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The Exile's War

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THE EXILE'S WAR

By

Stephen Arnold

In Gaelwyn, the village of a thousand-thousand stories, Katchan receives a powerful ruby and an ancient technique called writing hidden by his grandmother, Maggaline. Jealous of the power Katchan has, the village Elder seeks to destroy him. After escaping the Elder, Katchan must leave his home and traverse a dangerous and mysterious wasteland that will lead him directly into an ancient conflict that lost a powerful empire to the sands of time.

PROLOGUE

The air was thick with the stench of blood. Fractured, falling, and burning houses told the story of a one-sided battle. This place was a nightmare from how it looked mere hours ago: rolling green meadows, vast orchards, a vineyard stretching as far as the eye could see, lush gardens and tall, strong trees, a gleaming white wall protecting a massive city, now broken: razed to the ground, with meadows of ash, rows of stumps, and gardens full of tinder and flame. Academies built a thousand years ago were reduced to dust; strongholds of refuge were now cinders. Little remained standing in the city, only statues of their revered protectors remained upright and untouched. Beauty amidst the destruction. Micah, commander of the invading legion, stared at one statue: a woman, a princess, wearing a dress blown by the wind and holding a large jewel that in the sculpture's genius, managed to catch the sun and glimmer as if alive.

If only you were here to protect them, Valerie, thought Micah.

As he walked and examined the extent of the damage, debris fell from what was once the wall of a nobleman's home. The brick was blackened by fire on one side and gleamed silver-white on another. It fell beside a trinket from that home: a small statue of a long dead hero. Micah picked up the bronze statue and polished the face. Without the covering ash, the face almost looked familiar. The bronze was stained red; the owner of this house must have escaped with it in his hands only to meet his end just a few steps from his home. He must have believed the statue would offer protection. Micah looked west where large black clouds billowed from a fire pit. Whatever happened to the nobleman's family? There was no evidence they perished with him here, but death, perhaps, brought them back together.

He walked until he came to the edge of the city's limits where he was to meet the sorcerer calling himself Beyda. Micah did not care that Beyda wasn't his true name. Of the dozen or so

sorcerers he had met, not one of them would think to call themselves by such a powerless name. His name did not matter. Micah only wanted what the sorcerer offered. For Micah, that was the end of a lifelong journey, but the destruction of this city, Micah never expected.

The sorcerer approached from the east. Smoke rose from the scattering ashes of a thousand burnt homes, and somehow the sorcerer appeared serene. He looked ten years younger than Micah, but was old, much older. He was older than even the city they destroyed. Upon seeing Micah, Beyda quickened his step, his hands clasped in back.

“The war begins with a triumphant victory. May the gods tremble,” Beyda said.

“The gods shake with rage, not fear, when foolishness prevails,” Micah said.

Beyda glared then returned to a relaxed, demeaning posture. “Why care now, Commander? You’ve fulfilled your covenant to me, now I shall do the same.”

“Our original agreement did not include a city full of dead humans,” Micah said.

He smirked, “Do you know what my brothers say about humans? They are cattle: mindless and easily satisfied. Give them food and they eat until their bellies are full. Give them wine and they drink until their minds go blank. Give them a compliment, and they’ll spend a week musing over their glorious achievement. Then, when humans are good and fat, snatch it all away.”

“That seems cruel,” Micah replied.

“If only that were the limit of their cruelty. Once the food, drink, and comforts are good and gone, return them, slowly, to make humans crave more. Soon they forget what happened before and they love you again. That, Commander, is true cruelty.”

“And how will you be truly cruel? Who lives for you to twist?”

“How could you think so little of me? I am not cruel like my brothers. I would not save a wounded animal’s life just to kill it for a feast. And don’t so forget the role you played, the city’s bones surely will not,” Beyda said.

Numerous soldiers looted through the few still standing houses and drank from barrels of ale remaining intact. The debris littered every speck of former beauty, smoke rose from every edge of the world. This was not supposed to happen; this city was not their enemy. Micah built his army for one purpose: revenge. He tackled the strongest foes on every world across the Scope, testing himself. Was he capable of meeting his brother in combat? He must. Would his army survive the encounter? They must. It was the only path to peace. But many of the strongest foes in the Scope are a gentle breeze to this man’s mighty wind. When Beyda offered his strength in the fight against Micah’s brother, he could not refuse. They made a blood pact. The conditions were simple, destroy the city of evil. The city Beyda hates above all else. Livana is not that city, but Micah ordered his men to crush the city underfoot and they did. The pact he made did not allow him to stop the attack, for if he did it was his death. Seeing the aftermath, Micah knew his death would have been better.

“I won’t quickly forget,” Micah said and dropped the nobleman’s statue. Dust puffed in a cloud and was swept away with the wind. “And neither will you.”

Beyda noticed Micah was unarmed. His boastful smirk dropped to utter devastation. “Where is the key? Don’t tell me you planned to exact revenge on your enemy without a weapon.”

