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THE ZODIAC ARMY

By

Keith Charles Marks
B.A., Michigan State University, 2006

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Master of Arts
In English

Department of English
University of Louisville
Louisville, KY

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A Thesis Approved on

November 16, 2016

by the following Thesis Committee:

Thesis Director
Paul Griner

Second Committee Member
Glynis Ridley

Third Committee Member
Michael Williams

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife

Kathryn Marks who pushed me to pursue my dreams

And also to my son Tyler

Who inspires me to dream

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my two thesis directors. The first, Ryan Ridge, who helped show me new techniques and interesting methods for structure and story-telling. The second, Paul Griner, who agreed to guide me after Professor Ridge took another opportunity and who gave me the confidence in my writing and myself to attempt to write a book. Thanks also extend to Glynis Ridley who exemplifies the art and science of teaching and whose passion for literature spills over to her students. And thanks to the final member of my committee, Michael Williams, who took a chance on a random student whom he never taught and has helped tremendously in the finer details of world building. Finally, to my wife who has given me unwavering support and guidance in helping my world and characters come alive.

ABSTRACT

THE ZODIAC ARMY

Keith C. Marks

November 16, 2016

This thesis is the beginning of a book title *The Zodiac Army*. The book is the first in a trilogy and follows three different characters. The first, Ash, is a teenage boy who discovers he is a powerful magician who, along with another magician, can control the elements of nature. The two form a Twin pairing and will fight for each other and for the *safety* of the kingdom. Alora, the second character, is a young and faithful priestess in the Temple. Her faith, in both the gods and those in charge of the Temple, could bring the entire system to its knees. Finally there is Maze, a criminal-turned politician whose role on the Council of Thirteen, the advising arm to the throne, is not enough. He desires the throne and the kingdom, not for the sake of power, but for an idealistic view of what the world could be under his control.

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PROLOGUE

THE ATTACK

Gerrault snapped his eyes open. He had fallen asleep. Again.

He looked down the stone hallway; torches lined the wall of King's Corridor. It was long; the King's chamber used to be tucked in a corner in the west wing of the castle, but His Majesty felt too hidden from his guards. After moving his chamber the new corridor provided little cover for any intruder to sneak up on a guard. Gerrault turned around and inspected the heavy-duty wooden door, metal straps crisscrossing the front so no more than a square inch of wood showed through. The King's Door. He was guarding it; or rather he was supposed to be guarding it. Instead, he had been sleeping in front of it.

He was angry at himself; he was hoping to be promoted to captain of the watch soon, but the king would never allow such an unreliable guard to advance if he knew the truth. Gerrault swore that he wasn't going to allow the nightmares to affect his duty. However, what little sleep he was able to capture was haunted by the most terrible images. No, they were more than images. They felt so damn real.

Last night when the tendrils of exhaustion finally pulled him down into sleep he lived the most horrible moment yet. He was walking through a cave, unable to see more than a foot in any direction. In front of him he heard whispering and almost out of sight he could see him: The Faceless Man. The demon that haunted his nightscapes. He always looked the same: a figure in all black with no discernable features; where his face should

be only a slow swirling mass of skin and sinew. He taunted Gerrault, beckoning him ever closer and Gerrault was unable to resist the siren call.

He continued through the cave, terrified of what would happen if he ever managed to catch the Faceless Man. The cave was large but it felt like the ceiling was so close to him. Sweat began to trickle down his temple and he reached up, wiping his brow. He increased his pace, hoping he would find a way out. The ceiling felt like it was pressing down on him, it restricted his breath, causing a knot in his chest he had never experienced before. He was searching for a way out when something fell on him and knocked him over. He rolled over and pushed the thing off him when he saw it was a torso, the arms and legs torn off, a bloody stump at the neck.

He scrambled up and tried to move faster, tried to find his exit, but another torso toppled on him and he stumbled once more. Bile was forcing its way up his throat and he fought it, tasting the acid against his tongue. He heard cackling from ahead, the Faceless Man taunting him. He stood up and ran as fast as he dared, his hands out before him hoping he wouldn't run straight into a wall and knock himself out, but no matter how fast he ran, the bodies kept falling and knocking him over. He tried weaving back and forth, attempting to dodge the blows, but it was useless, the bodies were relentless, his arms and back assaulted from above, his breath running out. He ran out of energy, out of willpower after a heavy torso landed directly on his shoulders. He fell to his knees, gasping for breath, soaked through with sweat. A second body landed on top of him. Then a third. A fourth. The cackling increased in pitch and volume, the only sound he could hear besides his ragged breathing. More and more shredded torsos stacking on top of him, crushing the

breath out of his chest. He awoke gasping for breath and covered in sweat, the sound of high pitched laugh echoing in his bedroom.

The terrors of his sleep plagued him, distracting him from the simplest of tasks. That morning, after his futile race from the falling bodies he took the water pot outside to fetch water for breakfast, but almost as soon as he left his home he became disoriented and confused and instead used it as his piss pot and brought it back inside. Luckily his wife smelled the difference before making the morning porridge.

He rubbed his face, trying to force the weariness out of his pores and the nightmare out of his mind. Hopefully Demear hadn't seen him sleeping this time. He said he would overlook it last time but Gerrault thought he was too noble to overlook another infraction; or maybe not noble enough. Either way, he couldn't afford to get caught again. Where was Demear? He wasn't at his post. Gerrault counted torches again, and sure enough, down between the painting of the largrim and the tapestry of the war of Antara, there was no one there. Maybe he had fallen asleep, but he would never abandon his post.

Gerrault turned a full circle, once more examining the King's door. It appeared to be shut tight, and as exhausted as he was, there would be no way to sneak past him. As he was turning he thought he saw some movement down the corridor, but when he squinted he didn't see anything. The weariness that soaked through his body made him paranoid and he was worried he was seeing things. He rubbed his face once more and tried to ignore the movement, thinking his exhaustion was getting the better of him again. It took a few more moments for comprehension to pass through his mind. There *was* someone

standing at the end of the corridor. A man stood there, motionless. None of the other guards were around.

Gerrault put his hand on the hilt of his sword, Night-Watch, and turned his body so he was fully facing the man. He pulled back his shoulders, and tried to make himself look big and threatening. It was possible that this was a guest of one of the royal family and they had just wandered into the wrong area of the castle. That didn't make sense though; the family was still in mourning over the loss of the queen during childbirth. He yelled down the corridor to the man, "Who goes there?" But the man didn't move, didn't speak. He just stood there.

Gerrault started walking down the hallway, his hand gripped the hilt stronger. He was far enough away that he could unsheathe Night-Watch with ease, but he wanted to be prepared in case this person proved to be more than a mere nuisance. There hadn't been an assassination attempt on King Danton's life since before Gerrault had joined the watch, but that was no reason to let down his guard. He was tired, but his training had already kicked in and adrenaline was starting to course through his body.

He walked slowly, methodically down the corridor, passing torch after torch, just waiting for the man to run away. But the man stood still. Gerrault tried speaking to him again. "You appear to be lost. Turn around and head back to where you came from." Still no response. Not even the slightest movement.

The end of the hallway was darker than he remembered and each plodding step stirred something in his memory. His chest tightened and he felt sweat drip down his brow. His breath became ragged and labored and he struggled to keep calm. He felt his skin begin to crawl and he realized that he still couldn't see the man's eyes. He was close

enough now, no more than ten paces, and he couldn't see any expression on this intruder's face.

No. It couldn't be.

"You," Gerrault stammered, fighting back the bile that had forced its way into his throat. The Faceless Man stood before him like in his nightmares. But this couldn't be. That was all they were, nightmares. No being like this could exist.

Gerrault tugged on the handle of Night-Watch, and the sword pulled free with ease. As soon as the blade was unsheathed it began to hum. This was the first time that Gerrault had heard the eerie, high pitched hum of the sword and it took him a moment to figure out where it was coming from. He looked down, dumbfounded. His breath caught in his throat as his nightmare became worse. Not only was this demon here, in the flesh, but the sword was telling Gerrault he was also a Zodiac. And without knowing what kind of Zodiac, Gerrault was taking a risk simply by standing here. He looked back up at the Faceless Man and he swore he saw the slow swirling skin morph into a kind of eerie smile.

Gerrault shifted into a defensive stance, his sword held to ward off any attack. He couldn't charge at the Faceless Man without knowing what power he was going against. Some Zodiac Magic would be useless in this corridor, but Gerrault doubted the Faceless Man would come to find him if that was the case.

The intruder threw his head back and starting cackling, the sound coming from nowhere and everywhere at once. The high-pitched squeal sounded like steel scraping across glass and it engulfed Gerrault and he instinctively took a step back. In that single step the Faceless Man acted. He disappeared and it took a moment for Gerrault to realize

that he had changed his form, turning into a shadow on the floor. He was a Shade. Gerrault ran towards the black puddle on the ground, but as his feet fell in rapid succession the shadow began to move towards him. It flowed right under his legs and kept going down the hallway. It was becoming thinner and Gerrault hesitated, watching its course along the floor. The shadow ran the entire length of the hallway and was stretched like the shadows in the early morning when the sun is rising. Gerrault scraped Night-Watch on the ground, unsure if he could cut a shadow or not, but before the Althelium could make contact the shadow rushed down the hallway and Gerrault missed.

Gerrault turned just in time to see the Faceless Man revert back to his nightmarish human form, the Shade now framed by the King's door. The two men had completely switched places from just a few minutes ago. He snapped out of it and yelled "Shade! Shade!" He still hadn't seen any sign of the other members of the King's Watch, but he wanted to alert them if they were near. Or if they were even alive.

Gerrault ran, his feet echoing off the stone walls, Night Watch's song slowly growing louder and louder. Before Gerrault was even half way down the hallway, the Faceless Man changed once more into a shadow and slid under the crack at the bottom of the King's door.

By the Thirteen! Gerrault hadn't even considered that the Faceless Man was actually there for the king. He figured that he was a demon messenger of Mestaphor's, sent from the underworld to steal his life-force and stop him from achieving his Ultimate Purpose in the afterworld. But no, this was just a man, here to assassinate the king.

Gerrault pumped his arms hard, willing his legs to go faster. He had no time to wait for anyone else. He figured the Shade would need to orient himself in the room

before rounding on the king. He would probably still on the other side of the door.

Gerrault hoped he was right and didn't slow down as he reached the door, he just lowered his shoulder and aimed for right above the handle of the door.

His gamble paid off, and he heard a loud "oomph" as the door connected with the man on the other side. The man fell to the ground, his black cloak bunched around him, and Gerrault tumbled on top of him. Gerrault pulled himself up and, kneeling on top of the would-be assassin and plunged Night-Watch deep into the Faceless Man's huddled body. The Faceless Man screamed and Gerrault felt a wave of relief and vengeance wash over him. Not only had he saved the king, he had rid himself of this demon. Hopefully his nightmares would end soon. But that wasn't the case. His nightmare was just beginning.

"Help me," a weak voice said from under him.

Gerrault removed the cape and saw King Danton laying on the ground, blood pooling on the floor, draining from the wound where Night Watch had punctured him.

"No, this can't be." Gerrault was frantic. He grabbed the cloak and tried pressing it against the wound but the blood wouldn't stop its merciless rush from the king's body.

"No Shade. I had a nightmare," he said. He struggled to get the words out, his breath wet. "Came to see if you were still here."

"I'm here your majesty."

"Why," the king coughed, blood spattering Gerrault's face. "Why did you betray me?"

"I didn't! I would never—" but the king's eyes lost their light. He had crossed to find his Ultimate Purpose. Gerrault held him in his arms and began to weep, unable to

comprehend what had he had just done. He faintly heard footsteps rushing down the corridor.

Gerrault was hit from behind and knocked to the ground. He struggled, trying to get loose, but another person jumped on top, and a third, and the weight was too much to bear and struggle through. He could barely breathe and he was suddenly exhausted from the exertion of the night. He looked up and saw the Captain of the Watch staring down at him, eyes wide in disbelief.

“You killed the king!”

“It was an accident,” Gerrault said, trying to explain.

“How did you accidentally kill the king?” Captain Stanpri said.

“I thought he was the Faceless Man,” Gerrault said, his mind as thick as molasses now.

“What are you talking about?”

“He changed into a shadow and snapped down here.”

“By the name of name of the gods what are you talking about?” It wasn’t making sense. How could he explain this? But the words wouldn’t come out, his tongue was getting twisted. He struggled to keep his eyes open, the adrenaline disappearing just as quickly as it had kicked in. His head slumped and tears continued their slow roll down his cheeks.

Captain Stanpri had heard enough. “Gerrault, you are charged with high Treason, with assassination of the king and with conspiracy to overthrow the kingdom. I hereby enact an emergency sentencing of death by Conflagration. The Temple will decide what happens to your family.”

Gerrault looked around the room, trying to find the Faceless Man, trying to protect his king. But he failed. And later that night as he burned at the stake, the only sound he could hear over his own screams was the sound of maniacal laughter ringing in his ears.

CHAPTER ONE
OUT OF THE ASHES

The village of Tarastar was nearly forgotten; nestled at the base of Mount Fury, it had little necessity for the rest of the Kingdom. For a brief spell in the near-forgotten past, the soil had been enriched by volcanic ash providing a significant crop yield for almost a decade. But the Fury had gone out of the volcano, and ash no longer fell. Now the most the village could boast was that the center of the village had an onyx road running through it from an enriched lava flow from centuries before. The village had never been mentioned in any of the official histories of the kingdom as no one of note had been born there. In fact, of the six most recent official maps of the kingdom made by the royal cartographer it had been left off of four. Yet, two powerful men on their way to Tarastar appeared at the top of a hill, each riding a black stallion. They paused for a moment, surveying the area around them. “There,” the first man said, pointing across a valley to the base of Mt. Fury.

“Thank the gods,” the second man said, muttering more to himself than his master.

“They had nothing to do with getting us here,” the first man said “I got us here.”

“Eventually,” said the second. The first man turned and looked at his companion. “What do you want from me Syphas?”

“I don’t know why we didn’t just use the Bridge,” Syphas complained.

“I told you,” his master said, “the Bridge of the Gods is not some toy to be used whenever we want. Every request invites other people to look into our business.”

“Maze, you’re on the council,” Syphas countered. “You can do whatever you want.”

“I’m one of thirteen. I have power, but certainly not enough to use the Bridge whenever I want. Besides, you wouldn’t like it.”

