty horn broke out over the battlefield. It was so ferocious that it shook the Eluse's ears even through the silence, and the grass beneath him trembled like under a strong wind. All at once, great white horses were upon them, leaping over the dead and the dying, trampling men, riders swinging bright silver swords. At their helm was King Gabriel, and he held high the Grace of Oriothen.

A brilliant light shone from it, more dazzling even than the brightest light that had broken out over the battlefield that day; with more power to it than the sun which now hung low in the sky. It glinted in every eye for a mile around, and carried within it a deep and timeless magic that whispered to every heart of the strength of the ancient World Spider. Eluse fell to the grass, released from the Twisted King's spell.

To every man in Dharian colours, and to every elf, the light was a beacon of might and power, and they were heartened, and their spirits whipped up into a frenzy to fight for their King. And to every man who fought under the Shadow King's army, into their hearts shone a dreadful terror, as if they were face to face with the Spider herself, her mouth opened toward them. In only a moment, every one of them cried out, and all at once dropped their weapons and turned to flee. In every direction they ran, charging madly on foot and horseback, and even those who lay maimed and wounded in the mud found within themselves such a fright that they tried to run on broken legs. Like the tide of a black sea, every man turned tail and ran.

Every man but the Twisted King.

He stood, abandoned, before King Gabriel, over Suscepto's unmoving body. He was surrounded by the King's men, all horsed, weapons pointed at him. There was no fear in his eyes. There was only malice.

"Hello, my boy," he greeted Gabriel. "That was an interesting trick. You've arrived a little early. I wasn't quite finished."

"Stand back," Gabriel called to his men. "Make space. I shall deal with this creature."

Reluctantly, but with obedience, the knights surrounding the Twisted King widened the space a little. Eluse found he could move again, and crawled back over the bloody grass. Consora's hand found his.

King Gabriel dismounted slowly, purposefully. The Twisted King raised his black blade, still dripping ruby with Suscepto's blood. He was ready.

"Your Grace, no!" Eluse shouted to the King. "He's too dangerous!" No other voices cried out. Nobody tried to stop him. These men just *watched*. Consora put a hand on the back of his neck.

"You know what comes next," King Gabriel growled to the Twisted King.

"I fear I do," the dark man looked at the sea of silver and red that now surrounded him. "But I shall not make it easy for you." He kicked aside Suscepto's body and raised his sword. Eluse saw with tearful eyes the dead face of the elf who had given everything for them. On him he wore no regret, but instead a look that told Eluse that if he had to die a thousand times, he would have done it.

King Gabriel's own sword was already raised, and his shield too. The Dharian colours glinted bright in the dawn.

"This day you die!" King Gabriel roared like a lion, and charged. He bashed his shield into the slender frame of the Twisted King, who was knocked by it, and then slashed with his sword. The Twisted King deflected the blow, but seemed surprised by the ferocity of the attack. He staggered a little.

"You're getting old, son. In your youth you would have had me dead already."

Despite his words, Eluse saw how much older the Twisted King was. His face was sagged and low, and he could have been as old as eighty. He did not fight like it, though. Gabriel charged again, whirling his sword above his head. The Twisted King rose to parry, but at the last instant Gabriel swung his sword low, and it cut deep through his leg. He did not cry out, but fell to one knee. He rose again, black sword still lifted before him; a thin band of wickedness that threatened to slice the Dharian King in two. Gabriel raised his own sword and hacked down twice more, but both blows rung off against the Twisted King's deft sword swings. This was a dance, and Gabriel danced like a mighty bear, and the Twisted King like a gazelle. Whatever magics the Twisted King had used against Eluse, he used none now, perhaps quelled by the Grace of Oriothen. None of the men who watched dared intervene.

Sword high, teeth bared, the Twisted King attacked. He launched himself through the air, dived low and swung at the plated shins of his son. Gabriel leapt over the blade with surprising grace for a man of his size, and no sooner had he landed than he swirled around with his own weapon and cut down again, this time into the arm of the Twisted King. It thudded into the flesh with a wet noise.

Again, there was no hint that he had been wounded. The Twisted King simply rose, and swung back the sword. "Steady, my boy. You'll blunt that lovely blade on me. You ought to cut for my neck, where the flesh is softest."

"This charade is pointless," Gabriel shouted. "You do yourself a disservice. Your army is gone. You are defeated. Accept your death with dignity, old man."

The Twisted King stood tall, and admired the sword in his own hand. His mouth twitched and curled into a smile. He considered himself for a moment, and looked at the battlefield. Thousands of elves and Dharians surrounded him. Every man who had stood with him the night before was routed or dead.

He moved his head in a small nod. "Dignity. Yes. I can do that."

He tossed down his sword before him, where it landed by Methirindil. He lowered himself to his knees. He looked, his black eyes into Gabriel's blue. "I am a done man. It has been good to see you again, my boy."

Gabriel stepped forward. He lifted his sword, but before it came down, he raised his eyes to meet his son's.

“Though I am done, the Shadow is not.”

Gabriel's silver sword swept down, cleaving his head from his shoulders.

It had not hit the grass before the entire field of battle erupted into cheers, shouts, screams and hollers like no other. The Twisted King lay dead.

Elves who had come down from the valleysides joined arms with the Dharians. King Gabriel was hoisted high by his own men, and every one of his knights reached forward, to touch him or his armour; the man who had slain the Twisted King. Songs broke out, horns and trumpets with them, and the Men and Elves stood, sang, and danced together triumphantly, rejoicing wildly. Joy beamed from the face of every man and elf on the battlefield.

All except for two young elves, who lay curled, sobbing, by the body of their friend.

“Now, young master, you can’t avoid your duties forever. It’ll have wider-reaching effects than yourself alone. The things that you learn now will save lives one day, Master Eluse, and mine may be among them. So listen well, I implore you.”

-Suscepto, some months ago, in a conversation Eluse ignored.

CHAPTER 29 - SYCAMORE WINGS

The horn rang out one great blast, and the order was given to raise the Glendil Gate. Exhausted elves who had battled through the night poured into the city for food and rest. The Dharians followed, met by cheers hailing them as the heroes of the day. The Seers directed their powers onto the fires of the city, which still burned, but now the heavens opened under their untempered magic and quenched the flames.

People from Lenune came out onto the battlefield—healers, enchanters, Palace staff, and ordinary folk—onto the wreckage before them. They tended to the wounded, gathered up fallen armaments, and sorted friend from foe among the dead.

Eluse and Consora stayed with Suscepto’s body as long as they could, until at last Sorrel found them. They were soaked through when she did, and shivering cold. They looked to her with bitter eyes as her face fell dark.

“Is there nothing you can do?” Eluse asked with a waver in his voice, and he already knew the answer.

Though there was no help that could be offered to Suscepto, what she could do for Eluse and Consora, she did. She wrapped her arms around them in a firm embrace. It was like her body was made from stones and wood, far too hard for a comforting hug. But, it made him feel better anyway.

“What will we do for him?” Consora asked. Her eyes were still red, but her voice was flat now, and her face looked numb.

“A willow tree,” Eluse said, trying to keep his voice from breaking. “He wanted to rest under a willow.”

Sorrel nodded deeply, and scooped his body up. “Then we shall find him the finest willow in all of Arath’ Sayah,” she said. “Come. Let us go.”

His body hung limp as she brought him back through the Gate. Eluse and Consora followed, and they gasped when they entered. Half the city was blackened and ashed, and all about it, trees had fallen across pathways and onto one another. Soot drifted through the air, and everything dripped with black water.

“It’s ruined,” Eluse whispered. “The city is gone.”

“I will take Suscepto to the Palace, for now,” Sorrel told them. “Consora, go and find your mother. Eluse, your father will want to see you.”

Consora hardly needed to be told twice, but Eluse wanted to do little less than go to his father. He began to walk with Consora, but she turned to him rather awkwardly.

“Eluse, I’d really like to see my mother alone. You understand, don’t you?”

Eluse told her that he did, and perhaps part of him was telling the truth. But as she left, and he stood in the razed forest alone, he wished it were not so. The smell of smoke was heavy in his lungs, and a grey haze hung lazily around the forest floor and drifted up through the pouring rain.

For lack of knowing what else to do, he wandered slowly up to the sycamore grove. As he went, he saw that the city was busy with people; not just Elves but Men too. They had come into Lenune to see to their wounded and take respite after the battle. They mostly filtered in lines up to the First Tree.

The rains drummed on the empty branches, and the fires were almost out now. Still, the damage was done, and when he arrived at the grove he saw that the sycamores here had all burnt up too; most were stumps and charcoal, with one or two standing—spectral, leafless branches stretched over the sky like fingers reaching up at the rainclouds. But, all by herself on her usual stump, sat old Grenka.

Eluse wanted to laugh at the sight. This ancient elf had managed to outlive the trees of the grove and seemed absolutely unfazed. Knowing her, she might well have sat here as the fires burned around her. She gazed down at her hands, where she grasped a small handful of sycamore wings. They were warm brown and green; fresher than the black forest. She looked up as she saw him come.

“Oh! There he is. Returned home again, sure as the rains come.” She looked around her, drenched through. “And come they have.”

“Grenka! You must be freezing,” Eluse said, removing his cloak, though it was just as sodden as her. He placed it around her shoulders and tucked it tight.

“Hush, child,” she said, shrugging away the cloak. “These bones have seen enough winters to not mind a little chill. What stories have you for me?”