“You, Beyda, are my enemy. You were from the moment we met, but somehow I could not see. Your sorcery is trickery. And revenge? The greatest revenge I can exact now is through

shutting you away. Escape is closed to you. I realized too late your plan to destroy the city of Marikel. How foolish are you? Did you think he wouldn't notice? Is Ashen beyond its master?"

Ashen, the sword of Asher. How it came into his possession is a legend even unto him. The power to transpire through the thin spaces of the Scope, to travel through the known and unknown parts of Creation. A coveted weapon even among the gods and the servants to the gods. With the sorcerer's influence departed from Micah's mind, he could think. Beyda was alone in this world. Micah held all the power now, plus the strength of a small, but powerful army. Even without the sword of Asher, Micah could handle a mere sorcerer.

A team of Micah's soldiers approached. The sorcerer's scowl signaled all was not well. They drew their swords and leveled them at the ready, targeting Beyda, their former ally.

"Is everything all right, sir," one of Micah's lieutenants, Orphion, asked. His eyes peered at Beyda as a predator would prey.

"Your commander is a fool," Beyda snapped.

Orphion shouted, expressing the power of his breath, and struck his sword at Beyda. He caught Orphion's blade and kicked him into the still standing wall. It crumbled from the blow and began falling.

"No!" Micah cried. He leapt to catch the roof before it crushed his lieutenant.

Several of the soldiers pointed their blades at Beyda but were too afraid to act. The man looked innocent and weak, but he caught the blade of a Musphelian sword in the palm of his hand as if it were wood. Lieutenant Orphion's golden armor, like all of theirs, made from Dimithrium ore, was cracked, almost shattered. Beyda's scowl only deepened. He let the sword fall with a clang, his hand bloodless. He watched the Commander hold the roof while other soldiers dragged their Lieutenant from the rubble.

“He’ll struggle and risk his life for you now, but he’s put us all in greater danger than a roof crushing you flat.” Beyda aggressively pointed at Orphion, “before this is over you will wish he let you die. In fact, you will grow to hate him for saving you. You all will grow to hate him!”

Lieutenant Orphion was clear from the path of the heavy roof and Micah let it fall; he felt the eyes of not just his men, but the weight of all creation boring on him.

“Never,” Orphion gasped forcefully through cracked ribs.

“Oh, is that right? Even when I tell you what he’s done? Even though there will now be no gold nor riches, no coat of splendor laid across your shoulders, no cheering crowds once you return home after vanquishing evil. Even after you learn what this city once used to be and who its defender and patron is? Oh, yes, you ignorant child, you will hate him.”

Whispers swept through the crowd of soldiers: “No gold? No glory?” For what else does a soldier of Micah’s company fight for? Gold to obtain wealth, glory to obtain power, and power to rule the great cities across the Scope. There are few who fight to dispel the chaos designed by the Architect of evil. So few are pure of heart. The whispers grew to argument, and Micah believed they would abandon the faith they lay in him. They would be right to do so, he knew. He led them to this battle, and although victorious, it was a dark victory. Destruction of beauty was not the fruit he sought. Despite his protests, they waged war on the defenders of the great city, and it fell. He led them here, and he will leave them here. He was certain they would abandon him now.

“We will die before we hate him,” one soldier said.

“Whether on the field of battle, or in our homes from old age, we are loyal to the end,” another cried.

“There will be no death on the battlefield. There will be none from old age,” Beyda said, “and why? Because your Commander is not loyal to you.”

“You lie,” Orphion accused.

“Do I? Why not ask your commander to whisper the words of power and carve signs into the fabric to return home?”

Murmurs swept the crowd of battle-weary men. Soldiers finished with ale and plundering ruins wandered to the circle surrounding Beyda and their commander. The two circled one another as the crowd grew; soon they were closed in, surrounded. It seemed as if only one would leave alive. Micah felt the electricity in the air caused by the fear and confusion sweeping his army. He feared Beyda would win over his men with the lies of before, of riches and glory, but this time, the enticements would be promises of death and destruction. His men were sharp, but Beyda was brilliant in a way so unlike any of them. He was brilliant because he knew the rotation of the Scope in a way no one else possibly could.

“Because he has hidden the sword of Asher,” Beyda said.

“My liege, is this true?” A soldier with a bloody wrap around his eye asked.

“Please, answer him. Tell us the man lies so we can go home already!”

“Have you betrayed us? Tell me my children won’t grow up without their father.”

“What Beyda says is true,” Orphion said, pointing to Micah’s empty belt. “Where is the key, my lord? where is the sword of Asher?”

“Yes, where is it? But more importantly, why wouldn’t he have it? Would he hide it?” Beyda asked. “When he knows once the patron of this city discovers what happened, we will be cast into a misery never before heard of.”