“Don’t tell me what I would like. I don’t like riding for five days in this terrible rain.”

“The closest drop point from here is still a day’s ride that way.” Maze pointed North, over the mountain.

“It still would have been better than five days,” Syphas said.

“We would have been on the other side of the mountain. And where would obtain horses from? You can’t just walk horses through the Bridge, not without drawing a lot of attention.”

“You’re a councilman,” Syphas said, emphasizing the word *council*. “You could take whatever you wanted and no one could say anything about it.” He wasn’t wrong about that, especially now that the king was dead. No one would challenge his authority; at least, no one outside of the council.

“Syphas, how many years have we been doing this now?”

“Five long, tedious, cold and dreary years.”

“And how many times have we been caught? Or been suspected? Or had our plans revealed to the king or the council?”

“None,” Syphas said.

“Correct. None. Why compromise that now, why risk all that we’ve worked for? Because you don’t want to get wet? Or get saddle sores? I think you’ve been with your books for too long again.” Maze did not like to be so blunt with Syphas, but he was running out of patience on this particular journey. It was longer than normal, and it really was quite uncomfortable. His heavy riding cloak had provided warmth, but after the third day of near constant rain, he was soaked through and cold. The rain turned to mist the previous evening and had stopped before morning, but he was still cold. He was just starting to dry out, and with any luck would be more comfortable by the time they arrived at the village. Syphas wasn’t wrong to wish for a coach; Maze had the same thought at the end of the second day’s journey, but their mission was more important than their comfort.

“Fine. But I don’t see why we couldn’t have taken a coach at least.” Maze sighed.

“I’m sorry,” Maze said, “that you are so uncomfortable. But I need you here with me. And we can’t afford to draw any unnecessary attention to ourselves. Our work is too important.”

“Well then let’s get it over with, if you don’t mind.”

“You need to watch the way you speak to me. Soon we won’t be alone and you must watch your tongue around others.”

“Yes, *Master*.”

They rode in silence for a while. Maze noticed that Syphas was tightening his grip on the reins of his horse and was avoiding looking in his direction. Maze left him to his own frustrations, but eventually Syphas slipped back into the bouncing cadence with his horse and his posture seemed to relax. Their animals would need to be fed and

watered when they arrived at the village, and Maze didn't want to push them too hard. Of course they could handle it, but even a sick horse could draw unwanted attention from Balador or another inquisitive council member so soon after the king's death.

"Do you want to talk about it yet?" Syphas asked. He was not quite happy, but his tone was a little more deferential at least.

"There's nothing to talk about," Maze responded. "They voted for that idiot Balador instead of me."

"Is there no prior precedence for overturning a vote? Was there anything else you could have done?" Syphas asked.

"Don't you think," Maze snapped, "that if there was something to be done I would have done it already?" Syphas didn't reply, only pursed his lips in anger. Maze softened, just a bit. "No, there wasn't anything. Liorus played his part. I think there were others that heard him out and considered me for head. But Balador is still too influential. He's been on the council longer than anyone else and it was his quick action that allowed the Twins to save the princess."

"Was she in danger?"

"Of course she was in danger. With her father assassinated there's no telling if there were others looking to destroy the whole line. But they've hidden her. Only Balador and the Twins know her location right now and they're too cautious to divulge anything, even to the council. Especially since they suspect me."

"That'll pass."

"Yes, it will, but it's one more reason we have to be careful right now. I'm hopeful they think that I left the council chambers to go lick my wounds instead of

coming out to this little piss pot of a village. They won't be surprised if I'm gone for a while now. Even with all of the matters that need to be attended to, they won't miss me in council meetings."

"What if they usurp you while you're gone? Find a replacement?"

"No, they wouldn't dare. Plus, who would they replace me with? There isn't anyone else smart enough to handle the treasury as adeptly as I have"

"As long as you're confident." Maze sensed a not-so-subtle undercurrent of sarcasm but he brushed it aside. He had already been hard enough on Syphas and they both were tired of this dreary weather.

"I am. Suspecting me does not prove anything."

"What about the guard? Or his family?"

"He's already dead. Captain Stanpri had him executed the same night. He invoked his right as Captain to issue an emergency verdict of death."

"Without the priestesses?"

"It is his right. But still, they were angry I'm sure. I wouldn't doubt it if we came back to the city to find that Stanpri had either been forced out of his post by Aniste or that some type of accident had taken his life." Aniste, as head priestess, took her role in the judicial power of the Temple seriously. That is, she clenched it with no willingness to let it go.

"The guard wasn't even given a chance to explain? To defend himself?"

"Explain what? His sword was in the king's belly when the other guards came in. That's all that was needed." Maze watched Syphas contemplate this fact, no doubt

running through his mind the multitude of cases of emergency sentencing that he had probably memorized.

“Before we left to come here, Palea told me that the guard was raving madness as they burned him. She said he was screaming about a faceless man and that this man was a Shade who was the real assassin. Sounds like there’s more here than we know.”

“I’ve seen quite a few executions and almost all of them involve the guilty party screaming either that they are innocent or some incoherent nonsense.”

“And what about his family? Palea also mentioned that his wife had already been arrested before his death. The woman claimed that her husband had been having nightmares and that he would never do anything to harm the king, that he was loyal and true to Danton.”

“Yes, I had heard that information as well. She’s likely dead at this point too. The priestesses see conspiracy everywhere they turn. They hold onto their power with a tighter grip than any monarch I’ve ever seen.”

“But she didn’t do anything,” Syphas said. He was clearly troubled by this information, which is why Maze didn’t want to talk about any of this in the first place. He tried to keep Syphas clear of any of the dirty work he performed.

“Everyone is a tool to be used in one way or another.” They were silent for a moment and Maze assumed that Syphas’ conscience had been satiated. He was wrong.

“Was it you?” Syphas said.

“What?” Maze tried to sound unconcerned and innocent, although he wasn’t sure how successful he was.

“Were you involved in his nightmares?”

Maze realized that the idea might go through Syphas' mind at some point, but by the end of the third day of travel he figured Syphas had put it out of his mind. He realized now he was wrong.

“Why did you wait nearly five days to ask me this? You've had this information since we left, so why now?”

“I had to think about everything. Mull it over. You know how I am; I don't like to make illogical leaps into anything.”

“Of course you don't. And so by you asking me now, you've concluded, logically, that I must have had something to do with the nightmares, and therefore with the overall plot to kill Danton?” Syphas said nothing to this; he looked down and away from Maze. Maze didn't like to lie to Syphas but there were times when he felt like a small lie to protect someone was better than a chance at damaging the relationship.

“No,” Maze said. “I did not. But the two of them did serve a greater purpose.”

“By being murdered?”

“By turning curious eyes away from us and towards a larger conspiracy. My informants tell me that there was evidence found in their house. The two had been conscripting other guard members to join a faction which was trying to take over the castle. The perpetrator, Gerrault I think his name was, would soon set up an accident that would take out the current captain. He would assume control and begin the administrative task of setting watch schedules for the guard. He intended to slowly place more and more men who were loyal to him instead of the king on duty and eventually there would be no guards in the palace who were loyal to King Danton. They would take over the palace

and, with the council out of session, would find little resistance, at least for a short period of time.”

Syphas did not speak again for a while. He was loyal and could be trusted with anything. But he had spent years studying history, politics and philosophy. He had developed a strong moral compass that rarely pointed off course. He did not understand that sometimes situations called for that gray zone that Maze operated within.

“So why did he kill the king now?” Syphas said. “Why not wait until his plan had been put into place?”

“I don’t know. And I’m not sure we’ll ever know. Stanpri is gathering the evidence about the other members of this conspiracy, but it was still in its infancy. The guard might have just seen an opportunity and seized it. I guess we’ll never know.”

The men approached the village. A simple mud path led up a gentle slope from the valley to the heart of the village. The huts were arranged in a circle and in the center was a simple shrine to the Thirteen Gods. Larger towns would have basic temples, with the largest cities having grand temples.

A woman was kneeling at the shrine, praying for better crops, more money or a gaggle of children. Whatever the people prayed for didn’t matter, the gods never listened anyway. Maze rode up to her. “You there, woman.” The woman ignored him and kept on praying. Maze had little patience for impertinence after such a long journey. Syphas sensed his mood and jumped off his horse. He grabbed the woman by the elbow and pulled her up to standing. Syphas shouted in her right ear, “Do you have any idea who you are ignoring?”

The woman shrunk a little, her head dropping low, her voice dropping lower. “No sir, sorry sir, was jus’ prayin’, not trying to hurt anyone sir, no disrespect meant by it”

Syphas lowered his voice but added a discernible edge to it. “This,” he said, “is Master Maze of the Council of Thirteen, one of the great leaders of your kingdom and a man whom you should be grateful to just for speaking to you.”

“Sorry sirs,” the woman said, as she tried to curtsy, “I jus’ thought no man woulda halted a lady from her prayers, sir.”

“The gods can wait,” Maze said.

The woman looked up him, astonished at such open blasphemy. Maze was used to this kind of reaction from commoners whenever he spoke about the gods in such a way. He would normally have little patience with a woman like this to begin with, but the drudgery of the journey granted him none instead. “Where is the man named Tyndar?” He asked her.

The stupid woman looked at him, no answer coming. Maze glanced at Syphas and gave a slight nod and Syphas responded by slapping the woman on the back of her head. She yelped and pointed to one of the cottages. Syphas pushed the woman away and remounted his horse. The men rode to the cottage and dismounted, the woman scurrying away behind them.

The two men tied their horses to a worn out fence post, and walked up the path approaching the house. It was in better shape than the rest of the huts in the village, but there were still worn boards and rot on the door. Maze knocked so hard that small pieces of wood fell from the door. A moment passed and the door creaked opened. The man standing in the doorway was tall but thin, almost gaunt. He had pale yellow hair that hung

over blue eyes. He looked disheveled, his clothes askew and dirty. A smell lingered between Maze and the man that was not unlike the air outside of a stable.

“Whatch you want?” the man asked. He wasn’t rude, but he wasn’t hospitable about it either.

“Are you Tyndar?” Maze asked.

“Who’s asking?”

Maze did not have the patience to deal with another commoner like this. He pulled his travelling cloak taut around his shoulders, causing the fabric to smooth out and reveal his pin with the Mark of the Thirteen. The pin signified that Maze was a council member and it was an emblem that people throughout the kingdom, even this little village, recognized.

“Oh,” the man replied. “What can I do for you? My lord?” The second part was added after a brief pause.

“You have a child that was born a fortnight ago, a son, yes?”

“Yes. What of him?”

“We need to see the child, verify his birth for our records.”

The man grew uncomfortable at this request. He was hiding something. “He was born, if that’s what you’re asking.” The man was dodging the question, which worried Maze that the boy was not well.

“Where is he right now?”

Again, the man shifted uncomfortably. He stepped away from the door, motioning for Maze to enter the house. Tyndar’s outward appearance reflected the interior of the

house: sloppy, unkempt and odorous. As Maze stepped in, the father pointed to the corner, near the hearth.

Maze was horrified. “In the fire?”

“What?” The man was clearly confused. “No, I told you he was alive. He’s sleeping, there on the floor.”

Maze looked near the hearth and there, next to the fire was a child sleeping in a large pile of ash. The child was naked but otherwise seemed to be healthy. “You let your child sleep next to the fire in your ash pile?”

“It seemed fine to me.”

“You didn’t stop to think that the ash could stop his breath?” Maze was furious at the ignorance of this man.

“Do you want him? Maybe you can take better care of him?”

This man was trying Maze’s patience, and his understanding. “Why would I take the child?” Maze asked. “And where is your wife, Leda I believe it is? How would she react to you offering your child to a stranger?”

Tyndar’s eyes filled with tears. “My wife,” he choked out, “was killed by that child. The midwife could do nothing for her.” He turned away, hiding his pain and shame.

Maze was taken aback. Surely this man couldn’t blame a child for the death of his wife? It was a wonder the baby had survived this long with a father that wanted nothing to do with him. This child was too important to leave in the care of this man. Who knew if the baby had even been fed?

“What’s his name?” Maze asked.

“He doesn’t have one,” Tyndar said. Maze struggled to keep his composure.

“You will name him, feed him and make sure he stays alive.”

“Fine, you can call him Ash,” Tyndar said. “He sleeps soundest when he’s in those ashes anyway.” Then Maze saw the comprehension in Tyndar’s eyes. “Why is it, er Ash, so important to you?”

“It is like I told you; it is solely for record keeping-purposes. The council has started taking a census of all births in the kingdom.”

“Aye, I can believe that, sir, but why would a council member such as yourself be sent on such a simple task as checking if a babe had been born or not? We are far out of the way for someone as important as yourself to come on such an errand.” Maybe this man wasn’t as dumb as Maze had assumed.

“The council’s motivations are not of your concern and you would do well to remember your place.”

Tyndar, to Maze’s surprise, understood at once. “You think he’s a Twin? That’s not possible.” Maze wasn’t going to be able to lie his way out of this.

“We aren’t sure to be honest. But he needs to stay healthy in case.” Maze tried a different tactic with the man. “You would be doing your kingdom a great service if you made sure he made it to his Ordeal.”

The man just stood there, unmoving. Maze had rarely encountered someone so impertinent when out amongst the commoners, but he suspected that this man had little to lose in his life. Maze noticed for the first time that Tyndar’s eyes were red with circles so dark under them it looked like he had been punched on each side. The man was clearly

still suffering the loss of his wife and there would be little Maze could say to convince him to care for the child.

No more was said between the men. Maze and Syphas walked out the front door and turned around, glaring at Tyndar one last time before he shut the door.

As the lord and his servant walked down the path, back to where their horses were tied up, Maze asked “Does the boy have any other relatives that could take him in?” He decided that he could not trust this man with the child, regardless of what orders were given or who gave them. Plus, he already knew too much.

“Yes,” was the answer. “An aunt and uncle I believe. In a town less than a day’s ride from Hagadorn. But the father seemed in fine health.”

Maze smiled at Syphas. “Well, the cold rain can do all sorts of damage.”

CHAPTER TWO
PREPARATION
SIXTEEN YEARS LATER

The season was just beginning to change in the kingdom of Lanser, the last remnants of snow had melted and the sun was fighting harder and harder to keep the air warm. The ground was muddy most of the time, but in just a few weeks the leaves would glow a brilliant green once again and planting season could begin in earnest.