Eluse liked hearing her old voice. It felt like home to him. “Stories? Old Grenka, they’re yours. I can’t tell stories.” He sat down with a squelch on the wet grass beside her stump.

She huffed a little and gave him a sideways look through milky eyes. “What good is an adventure if you’ve no stories? No, child, you have stories. They’re just... They’re all in here.” She struggled herself around and grasped him, one hand on his shoulder and the other thumping onto his chest where his heart was. Her hands were warm.

“Maybe they are,” he said flatly.

“Sad stories, I think. You were sad to leave. Sadder to return.”

Eluse’s face was cold in the rain, but drops of warmth shimmered from his eyes. “Not all of us did return, old Grenka.” He clenched his teeth and bit down hard. He didn’t want to say what he said next. “Suscepto died in the battle. He died saving Consora and I.”

“Oh, child.” Her voice was mournful. “Such a loss. Such a sorry loss. It takes a dear love to lay down a life for another. He must have loved you much.”

Over the branches and onto the grass, the rain rushed down. He listened to it for a while. Finally, he whispered, “I didn’t realise how much until the end.”

“Yes, child. Always the way. Oriothen never knew the love of Methir until her life was given, at the very end. After she was gone, he knew it in his core. Love hurts much, and costs all, but be sure that it is freely given. A love so strong is not often regretted.”

She began to hum, and Eluse closed his eyes. No force in the forest would stop old Grenka from singing once she had begun to hum. It was a tune he remembered she used to sing years ago, in his childhood. It was a pretty song in a language he did not know. It sounded like wind chimes and morning dew. The sound of it took him away from the ruin around him.

Hol’yd y’iliyana it yal
Aurola une y’eliohan Methir.
A’malh endar’lo
Son aetherarath’ ji rhyrr.

Oriothern ynda’sha tira
Arath’ in’sildan rhosa.
Isil tratn’sha istil it silvala
It yonhala dal’lo son entosa.

She stopped singing, but Eluse remembered the song she would sing when he was a child, sat cosy on her knee as she readied him for bed, was much longer. “Why did you stop?” he asked her.

“I sang what I needed to,” she told him. “Do you remember what it means?”

Eluse shook his head. She smiled and began singing again, this time words that he knew.

*Look to the south, and see
Fair Methir’s golden light.
From the darkness it breaks
Like stardust in the night.*

*Oriothen knows well
The power of true love.
He now breaks spear and sword
And peace comes like a dove.*

The words washed over him. “I think Suscepto would have liked that. It’s strange you sang of Methir. I do have a story for you, Grenka, though I don’t tell them as well as you. It’s a story about a sword. I don’t even know if you’ll believe it, but Suscepto’s sword was blessed with the light of Methir. It saved us many times on our journey.”

Old Grenka gave Eluse a funny look, and made a *tsh* sound. “No, child. True, you are not so good at stories yet. It was not a sword that was given the light of Methir. It was his very heart that was made right with it.”

Eluse was puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“Starlight might give a sword a shine, but Methir’s power was not in magic. Her power was in love, and a sword cannot love, child. Metal makes only trinkets. It was not the sword that was blessed under these woods. It was his heart.”

Eluse’s eyes widened in astonishment. “What do you know, Grenka? Do you know what lives in the Underwood? *Do you know what happened to us?*”

“Oh, child,” a wobbly smile formed on her crooked old face. “Ever I tell you, I know what the trees tell. And they love to talk. But I tell you this: What that blessed elf held most dear in his heart was that others would be well, and he held it dearly to the end. And now he is gone, his life vanished like a dawn mist. But all that he asked for was given to him, and he would have had it no other way. Hard though it may seem to our hearts, it was in his heart to give all that he could for you and the girl. He did only as much as he desired to do.”

Eluse started to talk again, though he had no idea what words to use. Stutters tumbled from his lips.

“I tell you, child, I know what the trees tell,” Old Grenka said, silencing him. “But,” she looked around with darker eyes, “There is something wrong with the trees of late. They grow slowly. Some do not grow at all. There is death in these trees, but a strange death. A death that does not bring life. Do you feel it, child?” Something had changed in her voice. It was as if the sun had clouded over.

“What do you mean?” Eluse asked. He looked at the black husks of the sycamores. “These trees *are* dead.”

“Yes, yes, dead they are. And thousands more dead outside the Gate.”

“Elves and Men died out there, Grenka. Not trees,” Eluse reminded her.

“Elves, Men, trees. All the same in the end.” She put her knobbled hand to the stump she sat on. “But where is the life in them?” Her voice was colder than it had been before.

“Of course there’s no life in them.” Eluse replied. “They’re dead.”

“No, child. You must stop talking so, and listen to the trees.” She gripped his hand with her frail fingers and moved them to the tree stump. “Life leaves the dead, and goes into the aether. Then it goes back into the earth and gives birth again. The dead don’t die, you know this. They become the flowers and the trees, the animals, the Elves. All things that live have come from the dead.”

“Yes,” Eluse said, unsure of her point. Of course, the magic and lifeforce in the living things left them when they died, and gave life to the rest of the forest. What was the old elf talking about?

“So?” Grenka’s eyes furrowed and stared straight at him. “Where is the life now? Why does it all feel so gone?”

Eluse concentrated, like when he used magic. He tried to feel through the air around him, into the trees. Into the dead tree stump that Grenka held his hand on. There was nothing there. Blackness yawned around him.

He swallowed. He didn’t know what to say, or really understand what it meant. “The forest will regrow,” he said in the end.

“Will you see to it so?” old Grenka asked. He gave half a smile. His fingers tingled with familiar magical warmth. A few small golden sparks escaped him.

“I can do my best.” He held his hand out across the clearing, and felt into air. There was life still out there, even in the dead. Even among all the black, things lived.

He ushered his lifeforce forward, and though he was so tired, he still had more to give. He remembered everything.

He thought of Isendré, living deep beneath his feet, and her connection to the world and the roots of the First Tree, and as he did, he felt his own connection to the woods he rested in. He thought of the aether stone, and its magical link to itself even across all of Anima, and how it had saved them under the earth, and he felt his own link to the forest here, bound by the same magic that held the stone together even when it was in two parts. He thought of Suscepto, how that beautiful elf had given everything of himself so that he and Consora could live. As he did, he gave all of himself to the forest—his life was not his own. He knew now that there were greater things than himself, so much greater. He thought of Consora, and how she had stayed by his side without hesitation, no matter the risk; she knew he needed her and she had not faltered. As he did, he knew the forest needed him, and that it needed all of the Elves, and he found in the forest a belonging that he had not felt before. He even thought of Danté; that twisted, broken man who had cried out for hope at the end, even in the very darkest of places, and knew that now, when the forest around him was at its most broken, hope yet remained. And, as he remembered all of these things, he saw the magic and the life of the forest so much clearer now, and connected with it. All of it. He pushed himself, and his own life, and gave all that he could to it.

He opened his eyes, even as he focused, and the clearing was aglow with lights. Green and gold, like fireflies, they danced over the grasses and fell down. He could *feel* where the living things lay—the little seeds dormant beneath black grasses, trees and the bushes that were not quite dead yet glistened with a new vibrancy. He spilled himself into them, and where he did, little leaves and shoots appeared. Sycamore saplings twirled up in spires where their wings had come down and been buried. Ivy twisted and climbed wherever it could, climbing trees in playful tongues, sprawling over roots and stumps. Somewhere his eyes couldn’t see, but his magic could taste, he felt a little chrysalis of a luna moth that had survived the flames, and he shimmered faint magic into it. The chrysalis cracked open and the moth emerged, stretching its wings for the first time and lifting into the clearing. Even the winds shifted, bringing with them little seeds from the treetops or other parts of the forest; dandelion and grassweed, clover, poppy. They kissed the ground and took root, and buds blossomed.

By the time Eluse had let himself stop, the blackened clearing was not black any longer. A calm green had come up marking the scarred land soft.

“Perhaps things will regrow,” said old Grenka, and suddenly her voice was warm and old again. “We shall see.” She fiddled again with her sycamore wings.

“You see?” Eluse said, exhausted. “If you plant those sycamore seeds, they will grow.”

She turned to him and held up the sycamore wings. “These aren’t seeds, child. These are hope. And we could all use a little more of that.” She turned and looked at him straight on. “Why do you come to see an old woman in the woods when your friend needs you?”

Eluse blinked. “Consora? The—no, Grenka. She said she wanted to be alone. She wanted to see her mother.”

“I am sure she did, child. But often what we want and what we need are not often the same.”

* * *

The burnt husk of the mangrove raised out from the water like a black tooth. Eluse nearly turned around and left until he saw movement inside.

“Consora? Marad?”

There was no answer, but he slipped through the roots into the burrow. The smell of smoke permeated everything, but it was the acrid lysian that lingered in Eluse’s throat. The home was in ruins, but among the charred roots Marad sat on a barkmound, staring into the waters. Consora was behind her, combing through her hair as gently and carefully as if she was a newborn kitten. Lysian bottles littered the ground. Seven or eight at least. Marad clutched another.

Consora was talking quietly, but looked at Eluse when he entered.

“I told you I wanted to be alone.” Her voice was flat, but she wasn’t angry.

“I know.” He sat down next to her. The barkmound was sodden and cold, but Eluse’s skin prickled with a chill that had nothing to do with the damp. “Hi, Marad.”

Nothing. Consora’s aether stone dangled at her neck, pale blue, and Marad’s peeked through her curled fingers, cloudy grey.

