

MUD ON THE BOOTS OF KINGS

BETA READER EDITION

PART ONE - CINURA

Chapter 1

Alrik helped his father up a rocky rise, and mourned the death of clarity. Cinura lay behind and below them, out of sight but thoroughly and inescapably in mind. It pulled at him like an anxious but angry lover, and the thought of staying or leaving it behind filled him with equal dread.

“*Ay-ay, upa*,” he said, puffing. “If you came with me on walks more often maybe you’d be easier to lift.”

His father smirked and play-batted his son’s hand away, gaining his footing and stretching his shoulders and pulling them back until his spine popped. It was early morning, sharp-aired and windy, apparently enough that nothing but shrubs could grow. “That’s juniper,” pointed out Alrik, stooping at one of them to check for berries. He grunted. “No luck.”

“No luck indeed,” rumbled his father, scratching his beard. It was mostly grey now, only a little bit of the black still visible. He glanced north, to the place where the trees formed their own windbreak and began to grow tall, dark and broad, like towers. “She’s in there?”

“She is,” said Alrik, brightening. “Or if she’s not, she will be soon. Sometimes she hunts further out, but most of the time she stalks the Weald. She’s a smart girl; I reckon she’s realised if she moves slowly enough, some prey will think she’s a tree.” He grinned. “Come on!”

Alrik’s father knitted his brow, following cautiously while his son practically skipped. “And you’re *completely* sure that prey doesn’t include people?”

“Oh, no, it does,” said Alrik, just to see the expression on his father’s face. He laughed. “Only dead ones, though, *upa*.”

“Alrik, that’s--” his father sighed, but couldn’t help cracking a smile himself, shaking his head.

It became darker as they went further into the Weald. Little animals scuttled and padded around unseen - it was remarkable how well creatures could slip by human sight.

“When I was trying to convince you to meet her,” said Alrik, “You told me that ‘it wasn’t what *I* did at your age. What *was* that, *upa*? What were you doing when you were twenty-two?”

Alrik glanced back, and he saw a mischievous grin appear on his father’s face that almost looked like it belonged to another person. A younger person. He felt like it half belonged to *him*.

“Foolishness, my son. Your mother and I were born here, of course,” He paused. “Or down there, anyway,” he said, motioning in the general direction of the city. “But we *met* in Canalas City by chance. I was eighteen, she was nineteen. I was apprenticing under the only tailor who would take me, an old leathery thing surely dead now, living off his scraps. But on the weekends, I’d go to every debauch in walking distance and I’d fob everyone off for a drink. It wasn’t good for me, and people didn’t like it, so I got kicked out of every place but one. Run by a man named Ellis, who had a soft spot for me because I’d fix his shoes for free, and he did a lot of walking. That’s

where I met your mother. She was a cleaner, I think - hadn't landed on smithing yet. But I saw her at the bar every weekend. I didn't talk to her for a while."

"Why not?" said Alrik. It was darker still, almost a twilight cast, tinged greenish by the pine leaves. He glanced down. "Careful, dad. It's limestone up here, and it can crumble. There are even some cenotes further out, but they've mostly collapsed."

Alrik's father looked down, now, watching his step, and Alrik took his shoulder to help his balance. "What was I saying? Oh, yes," he said. "I didn't talk to her for a while because she was *naca* scary," he said, laughing. "Being a Cinuravese woman in Canalas City wasn't easy back then, and she went through life like a bull juksha to make up for it. I loved her quite quickly-- oh!"

Alrik grasped at his father as he stumbled on a patch of crumbly grey-blue limestone. "Are you alright?" he asked.

His father waved him away. "Fine, fine. I just can't say this is the thing I'd worried about, coming here."

Alrik nodded, paused, and thought. "So the answer to my question, then, was 'drinking too much and fixing shoes?'"

Alrik's father shrugged and nodded. "More or less."

They first knew Sarensa by her warning gurgle. What at first looked like a fuzzy pine or monkey puzzle tree shook its 'trunk' and stepped forward, cocking a head like a canoe at the two men. Alrik held out a hand and shushed her, clicking his tongue. "It's me, girl. It's just me. Come here," he said, opening his arms and taking another step forward. Sarensa hesitated, but then she trotted forward, backwards-facing forefeet crunching in the leaf litter, and pressed her sternum against Alrik's face with a *thump*. Alrik absorbed the blow and threw his arms around her. In turn, she lowered her great neck and rested it across his shoulders like a scarf. She was warm and a little rough, and smelled like pine needles and guano.