The sun had just peeked above the bare branches of the trees in the Forest of Illusion, the soft orange light creeping towards the homes in the village of Arbrille. The house at the northern-most point of the village was bathed in light and inside a young boy on the verge of manhood sat on the edge of his bed, exhausted from a night without sleep.

Ash had spent the evening tossing and turning in his bed, unable to find any respite from the worry that had plagued him the past week. He so badly needed to rest, to be ready for what lay ahead of him, but the more he desired sleep, the further it slipped away from him. That morning he would be going to the capital of Lanser and he wasn't ready for that journey. If he was being honest with himself, it wasn't the journey that was the concern, but what lay at the end of that journey that had him fighting insomnia.

Ash looked around his room and wondered if he would ever see it again. It was plain, just his bed with the heather-stuffed pillow and a single set of drawers for his clothing. On the opposite wall hung a shelf where he put his prize possessions: a toy

soldier that was carved for him by a wandering tinkerer who claimed it was once enchanted to march on its own, a small knife that his uncle gave him when he turned twelve and started working in the workshop, and his own tattered and faded copy of *Facets and Virtues*, the sacred text of the Blessed Thirteen. He may not have much, but he still loved his room and the few possessions he could call his own.

“Hey Ash,” a voice from outside his window yelled. “Are you in there still?” That voice belonged to his best friend, Jaslin. He had hoped that she would come over to see him; he had actually considered going to see her in the middle of the night when he realized that sleep would evade him again, but he had decided against it. He had been raised to respect the rules that governed social interaction and while the two were best friends and had been since they were children, she was still a girl and it would be improper for him to have a late night rendezvous with her.

Jaslin pounded on Ash’s wooden shutters. “Come on, I can hear you in there. Your uncle said you were still sleeping but I wanted to see you before you left!” Ash smiled, glad that she stopped by and finding humor in the fact that Uncle Carrus said he was still sleeping. As if he had even fallen asleep in the first place.

“All right,” Ash said, “I’m coming, just give me a moment,” He got out of bed and swung his feet to the smooth, warm wood floorboard. He stood up and put on pants and a shirt. His uncle had suggested that he not wear his nicest clothing to the city and especially not for the ceremony. Many a fine smock had been ruined by the Ordeal of Ascension, and while the Council of Thirteen was eager to know who had a Gift and who did not, they did not care about whose clothing was ruined during the process.

Ash walked out of his room, a luxury to almost any person his age. When his cousin left for the army two years ago, Ash became the sole proprietor of the room. He greeted his Aunt Dara who was clearly done eating breakfast but who was waiting for him. The smell of porridge still hung in the air, making Ash's stomach grumble with hope. Normally his aunt and uncle wouldn't let him sleep so late, but today he wouldn't be helping his uncle in the carpentry workshop, so they had decided to let him rest.

"Good morning Aunt Dara," Ash said, smiling at her.

"Good morning dear, how did you sleep last night?"

"Great," Ash said. There was no reason to worry his aunt any more than she already was. Since her son left for the army, Ash was the only one she could fuss about, and she seemed to make it her primary job.

"Where's Uncle Carrus?" Ash asked.

"He's outside finishing loading up the timber that he's taking in to the city today," she said.

"Does he need any help?"

"I don't think so, he should be close to finished. Was that Jaslin I heard outside?"

"Yes ma'am. She wanted to see me before I leave today."

"Well, go ask your uncle if there's time. And here, take a couple of hard rolls to eat before your trip."

Ash walked over to his aunt and took the rolls from her hand. Most likely she had woken up early this morning to start making their food for their trip; the rolls would still be warm on the inside.

His aunt looked at him as she handed him the bread. "Is everything all right?"

“Yes ma’am”

“You look different, worried.” Aunt Dara had a way about her, an extra sense. She always knew when something was bothering Ash. Although most times when he explained it to her she simply offered some basic advice from *Facets and Virtues* and left it at that. Knowing when something was wrong and being able to fix it were two different talents.

“I’m just a little nervous for the Ordeal,” Ash told her.

“Well, it’s nothing to be worried about. Remember, the Thirteen created the Ordeal of Ascension to ensure that we will always have guides in the world to show us the path to our Greater Purpose.” This wasn’t word for word from the text, but it summed up a passage nicely. Satisfied that she had eased his mind, she turned back around and started wrapping up some dried meat for their ride.

Ash stepped outside and met Jaslin. She was six inches shorter than him, but both were skinny with tight muscles running through their bodies. Her black-as-night hair contrasted completely with Ash’s pale yellow. The contrast in physical appearance also held true for their personalities. Jaslin was headstrong and brave, willing to go out of her way to prove a point. Ash was quieter and more thoughtful, thinking through every decision he made and trying to weigh every outcome. However, the two were inseparable, and had been since they were small children.

“What took you so long?” Jaslin asked. “You slept forever this morning!”

“Yeah, something like that,” Ash said. Jaslin gave him an inquiring look but he moved passed it. “Uncle Carrus wanted me to be ready for the trip. Wait here for a moment, I have to go ask him if there’s time for you and I to take a walk.”

Ash walked around to the side of the house where his uncle was tying down the boards for delivery to a shop in the city. He looked up, red in the face from exertion.

“Ash, good, you’re awake. Come here and help me with this.”

Ash walked to the side of the timber cart and took the rope that Carrus handed him. Ash pulled the rope down as hard as he could while his uncle pulled a rope up from under the wagon and tied the two ends together, securing the boards.

Carrus was taller than Ash by two inches and had large strong hands that were calloused but dexterous. His light brown hair and soft complexion made it clear that Ash and he were related but that Carrus was not his father.

“Uncle, is there enough time for me to take a quick walk with Jaslin before we leave?” Ash asked.

Carrus’ face returned to its normal color and he exhaled slowly, although whether it was him catching his breath or being disappointed in the request Ash wasn’t sure. Carrus looked up at the sky, noted the sun’s position then said, “Yes, but not too long. No big adventures today, ok?”

Ash blushed at this mild admonishment. When they were younger, Jaslin and he used to pretend that they were on some type of great adventure, rescuing the princess from danger, (or in her case, the prince), finding some ancient magical relic or beating entire armies, just the two of them. “Alright, I promise.”

The two friends were instinctively walking towards the forest that they played in when they were children. It was only a quarter of a mile northwest of Ash’s house. The Forest of Illusion became more dangerous the deeper one walked, but they always made sure they always stayed just on the outskirts, never venturing too far. At dusk on the eve

of the autumnal equinox the branches of the trees would begin to sway, as if blown by a strong wind. Then one by one each tree would shoot its leaves into the air in a vortex of green. The leaves would remain aloft and the leaves would change their colors to brilliant oranges, reds and purples. Then the leaves would return to their tree, to their rightful branch and would remain there until falling off, one by one. People would travel for miles to see the Dance of the Leaves, although few people stopped in Ash's village as there were larger villages with great views and more inns for travelers. Uncle Carrus told him for every beautiful bit of magic, one should always be wary of the ugly side of that magic. Ash hoped more than ever that he would be home to see the Dance this year with Jaslin.

“So, are you nervous?” Jaslin asked.

“Yeah,” Ash said. “I had trouble sleeping last night.” Ash would never admit this to anyone but Jaslin. He had to prove to his uncle that was mature enough to one day take over the family carpentry business since his cousin left. No matter how big or small his problems or concerns Jaslin never made fun of him for his true feelings. It was that undercurrent of compassion and support that made Ash fiercely loyal to Jaslin. He would defend her against just about anyone in the kingdom.

“Why are you so nervous, though?” Jaslin asked. “Everybody has to go through the Ordeal. Plus, it's not like they're actually going to find anything with you. You were born in March. Twins just aren't born anymore.”

That much was true. There hadn't been any twins born for almost three decades. The only known twins in Lanser, Callyndrow and Vane, were near-legends everywhere they went. While their council pin, the Mark of Thirteen, granted them almost infinite

influence in the kingdom, they never needed it. They were praised nearly as often as the Blessed Thirteen, and with almost the same air of sanctity.

“The thing is,” Ash said, “I don’t know what to expect. People just kind of accept the Ordeal as a part of life and they don’t really talk about it. All my uncle ever tells me is ‘it’ll be over before you know it and then you can get on with your life’”

“Well he’s not wrong. They’ll do their little test on you, find nothing and move on.”

“What if I am a Twin?” Ash’s voice had dropped almost to a whisper and they stopped walking. Ash saw that Jaslin could tell he was upset, but her hesitation led him to believe she hadn’t quite figured out why.

“Wouldn’t that be a good thing? You’d be this all powerful legend; people would write songs about you and worship you. You could do whatever you wanted to do, go wherever you wanted to go.”

“What if I don’t want that?” Ash said, casting his eyes downward.

“You can’t be serious?” Jaslin said. “How could you not want that? Isn’t that every person’s dream? To be able to use magic, to command respect and power?”

This was the true reason for Ash’s insomnia, the true root of the problem for him. The Ordeal, in its unknown possibilities worried him, but he couldn’t stop thinking about the possibility that he was a Twin. What if he was given the power that most people only dreamed about? How would he handle it? And most importantly, what if he couldn’t?

“Look, I know that is what we always pretended to be, what we always pretended we wanted but, I’m happy here. And honestly, what if I don’t want to go anywhere new?”

Ash didn't know how to explain what he was feeling. He started to walk again and tried getting Jaslin to understand. "Is that what you want? When you go through your Ordeal, you want to leave here and never come back?"

Like everyone in the kingdom, hers would take place on the last day of the month she was born. For Jaslin that would be in three months, and she, like every other sixteen year old born in that month, would travel to Hagadorn to be tested.

"Yes," Jaslin said. "And you should too."

He wasn't sure and he was even more aware that even though his Ordeal officially marked his passage into manhood, he was still a child in many ways. Leaving home held exciting prospects, but he was comfortable in the town, and he was happy in the woodshop. How could he give that up?

The two friends reached the edge of the forest and started walking past the tree line. Jaslin stopped, turned toward him and put her hand on his arm. Ash felt a shock travel up his arm, sending a burst of *something* straight to the center of his chest. She looked into his eyes, searching for something, and suddenly Ash felt different. Their friendship had always been brother and sister, but this affectionate grasp made him feel strange. He needed to get rid of it, to get back to the comfort their relationship offered.

Ash smiled at Jaslin. "Yeah, I guess you're right," he said. "Being a Twin could offer some unique experiences." He broke contact with her, turned and started walking again. The confidence that he'd felt started to dissipate almost as soon as Jaslin let go. She had always made him feel more comfortable, but he wasn't sure what to make of this extreme waxing and waning of emotion. The doubt was already starting to creep back into his mind.

As soon as Jaslin asked him what he was most excited for in the city, Ash smirked. He knew her so well; if she couldn't make him feel better about something, she always tried to distract him with something else. "I don't know," he said. "Uncle Carrus has told me a little bit about the market so I guess I'm excited to see that. I hear that there are rows and rows of open-air vendors that sell their goods right on the street, not from a workshop like we have. That'll be interesting."

"Yeah, maybe you'll even get to see someone get caught stealing!" Jaslin said.

"Why would I want to do that?"

Jaslin had been to the city a few times, a fact that she rarely let Ash forget. She used the opportunity to try and prove how worldly she was, even though the city was only a day's ride from them.

"Well, I heard they chop the hands off any thief in the market. Just, whack! Right there on the spot." She made a cutting motion with her hand, slicing through the air and pretending to lop off some poor street rat's hand.

"That's gross," Ash said, rubbing his wrist. They arrived at the edge of a small circle of trees in the forest, and he sat down at the trunk of a huge willow tree, its branches just starting to bud. Jaslin sat down next to him and for a while, neither of them spoke, opting for the comforting silence of each other's company.

Jaslin was the first to break the silence. "You know," she said, "even if you are a Twin, I'll always be here for you."

"I know," Ash said. "Besides, if I am a Twin, you'll probably end up being my other half."

"That's not possible. That's not my sign, we were born in different months."

“Yeah, I know, but who are we to question the Blessed Thirteen?” This was a common refrain of his Aunt Dara and Ash liked to jokingly use it whenever he couldn’t explain something.

Jaslin smiled at this and looked at the ground.

“I should get going,” Ash said.

Jaslin jumped up so quickly it looked like she was a wound spring, ready to unload. She did it with such grace and agility it amazed Ash that he had ever won their little battles as children.

He looked up at her while she brushed dirt off herself, secretly searching for that same look in her eyes. He didn’t know why he was looking for it when he was so quick to banish it in the first place, but he was curious. But when she looked at him, all signs of it were gone. Now she just looked at him with the same sisterly glance she always had in the past.

He stood up, brushing some loose dirt off of his pants. “Uncle Carrus wants to leave soon to make sure we make it to the city before the gates close. He told me it’s more comfortable sleeping in a bed at an inn than in his lumber cart.”

They walked back in silence, Ash unable to shake the feeling that something had changed between them. He needed Jaslin in his life, he needed his best friend. If things changed, his life would be more complicated. And less fun.

As they approached Ash’s house, he could see his uncle loading up his wood cart with supplies for the next three days. They would arrive at Hagadorn before sunset. The next day they would report to the House of Ordeals where all of the citizens born in the month of Doowain sixteen years ago would report. There, the Ordeal of Ascension would

take place, and could take the entire day. Then, Ash and his uncle would spend one more evening at the inn and come home the following day, ready to start on a large order of boards for a neighbor who needed to repair the side of his house.

Before Ash and Jaslin were within earshot of Ash's uncle, Jaslin once again grabbed his arm. No shock this time, but he heard affection in Jaslin's voice. "Ash, be careful," she said.

"I will be. Plus, I'll have Uncle Carrus with me. He'll make sure I'm safe."

"I know, but he won't be with you during the Ordeal. Just make sure you take care of yourself."

"What do you mean?" Ash said. It wasn't in Jaslin's nature to worry and seeing her like this added a new depth to his anxiety.

"Look, I don't know. Just, be safe." She let go of his arm and gave him a quick hug. While they were close, they rarely expressed it in any physical manner. She looked at him one last time, then angled away from him and headed toward her house. Ash watched her for a moment, hoping she would turn back around, but she didn't.

CHAPTER THREE
JOURNEY TO THE CAPITAL

Ash started for his uncle, hoping that he wasn't late and that the ride to the capital would give him time to get his mind off Jaslin. Carrus, as he approached, called out. "Go inside and ask your aunt for the food and the Dermas to pay the inn keeper with."