“Eluse is here, Mum,” Consora touched her mother’s knee. “He... He looked after me out there.”

Her mother trembled with every breath, like each one burned. She made a groaning in her throat, then something that might have meant to be words.

“What’s that, Mum?”

“How’s he, how’s he doing?” she said, a little clearer this time.

“Yeah, he’s doing well. Really well. He’s here, Mum, right here.” She tapped her mother’s shoulder. Marad turned and looked at him, sort of surprised to see him. She grunted.

“I’m alright thanks, Marad. I think Consora looked after me more! She was amazing. And, did she tell you how she healed Suscep...” His voice died in his throat.

She stirred a little at that. “My girl. My girl. Ever such a good girl.”

“That’s right, Mum.” Consora grinned, and Eluse almost didn’t see the sadness beneath it. “Keeping everybody safe. Learned that from you. And look at you, ey! Still in the city when so many others ran away. Nobody has anything to fear with you defending Lenune, do they?” She rubbed her shoulder, then pulled hair from the comb. A clump fell to the floor.

A sheepish smile twinkled over Marad’s lips. She took a sip from her bottle. She gurgled as she swallowed it.

“There she is, there’s my mum,” Consora said. “It’s nice to see you smile, Mum. I couldn’t stay away too long, could I? Not from that beautiful face. And your hair will be just as beautiful when I’m finished with it. I was worried about you, you know. Had to get back for you.” Marad made a noise like she was in pain, then nodded. “Keep your head still, Mum. You’re doing amazing. Nearly done now. Well done. Well done.” Her fingers trembled with each stroke as she worked through her mother’s hair. Marad’s scalp showed through the thinness of it. “I remember when you used to do this for me. It’s my turn now.”

A little bit of light came to her mother’s eyes. “member the time in—in with the ribbons...” she stammered.

Consora frowned a puzzled brow, the glint of a smile on her lips. “The ribbons? Oh! When I was eight summers?” She broke into laughter, and her mother laughed too. “When you took me to your friend down in the Alderbarrow, and she did my hair? Oh my starlight, I remember that, what was her name?”

“Glenna,” Marad chimed.

“Glenna! That was it! And the long pink ribbons she put in, and the bows all tied up in pigtailed, and braids... She spent hours doing it!” They both laughed more, Consora’s laugh high and tinkling, her mother’s low and hoarse. Marad made a noise again and took another gulp of lysian.

“And you din’t... Even to the end of the gard...”

“Yes that’s right! I was so angry, I hated them so much, I didn’t even leave them in until we were away, I just threw them off as soon as we were out of the home and stamped the ribbons

into the path, and when we turned around Glenna was watching the whole thing!” Consora’s eyes were wet with laughter, and Marad laughed too, but like a wheeze, until she coughed. “Oh, you were so embarrassed. You and dad just pretended like it didn’t happen and we kept on going until we were out of sight, but when we got back you were so mad, telling me to just be polite and not be rude...” Eluse found himself grinning too.

The laughter quietened, and Marad took another drink.

“I’m just about done here, Mum. Here we go. All done now.” Consora tidied the hair out of the comb again and brushed her down. “That’s alright, isn’t it?”

“She’s done a good job there, Marad. You look lovely,” Eluse said.

Marad groaned into herself, content, then drained the last of the lysian. She crumpled to the side, heaving her legs up next to her and lying down.

Consora stroked her shoulder. “You going to lie down for a bit? Yeah? You have a sleep, Mum.” Marad took another few strained breaths, then sighed out, long and low. She drifted away and began to snore. Her grip loosened on the empty bottle. Gently, Consora took it from her. Her fingers flitted to it, then let go. Consora held it, turning it in her hands, staring down.

For a long time, neither of them moved. There was no laughter in the room anymore. All that was left was the sound of her mother’s laboured breathing, the soft rustle of the bottle as Consora’s fingers cradled it. The weight of it all pressed down onto Eluse.

“I think... I think I felt like it would all be different now.” Consora said the words like they were splinters she was pulling out of herself.

The rawness of it sat on him. He wanted to go to her, but couldn’t find a way to move. His arms felt so stupid and clumsy, like whatever he did would be wrong. She just kept staring at the ground.

“I think I thought... that when we came back, there would be hope. I thought things would change. When we were out there, and... and I felt her in the stone...” Her hand fluttered to it. “Things felt lighter. It made me feel like I could fix it. It made me think... There’s a chance. But it’s all so inescapable.” She dropped the stone.

Say something, Eluse. Give her anything.

“I... I hate being here.” Her eyes shone wet, and her voice trembled. “I... I know I shouldn’t say it, but I hate it. I love her so much, but I... I don’t like being around her. It breaks my heart.” She sniffed and a tear rolled down her cheek.

Eluse’s eyes filled with water too. All he could do was lift a hand to hers, and hold it.

“There’s only one way this goes.” She looked in his eyes, and they saw one another’s tears. “I know how this will end. She’s already gone.” She collapsed into him. Her breath hitched, this time a strangled sob that broke through her tightly held control. “I just want... I just want my mum back. I don’t want to wake up and she’s gone. I’m scared of... I don’t want to come home one day and she’s just not here any more. Never here again. I don’t want to find her like... I can’t... I just want her back.” Her body shook violently as she cried. Eluse held her tight. He stroked her hair and pulled her harder into him.

“It’s alright,” he whispered, wrapping her up in his arms. “You’ve got me—”

“Shut up,” she sniffled, her words muffled because her face was buried in his chest. “Don’t say anything. Just be here.”

She wept, and shook, and let her heart out.

And so Eluse said nothing else, and held her, and was simply there.

Food is the great equaliser. It binds up the broken hearted, it brings together Men, Elves, animals, and everything in between. Communities are born and maintained when they marinate at the dinner table. When the day has been a joy, eat well! And when the day has been hard, eat well too. If you are happy, eat and be happier, and if you are sad, eat, and forget your sorrow. Food is not something to fit into life. Life is just the word we use for those empty gaps between meals.

-P. Zindergruft - chef, food critic, enormous.

CHAPTER 30 - THE GREAT HALL

When Eluse entered the King's Hall, Gabriel was already with his father, with Iridian lingering behind. As soon as he noticed him, his father rolled toward him like a thundercloud.

"You, boy! What do you have to say for yourself!?"

Gabriel turned to face him, too. The human's face was red and flustered.

Eluse instinctively lowered his head, and had a half-formed apology in his mouth before he stopped himself. Then, he lifted his eyes to meet King Auctoria.

"Hello, father. It's good to be home."

The King's eyes flashed. He towered over Eluse, but Eluse was far too tired, and grieved, and stubborn to be moved. "You have left the bounds of this city without safety or surety; you have taken into your own hands the negotiation of our most precious relic; you have been responsible for a hunt the realm over for your safety—"

"I have brought home the Grace, and an army along with it. It looks as if you needed one. You're welcome."

The King's eyes widened as if the words were a slap. Eluse's head went light as he said it. He could hardly believe the words out of his own mouth. Over Auctoria's shoulder, the glint of a smile moved on Gabriel's mouth.

Auctoria's jaw hung open, and Iridian stirred. "And yet it is not you who now bears the Grace, is it, Eluse? But a human in our own realm."

King Gabriel took the Grace from a pouch at his side. "Humbly returned with our thanks, Lord Auctoria." He passed it to Iridian, with a regal quirk of his lips.

Looking at that little trinket, passed so casually, Eluse remembered how desperately he'd hoped to ride home victorious with it for his father's praise. But now, as he saw it, those memories felt like someone else's. His mind screamed at himself. *Don't say anything else. Don't say anything else.*

"And something else," he said.

His father's eyes snapped to him.

"If I have erred in what I have done, made some great mistake, then perhaps you—the lot of you—will take it as a lesson. Because *clearly* there are things at work which I don't understand. I haven't any idea what's going on. And so if I've made any mistakes, well, then, I'm sorry. Father, you chose me to go for the Grace of Oriothen, but were not honest with me why—and whyever it was, I still don't know. King Gabriel, I thank you for your help, but you have known much and kept it from me. And Iridian—well. I don't know *what* you are, and I wonder if nobody else here does either. I don't know what all of this means, with crowns and kings and Eyes of the Spider and everything else. But here's what I do know. Suscepto is dead. The people out there in that city are hurting. And so am I. I'm done with this. I'm too tired for it. I'm past asking for answers, because I know I'll need to find them myself. Father, I think... I think I cared so much about what you thought of me that it paralysed me. But now, I just... don't. I'm your *son*. I'm who I am. You can have me for who I am, or I can be nothing to you, but you cannot shape me into something else. And I'm exhausted, and sore, and not in any mood to be shouted at. I'm leaving. Goodbye."

And Eluse turned on his heels, and ignored everything that exploded behind him, and let the door swing shut as he left the room.

* * *

Despite his grand exit, even now Eluse did not dare miss the victory feast that night. The feast in the Great Hall was beyond any Eluse had seen before, and well beyond what he thought was appropriate either. Five hundred Elves had now been counted lying dead outside the Glendil Gate, and over a thousand Dharians. The city was in cinders outside the First Tree, and half its residents had fled over the last days. Still, he thought as he looked around the splendour of the Great Hall, you wouldn't have known it from here.