Alrik glanced back at his father. The man was shaking his head, and the grin was back. "Hammer me flat," he said. Half a dozen emotions visibly passed over the familiar face. "I'm glad it likes you, but moons above, when you said it was *big--*"

Sarensa lifted her head and leant forward quite suddenly, cocking her head to the side and regarding Alrik's father side-on with one eye. The man stumbled and almost fell, and Sarensa jumped back in surprise. Her eyes widened, the down on her shoulders ruffled out to make her look bigger, and Alrik started shushing her again.

"You alright dad?" asked Alrik, watching him get up and dust off his knees. "She's a bit skittish, that's all. And she's curious about you."

Alrik's father nodded. "When I first saw her I'd have said that'd be hard to believe. But, moons - she's *thin*, isn't she? Does she eat enough?"

You sound like uma, Alrik almost said. He smiled instead. "Definitely, dad. She needs to be built like this to fly. She's like an athlete. She can't be too heavy."

His father nodded, still tracking that lofty head as it lifted up to its full height, level with some of the trees as she scanned their surroundings. He had to crane his neck. "I think I've got my fill, son. Let's go home."

Alrik smiled, nodded. "Thank you, *upa*," he said, scratching at Sarensa's musky chest with his fingernails. *It means more to me than I can articulate*, he thought.

They took a shorter route back, with Alrik's father's acceptance that they'd have to check the ground more often - the rock was even *more* porous here, sometimes opening up into full caves with their own pale and unusual denizens. The older man was quieter now, like he was thinking, and Alrik was thinking *about* him thinking. His father was a strong man. A practical man. His name was Arvid, and he was good with his hands. That's who he was. Alrik had been different from him forever. The distance had gotten greater when Alrik had been forced to flee. Now he was back, and what? Who was Alrik now? Arvid knew who *he* was. Or at least, Alrik thought he did.

"Dad--" he began, but then didn't know how to finish his sentence.

"Yes?" the older man replied anyway. They'd stopped, and were skirting around a collapsed cirque, grass and flowers starting to take root in the chalky soil, but the shape still apparent.

"Dad, are you alright?" said Alrik, frowning and looking away.

His father frowned back. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Don't be fucking dense was Alrik's first thought, but he pushed it down. "*Upa*, you know."

His father waved him away. "It's been some time, son. I've had my time to-- to, er," he swallowed. "Mourn."

Alrik stepped closer, took his father's calloused hand in his own and squeezed it. After a congested moment, Arvid squeezed back.

The trees were sparser, approaching one of the great cliffs at the edge of the cirque. An ocean breeze filled Alrik's nostrils and he sighed in satisfaction. The Northern Passage was only a half hour's walk, now, and Alrik had batted his pockets enough to know he had the right papers. But there was something poking out of the sand before him, and he squinted at and squatted before it, cocking his head.

"Dad," he said, brushing it with his hand. "Come look at this." It was off-white, and looked halfway between a rock and a piece of wood. He pulled it from the ground with a tug, and revealed a knobby end, with something red clinging on.

"It's some kind of bone," said Alrik, frowning. "I don't know what it would have come from. I mean, it's not small. It's actually about as long as--" with a sinking feeling in his guts, Alrik held the bone up to his arm. It was a match in shape if not exactly in length.

"What's a human arm bone doing out here?" said his father, looking around, as if the long-dead person's killer could still be hiding nearby.

“They could have gotten lost,” said Alrik. “Or died of exposure, so close to town. Actually, this was a cenote once, right?” He patted the sandy soil with one hand, crouching down. “Maybe they were in there when it collapsed.”

His father frowned. “That doesn’t make sense, son. If they died in the cenote, their body would still be down at the bottom. Dead things don’t just rise up in the earth over time. They must have been near the top when they were buried.”

Alrik’s frown deepened. “So you think the cenote had already collapsed. Or partly. And this person went there and died?” *Or, the thought passed between them silently, he was buried.*

What was this? Some sort of haphazard disposal of a murder victim? A vagabond’s last rites? Alrik put the bone aside and licked the backs of his teeth, thinking.

“I’m going to see if there’s more of them.”

He picked the bone up again - he wished he’d brought a shovel, but really why *would* he have brought a shovel? - and began to move the dirt aside with the bone’s wide end. For a few minutes, nothing but worms and beetles. Then something that might have been a scapula. Vertebrae. A skull, adult-looking. Then another. Alrik closed his eyes and fought back nausea. He turned back to his father.

“There’s not just one person buried here, dad. We need to get some help.”