Ash found his aunt busy at the fire finishing cooking venison. She turned around and saw Ash standing there, dirty from sitting on the ground. "Even though," she said, "you aren't supposed to wear your nicest clothes, that's no reason to muss up the ones you're wearing before you go."

"I know Aunt Dara, I'm sorry."

"Here, take the coin purse. There's enough in here for the next few nights. Hopefully you won't need to eat much at the inn. I'm almost done with the meat, let me just wrap it up for you. This is for tonight, and there is some dried meat for you for tomorrow."

Ash collected the coin purse and the wrapped meat and grabbed his satchel from the hook near the door. He placed all of the items in his satchel and started out the door when his aunt grabbed his wrist and spun him around into a hug. His aunt and uncle had always been wonderful to him, and he was always grateful that they took him in after his father had mysteriously died when he was just a baby.

“I love you. Take care of yourself and don’t be nervous. We all have to do it. Ask your uncle about his experience, he’ll tell you it wasn’t so bad.”

“Thanks,” Ash said. “I will. And I love you too. I’ll see you in a couple of days.”

By the time Ash made it out of his aunt’s embrace and arrived back at the cart, his Uncle was ready and sitting on the bench. Ash climbed up next to his uncle and his uncle took the reins to their horse, Noble, clicked his tongue and gently snapped the reins. The carriage slowly rolled away from the house, and Ash’s leg began to shake with nervousness. He was already looking forward to returning here and getting on with his life.

* * *

Nine long hours of riding on roads and over bridges at first seemed like a thrilling prospect, the wind rushing through his hair and scenes never witnessed by him. Ash hadn’t planned on how slow Noble had to walk, pulling a full load of cut boards behind him. But the slower pace actually allowed Ash to take in all of the amazing scenery they passed. The road was well-worn, but the area around them was still wild. The forest that was by their house actually expanded to the northeast, much farther than he had imagined.

He saw a creature emerge from the edge of the forest and stare at them as they passed by; it had the face of a bear, but it was smaller and more narrow, with a wolf’s ears and body. It was bigger than a normal wolf, but smaller than any bear he had heard of.

“Uncle, is that a Largrim?”

“It sure looks like it,” his uncle said. He sounded as fascinated by it as Ash felt.

“I didn’t know they actually existed, I thought they were just a story you told us as kids” Ash said.

“Well they were a story we told you, but they are real, although they are rare. It is horrible luck to even think about hunting one because Largra herself likes to take its form often and patrols the Forest of Illusion.”

“Why aren’t they called a ‘bol’f’, or a ‘woar’ or something like that?”

“To remind people that it is a bad idea to kill one. If you do, you might bring the wrath of the gods down on you.”

“I heard that those born under Largrim’s star can change into one.”

“I’ve heard that too.”

Ash was astonished at this. Magic was still distant to him; he was fascinated by all of the different Gifts given to people by the gods, but his small town did not have anyone with magical abilities or family members that were granted the magic. He actually knew little about how it worked. They continued along, Ash noticing the Iron Mountain off to the north, where Kitorr, the God of nature was said to overlook his realm.

After travelling for five hours, the wooden bench hurt his bottom fiercely. At first it just felt uncomfortable, but the pain had begun to creep in. Ash tried to casually rub the side of his butt, massaging it to make the pain subside, but it was no use. It was as if the bench had splintered and had driven all of its sharp fragments through his pants.

The pain in his side was still not enough of a distraction to him and he had difficulty not returning back to the reason he was going to the capital. Growing up and pretending to be a Zodiac with Jaslin, it had always seemed so fun. Of course they knew little about what Gifts each sign commanded, but it didn’t stop them from pretending

anyway. But now it was real. Ash would actually be facing his Ordeal of Ascendancy and as he saw it, there were only two real outcomes that he faced.

The first was that he was a Zodiac; not just any Zodiac, but a Twin. The most powerful of all the signs. Caione, the god of war, and Evnir, the goddess of peace were the Twin gods, two of the most powerful and influential in Uridel, the afterlife so many humans aspired to. When the Twin gods were in harmony with each other, the world experienced a congruence and balance that resulted in stability between countries. It saw periods of growth in the position of most people; there was more to eat, fewer deaths from disease, and a general sentiment of support amongst neighbors. However, when the two clashed, their fury at each other could wipe away whole civilizations in a single breath. Their sibling relationship could mean life or death for everyone in the world.

Ash wasn't quite sure what the Gifts of the all Zodiacs were but he knew they were immense. There was always the contention that some of the signs kept secret their most powerful abilities, but rumors were always spread. Water Walkers were able to walk through anything that was solid, except for metal. They could simply penetrate the walls of a city, or a castle, or even their outhouse door. Ash had heard that they could also reach into a man's body and grab his heart and stop it. That part sounded ridiculous to Ash and it was part of the rumor-mongering that he associated with some of the Zodiacs. But with the Twins, it was all rumor. Some people said they could fly, others that they could walk through fire without being harmed. Still others said they simply were immortal and had been granted the gift to serve as mini-gods. For Ash to even consider wielding that much power made him uncomfortable. It just couldn't be possible that he, the nearly-orphaned boy could have those Gifts within him.

The other and more likely possibility was that he wasn't a Zodiac at all. He had never felt so much as a tremor of unexplained talent emanating from himself, and he doubted waiting until this month made that much of a difference. He found himself hopeful for the safe outcome; he would go to his Ordeal of Ascendancy, they would simply test him and would find that he wasn't spectacular in any way. He would thank them and leave and would go home with Uncle Carrus, the whole episode behind him. He could get back to his life; he could get back to Jaslin. She might be disappointed that he wasn't an all-powerful Zodiac, but she had been happy enough to be his friend up to this point in life, so why should that change now?

As soon as Ash had made up his mind about his desires that tiny little voice in the back of his mind spoke up. It was a voice that Ash had come to both welcome and despise, that deep part of his mind that wouldn't rest until all options had been explored. That little voice brought up a third possibility. "What if you don't live through the Ordeal?" it whispered. "What if you are weaker than they expect someone of your age to be? What if you don't have the option to go home?" Ash didn't know how to answer this question. He didn't want to face it. He knew that there were people who had died during the Ordeal, but he didn't know how common it was. Still, it only seemed logical that to obtain the greatest of the Gifts, the Ordeal itself must be the most dangerous as well. He had to ask Uncle Carrus, but that little voice in his head made him feel even weaker for needing to do so.

"Uncle, what will the Ordeal be like?" He tried to sound nonchalant, but he worried that the quiver in his voice would be heard.

“Oh, it’s not so bad.” His Uncle didn’t even turn to look at him, which Ash couldn’t read as a good sign or bad.

“Yes, everyone keeps telling me that, but no one will tell me what to actually expect. What happens, what does it feel like, who performs it? I have a million questions. Maybe you could tell me about your own Ordeal so I will have a better understanding of what I will be doing.”

“That’s not a problem.” Uncle Carrus glanced sideways at Ash. “Look, there’s nothing to be nervous about. Now, your experience will be different than mine because we are born under different stars, but the general procedure should be the same. Tomorrow morning we’ll travel to the House of Ordeals where you will present your Writ of Testing at the gate. Your name, along with your birthdate and village of birth will be recorded.”

“Then, you will go inside the House where you will be taken to your testing room. The House is basically just a large stone building with different areas in it. Each area contains a test for the different Zodiac signs. For example, when I went, there was a giant hole filled with water, about seven feet deep. At the bottom of the hole was an iron ring with a rope tied to it. They placed me in the pool, had me take a deep breath, then a Chelae who was in the pool already pulled me under and tied the rope to my ankle. Since anyone who is granted the Gift of the Chelae can breathe underwater, she basically just monitored my progress. As soon as it was clear that I did not possess the Gift, I was untied and released. There was only a foot of water over my head, so it wasn’t hard to get to the surface so I could breathe again.”

His uncle stopped talking as if this information was all that was required to alleviate the anxiety that Ash was feeling. His story, however, had just the opposite effect on Ash. Instead of feeling calmer, he was absolutely appalled at how his uncle spoke of this experience. “That’s terrible” Ash said.

“What?” his uncle asked confused.

“You tell me they tried to drown you and you are fine with it? Like it wasn’t the most terrifying moment you could experience?”

“Well, I guess at the time it was a bit scary, but you must realize that the Ordeals have been designed purposefully. While there are injuries, they are rarely grave. Plus, there are many Chelae around to heal any minor injuries that might occur. Don’t worry; there are rarely deaths anymore.”

“Rarely? But it does still happen?”

“Well yes. Every year there are one or two deaths. But that is out of all of the tests during the year, not each month. The chances are slim that it will happen to you.”

This did little to put Ash’s mind at ease. In fact, he spent the rest of the journey absorbed in his own thoughts, trying to figure out what could be waiting for him. How could they test this dormant power in potential Twins if no one actually knew what that power was? He had no idea.

Ash was so lost in his contemplations that he only realized they had arrived when Noble stopped suddenly and Ash had to grab the side of the bench to make sure he didn’t fall off. He looked up and saw that they were approaching a large series of docks. The trail had transitioned into an actual road made of cobblestones, and signposts ahead

pointed the way to different roads, all of which were numbered. “Uncle,” Ash said, “are these the docks that lead to the city?”

“They are,” his uncle said.

Ash knew that after the King was assassinated the docks were built and a large moat created to prevent unwanted people from approaching the city, but he had no idea that it would be this large. The moat had to be at least a mile and a half across and the docks were huge and expansive. Windmills lined the road and Ash heard a large grinding sound.

“There are eight different docks to maintain control and decrease congestion to the city. The moat is a compass rose, with different docks for each point. The numbering starts at due north and works clockwise. Your writ of Testing should say which dock we’ve been assigned too. Otherwise we would have to go to that building over there to be assigned.”

“Dock Six” Ash said.

Carrus looked the boy, surprised he didn’t need to look at his Writ for the assignment.

“I’ve been staring at that thing since it arrived from the courier. I have it memorized.

Carrus chuckled. “Good, that’s the Southwest dock, we’re close.”

His uncle steered Noble to the right and they started down the cobblestone road. They did not arrive from direct due west, so it was a couple more miles until they reached the dock. A ship had just finished unloading the cargo using carts similar to the one Ash

and Carrus were riding in. The docks were busy, at least to Ash's eyes. He and his uncle should be able to take this ship, but it might be close with this crowd.

Carrus directed the wagon to the end of the cobblestone road where it met with the beginnings of the wooden docks. The joints of the dock appeared to be strong, with large poles sticking out of the water at regular intervals, far closer than would technically be required to handle a crowd of the size standing on the docks. There must have been at least five hundred people on the southwest dock, more than his entire village.

While Ash had been staring at the work sprawled out before him, Carrus had dismounted from the wagon. He called to Ash, snapping him out of his amazement. "Ash, jump down. We have to walk from here." Ash did as instructed and followed his uncle who was holding onto Noble's reins close to the horse's mouth.

The dock started as a large receiving platform, with enough room to accommodate fifty men standing with their horses and gear. As it approached the water, it narrowed until a section of railings formed a snake-like pattern, creating a queue for those waiting to board the boat. The line terminated at a ramp that led down to the boat, wide enough to allow carts, and strong enough for the loads and horses that accompanied them. The ramp that Ash's line would use for loading the ship was at the aft of the ship. There was another ramp located near the bow of the ship which was used for unloading the passengers and cargo that had come across.

The boat was magnificent, larger than Ash had ever imagined, so large that it allowed both ramps to be lowered onto its hull without having to move positions on the dock. The deck was completely flat with very low railings around the perimeter. The only

raised part of the ship was in the back, where a platform stood with a giant wheel and what appeared to be a metallic crank. One feature stood out to Ash though as peculiar.

“Uncle, why aren’t there any sails?”

“There don’t need to be any. The ship is actually ferried across by latching on to giant chains that run underwater from this side to the other. There is a giant hook under the boat that attaches to the chain. The chain is powered by the windmills. If there is no wind and the chain isn’t moving, the oarsmen simply row.”

“That’s amazing.” Ash didn’t know which he wanted to see more, the ship moving because of a giant chain just below the surface of the water, or the coordination of oarsmen propelling the ship across the water.

“Yes. The council has figured out how to harness nature, or do without it.”

Suddenly Ash was elbowed, hard, in the stomach. It knocked the air out of his lungs, and for a moment, he felt as though he would never breathe again. Just as quickly as the air was knocked out of him, it returned, crisp and delicious. He searched for his attacker when the bearded man in front of him turned around. “Sorry lad, was knocked back there. These damn queues, everyone rushes to get on and then we practically suffocate each other waiting to load.”

Ash was absolutely flabbergasted at how large the man was, at least six and a half feet tall, and near as wide as far as Ash could tell. He was dressed similarly to those around him; a plain tunic with sturdy wool pants and a wool cloak, although it wasn’t pulled tightly around him. The man was clearly not poor, but he was most certainly not nobility either. He did not seem to offer any ill will to Ash, and Ash was grateful for that. “It’s not a problem” Ash assured him.

“Are you going for your Ordeal?” the man asked.

“Yes.”

“So’s my son. Kelik! This boy’s going to the Ordeal as well!”

The “boy” that the man called to looked quite a bit older to Ash. As he turned around Ash noticed he had definitely inherited his father’s size. His muscles were literally rippling through his shirt. His hair was cut in a traditional military style and, combined with his size, gave him a menacing look. Kelik looked Ash up and down and nodded to him.

“Hi. Is this your first time to the city?” Ash asked.

“No.” Kelik practically grunted this answer.

“Have you traveled here a lot?”

“Yes. To see Ferrous.” Kelik said this as if Ash was supposed to know who Ferrous was. The look of confusion must have registered with Kelik’s father. “He’s the most famous blacksmith in the city,” Kelik’s father said. “After the Ordeal, as long as Kelik isn’t a Twin, I will be taking him to Ferrous’ workshop to try and obtain an apprenticeship for him.” His father implied, though, that there was a very real chance that Kelik would, in fact be a Twin, but if it didn’t work out, he could still become a world-renowned blacksmith.

Ash turned back to Kelik. “Are you nervous for the Ordeal?” he asked, unsure of what else to say.

“What’s to be nervous about? What are they going to do to me that I can’t handle?” This annoyed Ash more than it should have. But everyone was acting as though this test was no big deal.