Hundreds of Elves and just as many Dharians crammed themselves around tables on squat benches far at the end of the hall with the commons, and even Consora had managed to wrangle herself an invite. Even her mother was here somewhere, impossibly. Eluse sat at the other end of his father's table, which was bedecked in fine linens of cream and gold and raised

up on a dais so that every person in the hall could see them. He kept his head down and his eyes on his plate. He had little patience for today's formalities. Seated around his father were King Gabriel and a dozen high-ranking men and elves, lit by jars of golden fireflies and a green, magical light that filtered down from portways in the wood. Even now, flitwings zipped through the top of the chamber, Tinlit among them. The entire hall was hewn from inside the wood of the First Tree, with thick mossy carpets on the ground and ornate carvings on the walls, and living orchids and lilies that grew straight from the wood. The air was sweet with their scent.

The food and drink flowed in like a river; delicacies not just from Arath' Sayah, but Dharia too, as the provision wagons that had not kept up with the horsemen had now arrived. The table before Eluse was set with foods he'd never tried and some he'd never heard of. Partridges stuffed with dates and orange sat steaming on beds of cabbage and rittleflower; flaky white fish the size of a man, fresh-caught from the Serpent's Tongue stared with black jelly-eyes from under clay it had been dressed and baked in. The smell of salty samphire mixed with rich, musky broth made from gladeboar or venison, and there were even pastries, jams, wheatbreads, and other Dharian delights, though Eluse hadn't a clue who had baked them or why they had been brought. Up and down the tables, elves who had lost everything forgot themselves for a few wonderful moments in bowls filled to the brim with fruited spiced wines and vine leaves wrapped around pretty sugared fruits or hot smoked offal. Everything was stacked high and quickly refilled and replaced as needed by a swarm of Palace staff who flew around the hall like winterflies, clearing and scraping and bringing ever more food and drink. And none of it interested Eluse at all.

His stomach was empty, but felt filled with hard stones. He couldn't face eating properly, and though he'd tried picking at a sweet mincemeat tart and a couple of herbed potatoes, he had no appetite. He was astonished that any of them did; every elf in the hall must have known several among the dead, and he wondered how many of the Dharians had lost friends or brothers too.

King Auctoria demonstrated none of the young prince's reservations, and had begun the feast with loud honours. Gold and glass goblets were raised among the nobility, and wooden tankards among the commons, and cheers shouted loud as names were called. Even Eluse himself had been forced to stand and bow humbly as he had been honoured "*as a delegate of the realm, and for services to his King.*" He grimaced now at the thought of it.

After what seemed an appropriate amount of time sitting at his father's table, he slipped from his chair and made his way down to the commons. The commotion was far greater here, and unlike at his father's end of the hall, where knights and Palace staff pecked awkwardly at their food with delicate cutlery, Eluse preferred to see unwashed men and elves tearing into the same greased poultry carcass with bare fingers they licked clean, and throwing back tankards or horns filled with all manner of drink. He'd even smelled ale that the Dharians must have brought, though made sure to keep well clear. Jarring music played, and rowdy songs were sung.

He could get himself lost in the bodies down this end, and though he could probably have been recognised by his fine clothing he'd been trussed up in, nobody really cared to look. He found Consora helping her mother to a slice of salted pork, and Sorrel sat beside her. It surprised him a little to see them sat together; he thought perhaps Sorrel would have found more important things to do. He squeezed himself onto the bench across from them.

Before Consora had noticed him, fiddles, tambourines, and flutes struck up from a cluster of men in the corner, all Dharian, and feet stamped in a rhythm. They sang out a tune they'd been playing on and off throughout the feast, and even the Elves around them were joining in now. Tankards and knives clattered on table, drumming out a rough beat for the song. It was a long, jovial anthem that they seemed to make up as it went along, and sang of Dharian heroics and Elven alliances and death and glory. Even Eluse found himself tapping his fingers in a rhythm, and the song was led by a Dharian with an out-of-tune lute.

*The Twisted King and his warring band,
Set plight upon the Dharian land,
For fifteen years we had fought them back,
And battered the bastards blue and black!*

*Oh-oh, oh-oh, let sword and shield clash!
Oh-oh, oh-oh, let fire and lightning flash!*

*But still the Twisted King didn't fall,
He fled in the East, army and all,
In deep sandy deserts far away,
We knew we'd have him again some day!*

*Oh-oh, oh-oh, in the desert he hid!
Oh-oh, oh-oh, terrible things he did!*

*But then when the Twisted King commands,
His armies attack the Summerlands,
They bit off much more than they could chew,
Their enemies were not one, but two!*

*Oh-oh, oh-oh, we'll fight them til they fall!
Oh-oh, oh-oh, spill blood before the wall!*

*The Dharians and the Elvenkind,
An alliance you will seldom find,
The noble Dharian King did say,*

We'll ride and fight for the Elves this day!

*Oh-oh, oh-oh, let spear and jav'lin sing!
Oh-oh, oh-oh, we'll slay the Twisted King!*

*The Men and the Elves, they fought as one,
And by the time that the day was done,
We saw the Twisted King lying dead,
King Gabriel's sword cut off his head!*

*Oh-oh, oh-oh, he drew his final breath!
Oh-oh, oh-oh, Gabriel brought him death!*

*Our swords had crashed and our shields cried,
And half the enemy soldiers died,
His army fled in a ruined state,
You should never attack the Glendil Gate!*

*Oh-oh, oh-oh, let sword and shield clash!
Oh-oh, oh-oh, let fire and lightning flash!*

Half the hall erupted into cheers, and by the time it was over even some of the nobles at the far end had joined in with the song, though most seemed not to know the words. Even Eluse was laughing by the end.

“Eluse!” Consora called as the players finished. She gave him a funny sort of smile; the melancholy behind it was plain as day, but there was happiness too. Her mother was out of the mangrove den, and Eluse didn't remember the last time she had been.

“Hi, Marad,” he beamed at her mother. “Enjoying the party?”

“Yes, yes,” Marad replied quickly, not looking up. “Wonderful food. Very good.” She'd been swaying along to the beat of the music as she'd eaten.

Consora grinned at Eluse. He noticed Marad scraping half the food Consora put on her plate onto a second plate by her side. He laughed a little.

“Is that to take home?” he joked. “I think they might want their plate back!”

“No, no, not for me,” she said, busying herself cutting her pork into even slices. “Got to save a plate for Riváren. Not long now.”

Ahh. There it was. He gulped and pretended he hadn't heard anything. Instead he turned to Sorrel.

"I've never seen so many humans in the Great Hall before. Or even in Lenune. I'm surprised the Palace have allowed it."

"Mmm," she replied thoughtfully. "And many more in tents outside too. As many Men in the city as Elves, now. Or more."

Eluse looked across the long hall to King Gabriel, who was toasting with his men close to Auctoria. "I suppose they finally got their alliance in the end."

"I wonder if it'll last," Consora pondered. "What will happen to the Fanatical Dark now?"

"Over the next few days we'll ride out and pursue," Eluse said confidently, though truthfully he had no idea at all. "With the Twisted King dead, they'll be in disarray, so it will be an ideal time to strike. The tower of Udol Aethune still lies in the desert, and even with their King dead, we ought to secure it."

Sorrel did all but roll her eyes at the young prince's pretend knowledge. Eluse ignored it.

At the far end of the hall, a clanging began; a Palace attendant striking a fork on a glass. Others joined in, until the whole hall was making a din.

"Speeches," Eluse groaned at Consora.

"I thought they did the speeches already?"

"No, they did the *honours*," he sighed. "The speeches are much longer."

And absolutely they were. The clanging died down as King Auctoria stood, and what followed was twenty minutes (though it felt like far longer) of words about Elven greatness, thanks given to the Dharians, grand smiles and a dozen different ways to brag over vanquished enemies. Whoops and hollers interrupted at times, though King Auctoria did not seem to mind, and his mighty voice carried over them all. Toasts were raised, and goblets refilled frequently, even down in the commons. It was an act, Eluse knew—speeches were expected, so speeches were what the King would give. This great and gracious Elven King who spoke so highly of noble deeds and valour existed only as long as eyes were on him.

Finally, the King sat again as elated elves applauded, and Eluse turned back to the table. However, no sooner had he sat than a great muscled Dharian, still in his armour, stood up and shouted "Speech from the King!" at the top of his lungs, and a dozen other Dharians around him cheered.

“He just *gave* a speech,” Eluse grumbled.

“Not *their* King,” Sorrel said, eyebrows raised.

Another Dharian yelled “Speech!” and quickly a hundred or more Dharians were gleefully demanding a speech from King Gabriel, pounding down on the tabletops and the floors. At the end of the hall, King Gabriel’s face turned red with laughter, and he turned to Auctoria apologetically. The Elven King gave a shrug and a slight nod, and King Gabriel rose to his feet to rapturous applause.

“Noble men of Dharia!” He cried out in a King’s voice, and cheers and clapping drowned him out for a moment. “Noble Elves!” More of the same. “Firstly, I thank King Auctoria for his warm hospitality to the Dharians!”

Excited Dharians banged on tables so hard Eluse wondered if they might break. They were nothing if not animated.

“Though it is not much, we offer a little hospitality of our own. Ripe summerwine from the Fartherfields!” He gestured an arm to the double doors at the hall down by the commons, where half a dozen men strode in, heaving great barrels that sloshed around as they moved. If the hall had cheered loudly for the King, they cheered louder for the wine. “Let us drink to our fallen brothers. Elven and Dharian blood both has been spilt this day. Let us give tribute to those who made the ultimate sacrifice. Let us raise a toast in their honour, pale tribute though it is.”