The Lefaneie looked right at home up on the windy cliff, all tied-up hair and confident demeanours, surrounding the demure form of a pale northern Roitian in Cinuravese clothes. It was midmorning. Alrik had tried to get a hold of Lumi and the *jojeron*, Olifiela, but the latter had been in the new Lefan church and the former was apparently at some sort of fighting tournament. Alrik didn’t ask questions - instead, he’d dropped his father home and walked to the new Cinuravese University and asked for Rohan Soffel. Before the revolution, Alrik would’ve said, if asked, that Cinura wasn’t a prosperous enough place for archaeologists - any bright-eyed child with a matchbox and a pin could be a naturalist, but archaeologists needed money and expensive tools. He might have even been right - Soffel had been in Cinura on assignment from Adrest when Kenneman’s people had rebelled, and against all likelihood, he’d joined on the side of the rebels. Now he taught his craft in Cinura. When Alrik had explained, the professor had nodded thoughtfully, and suggested fenworkers. Alrik said he knew some of the best around. Whether or not he’d been right, among the Lefaneie, Soffel looked fusty and uneasy.

The Lefaneie were led by Salemi, Olifiela’s second, and the man grinned at Alrik and shook his hand as he approached. “Book boy,” he said, his vowels still very Lefaneie. “You found something not good, yeah?”

“Very not good,” said Alrik, motioning to the burial site, and the ageing scientist already squatting before it. “At least two dead people’s bones. They can’t be too old, because there’s still a little bit of flesh on some of them.”

“Right,” said Salemi, his voice more solemn. “Very not good. Bad. Any identifying items?”

“Haven’t looked that far, yet,” said Alrik. “If this is recent, it could be a crime scene, or close to it.”

“Indeed,” said Rohan Soffen, stepping up to them, rubbing his hands together. The northerner, grey-eyed and pale and bald as a desert frog, rubbed his hands together, unused to the cold. “This isn’t quite my area of expertise - this isn’t for an archaeologist, it’s for a criminologist. But the methods of extraction are similar enough. Sir,” he said, turning to Salemi. “I’m going to need you and your men to remove successive layers of sand. If you expose a bone, don’t take it out. Keep all the sand you have to in order to keep the bones where they are - doing so will tell us more than if we pulled everything apart.”

Salemi took a moment to process and translate everything, nodded and saluted, then stepped off and began calling orders to his men and women. Eight people, all some of the best magicworkers Cinura had seen in generations - and they were just the ones Alrik had been able to wrangle in an hour.

They surrounded the wobbly circle of the collapsed cenote and called out to each other, synchronising their magical manipulations with hand signals and chants. One, *two*, and an inch of dirt rose from the ground’s surface and congealed into eight lumps which were deposited around the cenote. No new bones were revealed - but one of the skulls showed something new. A ragged hole in the forehead.

There was another chant, a synchronised stomp, and then another inch of soil lifted. One of the Lefaneie cried out in shock, and some of the dirt wavered before it was deposited. There were dozens of bones. Not dozens of bones, but dozens of bodies, hundreds of bones, all human, rib cages and skulls with obvious holes - bigger in the front and smaller in the back. Exit wounds at the front of the head - they’d been *shot in the back of the head*. Soffen had somehow gone even paler. More dirt was moved. Alrik tried to eyeball it - twenty people? Twenty-five? One rib cage was revealed, in the middle of the cirque, arms still in place, legs further away, disarticulated. The person had been lying down when they’d died, arms holding... what?

A final layer of dirt was gone. The bundle was another skeleton. A much smaller one, with a disproportionately large head.

Alrik felt his guts fall out of his feet, and was sitting before he knew it. This was a massacre. People had died in the revolution. Lots of them had. But they’d been buried the *right* way, or cremated. What was this? Who would do this?

“Kenneman,” said Salemi, simply, and both Alrik and the professor turned to look at him. The professor had fought under the man, before the Lefaneie had come, and Salemi and Olifiela and the rest of the ancient magicians had worked with him too. Then he’d left them in the lurch, betrayed.

“Kenneman did this?” said Alrik. “But then who...?”

“Ah,” said Soffen, grim, straightening up from his squat. “The ones that came before me. Came before Kenneman,” he said. He really wasn’t that old - maybe fifty - but he spoke like he mourned the passage of lifetimes. He pointed at the skeleton clutching its child. “That was Akçal. She wouldn’t leave her baby, so she was making us new musket balls in a tent near the cascade. All this time, I thought she’d died in the fighting. Kenneman must have taken them out here at night, shot them, and...” he trailed off, shaking his head. “That bastard.”

Alrik was still sitting down, staring up into the sky, as if by doing so, he could erase the ugliness of what lay before him. He wondered how Lumi would react - pain, definitely. But maybe relief? Was this closure, or had she really believed the man when he’d said they’d *all* been casualties? Salemi swore something in Lefaneie, then spoke in Nuarec, staring at the bones. “And to think I shook that man’s hand.”