Ash had nothing left to say to Kelik, and as they were beginning to board Kelik turned around and started moving towards the ship. The progress was slow, but Ash and his uncle finally made it onto the boat, with only four more people behind them making it on. The guards that were guiding everyone aboard called for a halt, and the people left on the docks would have to wait another fifteen minutes for the next ship to circle back.

As the natural boarding order filled the ship from aft to bow, Ash was located near the raised platform at the very rear of the boat. The captain was already up there. Once the ramps were raised from the ship, men on the dock used long poles with hooks on the end to guide the ship so it was facing away from the docks Ash had just loaded from. It was quite the ballet to maneuver a ship from a dock, switching places, ducking under each other's poles, pushing and pulling to ensure a smooth ninety degree turn, but they accomplished it with speed and precision. In just under two minutes, the boat was facing northeast, toward Hagadorn.

Ash felt a sudden vibration in the wood beneath his feet and he looked around, trying to find the source. He had never been on a boat before but he was still sure that the vibrations were unnatural.

Ash turned to his uncle, who was gently stroking the chestnut brown mane of Noble, trying to keep the horse calm through the disturbance underfoot. "What was that?" Before his uncle could answer, the boat jumped forward, causing Ash to stumble backward and hit his back against side of the platform.

"They just clamped onto the chain," his uncle said. "There is a mechanism to stop the chain in place."

Now that the boat glided with the chain, Ash felt the breeze in his hair and was able to stand solidly with no sign of wobbling. The ship was moving at a nice speed, faster than Noble at a full trot and Ash could already see the walls of Hagadorn approaching. The people on the boat were talking, some laughing and some complaining. He heard a scuffle break out a little ahead of him and heard a curse or two until a guard yelled at them to shut up or be thrown over.

He knew that the walls of the city were one hundred feet tall, but as the ship approached it left him speechless. Even without being next to the wall Ash had to crane his neck to see the top. The grey stone of the gate sparkled, reflecting thousands of small lights across the deck of the ship. It was as if the walls contained millions of little gemstones and they acted as mirrors to the setting sun.

The ship slowed to a stop and Ash saw the ballet of the hook-poles begin again on the docks. The ship turned another ninety degrees and sidled up to the dock. The ramps were lowered to the decks and the people at the bow of the ship left. When Ash and Carrus were off the docks they climbed back up on their wagon. They headed towards the city gates, the setting sun at their backs. On the other side of the city, the walls were probably already casting shadows over the Eastern docks.

As they made their way to the gate, they passed Kelik and his father, who were on foot. Ash caught Kelik's eye and shouted "Good luck tomorrow!"

"Sure. You too." Kelik didn't need to shout; his voice was as strong as he was.

They made it to the gate, still standing wide open with eight guards checking papers, asking questions and inspecting carts and wagons. They approached on the far left of the gate. The guard looked tired, but he remained vigilant. His uniform looked a

little ragged, his doublet wrinkled and fraying at the bottom. He was clean-shaven, which accented the large scar running from just below his right eye down to his chin.

“Ash, give me your Writ of Testing. When we get to the gate, don’t say anything unless you are spoken to by the guard. This is heavier security than I’ve ever seen. I don’t know what’s going on, but let’s not get detained.”

Ash produced the parchment and gave it to his uncle, but he had trouble keeping his eyes forward. He looked around and saw the speed and proficiency of the entry process. The guards checked forms, stamped orders and searched containers.

Ahead of him he could see the jumble of buildings in the city. The very first buildings he saw were made of a dark stone, almost black. There were three side by side, with huge spires at the top and actual glass windows. He heard the sounds of the city, a cacophony of voices and noises. He smelled spices and sweat and feces all mixed together and he was appalled and excited all at once.

When it was their turn, the guard motioned them forward and Carrus held out the parchment for the guard. He took it and examined it. “Here for the Ordeal?” the guard asked. “Don’t know why they would schedule the princess’ coronation on the same day.” The second part seemed to be more to himself than his uncle. “What do you have in the cart?” he asked Carrus.

“A load of boards for a customer in the market,” his uncle said. “After I am taking my nephew to his Ordeal and then we shall be on our way home.”

“Alright. Because of the ceremony tomorrow, all Ordeal participants must stay in the market. Only inns with vacancy are there.”

“Thank you that will be fine.”

The guard handed the parchment back to his uncle, who in turn gave it back to Ash. He stuffed it back in his satchel and the guard passed him another piece of parchment with a string of leather attached to two holes, forming a necklace. “Tell your nephew he has to wear this around his neck. It indicates he is to be tested tomorrow. Now stay out of trouble.” The guard motioned them forward and the wagon slowly crept past the city gates.

Ash pulled the necklace over his head and studied it. It was in the shape of a shield with four symbols, a feather, a fire, a plant and a raindrop. There were two arcs traveling from top to bottom that split the shield into four sections. Just as they passed inside the wrought-iron gate Ash turned to see the sun gasp its last breath, fade beneath the horizon and he was suddenly cast in darkness.

CHAPTER FOUR

ABDUCTION

The smell of the capital hit Ash immediately. It attacked his nose, causing him to gag. He reflexively squinted his eyes and pulled his arm up to his face, hiding his nose in the crook of his elbow. Uncle Carrus, who was apparently familiar enough with the smell of bodies and piss pots hadn't stopped like Ash had. He turned around and saw Ash, smirked and said, "are you coming or not? It gets better."

Ash barely heard him. His ears were attacked next. It was so loud in the city. Noises seemed to come at him from all direction: people's voices, vendors yelling, music drifting through the air. The walls seemed to act as the gorge near his house did; all of the sounds seemed to bounce around and echo, creating an affect that only heightened the sound.

Ash was overwhelmed and instantly wanted to go home. What would it matter if they didn't test him anyway? Twins don't exist, there's no chance he could possibly be one so why even bother? He could turn around right now and no one would know. They don't record your name in the census book until you actually get here, how would they know that he skipped out? Uncle Carrus could lie, say that he had an accident, died, or was badly maimed. Even if he was a twin, they'd have no use of him anyway. All of this flashed through Ash's mind in an instant as his uncle slowly walked towards him and threw an arm around his shoulders. "It'll be ok," Carrus said, lowering his head near

Ash's ear so he didn't have to yell. "You'll get used to it. It's like walking into a barn; at first you can't understand how anyone would ever step foot in it but eventually you don't even remember why you were so offended in the first place. Besides, while the city holds its dangers, it is also filled with amazing things to be seen. Like that."

Ash felt his uncle angle his arm upwards and he opened his eyes. He didn't know how he didn't see it at first, but now that he was looking, he couldn't stop. The palace was awe inspiring in its beauty and size. Six slim, round towers surrounded the castle in almost a perfect circle, with walkways going between towers. Its walls were pure white and seemed to almost radiate light. Ornate windows were scattered generously around the walls in seemingly perfect symmetry, along with holes of various sizes for archers and artillery. Ash felt himself get dizzy just looking up at the walkways; he couldn't imagine what it would be like to walk along them.

"It's pretty impressive isn't it?" Carrus asked.

"It's incredible. Why is it so tall though?" Ash asked his head and eyes still craning upward looking at this castle in the sky.

"Don't really know to be honest with you, but my guess is to show that the King, or Queen as it will be soon, is closer to the gods than anyone else. The thought is that, even as the ruler of the kingdom, they still must have the favor of the gods. What way to prove your favor than to say you're physically closer to the gods than anyone else?"

"What about the Temple?" Ash asked.

"The Temple was originally the tallest building in the city. King Danton's great grandfather, Dobbin was worried about how much power the priestesses were gathering.

They are very influential. It was during his reign that they grasped the power of judgment from the throne. So he had the original palace torn down, brick by brick and rebuilt.”

“Why not just build up from the original?”

“It’s not always enough to continue where you left off. Sometimes you have to start all over if you want to achieve your goals.”

“But he didn’t enjoy it, if I remember correctly.”

“Your lessons are going well.” Carrus smiled at Ash, the pride showing in his eyes that his nephew wasn’t as opposed to history as his own son was. “You are half right. Dobbin entered the palace on the day it was completed. He walked through every room, every hallway, every secret passage. When he was done, he went into the throne room, sat on his throne and, if the legend is to be believed, he smiled and died.”

“That’s terrible!” Ash was appalled at the thought of a dead monarch smiling on the throne. It was enough to make the hair on his arms stand up straight.

“What’s terrible?”

“He wasted his life and was barely able to see the palace be used for any good.”

“That’s one way to look at it,” Carrus said as he nodded his head thoughtfully.

“Another is that he had fulfilled his purpose and that the gods, happy with his accomplishments, welcomed him to Uridel where he could fulfill his Great Purpose, satisfied with his deeds in life.” Ash hadn’t considered this. It seemed that, as hard as he tried, he often forgot that the gods had a Greater Purpose for everyone that fulfilled their duties in life. Carrus squeezed Ash’s shoulder and said, “Come on, let’s get going. It’s going to be dark soon and I’d like to find my friend’s ale house before too many of the vagabonds come out to play.”

The two began walking east, following the road set out before them. The city was so large that it took Ash a while to realize that the road they were on actually curved. It was the Great Road that curved around the perimeter of the city. As they walked, Ash realized that the buildings looked remarkably different from one another. He had heard that the city was slowly built up through the generations, and this must be the reason for the differences. Some were two stories; some were as high as four. Some had different clay tiles for roofs, some were still just straw and thatch. Ash had already become used to the noise and smell of the city and he continued to look around in wonder at all of the different sites he had never imagined could be real. He had heard stories of the city and the people, but he assumed they were like their neighbor Pike's fishing stories; somewhat based in truth but the reality was rarely close to the tale told. But here, the sights and sounds were more magnificent than he could have imagined.

"We're approaching the market district," Carrus said to Ash. Ash's ears had even adjusted to the cacophony of Hagadorn because he had little trouble hearing his uncle this time. "You need to make sure you keep a keen eye out at all times. There are many con men and cutpurses that would love to take advantage of a newcomer like you. Try and keep your eyes in your head and your jaw from dropping at the sight of every new thing you see."

Ash blushed. He was excited, but he didn't realize just how obvious that excitement was. Carrus softened a bit. "It's ok," he said, quieter, "I don't blame you for being excited. Reminds me of how I reacted the first time. I'll be by your side the whole time, but be careful all the same. The city is dangerous, even with me here to guide you through."

Carrus led Noble and the cart to a street to their left, taking them deeper into the city center. The road was narrower than the Great Road and people were gathering in the streets. Ash was starting to feel crowded and he had to concentrate on what was ahead of him and next to him so he didn't bump into different carts, stalls or people. He was trying his best to look out for anyone who might be determined to do him harm, but he was having a hard enough time just focusing on not running into people. He instinctively grabbed the necklace around his neck that the guard at the front gave him, holding it tight.

It was almost completely dark and Ash watched the City Lightmen walk through the streets with their candles on long poles, lighting the lamps along the city streets. Other people, more adept at navigating the streets were laughing, a large group of men running by and screaming obscenities at each other and laughing, having a majestic time.

They turned another corner and two more quickly after that. Ash was losing any sense of where he was. They were deep in the heart of the city, and these buildings were actually tall enough to obscure his view of the palace. It would seem that any sight of the palace would be a great directional tool, a compass for the city, but the streets were now so narrow that the buildings felt like they were on top of him. There were streamers running above his head from building to building and new flower bouquets set out along each lamp post, (although in the orange glow of the lamps they all just looked orange or black.) There was music ahead of them, and a general feeling of celebration seemed to be filling this particular area. Ash couldn't help but let that feeling in and he smiled, laughing as a group of revelers passed by, all in masks.

“Here we are,” Carrus exclaimed. Ash looked up and saw a sign hanging above the building: “The Drunken Toad”. He didn’t think it sounded like a particularly nice place to have a drink, but maybe that was the point. It was probably why Carrus’ friend was able to have room for them to stay during as important a time as the princess’ coronation. “Ash, can you take Noble around to the back of alehouse and tie him up? There should be some hitching posts there. And make sure he gets water too.”

“Yes Uncle, no problem.” Ash took the reins and led Noble around back, making sure to swing him wide enough for the cart to follow. There wasn’t anyone in back to help him, so Ash had to figure out where to put their cart for the evening. He unhitched Noble and tied him to the post; the water trough was in front so Noble would have no problem drinking.

Ash looked around and saw a small overhang that extended out from the back of the Alehouse. It was simple, with two posts in the ground and a thatch roof covering the top. Ash pulled the cart over there and parked it as best as he could. Finished with his task, he walked around the front and opened the door.

Stale ale and the burnt bread overran his nostrils at once. He stepped inside, looking for his uncle. To his right sat the bar, a ragged looking wood structure that seemed no more than a long box with a slab of wood on top. There were shelves behind it with plates and glasses and a few half-empty bottles of what appeared to be potato port with other half-finished bottles of wine. The walls were decorated with old paintings covered in dust. Seven tables sat directly across from the bar, each with two benches that looked like they could accommodate three men. There were a few men at two of the

tables but Ash thought the place should have been busier with the number of people in the city this week. His Uncle was seated at the back table, his back against the wall.

Ash walked over to him and sat down across from him. “My friend Marcus has set us up with a room upstairs,” Carrus said. “He’s gone to get us food and some ale.”

“Aunt Dara told me that we shouldn’t need to buy any food or drink, though. She didn’t give us enough Dernas for it.”

“There’s no reason to fret, Marcus told me it was on the house tonight. Better to have people here eating his food and drinking his ale. Looks bad for business if two of his eight customers brought their own food.” Marcus was a large man whose belly could barely fit behind the bar. When he brought the food out he set it on the table in front of Ash, slapped him on the shoulder and let out a booming “Ha!” before walking away. Ash had no idea what was so funny, until he looked down at his plate.

Ash understood at once why people might want to bring their own food to the Drunken Toad. The smell of burnt bread when he walked in revealed its source. There was also a plate of meat, although to Ash he wasn’t sure what animal it could have come from. It was rough and dry, and the ale, thin and sour, did little to help wash it down. He choked down as much as he thought his stomach could handle, and then insisted that he was full.

“Well, we had better turn in for the evening,” Carrus said. “We have a long day tomorrow.”