A reverence fell over the hall, and the only movement now were Dharian men rushing to bring wine to the tables. They poured it in deep bowls up and down the tables in the commons, and goblets were dipped in, and for those at the King’s end of the hall they were poured goblets from white stone jugs. As they waited for wine to be brought all across the hall, Men and Elves alike stopped and quietly thought of the dead. Eluse was handed a tankard full of wine, and stared into the thick red liquid. It smelled of oak and fruit, like the wine he’d been served by the King himself in Fal In’myhra, but the look of it reminded him of the blood on the battlefield. In his mind, he saw Suscepto’s lifeless body again, bleeding. He felt sick.

Consora and Marad took cups too, with Marad taking an extra for Rivarén, but Sorrel declined politely. A minute or two passed before almost everyone in the hall held a cup, each thinking of those they had lost. The mood in the hall had deepened.

“For the fallen,” King Gabriel said somberly, and raised his goblet.

“For the fallen!” King Auctoria rose to his feet, and raised his own glass, his voice so much the louder, and he drained his cup. He was not to be outdone at his own feast. All across the hall, similar cries rang out, and wine was drunk. Eluse tasted his too; it was harsh and he had no idea how the Dharians considered it sweet, but all at once, and with Suscepto on his mind, he

drank the lot. It burned his throat as it went down. The room returned to the quiet reverence that had washed it before.

“Let us give thanks to our Elven brethren; true thanks,” continued King Gabriel. “And may this wine be drunk in their honour too. But before I go on.” He stopped himself with a small smile. “King Auctoria, perhaps we forget ourselves. We ignore a sacred tradition!”

The few who knew of what he spoke gave small laughs, and Eluse remembered too—they had yet to exchange the Mercies. Though, as true Dharian mercy had rescued the Elves, and Elven mercy had opened the Gate to the Dharians, it seemed especially unnecessary now.

“There is a time-honoured tradition since the dawning of the Amber Age that the Twin Kings demonstrate their mercy toward one another,” Gabriel explained to the unaware. “King Auctoria, I humbly ask you now for your mercy.” He gave a little bow; respectful, but he took humour in it. Happy laughs broke out around the hall.

Auctoria stood, obliging, though his golden eyes gave nothing away. Eluse wondered if secretly, he fumed beneath them. He did not care for surprises. Still, the mood from the nobles was good, and low chatter had resumed in the hall.

Auctoria spoke again, towering over the Dharian King. “Well, King Gabriel, you are well received. Let us formally welcome you and all Dharians here. I welcome you, King Gabriel Lamont, two-hundred and twenty-eighth king of Dharia and the Sprawl, Lord of the Fellstar Keep and Sentinel of Fal In’Myhra, guardian of the Pass of Thunder and the Outerland, and keeper and protector of the Shadowshatter Crown, to our hallowed halls.”

King Auctoria extended a hand for Gabriel to kiss, and Eluse realised with a jolt that the King did not wear his Seal. *He* still wore it. He looked at it now on his finger. It was an easy thing to forget. In the low light, the dark oily wood looked close to ebony black. Still, most in the room didn’t know the tradition, and Gabriel kissed Auctoria’s empty finger anyway.

“If you will it, you may take my life,” King Gabriel said, and a smattering of chuckling broke out among those at the tables at the idea of regicide after such a hard-won battle.

“Ahh, go on, Auctoria,” shouted a rowdy Dharian. “Hold your mercy back ‘til he grants us lower taxes!”

Laughter rippled around the hall, and Gabriel grinned. Auctoria held a porcelain smile to his face, and replied clearly and for all to hear, “All is past.”

Eluse had begun feeling a little lightheaded. Perhaps it was the wine. Perhaps it was the grief, and the victory, all rolled up into one. He watched as his father went to sit, but King Gabriel withdrew his obsidian dagger.

“And now for the Dharian Mercy,” he reminded the King. King Auctoria stood back up again, but stumbled slightly as he did.

“Your father looks like he’s had an ale or two himself,” Consora joked. She was right—he did look like something wasn’t quite right. He was leaning over, which at his height, was quite noticeable. Eluse examined him, but then his eyes moved back to Consora. Even she spoke with something of a slur to her words. “Whose is the baby?” she asked, looking over Eluse’s shoulder.

Eluse looked around. “What baby? Are you alright?” he asked her, surprised to hear his own words drag a little, too. That wine was powerful indeed.

King Gabriel called out across the room again. “And, in preparation for the Dharian Mercy, I have something for each and all of you to see!”

Eluse frowned. His forehead felt funny as he did.

“Elves of Arath’ Sayah, please, do forgive the method—I think you’ll find that it’s a little less refined than the mycelia of your own records, and hasn’t undertaken quite the same curation. Those of you who are used to your own mycelian records might find this raw form a little more jarring.”

King Auctoria steadied himself on his table. His voice rolled out across the room.

“What have you done?”

Silence fell.

King Gabriel continued, entirely ignoring the imposing Elven King. “You see, there have been truths concealed from every one of you. Truths which I intend to bring to light.”

Colours flashed before Eluse’s eyes. He watched Gabriel, and the grey fluttered away from his hair. He seemed younger now. No—that wasn’t real. The grey was back again. The lights in the room grew and dimmed. Fireflies danced around him.

“And when I learned the truth from the mycelia from your own forests, you’ll see why I think you ought to learn something new about Dharian Mercy.” King Gabriel poured his goblet to the ground; the wine inside it had been untouched. All around the hall, Dharians knocked their wine goblets over, and the deep red soaked into the wood of the tables and moss of the ground.

Outraged, a number of elves stood from the tables, but stumbled, and many of them couldn’t stand at all. Those who could were quickly held back by the Dharian soldiers around them. Eluse saw Iridian before him, close by, even though he couldn’t really be close—he was seated far away with his father. Visions overcame him. It was the mycelia. It was in the wine.

He drifted away, long ago.

* * *

They were in the King's Hall. Gabriel was young, again, like when Eluse had seen him in the first vision. And there was something else—he carried a child. A boy. Three or four summers, perhaps. He had long dark hair and light blue eyes set in a pale white face. Eluse recognised the eyes. They were blue, like the King's. The child blinked them innocently, gazing, smiling, at the faces of the grand figures around him.

This vision feels different. Nothing seems to stick down.

“My Micah,” King Gabriel looked down at the child he held to his hip with eyes that had wept recently. In the room were no Crownswords; only Auctoria, Gabriel, Iridian, and the child.

“You cannot protect him in Dharia,” King Auctoria said firmly. “We offer the sole way to ensure his safety, and with him all of Dharia. You know this.”

King Gabriel gave a tearful nod. “I do. I know. I just... I wish I had been a more capable father. A stronger king.”

No pity was stirred in the Elven King. “If you intend to claim the Grace, this is the way. We are here, after all, at your behest. The Grace of Oriothen shall make you a king strong enough to protect your people.”

“Not strong enough to protect my son, though.” He gazed at his child. The child gazed back, with eyes like his father's.

“No.”

The Rosethorne stepped forward. The disdain on his face was hardly hidden. “Terms have been agreed,” he said, “and recorded in the mycelian records. We ought make them clear.”

The mycelian records. That was what this vision was. But this felt so raw. It didn't feel right. It was all ragged at the edges.

Auctoria turned to him. “Do it, then.”

The Rosethorne cleared his throat, as Auctoria stood tall and Gabriel shrunk away into himself. “The heir to the Dharian throne shall remain in Elven custody until such a time as the

Grace of Oriothen is returned. If the Grace is not returned at the defeat of Torvia Lamont, the heir's life shall be forfeit."

"Do not call him 'the heir.' His name is Micah," Gabriel interrupted. Iridian ignored him.

"The Dharian King shall name no other heir, else the mycelian record shall be revealed, invalidating the new claim and naming Micah Lamont as true heir to the Shadowshatter crown."

A slight pause, as Iridian looked up at Gabriel. The human king remained stalwart.

"The Dharian King Gabriel Lamont shall return the Grace of Oriothen to Elven custody at the timing of King Auctoria's choosing, else the heir's life shall be forfeit."

Gabriel opened his mouth to say something, but held himself back. Iridian's eyes flicked up to him again, and then looked away.

"With secrecy given to his origins to protect the child, the Dharian heir shall be raised by the Palace of the Summerlands, in accordance with our customs and statutes. He shall be named Chosen Son by His Majesty King Auctoria, and stand to inherit not solely the Shadowshatter Crown, but the Poisonthorn Crown also."

Eluse, still awake in his mind somewhere far in the future, tried to say something. He didn't know what.

King Auctoria spoke evenly. "Make no mistake, Gabriel. If you betray the Summerlands, your son shall bear the burden with his life." He took Micah from Gabriel's arms, who barely tried to hold on. The human King was a spent man. "When the Grace returns to us, your son shall return to you. If it does not return, then the Chosen Son of King Auctoria stands to inherit the Shadowshatter Crown, and with it, the entire Dharian Kingdom shall pass to him."

Gabriel nodded with sorrowful eyes. He held his mouth shut.

King Auctoria held the child in one hand, and in the other he held the Grace of Oriothen. He held it up to Micah's forehead. It glittered softly, and a golden light dripped from it into the child.

Slowly, softly, the child began to change. His skin darkened to a violet, and his ears changed shape and grew to points. He grew a little taller, and a little more slender. His eyes, though, did not change; they remained the same shining blue.