“Uncle,” Ash said, “I was wondering if we could maybe go out tonight and just have a look around the market.” Carrus did not look like he would be willing to allow that to happen at all. Ash doubled down on his efforts. “It’s just that I’ve never been here

before and there's so much to see! And I will be busy all day tomorrow with the Ordeal and then the day after I'm not so sure I'll want to stay in the city any longer. I'll probably want to be as far away as possible, at least for a little while."

Carrus grunted, thinking it over. Ash could see that his uncle didn't want to go out himself. "I could even go myself," Ash offered. "That way you can sleep. And I won't be out long. Only an hour at most. I just want to have a look around. And I'll be careful. I'll keep my head about me and pay attention to the people around me."

"I promised your Aunt Dara that I wouldn't let you out of my sight."

"It could be our little secret. I won't tell her if you won't." Ash smiled. He didn't understand where this little blast of bravery came from, but he was excited at the prospect of seeing what else the city might have to offer. Jaslin would be proud of him for being so spontaneous.

"Alright, fine. But don't stay out late. When the city chimes ring ten I want you to return here. We're upstairs, the second door on the right." Ash smiled, excited to go explore. "Thank you Uncle," he said and stood up from the table. He saw his uncle smirk as he turned and headed out the front door.

The first order of business for Ash was figuring out where he was so he made sure that he didn't get lost while sightseeing. It wasn't possible to return here when he didn't know where *here* was exactly. He looked around, seeking some kind of landmark. At the intersection of the road, just five buildings down, Ash saw an interesting roof. It had a horse standing on top of it. He had to look again to make sure he wasn't seeing things, but he wasn't. Although, after looking closer, Ash could see that it was only a statue. But

a building like that wasn't something one saw every day, so Ash was sure he could find The Drunken Toad again if he found the horse building.

He set off following the sound of the music he had heard earlier in the night. The crowd seemed to be flowing in the same general direction and Ash found it easier to navigate through the people than he had earlier. He tried to keep his wits about him, but the people around him were fascinating. There were many who were dressed in different costumes and masks. There must be some ball or masquerade tonight. The masks were mainly of the different deities, but different animals made appearances.

The street emptied into a large square courtyard filled with more permanent looking vendor stalls than he had seen on the previous streets. The buildings surrounding the courtyard were all uniform, dark gray stone that looked so smooth it was reflecting images back. There were breaks between the buildings and as Ash walked into the courtyard he finally caught glimpses of the castle through the spaces. He also noticed guards at the streets, each standing at attention and holding a pike. However, the real action seemed to be in the center of the courtyard. A crowd was gathered and the music flowed from there.

He approached the crowd, hoping to catch a glimpse of the minstrels at play. As he walked toward the merriment a man in a Mestaphor mask came running in his direction. Ash tried to side-step him, but the man was too fast and ran into him, lowering his shoulder to try and soften the blow. Ash gasped as the wind was knocked from him and he fell backward. The man barely slowed; he looked back over his shoulder and yelled through his mask, "sorry chap" and kept going.

It took a moment for Ash to catch his breath, and he shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. A hand appeared in front of him and he took it, grateful for the help. The hand pulled and Ash was lifted up as though he weighed nothing at all. He practically jumped up and almost tumbled forward if not for a hand that grabbed his waist, steadying him. He started to thank his would-be savior when the words stopped in his mouth.

Standing before him was perhaps the most strikingly beautiful woman he had ever seen. Her long black hair looked like ribbons of silk. Her eyes seemed to glow green in the night, and he could see that, even without any paint, her lips were a beautiful pink. She was wearing a deep blue dress with lace at the cuffs. The dress dipped down to the cleave of her bosom and Ash started blushing at once.

“You know, it’s customary to thank someone when they help you,” the woman said. Her voice sounded like honey, smooth, golden and sweet.

“I, uh, yeah, sorry,” Ash said, stammering through his embarrassment. His face was burning brighter by the moment and he was grateful that it was dark in the courtyard, less she realize the source of his embarrassment.

“You don’t have to apologize to me, you didn’t knock me down.” She smirked at him.

“Right, well, thank you.” He didn’t know what else to say to her. He looked down, scared that he might stare at the top of her breasts again and he turned to walk away.

“What’s your name?” she asked, stopping him and grabbing his wrist. He pulled away, unwilling to be party to such impropriety. He immediately regretted it, not wanting to be rude. “Sorry about that,” Ash said, not wanting to offend her.

“You keep apologizing,” she said. “Unless that’s your name? Is your name Sorry?”

“No, sorry,” he said. Todros blast him he was acting like a fool. This woman had disarmed him so quickly he couldn’t even speak properly.

“See there you go again,” the mystery woman said, laughing. “Ok, let’s try something. Just take a deep breath.” Ash followed her directions. “Now think hard. What is your name?”

“Ash,” he said, a little less flustered.

“See, that wasn’t that difficult, was it?” He smiled at her, and she smiled back, lighting up her face and the area around them.

“No, it wasn’t.” There was a long pause, Ash unsure what this beauty could want from him.

“This is the part where you ask me what my name is,” she said, once again breaking the silence.

“Right. So what’s your name?” He sounded ridiculous, like a child asking his parents if he could go out to play.

“Kiera. It’s a pleasure to meet you Ash.” She held out her hand to shake his. He hesitated, unsure of what to make of how freely she initiated contact with him. “Oh come on,” she said, “it’s not like I’m asking for marriage.” So she had figured out where his hesitation stemmed from.

“But you’re a woman,” Ash said.

“I am? Well thank the Thirteen you were here to tell me that, here I was, not sure about who I was before you fell down before me.” Ash felt stupid. Her teasing, light and playful, still struck him and made him feel like a fool.

“No, it’s just, women don’t normally shake hands,” Ash said.

“Don’t they? Well here I am, a woman, according to you, and I’ve shaken hands with people my whole life.”

“Of course,” Ash said, “how stupid of me. I’ll leave you alone now.” Kiera furrowed her eyebrows at him and put her hands on her hips as he turned to go. “You’re new at this, aren’t you?” she said.

“At what?” Was she also able to tell that it was his first time in the city? That he was both excited and completely overwhelmed by his first experience in the capital?

“Talking to women.” He hadn’t expected that. A rock sank in his stomach.

“No. Well, kinda. I mean, there’s Jaslin”

“Ooh, who’s Jaslin?” Kiera had taken her teasing tone to a whole new level of mocking.

“She’s just a friend. Look, why do you want to know so badly, why do you care?”

“I don’t.” She suddenly dropped her teasing tone and started to sound almost angry. “But I thought you looked like you could use some help and I was there to help. It shouldn’t matter if I’m a woman or not, you were the one knocked down on your ass, not me, so maybe you should be a little nicer to the only person here who even noticed that Mestaphor knocked you over in the first place.” She turned around and left him standing

there, dumbstruck. What was that all about? he wondered. Unsure of what to do, he yelled after her, "I'm sorry."

She walked back to him and pointed a finger in his face. "That's another thing," she said, "that's the fourth time you've apologized to me in two minutes. A girl doesn't want to hear apologies, she wants to hear compliments, fun conversation, anything but apologies." She turned again and left him.

He tried to follow her, suddenly feeling like he had to make it up to her somehow, but it proved too difficult. Where the crowd seemed to part for her like water around a rock, he could barely shove his way past the different people. He was disappointed and the idea of the music and minstrels no longer seemed so appealing to him.

He walked out from the center of the courtyard, glancing at the stalls as he went. The city seemed darker to him somehow. He kept looking around, hoping to see Kiera somewhere, hoping that she would give him a second chance. He thought of all of the incredibly suave and smart things that he would say to her, but it was all false bravado. Just as he was leaving the courtyard someone near him cried out, "Thief!"

He jumped a little, suddenly aware of everyone around him. He looked around, trying to spot the thief, hoping he could help the guards catch him. Maybe he could help them and Kiera would see it. She would think he was actually brave. Ash saw guards rushing over and he looked about more frantically, hoping to discover the perpetrator. The same voice, a woman, cried out again, "guards, please, thief!"

Still looking around, he noticed that a lot of the faces were looking at him. He turned toward the sound of the voice and saw a woman, small in a smock apron, pointing her finger in his direction. He turned around, hoping to leap on the thief who had

somehow made his way so close to Ash without him noticing, but there was no one there, only a fruit stall behind him. He looked back at the woman and his stomach dropped at once. She was pointing at him. The guards were getting closer now, only a few people in the crowd separated Ash from them.

He turned to flee, hoping he could weave his way in and out faster than the men in armor, but he ran right into a guard that was approaching him from the other direction. The guard grabbed him by the arm; Ash tried to wrench free, but it was no use, the guard had a solid grip on him, the man's fingers biting into his skin.

"Stop fighting," the guard said. "You have been accused by this citizen of theft. What do you say to these accusations?"

"It's not true," Ash exclaimed, "I've never seen her before."

"Ma'am," the guard said, ignoring Ash's protests, "what is it that was stolen from you."

The woman spoke up, her voice trembling in apparent fear. "A ruby broach," she said. "It's been in my family for generations. Goes back to the Aristen blood line."

"That's crazy," Ash said, fighting against the grip once again. "I didn't steal anything, I'm here for my Ordeal of Ascendancy, look." Ash took his free hand and reached for the necklace the front gate guard had given him upon arrival to the city. He felt under his shirt then quickly moved his hand up towards the nape of his neck, searching for the leather strap. It was gone! There was nothing there; someone must have stolen his necklace. "Someone must have stolen it from me," Ash said, trying to explain.

"Do you know the easiest way for a thief to escape accusation?" the guard said. "Accuse someone else of being a thief. It draws attention away from them."

“No, I swear. Look, I might not have the necklace but I still have my writ, let me go for a second and I’ll get it out of my coin purse.” The guard hesitated, but released his arm. More guards had arrived and circled Ash. It was clear he wasn’t going anywhere. He reached his hand down to his waist and grabbed his coin purse, pulling it free and opening it. He shoved his fingers in and searched, but there was no parchment there. What’s that? Ash thought, as his fingers grazed something unknown. Before he could pull his hand out, the guard snatched the purse from him.

The lawman barely had enough time to even pull the purse open when he triumphantly asked “what’s this?” He pulled out an ornate looking pin, molded in the shape of two birds flying around each other, the metal intricately etched with each individual feather a precisely carved ruby.

“I don’t know how that got in there,” Ash said.

“I’ll tell you how,” the guard said, “you stole it and thought you were too clever for us. I shouldn’t have even given you a chance.” He took the broach and handed it back to the woman, who thanked him profusely. Two other guards formed up on either side of Ash and each grabbed an elbow. They began walking him in the direction of the castle.

“Where are you taking me?” Ash asked.

“The Conflagratorium,” the guard to his left answered.

“But that’s where—“

“Criminals are burned at the stake,” the guard on his right finished for him.

No! Where was Uncle Carrus to protect him?

CHAPTER FIVE
A SERVANT'S LIFE

Alora looked around the prayer chamber and sighed. She was used to seeing it busier than it was today. In fact, she was shocked that there were as few people in here during such a busy time for the city. The princess' coronation was just a day away and the streets were literally crammed with people. And yet, it seemed that fewer and fewer people were willing to come say a prayer for their future queen and ruler. It was such a shame.

The chamber itself was huge, less a chamber and more a cavern, surrounded by windowless walls. The original High Priestess felt that being able to control the light would help foster a sense of quiet and meditation, regardless of what time of day it was. Plus, if it was raining or snowing, the floors wouldn't become damp or wet, leaving the nobilities' knees dry and clean while they knelt in prayer. Anything to keep the nobility from getting dirty, she thought and sighed again.

In the middle of the chamber sat a circular reflecting pool, large enough that it could hold twenty horses. The body of water was probably the most important reason to build the sanctum the way it was; the water had to be kept perfectly still. The pool was large enough that she would probably have trouble swimming from one end to the other if she went underwater and tried to hold her breath the whole way. (Something she'd dreamed of but never tried.) Above the pool on the ceiling there were thirteen busts, each

representing one of the different deities. The idea was a follower could kneel at the pool, look down and see their own reflection and the reflection of the deities face imposed over their own. It allowed them to see the gods and goddesses as being one with them. It was supposed to give the people strength and inspiration.

Along the ground around the pool were giant symbols marking the area where each deity would appear in the pool; a crab claw for Amella, Goddess of water; a set of scales for Chrona, Goddess of time and judgement; and of course the great wolf-bear for Largra herself. The people could find the appropriate symbol and wait to kneel at the pool. And usually, there were lines at most of the symbols, (except of course for Gorgone, because few actually prayed for that type of attention from the gods, nobody wanted undue trouble,) but even today there were only five people in the chamber, and two of them, women servants it looked like, were quietly whispering to each other away from the pool. They were probably just catching up on gossip in the one place that their masters couldn't stop them from going.

Alora walked over to them, trying to keep the holiness of the place intact; even if it wasn't being as used as much as she thought it should be it should still represent the best place to go and commune with the gods. The ladies saw her coming and offered her a half-hearted curtsy. Alora bowed her head in return and addressed the ladies quietly and politely, "good morrow ladies, and may the Thirteen guide your purpose."

"Good morrow, m'lady, and may their wisdom guide all who seek it," they replied, with the rote blessing. There was no sweetness in their voice, however; they seemed annoyed at being interrupted from what was likely the only break they would receive in their day.

“Have you good ladies come seeking advice or guidance?” Alora asked, trying to imply that, if that had not, that they might consider going somewhere else.

“We all need guidance in these troubling times,” the woman to Alora’s right responded. She was fairly dull looking, with mouse-brown hair and sallow cheeks. She couldn’t be older than twenty five, but she looked more worn out than Ravyn Caligari, the old hag that tried to steal the sky from Largra.

“What is so troubling,” Alora said, “that you might be scared to even approach the Font of Wisdom?”

“Why we fear for our new queen, of course,” replied the second woman. She was prettier than her friend and Alora sensed a bit of jealousy from the first woman even as the second spoke.

“Our new queen will be an admirable and strong leader, I am sure,” Alora said.

“Ay, she may be,” the prettier, and clearly more dominant, woman said, “but what happens if she gets a touch of the Stanger’s Mist?” The two women started snickering and Alora, having never heard of such a condition, allowed her curiosity to overcome their obvious crassness. “And what is the Stranger’s Mist?” Alora asked, already fearing the answer.

“Don’t you know my lady? Why, it’s what happens when her majesty’s queen-head gets brushed the right way and she can’t think of anything else!” The two women fell into fits and rushed away from young priestess, who was left blushing and unable to say anything. The nerve of those two, being so crude in so holy a place, she thought as she watched the two women leave.

Alora rushed over to pedestal in front of the wolf. She flared her elbows out to her side and put her hands together, calmly and methodically weaving them through the traditional prayer of cleansing. She ended the prostration by extending her hands slightly in front of her, palms up as if asking for bread like a beggar on the street. “Forgive me Largra; I have failed as your priestess in keeping the sanctity of Temple. Please give me the strength to deal with those who would debase and make a mockery of your sacred ground. Please watch over the princess as she transforms into a queen to rule over Lanser with a keen mind and sharp blade.”

A voice beside Alora spoke, interrupting her prayer. “I hate to be the one to tell a Priestess of the Thirteen about the gods, but you do know you’re praying to the wrong god, right?” Alora looked to her left to see who had spoken to her. A man stood there just smirking at her. She saw that he didn’t mean any offense; even still, she was not in the mood for teasing.

“You presume too much, sir,” she said, as forcefully as she could, although to her ear it still sounded woefully weak and pathetic.

“I don’t presume anything,” the man said. “I’m just wondering if the beautiful priestess would be so kind as to offer me a lesson in theology, since it is I that am clearly confused. I would have thought that a prayer of transformation might be uttered to Gorgene, whose manipulations can go far beyond that of character.”

“I would never pray for the queen to—“

“Or perhaps Lissyn, who sees growth in all things, not just our fields.”

“Lissyn’s power does not outgrow—“

“Perhaps even Todros, for your request for strength for our new queen?”

“I suppose, but—“

“So why with all of those wonderful choices does the priestess pray to Largra, the mother of creation? Has the queen not already been created when she was born?”

“If you would let me finish, I could tell you my prayer served many purposes. The first was for Largra to grant me strength to carry out her wishes. The second was not one of wisdom or change, but for creation.” The man raised an eyebrow at her, seemingly beckoning her to continue her thought. “Largra oversaw the queen’s creation, but now she is being created into something new, a queen. Not just *a* queen but *my* queen, and *your* queen and all of Lanser’s queen. That type of power rests with only one goddess and that’s the Queen Mother Largra.” Alora was frustrated at the man for listening to her prayer and for thinking it was ok to speak to a priestess with such casualness.

“So your prayer for the queen was that second part of your prayer?” The man smiled and his teeth, although a little crooked, were bright white. He was clearly wealthy, able to afford hygiene products to keep his appearance up.

“Of course it was.”

“The queen is just an afterthought to you, then? I thought the Priestesses and the Matriarch were to work arm in arm to ensure the health and strength of the kingdom”

“Of course they do, I mean, we do, and no, she is never an afterthought, she was just second in my prayer.” Alora was flustered.

“Second only to yourself? So the queen is beneath you?” The man seemed to be enjoying himself too much.

“No, of course not, and to suggest such a thing is blasphemous. You are talking to a priestess, not some commoner to be mocked for your amusement.” She was actually

mad now; he was clearly trying to provoke her. To her surprise, however, he bowed low to the ground and said “You are right, of course. I beg for your forgiveness and hope I can make this right.”

She was shocked. It took her a moment to respond and when she did she momentarily forgot that her position as priestess technically set her above almost everyone in society. “You actually seem sincere,” she said.

“Of course I am,” he replied, staying in his bow but looking up at her.

“You can come out of that ridiculous bow now.” He straightened up and it looked for a moment like he wanted to take her hands in his, but he stopped himself. He smiled at her, more meekly than she thought would be possible from him. “What’s your name?” she asked him.

“Torelle, my lady.” He bowed again, but came out of it right away.

“Torelle? Of the house of Kozile?”

“Yes, my lady. At your service.” The house of Kozile was a noble house whose bloodlines had run thin in recent generations. Much of their money and influence had dried up with the mines their family owned. Minor nobility was still nobility though, and Alora had to make sure that she didn’t offend him. It was one of the trickier parts of being a priestess. Her position was technically one above anyone but the queen or council, but she was still a servant to the people. It sometimes made maneuvering the social ladder difficult and she was still relatively new at the process, having just been confirmed as a Neophyte into the Order of Priestesses last year.

“Well, it is a pleasure to meet you my lord. May the Thirteen guide your purpose”

“Yes of course, it is a pleasure.” She waited for the return to her blessing but was left wanting. “In all seriousness, though, why do you pray to Largra for wisdom? She’s the Creator.”

Alora had this thought many times, but she couldn’t stop herself from seeking out Largra in her times of need. She just felt comforted by the idea that the ruler of the gods and goddesses was listening to her prayers. But she couldn’t tell anyone that, so she had long ago decided on what she would tell people who asked her this very question. “She is the creator of the world,” she said, “and therefore creator of all that we know. She created wisdom even if she isn’t the one who oversees the wise.”

“But if she created everything, didn’t she also create doubt, fear and worry?” Torelle asked. He didn’t seem to be mocking her this time, he seemed genuinely curious.

“Of course; but those were only created for our benefit.”

“Our benefit? How much more beneficial would the world be if we weren’t ever scared? Or if we didn’t envy what each other had!”

“Fear is important in our lives, it helps us, it creates our instinct for self-preservation. How many children would die from running off cliffs or drowning in lakes if they weren’t scared? And envy allows us to see what’s possible, to work hard and try and improve our situation. It gives us longing to fulfill our purpose in life.”

“Are there a lot of children running off cliffs?” Torelle said with a blank look on his face, apparently flabbergasted at this line of thought.

“No. Because Largra was wise enough to create fear.”

“But why not pray to Fantomine? She is the giver of wisdom.”

“Because when a baby is thirsty, it will instinctually turn to its mother’s breast for sustenance, even if a wet-nurse is available.” Torelle grimaced, although she wasn’t sure it was out of discomfort. He was probably raised with a wet-nurse, she thought. He’s nobility; you just insulted his upbringing as well as his mother you fool.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean anything by that. It’s just, I feel like Largra still listens.”

“It’s ok. I actually admire your faith. I haven’t been sure that the gods have listened to me for quite some time.”

“Why do you say that?” She was confused with this interaction. It went from gently mocking, to apology, to defending and now to a crisis of faith, a true priestesses-follower interaction. It was strange how quickly he moved from one subject to another.

“My family, as you may know, has had some poor luck lately. Our mines have gone barren in the last decade and we have struggled to keep our financial viability.”

“I had heard,” she said, “but we can’t just pray to the gods to favor us with wealth. That’s not how they work. You must pray for the strength and wisdom to stay on your path, your true path, to fulfill your purpose. We aren’t always happy with what our purpose is, but we all serve in an important way. Some play a more significant role, but all are important.”

“And you’re ok with that? With knowing that what you want doesn’t matter?” She had never thought of it like that.

“What I want matters. I want to make the gods happy, to please them. I want them to be happy with me so one day I can be called by them to fulfill my Greater Purpose, to serve them in Uridel.”

“You’re happy with that? Being a servant?”

“I was born to be a servant; that is my purpose, to serve the gods and the people. I will embrace being a servant and pray for wisdom to fulfill my duties to the best of my abilities.”

“To have the faith of a priestesses is to have the favor of the gods,” Torelle said, reciting one of the nine minor tenets of the Thirteen.

“Yes it is. I would suggest praying for that faith.” She bowed her head slightly, turning to leave him there. She took a few steps then turned, finding that he hadn’t moved. “Try praying to Largra; she will always listen.” She smiled and walked away. Her time overseeing the Font of Wisdom for the morning was complete, and she had more prayers to attend to.

CHAPTER SIX
A MODEST PROPOSAL

Alora spent the rest of her morning as she normally did: reflecting on the day's events, followed by prayers and a light breakfast of bread and a tomato, then a quick bit of housekeeping by tidying up her room (which didn't take long as it was barely large enough for her bed and a small night table) and spending the rest of her day out into the city helping the poor. The Temple couldn't give out food or clothing very often, so Alora searched for people who were struggling with some trial in their life and she helped to comfort them and to try and understand how that trial might reveal their Greater Purpose. She loved the work, and although not everyone was eager to welcome a priestess into their home, they still listened and allowed the help to be given. She wondered sometimes why people were so unwilling to accept help when it found them in the streets.

Before Alora could change into her Apprentice's robes, marking her as a priestess for easier identification of her position, there was a knock on her door. In truth, no one needed to knock, and few did; the Temple was a place of complete honesty and openness and to withhold or hide anything was grounds for immediate dismissal. If a door was closed, it was assumed that the woman inside was sleeping, but even then all were permitted access to each other's rooms. The priestesses were granted doors for the sake of privacy in case a citizen, and more specifically a man, became lost and found himself

in the living quarters. How horrible would that be, she thought, as she made her way to the door to open it.

Standing before her was Rilara, her closest friend in the Temple. Rilara was kind and was the only person with whom Alora could trust with her deepest hopes and fears. Not secrets, exactly; she wasn't hiding anything and if she were ordered to discuss her doubts she would do so without a moment's hesitation. But sometimes her doubts ate at her and it was nice to have a friend like Rilara who would listen to her and not judge her or tease her about them. They went through their training together and they were lucky enough to be sent on their year-long mission to Arboria together, able to have a familiar face in so strange a land.

“Good morrow Rilara,” Alora said, “may the Thirteen guide your purpose.”

Rilara bowed her head and offered a quick and appropriate response. She looked up at Alora and Alora was frightened. There was a look in Rilara's eyes that Alora had only ever seen once, when the village they were working at in Arboria came under siege by a small band of vandals. The village had been defenseless and only through the wisdom of the gods and the quick thinking of their host had they escaped the fires that so many perished in. Alora shuddered remembering the horror.

“What's the matter,” she said, grabbing Rilara's wrist and trying to pull her into the room. Rilara pulled away though, refusing to enter the chamber. “Aniste wants to see you. Immediately.”

“Her Grace? What for? Have I done something wrong?” Alora was worried now too. The High Priestess and Purveyor of Truth was one of the most powerful people in all of Lanser save the monarch. She held more influence than even the council since hers

was not only with the king but with the people. If she was even half decent, she could turn a sermon into a riot with a mere sentence and nobody, not the king or the council, would want to openly challenge anything she had to say. Luckily for the kingdom, Aniste, the High Priestess was said to be the near-perfect embodiment of Ifena, the goddess of virtue. Every word Alora heard spoken about her painted her as kind and gentle-hearted but able to maneuver the necessary political aspects of her position with deftness and grace. She was busy and so rarely even acknowledged anyone under the level of Seer, the third highest level of progression in the temple. To call for a Apprentice was unprecedented.

“I’m not sure what she wants with you, but you’d better hurry up. You don’t want to get on her bad side.”

“I don’t think she has a bad side,” Alora said, trying to seem less concerned than she was. “But, it is still good advice. Thanks Rilara.”

Alora reached out and gave Rilara’s hand a quick squeeze and then left her room. There was no need to shut her door and so she just hurried down the corridor to the stairway that led to Her Grace’s tower. She held the west tower all to herself; she didn’t need to be disturbed while planning her monthly sermons or finding ways that the temple could better serve the people of Lanser and beyond. With each step up the staircase Alora’s stomach tightened a little bit more so that, by the time she arrived to the door of Her Grace’s chamber she felt sick to her stomach. Alora opened the door, trying to not seem out of breath or too hurried, but wanting to convey that she made it here as quickly as she could.

The room was beautiful, and larger than any other room Alora had seen in the Temple, save the Sanctuary of Reflection. Red and gold tapestries hung along the walls with a giant painting of Aniste over the four poster bed. A giant table stood in the center of the room, rectangular and able to seat fourteen people. Near the window opposite the door was a desk covered in scrolls and parchment. And standing next to the desk and looking out the window was the high priestess herself. Alora walked into the room.

“You didn’t knock,” Aniste said, not turning around.

Alora stopped, her stomach tightening even more. She fumbled for words, unsure of how to respond. “I’m sorry Your Grace, I didn’t think—“

“That could prove to be a problem. Do you believe my time is valuable?”

“Of course Your Grace!” Alora bowed, lowering her eyes to the ground.

“And you didn’t even consider that I might have been busy in here and that you might be interrupting a vital activity or prayer?”

“I hadn’t considered that, I was just nervous to be called here, Your Grace. I won’t let it happen again, of course.”

The High Priestesses and Purveyor of Truth turned and looked at Alora, who had raised her eyes while explaining. Aniste allowed a slight smile to brush across her lips.

“Of course it won’t,” Aniste said. “I have been told that, although inexperienced, you are quick to catch on. Not slow like some of the Neophytes and Apprentices that charge through my Temple like they own the place.”

“That is kind of you to say, Your Grace,” Alora said, although she was shocked to hear the head of the Temple speak so unkindly about the younger members of the Order of Priestesses.

“It is not kindness, it is truth,” Aniste said. “Unless you don’t think yourself smart. Then I would be saying something false to be kind instead of just stating simple fact. Is that what I am doing? Am I being false?”

“Of course not, Your Grace,” Alora said. What was going on, she wondered, frantically trying to figure out why she was being treated in such a manner.

“So you admit that you are smart?” Aniste began walking towards Alora, taking her time, every step an exclamation to a point she was making. What that point was though, Alora was in the dark.

“The second major tenant says we must never brag lest the gods think we try to fool them of our true character.” Alora was reminded of Torelle from the morning’s prayers, twisting her words until she became so frustrated she reminded him of her superiority. That wouldn’t work here; she was a mere speck compared to Aniste. She thought the gods must be punishing her for her arrogance this morning to think herself higher than anyone else.

“Do you think statements of fact are bragging then?” Aniste said. Alora couldn’t figure out where this was going or when it was going to end. She took a breath, trying to regain her composure and clear her mind.

“I think statements of fact made about one’s self that seek to explain a positive character trait can come across as bragging, regardless of their intention.”

“Good. That was the first smart thing you’ve said since you walked in here. I was starting to doubt what I had been told, but I see that you have proven your teachers correct. You may stand now.”

Alora stood, unsure what to do next. Aniste walked up to her and placed her hands on Alora's shoulders. "I am in need of a new servant. My last one died, unfortunately."

"May the gods bless her in their calling." Alora said, as she whispered the blessing of death.

"Yes. I suppose so," Aniste said, seeming to dismiss the prayer as it left Alora's lips. "Even still, having heard of your exceptional intellect and piousness I sent to have you up here for your audition." Audition? So that's what this was? It was all just a test?