Auctoria spoke one final time. "The mycelia have it recorded. The Dharian heir lives with the Elves now. He shall be hidden by the same power of the forest that first gave Elves our form in the first days of Oriothen. He shall be named Eluse, and his true nature shall be hidden from Dharian and Elf alike."

Eluse struggled and thrashed in his mind. He had to wake up.

What was he seeing?

* * *

The vision paled and ended, but Eluse was not back in his body again. Another vision swirled up before his eyes.

The King's Hall, again. King Gabriel was not here. In the room were only King Auctoria and Iridian, and before Auctoria, the sleeping child. Micah? Eluse?

Eluse did not know who he was.

Auctoria was facing away from Iridian.

"It is done, then," Iridian said to the King through gritted teeth.

The King's face was grave. "It is."

"And what will you do now? It cannot be revealed that the Chosen Son is human. The realm would not stand for it." His words revealed nothing, but Iridian seethed beneath his calm exterior.

Auctoria replied. "Nothing will be revealed until its proper time. And until such a time, you shall not question the wisdom of King Auctoria."

Over his shoulder, Iridian swelled up like a fresh blister and bit his tongue. "A human Chosen Son," he whispered to himself.

"Iridian, do not fret," Auctoria turned to face him. "You have made clear your mind. Now allow me to make clear mine."

Iridian stood to attention.

"It is recorded in the mycelia that, through the graciousness of the Elves, we took in the heir to the Dharian throne for the sake of his own life. Such secrets, of course, the realm shall understand were kept from both Elves and Dharians for the prince's own safety. A secret, even, from the heir himself. The mycelia shall be curated to reflect as such."

"Yes, but—" Iridian's jowls wobbled as he tried to find the words. King Auctoria held a powerful hand to stop him.

“Iridian, if the Dharian King Gabriel dies before the boy is returned to Dharia, then who stands to inherit the Shadowshatter Crown, in light of the mycelian record that *we* may reveal?”

“The boy,” Iridian muttered.

“And once the boy wears the Shadowshatter Crown, yet is still named as Chosen Son of the King of the Elves, let us imagine that he is to meet with some untimely tragedy, with no heir of his own. What then will become of the Shadowshatter Crown, and the claim to the entire Dharian throne?”

Iridian considered. His brow furrowed, and then his eyes widened. “It would pass back...”

“...*to me.*”

The two great elves gazed at one another. The air in the room felt brittle.

“You mean to claim Dharia for the Elves,” the Rosethorne said breathlessly.

“As Oriothien ought to have done in his day, and Glendil after him, and every Elven king since. And I shall do it without the cost of a single drop of Elven blood.”

Iridian lit up as he understood the King’s meaning.

“Well,” said the King, staring coldly at the child asleep before him, “No true Elven blood, at least.”

“The simple fact is, people die with every decision I make. If I spend a little more money on public amenities and less on arming our knights, the rebels to the north will kill more of our men. If I spend the money on the army, city-folk will die because some sewer got clogged up and they come down with typhoid. If I pass harsher laws for criminals, no doubt some innocent nobody gets executed by mistake, and if I show mercy, the cutthroats don’t hold back and do the executing themselves. If I put more of the Learned in the small towns to teach the children, some crisis arises in the City and we aren’t prepared. If I bring them all to the City, then the idiot villagers starve to death because they’re too dumb to feed themselves. I could pave every road from here to the Eastern Desert in solid gold, and some farmhand will slip over on it in the rain and break his neck. No, you understand that when you’re the King, everything you do kills people, and you just have to try to make the best of it.

-King Hovaar Lamont, Two Hundred and Ninth King of Dharia.

CHAPTER 31 - THE FOOLISHNESS OF AUCTORIA

Eluse’s eyes fluttered. The clamour of the hall returned.

He had been moved. While he had been dreaming, someone had dragged him and put him back at the other end of the Great Hall, by the King’s table on the raised dais. As he grappled with what was real and what was still a dream, he saw with a jolt that every elf in the room had a Dharian blade to their throat. He sat up, staring wide-eyed.

Very close, his father had been forced to his knees, with Gabriel’s black dagger at his throat.

Only...

“He’s not your father.” King Gabriel’s eyes looked solemnly at Eluse, with the same bright blue that Consora had described to him of his own eyes. ***“I am.”***

Though the mycelia had shown the past, the emotion that came with it had been restrained. Now, though, it flooded into Eluse. Horror gripped him as he looked between his father—No, Auctoria—and the Dharian King. Auctoria’s golden eyes blazed with malice and hate.

Gabriel held Auctoria from behind, with another two men pointing their swords at his neck. Even kneeling, the Elven King was nearly Gabriel’s full height. All it would take to end

him would be a quick flick of Gabriel's wrist. Across the room, elves were awakening, and beginning to scream. Chaos took them.

"Dharians! This is a day for celebration!" cried out Gabriel, arms wide in triumph, and human cheers resounded over the wails of the elves. "My son and heir is returned to us!" He looked again at Eluse, with a great smile on his face. "All is well, my Micah," he said, holding out his hand. "I have come to take you home."

A pit opened inside Eluse. He was falling, spinning into the black.

"This cannot be true!" he screamed out. He scrambled to his feet; he was the only elf in the room who had no blade threatening to cut him down. And yet... Was he an elf? *What was he?* "Father?" he demanded, looking at Auctoria, and the word tasted sour in his mouth.

King Auctoria's eyes gave nothing away. And, deep inside him, Eluse knew the truth. The Elven King, who had shown little but contempt for him since the day he had been Chosen, had plotted his death.

"Micah, this wicked elf has had designs on your death since the day he took you. He swore your safety—*swore it*—but saw you as nothing but a means to take the Dharian Empire for himself. Had an elf of Arath' Sayah not come to me with the mycelia and revealed the plot, we still would not know. He planned to await my death, however it might come, then reveal your identity. Then, once you were crowned with the Shadowshatter Crown, he planned to murder you and take it for himself."

The words swirled around Eluse. They might as well have been meaningless.

"And if that were not enough, the King grew greedy. He demanded back the Grace of Oriothen before the defeat of the Twisted King, and bore *you* to bring that message to me—tell him why, Auctoria."

Auctoria's face was like the snarl of a wolf. He said nothing, but his eyes darted across the room. Behind him, Iridian tried to climb to his feet, but his throat cut into a sword held by a Dharian knight, and he fell back. Eluse thought he seemed to have a mind to rise again anyway, his own head be damned.

"*Tell him why*", Gabriel repeated.

Slowly, reluctantly, Auctoria opened his mouth. "It was a message."

"A message of what, Auctoria? Tell my boy. Tell him what it meant."

"A threat."

“A threat to kill my son!” Gabriel exploded, roaring into the elf’s indigo face. “With that wicked Seal of yours!” His hand trembled, and Eluse thought it might cut into the King’s skin. “This is what is meant by Elven Mercy. You see what he has done? That Seal he forced you to wear, it is connected to the Poisonthorn Crown. Made of the same thorns that sit buried inside his wicked head. With just a thought, he could fill the thorns of the Seal with a poison to murder you. His meaning was clear; if we did not return the Grace, if we revealed who you were, he would kill you there and then. My—My Micah.”

Auctoria regarded Gabriel without fear or submission. “Do not forget yourself, Gabriel. You are in my home. I still can.”

The room was silent. Gabriel breathed in. “No, Auctoria. You cannot.”

He plunged the obsidian dagger deep into Auctoria’s throat.

Blood burst out, pouring over the ground and his clothing like a wave. In an instant Dharian cheers rocked the hall and all around, a dozen or more elves made desperate flails to rise to their feet; most were hacked down by the swords that held them. The Elven King’s mouth opened in silent shock, and he gasped for breath that would not come. The golden glow faded from his eyes. He fell forward with a crash.

Gabriel spoke again, bitterly. “There is your Dharian Mercy.”

The room was ablaze with commotion. Mostly it was Dharians crying out in victory, and music and drums struck up again. Elves wailed as they watched their King lie dead. They seemed so small now against Dharian steel. And in the middle of it all, Eluse stood, watching. He had no reaction of his own. He had no idea what to think, or say. His entire body was numb. As he looked down at the dead body of King Auctoria, he felt nothing.

The music and drumbeats organised themselves into a song; the same song they had been playing earlier. Only, the words were different now, darker. They sang out loud, with the same jubilation, over the din.

***Dark things moved in the wicked King’s mind,
And terrible plots he then designed,
The Elf King had a plan of his own,
To kill the son and steal the throne!***

***Oh-oh, oh-oh, behind his Gate he hid!
Oh-oh, oh-oh, terrible things he did!***

***And so we rode up to save the day,
Dharian horsemen joining the fray,***

*We waited for them to take the bait,
They hoisted open the Glendil Gate!*

*Oh-oh, oh-oh, let spear and jav'lin sing!
Oh-oh, oh-oh, we'll slay the Elven King!*

*The King that tried to deceive the crown,
In arrogance let his own guard down,
Our voices rise in euphoria
For the foolishness of Auctoria!*

*Oh-oh, oh-oh, let all the halls run red!
Oh-oh, oh-oh, the Elven King is dead!*

Eluse's knees trembled beneath him. Gabriel moved from the dead King, leaving the dagger jutting from his neck. "Be at peace, my boy," he said, with blood on his face. "It is over. You are safe now." He came forward, but Eluse withdrew, and as he did Gabriel stumbled. A strange look flashed across him. He shook his head and righted himself.

"Do not fear m—"

Something cut the words off in his throat. His eyes twinkled dark. Black. Then, they were his own blue again. He looked down at his hands.