"I don't know if I am qualified, your Grace," Alora said, unsure whether she should take this information as a compliment or an insult.

"You think you're more suited than I am to make a decision about what I need?" Aniste dropped her hands off Alora's shoulders and walked away towards the desk.

"Of course not, Your Grace." Aniste rifled through the papers on the desk until she found one that she was looking for. She took it and held it at her side.

"But?" Aniste said, waiting for a response that Alora was too scared to make.

"It's just, I haven't been trained properly as a servant. I don't know the first thing about washing clothes or setting a table."

"I was born to be a servant; that is my purpose, to serve the gods and the people.' Didn't you say that, just this morning I believe?" Alora tried to stop her face from showing her surprise. How did she know? Did she have someone checking her out before she called her here?

"I did, but that wasn't what I meant."

"No? Then what did you mean?"

“I meant that as a priestess it’s my job to serve the best interest of the people by helping them to understand the gods.” Aniste seemed to consider this for a moment. She walked towards Alora, more quickly this time and commanded her gaze.

“What better way to serve the people and the gods than to serve the head of the temple? What better way could you help those in need than by making sure that I am taken care of? What could be more advantageous for you than to learn from the conduit of the gods?” She emphasized each word so that by the end Alora was cringing, terrified.

“Of course Your Grace.” She bowed again, hoping to break eye contact and be relieved of some of the intensity.

“Stand up child,” Aniste said, her tone softening. Alora stood, not wanting to upset her further. When she brought her eyes back up she noticed a necklace around the High Priestess’ neck that she hadn’t seen before. It was shaped like a teardrop and was a beautiful deep purple. The light from the window seemed to be catching it correctly and it pulsed a beautiful, glittering light. She felt her gaze linger for a moment too long and Aniste grabbed her chin and pulled Alora’s gaze back up to her eyes.

“What does the Fourth Major Tenet mean?” she asked Alora.

“The gods are shapers of destinies, not creators of fortune.” Alora replied.

“I didn’t ask what the Fourth Major Tenet *is*, I asked what it *means*,” Aniste said. Was she serious? There were volumes and volumes on the philosophy and meaning of just the Fourth Tenet. It was the most studied and debated of the Five Major Tenets.

“Well, there is a lot of thought on the topic,” Alora said, carefully. “The most popular ideas come from Gerddy’s interpretations, most likely because of the relative

peace Lanser has lived in the last two decades. Van Stillis' work was, until recently also popular, although it seems that people are less inspired by it as they once were."

"I know. I've read Gerddy's interpretation of whether fortune means riches, spiritual wealth or other tangible valuables, I'm aware of Van Stillis' dreary work on which god shapes which aspect of anyone's destiny. In fact I've read them all. But I didn't ask to find out how well read you are. I want to know what you think it means."

"I think it means that the gods give us a general purpose in life and that it is our responsibility to follow through on that. They give us the choice to follow their wishes and that determines how we are rewarded in life."

"And what do you think fortune is?"

"I think fortune is too narrowly defined by looking at it from any one particular aspect. Fortune to one person might be having children with a barren wife. It could be having enough work to feed a family or the wisdom to find beauty in all of Larga's creations. But fortune can't be the same for everyone."

"Why not?"

"Because then there would only be one goal and one purpose in life. But that just isn't the way we humans work; and we must assume that we work as intended by Larga or she would just destroy us."

"But don't you think there are variables in play that are beyond the scope of humans? Nobody asks to be born poor or rich, and yet some are. A barren woman who is given the chance at having a child can die during childbirth, leaving a widow behind, sometimes without the baby's survival. Is that fortune?"

Alora hadn't thought about that before. She paused to try and figure it out, to fit it into her beliefs, but struggled.

"Good," Aniste said. "I don't want you believing you have all of the answers. You have a lot to learn. If you are as smart as you think you are you will do well. You will go down to your cell and gather your belongings and put them in the servant's chamber located below this room by the end of the day. You may take some time to say goodbye to your friends too."

"Goodbye, Your Grace?" Alora was confused.

"Yes, you will be taken off all other duties. You will no longer oversee prayer, preach or go out into the city. Your sole duty now is to make sure I am taken care of and happy. I hope you take to being my servant with as much verve as being a priestess. If so, we shall get along splendidly; if not, you may find me less agreeable than I have been today."

"Of course, Your Grace." Alora offered a smile and bowed, backing out of the room. Outside of the door, she turned to leave when Aniste yelled from in the room, "Girl!" Alora hurried back in.

"Yes?"

"You will always address me as Your Grace, never just yes or no, do you understand?" Aniste was turning a deep shade of crimson.

"Of course, Your Grace, I'm sorry."

"What was the first thing you learned when you came up here?" Aniste demanded. Alora was at a loss for words, unsure of where this transformation into rage came from. The first thing she learned? "To knock on your door, Your Grace?"

“And why do you always knock on my door before entering?”

“In case you are busy so as to not interrupt you, Your Grace.” Alora said, partially relieved that she guessed correctly, and partially confused as to why this was being brought up again.

“And what has to happen to make sure you can knock on my door?” Alora had no idea what she was talking about, but she couldn’t just say that. She strained, trying to figure out this riddle. “Um, the door has to be closed, Your Grace?”

Aniste sighed, and closed her eyes for a few seconds. “Thank the gods you aren’t stupid like Ulea was. That’s all. Shut the door this time.”

Alora hurried out and shut the door, making sure not to slam it. She didn’t want to be yelled at again. She shambled down the steps and walked back to her room. She was tired from that interaction and her head hurt. Could she serve under Aniste if all of their interactions were going to be so intense?

She walked into her room and hadn’t realized Rilara was sitting on her bed until she asked Alora “Well, what did she want?” Alora looked up, her stupor broken by her friend’s inquisitive glance.

“She wants me to be her new servant,” Alora said, still unsure of whether or not she desired such a position. Rilara’s face darkened.

“You have to be careful Alora,” she said, grabbing Alora’s wrist and squeezing.

“Careful of what? Aniste is kind and fair.” Did she believe that though, after this encounter with her? Was that just her instincts, looking to protect the High Priestess from any type of negativity?

Rilara didn't look so convinced, but she sat back for a second, taking her hand away. "What was she like?" Rilara asked, her tone changed into the polite tenor she used with strangers and followers.

Alora needed her friend more than ever and she had to trust that Rilara would understand where she was coming from. "Rilara, we can be honest with each other, can't we?"

"I thought so," Rilara said, her tone still guarded.

"She was intense. And she seemed to try and make me contradict myself. She made me question my beliefs and my understanding of the teachings."

"Was she as nice as everyone says of her?"

"She wasn't unkind but she didn't have the patience that I thought she would."

Alora suddenly felt uncomfortable, the hair on the back of her neck standing up. She stood up and hurried to the door, looking both ways to see if anyone was eavesdropping on them. Aniste had known her exact words from prayers this morning while no other priestess was present. How had she known? No one was there. She walked back to the bed and sat down next to her friend.

"Rilara, how much do you know about Aniste?"

"Not much. She tends to keep to herself and her closest advisors, although she is loved by the people. I don't quite understand why people care for her as much as they do to be honest, but she has been the leader of the Temple for a long time now. Word is that she was very active with the citizens of Lanser before her final Progression. That graciousness is probably still seared in their memories of her."

“Do you think she could be a Vestal?” Alora asked. Rilara dropped her cautious tone and started whispering. “A Zodiac? No way, she would have been identified years ago.”

“She somehow knew about a conversation I had with a follower this morning.”

“Maybe someone told her? Maybe she had someone watching you to make sure you were worthy of being her servant?”

“No, there were only a few people there and the only person within earshot of me was the follower I was talking to.”

“Well that’s not quite how Vestals work, is it?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I know they can hear things we can’t, but I don’t know how sensitive it is, you know? They like to keep the strength of their abilities a secret, you know?” The “they” that Alora referred to was Vestals, but it could have just as easily applied to all of the Zodiacs in the world. While everyone knew of the different abilities of the Zodiacs in general, the extent of their powers was a guarded secret. Many believed that Zodiacs wanted to create an aura of power greater than the magical gift from the gods would imply; others speculated that they didn’t want to give away their weaknesses to their enemies. Either way, it was impossible to tell what magic each Zodiac had access to.

“Well, I would be careful if I were you,” Rilara said, sidestepping the issue of Aniste being a Vestal.

“Why do I need to be careful? Even if she is a Zodiac, I don’t think I have anything to worry about.”

“Did you ever meet Ulea?” Rilara said.

“Her last servant? No, I don’t think so.”

“She was quiet and nice, but not very smart. I heard that she sometimes forgot Her Grace’s preferred robes for a royal function and didn’t have them ready in time.”

“So Aniste likely yelled at her like she did at me today.”

“She yelled at you?” Rilara’s eyes widened.

“She didn’t scream, but she was unhappy with something I did, yes.”

“Please watch out, learn everything you can and try your best not to mess anything up around her. Please, I beg you.” Alora was getting uncomfortable with the urgency in Rilara’s voice.

“Of course I will, but you’re just being silly, nothing will happen to me.”

“Did you hear that Ulea died?”

“Yes, Aniste mentioned it in passing. She said that’s why she needed another servant.”

“Do you know what happened to her?” Come to think of it, Aniste hadn’t mentioned it and Alora hadn’t heard anything from anyone. But she also mostly kept to herself and tried to stay clear of any gossip in the Temple, which most of the priestesses knew, and so no one came to her with any type of information that wasn’t relevant to her duties in the temple. Alora let her silence answer Rilara’s question.

“She was just pulled out of the moat at the northeast gate.”

“That’s terrible. What was she doing out there? Swimming in the river?”

“No, she didn’t know how to swim.”

“Then why go into the river in the first place?”

“She didn’t have a choice,” Rilara said.

“What do you mean—“

“Alora, she was found with her hands and feet bound together. Her death wasn’t an accident, she was killed.”

“What? Why didn’t I hear anything about this?” Alora started wringing her hands. What had she gotten herself into?

“Look, I’m not even supposed to know. I heard two Cleric’s talking about it at breakfast. I was walking by their table and they were whispering to each other but there weren’t many other members around so I overheard a little of what they were saying. They were so absorbed in their conversation that they must have not noticed me walking by.”

“Well I’m sure the Queen’s guard will find whoever is responsible and bring them to the Clerics of Justice for judgement.”

“Maybe. But just be careful ok? I don’t need to hear about you floating in the river if you forget to fluff her favorite pillow.”

Alora tried to process this information, but it seemed like Rilara was adamant about this story. Still, in the nights they had spent together in Arboria, Rilara was able to tell stories so detailed that Alora would have sworn they were history, just to have Rilara reveal she had made the whole thing up. Her knack for stories was why she was often given the duty of teaching the children of some of the lower houses of the nobility; she connected with the kids and made them fascinated by the deeds of the gods.

Alora smiled at Rilara, trying to pass off the warnings as mere exaggeration and concern, and assured her that everything would be fine. Besides, she was a smart girl and would catch on. She hugged Rilara and told her it might be a little while until they saw

each other again, but that she would think of her often and fondly. She ushered Rilara out of her room and then set about collecting her few possessions for her move to her new room. The gods led their believers down a path and one could fight the path or accept it and make the best of an unknown situation. Besides, every path led somewhere, and Alora was trying to be excited about where this might lead her.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Keith Marks

EDUCATION

- | | | |
|-----------------|---|----------------|
| 2014-2016 | University of Louisville | Louisville, KY |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Master of Arts in English/Creative Writing▪ GPA 3.93 | |
| 2006-2009
MI | Baker College | Auburn Hills, |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Postbaccalaureate Certificate in Secondary Social Studies▪ Graduated Cum Laude▪ GPA: 3.65 | |
| 2005-2006 | Lansing Community College | Lansing, MI |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ GPA: 3.81 | |
| 2001-2006
MI | Michigan State University | East Lansing, |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Bachelor of Arts in History▪ GPA: 2.58 | |

HONORS AND AWARDS

- | | | |
|-----------------|--|---------------|
| 2013/2014 | Teacher of the Year Runner-up Brooks County High School
Quitman, GA | |
| 2012/2013 | Most Likely to Help His Students Award Runner-up | Quitman, GA |
| 2012-2014 | Top 5% Teacher Evaluations by Administration
Quitman, GA | |
| 2006-2009
MI | Dean's List, Baker College | Auburn Hills, |

WORK EXPERIENCE

- | | | |
|-----------|--|-------------|
| 2011-2014 | Brooks County High School – English Teacher | Quitman, GA |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Taught 9th Grade Literature and Composition- Led students to meet State Standards in 9th Grade Assessment▪ Taught 10th Grade World Literature▪ Staff Incentive Committee Chairman (Elected Position) | |

- Led meetings of select staff and administration members
 - Implemented ways to motivate staff
 - In charge of allocating State Grant money to high achieving staff
 - Student Government Staff Advisor
 - Oversaw monthly meeting and fundraising activities
 - Led groups at team building exercises in summer
- 2011 Lowdes County School System – Substitute Teacher Valdosta, GA
- Taught grades K-12
- 2009
MI North Farmington HS Long-term Substitute Teacher Farmington Hills,
- Prepared/taught several units for 11th and 12th grade over 9 weeks
 - Hand selected for position by the Vice Principal
- 2009
MI North Farmington High School – Track Coach Farmington Hills,
- Coached 50-70 boys and girls high jump and sprinting
 - Led students to Michigan State Track Meet
- 2008-2009
MI North Farmington High School – Student Teacher Farmington Hills,
- 11th and 12th grade AP World History
 - 9th grade English
 - Prepared/taught units to 130 students for 20 weeks

**VOLUNTEER
WORK/EXTRACURRICULAR**

- 2013-2014 Financial Peace University Coordinator Valdosta, GA
- Founded and organized nine week course on financial instruction
 - Lead group discussions for class of sixty participants
- 2011 Disaster Relief Community Outreach Lakeland, GA
- Cleaned up local community following tornado
- 1997-2002 Appalachian Service Project TN, KY, WV
- Participated in repairing homes for the needy
-roofing, adding retention walls, gutters, septic systems, built decks

ADDITIONAL CERTIFICATES

2011	Cisco Certified Network Associate	St. Louis, MO
2011	Cisco Certified Entry Networking Technician	St. Louis, MO
2009	Michigan Teaching Certificate	Michigan