"I don't understa—"

Again, his voice was cut short, and his eyes shone a deep, deathly black. Darker than midnight. As dark as the eyes of the Twisted King. On his head, the Shadowshatter Crown seemed to shimmer and move. Not the whole crown, only the blood-red gemstone on the top, cracked down through the middle. Had it always been quite so red? Had it always seemed to burn with fire? Something swirled inside the stone.

Gabriel opened his mouth again, but this time his eyes were black and his voice was changed. Old. Ancient. A voice like the wind through deep, forgotten caverns whispered for only Eluse to hear. Gabriel spoke so softly, under the tune that echoed around the hall. Dark words from a fell voice.

*But there was one thing that none did know,
The Shadow had worked things long ago.
The Elves and Men, and all of the Kings,
They danced like puppets upon his strings.*

He blazed at Eluse with those wicked eyes, then something snapped him back. He was Gabriel again, with a face like a frightened child.

“Micah,” he blinked, with tears in his blue eyes. “This is not me. Run.”

His eyes shone black again, and the gemstone flushed red. Eluse froze, his eyes were fixed on the stone in the crown. It looked so familiar. It looked like...

It looked like an aether stone.

The Shadowshatter Crown. The Crown that the Shadow had worn eight thousand years ago, and had broken at his defeat. It had been shattered, ruined as a symbol of the oppression of the Shadow. Worn in an unbroken chain by over two hundred Kings of Dharia through all the Amber Age. But...

But what if it hadn't been broken by defeat? What if it had been broken by the Shadow himself?

Eluse gazed, mesmerised, into the stone, and the void gazed back. An ancient power swirled from it, dark as the blackest night and more evil than anything Anima had known. The aether stones had been soaked in magic and forged an unbreakable connection that could last across the entire world. And this broken red stone that glowed from the dark silver of the crown was forged in the dire malice of the Shadow, seeping in his wicked strength, and it, too, forged a connection. Eluse stared, transfixed, into it, and the black of the Shadow stared back.

He knew the truth of it. The Shadow was in the void, but not sealed away. The Shadow was connected to Anima through the very crown worn by King Gabriel himself.

The strength fell from Eluse. He collapsed to his knees. His mind was tatters, and he hardly even saw the Shade come again. It lifted from every shadow in the room and swirled together before King Gabriel.

“Kill them all!” cried a voice from Gabriel’s mouth, but it was not Gabriel’s voice.

“Father,” Eluse whispered, and something of the word hit Gabriel’s ear. The true Gabriel, not this thing that now inhabited him.

“No!” cried Gabriel, fighting back, calling from the same mouth that the Shadow spoke. “Not my son! Not my Micah!” The Shade fluttered and faded, but only for a moment.

Around him, Dharian swords sliced down in a slaughter. Somewhere, a magical crash exploded. Eluse hardly saw it.

He watched as those blue eyes turned wicked black for the last time, and the Shade moved between them. It reached out, and as it spread its spectral fingers toward him, it was as if

the Shadow's own arms reached for Eluse, down his throat and into his heart. Eluse turned ice cold, and all feeling left him.

But this time, Eluse did not panic. All that drifted inside his fading mind was a single thought: *hope yet remained*. Not for him. He knew that now, and a serenity overtook him. There was no escape from the Shadow this time. His journey was finished. But, within him he contained the light and life of the Spider itself, and it belonged to the forest. Whatever power the Shadow had, he did not have light. Eluse felt within the deepest reaches of himself, and clung onto the light he found within, and set it free. It shimmered from his chest, defiant against the dark, and shook out; not angry or violent, but soft, like raindrops, cool like morning dew, gentle like sunlight. Out, out it shone, not only around him in this room, but into the forest, and far beyond it too. Out there, in places no elf would ever look, life took shape. Green things grew for him, and a skylark sang to him. The oak he had grown with Sorrel stretched a little taller. The luna moth that he had shaken free fluttered its wings a little higher, and far, far away the snow on some mountaintop glittered a little brighter. Everything he had within him, he set free, and the last thing he felt was like the flurry of a little songbird, lifting off into the aether.

There was nothing left for him to fight with. Only an ember of him remained; an ember in a rainstorm.

The Shadow blew the ember out.

Eluse fell forward. The light in him was gone.

He was dead.

Oh-oh, oh-oh, the world shall soon be black.

Oh-oh, oh-oh, the Shadow is coming back.

“Death isn’t the end, Eluse. Every dead thing finds that once the blackness is done with, and the fear has gone, there’s a freedom there like nothing you’ve ever known. You make sure you live right, child, and trust that death will take care of the rest.”

-Old Grenka.

CHAPTER 32 - THE END

Consora

Consora blinked herself awake with a single thought in her head—the Elven King was a liar. And Eluse—*what was Eluse?* Her best friend, who she had grown up with since as young as she could remember—he was not Elven?

As the feeling returned to her body, she felt someone at her shoulders—an arm was around her. She tried to sit forward, but the arm held her back. Something sharp jabbed into her.

“What’s that?” she said blearily.

“Consora,” Sorrel’s voice spoke heavily from somewhere at her side. “Don’t move.”

Suddenly, things seemed clearer. It was a man’s arm around her, thick and armoured. She looked across the table. Eluse wasn’t there now, and the Dharians that had sat beside him were out of their seats. They were...

They were holding swords, standing over them.

“Sorrel? What’s happening?”

Sorrel didn’t answer.

“Mother?” she called, panicking now, unable to move her head around to look for her. The man held her fast. She struggled, trying to push away. “Mother, where are you?”

She heard her mother’s frightened whimper from beside her, but no words. Hot anger rippled through her. She reached up for the arm around her neck, trying to force it away. “Get off me!” she snarled with bared teeth. The arm only tightened, and the sharpness at her back pressed into her.

“Be still, elf. I hope not to harm you.” The man spoke into her ear. He sounded young.

She struggled more, growling, and the man pulled her from the table, back from the bench, almost on top of him. As she fell, her arms flew forward, and she managed to catch a cutlery knife in her hand. She could feel the sharpness of its point with her fingers.

“Consora!” hissed Sorrel, who she could now see through the corner of her eye, being held just the same. “Don’t move. Stop. You must stop.”

Consora’s breathing was frantic, but she had enough sense about her to stop for a moment, and she folded the knife up her sleeve. At the far end of the hall, King Gabriel was shouting something. His face was red and voice enraged. She gasped as she saw King Auctoria on his knees. Kings were never on their knees.

She could see her mother now. Nobody held her down, but a Dharian stood above her, sword poised. Fury spewed through her blood. She kicked and thrashed her legs, and it was only Sorrel’s insistence to stop which slowed her a little.

Suddenly, the entire room erupted—screams, gasps, cheers. Her eyes flicked back to the end of the hall. A cry escaped her mouth.

The Elven King had a knife in his throat, and blood poured from him. Gabriel released his shoulders, and he fell forward. And—Eluse was there! Not six feet from the Elven King, he stood, standing quite still.

Dharians cried out, and some began to sing. Elves wailed like grieving mothers.

“Sorrel!” Consora shouted. “Do something!”

And Sorrel did. The Dharian who held her had turned for a moment to watch the Elven King die, and his blade moved a little, away from her neck. She seized the advantage, jamming her legs onto the tabletop and kicking back, hard. She flung into him and he fell, dropping his sword. In a flourish, she swirled back and snatched it, jamming it between his ribs. He moaned out, his voice hidden beneath the commotion, and dropped down.

Somehow, in the chaos of the room, it was hardly seen—elsewhere, other elves had leapt to their feet and were sliced down by swords, but most eyes were on the Kings. The men around Consora and her mother had seen it, though, and they turned on Sorrel, swords drawn. The man holding Consora loosened his grip and faced Sorrel, and Consora rolled from him. In his mind, she must have seemed just a child. That was his mistake. She struggled behind him, ushered the knife from her sleeve, and before he had even a chance to look round, held it to his throat.

The man standing over Consora’s mother turned between the two of them, sword swinging wildly, confused and afraid. The din of the room swelled.

“If you move, I will kill him,” Consora said. She hadn’t meant to, but half an inch of the blade was already poking through his skin, and a liberal trickle of blood warmed her hand.

“Put your sword down or die,” Sorrel warned. The man barely moved, unsure of what to do.

Other Dharians had taken notice by now. One, across the table, had seen it, and moved in. Another called out from further down the row, pointing, but among the songs and the shouts, little was heard.

Before anything else could happen, King Gabriel shouted across the room.

“Kill them all!”

That was all that the Dharians needed. All around the room, swords plunged down onto defenseless elves. Sorrel, though, was not defenseless, and she leapt forward, plunging the sword through the man who stood between them. He screeched like a child and tumbled away. Consora held her man, terrified—if she killed him, nothing would stand between her and the soldiers who came at them. Sorrel’s hands glowed golden, and she sent two magical orbs at the men who came for them. Consora’s ears shook and the knife in her hand jolted as the soldiers were blown apart, spraying the table with blood. More came. They were utterly surrounded.

Ruinous cries of dying elves filled the air. Some fought back, and though there were scant few rangers in the halls, bright magic flashed. Sorrel conjured above herself a shimmering gold-green light that hung over her like a halo, and a flash of her hands sent it into the ground with a magical crash, sending men flying.

“Sorrel!” Consora cried. “Eluse is up there!” The young Dharian she held struggled, but Consora pressed the blade deeper at his throat.

Sorrel sent a ball of flame rocketing toward three Dharians who came at her. But Consora’s eyes were no longer on the Dharian men. They were filled with dread, gazing across the hall at Eluse, and the wicked black of Gabriel’s eyes, and the glimmering scarlet stone on his crown, and the Shade that had crawled from it.

“Eluse!” Consora screamed, but her voice was blown away in the frenzy. “Run!”

Eluse had frozen, and in just a second or two, he collapsed to his knees. The Shade was upon him.

A deep, guttural scream rushed from her, and, hardly in control of herself any more, she ripped the knife into the Dharian man’s neck and tore his throat out. She kicked him from her and **ran**—leaping, diving, rushing under tables and legs and anything else that lay between her and Eluse.

She watched, too slow, as the Shade sapped the last of him.

She still ran, even as he fell forward to his knees onto the ground, arm outstretched, desperate to pull him away.

She flung herself onto the ground, scraping her knees and arms, by Eluse's body, just in time to hear a final cold breath leave his lips.

And, gazing into the desperate black of the Shade, now so close to her, she knew that she was next. But she did not crease away with fear. She swelled up with rage and grief. She screamed out, a roar of fury at the blackest reaches of the void; at the thing that had taken Eluse.

She raised her pitiful knife to slash at the darkness, but then, as the Shade reached for her with an outstretched arm, it dissipated. But it was not like before; there was no golden light or explosion—it melted away like snowflakes in a flame. Behind the Shade, Gabriel's eyes flashed blue again. He saw the body of his son before him, and the King of the Shadowshatter Crown fell to his knees in anguish.

“My son!” he cried up, arching his back. He wept rolling tears into his beard. “My Micah! What have I done? What has the Shadow done?”

He reached out for Eluse, but Consora lifted her knife again and slashed at his hand, slicing into his wrist. His blood splashed her face. “Get away from him!” she screamed, vicious teeth bared, a sob in the words. She dragged at Eluse's body, trying to lift him, but he was too heavy. Her muscles burned. “Get up, Eluse! Get up!”

Eluse lay still. He was cold. An unnatural cold. His lips were blue and his skin was so pale.

Gabriel drew back for a moment, grasping his wrist. He looked at her with shock. Then, a devilish smile slipped back over his face, and his eyes were old again. “***He is already with me. Die with him.***” An ancient voice crept from his throat.

He reached out his hand, but as he did, a bolt of flame crashed into him. He sneered as it bounced from him and crashed into the wall beside them, slathering the wood in flame. He was completely unharmed. The fire spun up in a swirl, but Gabriel hardly noticed. He reached out again.

A body hurled itself into Consora, dragging her from the King's grasp. She rolled over and recognised it as Sorrel.

“We've got to go, ***now!***” The enchantress threw another bolt of fire at the King as she dragged Consora back, but the flames didn't touch him. The hall was ablaze, fire and smoke all around him, but he did not burn.

“Eluse!” Consora screamed out, reaching back for him with both hands as Sorrel dragged her away, but the flames were almost at his body.

“**Consora! NOW!**” Sorrel hollered, and even in the turmoil of the room, her voice shook through Consora’s ears. She could not bring herself to leave him, but Sorrel grabbed her shoulder and forced her away. With a last, desperate look back, her heart collapsed. The flames took Eluse.

He was gone.

A cry of pure venom loosed itself from her throat, and then she ran with Sorrel. She bounded up onto a table in a single leap and flung herself from it to the other side, knife high above her, and plunged it into the eye of a Dharian soldier who chased a woman. She felt the slick clink of metal on bone.

“**Now**, Consora!” Sorrel yanked her by the scruff of her neck away from the man before he had even fallen.

“My mother!” Consora screamed. “Where is my mother?”

Before Sorrel could answer, a piercing screech rippled through the hall, and she turned back toward the King. Gabriel hung in the air, floating above the ground, and from him, dark smoke poured, not like firesmoke but something worse, and wicked. It was a sinister purple, and threads of silver wound through it. Dharians and Elves alike were caught up in it, and where it engulfed them, both man and elf fell down dead.

“Run!” cried Sorrel again, grabbing Consora’s wrist and forcing her.

New desperation took her. They ran down the hall, but she could not see her mother. She had to find her.

I cannot lose everybody!

Behind them, the dark smoke chased after them like a pack of hyenas. Everyone still alive in the hall now clamoured to get out, even the Dharians, who had stopped the slaughter to run. Sorrel conjured up a great fizzing ball of light and power, and sent it straight into the side of a wall, smashing a hole through.

“Now, Consora! We’ve got to go!”

“No!” She yanked her arm back and spun around. “Not without my mother!” The smoke was almost upon them now.

I cannot lose everybody.

Then, she saw it. Her whole world caved in.

Her mother stood, alone, in the centre of the room. Around her were broken bodies, and wood stained red with blood and wine. She faced down the thick smog angrily, reaching toward it with a frail fist. Even from here, Consora heard her words.

“Don’t you threaten my girl.”

The smoke enveloped her, and she was lost to it.

Consora’s head went light, and her legs gave up beneath her. She felt Sorrel’s powerful arms under her, and that was all she remembered. “Mum,” she breathed, and everything she knew turned black and fell away.

* * *

When she came to, Sorrel ran with her over her shoulder. They were out in the thick woods, not far from the First Tree. Through the trees she could see the orange glow of flame in the night. Smoke filtered through in a haze. She wriggled and kicked. “Let me down!” She cried and screamed and struck Sorrel’s back.

Sorrel lowered her to the ground. “Consora, keep moving and keep quiet. You must. We must survive this.”

Instead, Consora collapsed in a heap in the ashen mud, wailing for all her life at the starless skies. Sorrel forced a hand over her mouth.

“Consora,” she said. “I am so, so sorry. And we will grieve. But first, we must live.”

She took the girl by the hand and guided her to her feet. Consora didn’t want to run. She didn’t want to do anything. She wanted to go back and get her mother, and Eluse, and Suscepto—to do something. To kill somebody. To do anything that wasn’t this.

But, Sorrel was all that she had. As the enchantress led, Consora clasped onto her through the darkness of the trees. The hand that held her now was the only one that she had left.

“The city is destroyed,” Sorrel said as they ran. “Inside and out of the Palace, they’ve burned it all.”

“What happened?” she sobbed. Her voice jerked with each footstep.

“The Shadow,” Sorrel said. “Gabriel had designs on King Auctoria, but the Shadow had designs on them both. He played them for fools with their own greed for power. Gabriel’s mind

is gone. The Shadow rules him now. The Fanatical Dark and the Dharians were both under the spell of the Shadow, whether the Dharians knew it or not.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The Fanatical Dark were not defeated, Consora. They played their part perfectly. The Twisted King planned his own destruction so that the Gate would be opened to his son and the Dharian army. Now the city is lost.”

“Where are we *going*?” Consora shouted. “If the city is gone, nowhere is safe!”

They came to a little clearing, which glowed not orange with fire, but green and gold with nature and magic. Little toadstools lay around.

“The fairy circles?”

Sorrel nodded. “We’re going under the ground.”

“Wait,” Consora said, and reached for the chain at her neck. She held up her aether stone. It was a deep melancholy grey, almost black. She felt through the magic into it.

It was like being plunged into cold water. Somehow, even in death, it was still connected to her mother. Ice cold nothing flooded through her. Empty yearning. Deep, and chilling, and as horrendous and frightful and gnawing as when the Shade had come, and even more. There was nothing, but it was not an absent nothing. It was a nothing filled with agony and anguish.

A gasping sob escaped her. “Is this what my mother feels?” she cried with fresh tears, wrenching the chain from her neck. “Is this what death is?” She held the stone in front of her at arm's length, horror wrought across her face.

Sorrel took it from her gently but firmly, without a word. She wrapped her arms around her, holding her close, only for a moment. Then there was a crash from the woods nearby.

“Consora, we must go now,” she said to the weeping girl. She stepped into a fairy circle, guiding the heartbroken Consora with her, who could not even open her eyes now. In the centre of the circle, a little hole had appeared. The Spider Bones. “We must go. But this battle is not done. I swear that to you.”

“Not done?” Consora spat. “Look around you, Sorrel! The city is ash! They’ve already won!”

“They have. So we must go to the only place with any strength left to it. We must go to the Eldergrove.”

So, the two elves disappeared into the Spider Bones, deep down, under the earth. Far above, a lonely star twinkled.

The Spider's Aria

Or

The Lonely Star

C#m A

O, the ancient mountains

 F# E D#m

The rivers, and the trees,

 C#m A

Know nothing of the secrets

 E G#m F#

Ere whispered in the breeze.

(chords repeated)

And O, the oldest forest

With roots that run so deep,

Will never know things hidden

In caverns underneath.

(chords repeated)

And O, the greatest ocean

With waves that rage and roar,

Knows not the treasures buried

In sands upon the shore.

 C#m A

And O, the bravest heart

 F# E D#m

That shimmers, clear and true,

 C#m A

Shall never know the wicked

 F# E D#m

That other hearts may do.

 C#m

I know when shadows fall in

 A

And nights become your dread,

 F# E

A lonely star will shine down

G#m C#m
And light your road a-head.

(chords repeated)
I know when hope is broken
And terror fills your chest,
Soft memories will comfort
Your heart, and bring you rest.

(chords repeated)
I know when you are long gone,
And lost, and all alone,
A melody of my love
Shall lead you back to home.

Consora and Sorrel's story will continue in The Aether Book 2: The Songbird and the Starlight.