“Whoever that is, we’ll destroy him as we’ve destroyed every enemy the Commander has brought us up against,” Orphion said.

“Not him. The one coming for us now is he who walks the full expanse of the Scope,” Beyda said.

Faces dropped at the revelation.

Marikel the Creator.

Fearful huffs of breath turned to anger directed at their once beloved leader.

“We are here because of you!”

“My children cannot grow up without their father!”

Orphion stood and the soldiers grew quiet, “My liege, if you have lost the key to the way back in the midst of battle, we would all understand. Just tell us that is so, and we will search night and day until we find it. And if that is not so, if you have truly hidden the key away for secret reasons, then tell us. You have brought us in and out of battles through many worlds; we will trust you if you would only tell us why.”

“Lieutenant Orphion, you still trust me?” Micah asked and hope surged within him. If his soldiers trusted the Lieutenant, maybe they would trust him as well. What he asked, though, Micah could not fulfill. How could he tell them he was deceived, betrayed, promised his life's dream by the stranger and instead of questioning him further and investigating who the man calling himself Beyda truly is, he leapt at the chance and doomed them all? Faith in his ability to lead them would extinguish like a candle in a storm; even Orphion would not remain loyal after hearing the truth. They would outright kill him knowing why he hid his sword, the key to escape.

“I have followed you many places and have always returned home in the end. We will return again, yes? My men and I stand loyal with you,” Orphion said and balled his fist and struck his plated chest.

Micah sighed with relief, then heard a scream as the tip of an Musphelian sword pierced through Orphion’s chest. Titus, one of Orphion’s squad leaders, threw Orphion to the ground, “any leader who leads his men to their doom is not worthy of loyalty. If you won’t take us home willingly, you will by force.”

“What have you done?” Micah cried.

Beyda threw a smirk in his direction. “It’s not too late, Commander. Take them home where you have the means to save him.”

Orphion lay with his hand over his chest, blood pooled beneath him. His eyes met Micah’s and his lips pleaded with him to flee, but it was too late; anger was already becoming madness. Titus goaded the soldiers to attack; Micah lifted a sword from one of the strewn bodies of the knights who had defended this city and stood in a defensive form. This blade was not nearly as strong as Ashen, now buried deep in an ancient crypt, so this fallen knight's blade would have to work.

He parried killing blows from his once loyal men. He dodged left and right, parrying multiple attacks at once, rolling and jumping through strikes aimed at his neck, arms, and legs. Many of his men on the outskirts of the circle had no idea why their beloved leader was now being attacked, but they joined the frenzy and fought him anyway. He finally broke through the circle surrounding him and escaped to the only destination his men would have trouble following: the edge of the world. If what Beyda threatened was true, if the city’s patron was coming here to this razed earth, then he had little time before he was caught in the arrival. Maybe

he would have a chance to explain and spare his men. He parried one more swipe and leapt to the top of a dead hero's sculpture, one brandishing a great axe, and met the gaze of the stranger, Beyda. There was anger and animosity between the two; Beyda led Micah to darkness to leave him there, but never once expected himself to be left. Their stare was a debate without words, a battle without swords, and an oath without blood. Micah knew not what would happen next, but he wouldn't allow Beyda, whoever he was, to best him again.

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Beyda sat on a large fallen statue carved in the image of some long dead hero, awaiting the inevitable arrival of his greatest enemy. Watching the Commander's army melt into a frenzy was a satisfying, yet fruitless venture. They turned on him the moment they realized there was no going home, not for many years at least, maybe longer. He hardly needed to weave any magic to promote their anger. Whatever Micah expected them to think about his stunt, Beyda was clueless. Did he not realize that sacrificing Ashen was betraying his men's loyalty? Did he not see the chasm created between him and they? What a fool.

He watched Titus go to his fallen brother, Orphion, and grab his still breathing neck. Orphion thrust a dagger at Titus's neck; he caught the wrist and twisted the dagger away. "You stay loyal to him even now? Who will love your wife? Who will teach your children? Face it, he never cared about you at all, only his life's dream," Titus pushed his old friend into the dirt. "I will allow you to bleed out and die. What are your orders, Beyda?"

Beyda planned this attack not because he is cruel, but because this city needed to die. He did not plan on dying with it, and he doubted he would; a fate worse than death awaited him, Micah, and his army of soldiers. Even Orphion would not die in time to escape their fate, whatever was in store for them now. "Go out into the mountains, the forests, the rivers, and

every place in this land. Never give him a moment's rest. You will hunt your commander until the end of time. And when you find him, bring him to me and we will leave this place together and I will give you glory and riches beyond your dreams." Beyda shot Titus and all his men with a glare that disposed of any resistance or question to his authority. They immediately set out.

As the sun set on this city's last day, Beyda wondered when the man he feared most would finally arrive to dispense his form of justice. He knew Titus nor anyone would find or catch Micah, he just needed to be alone for these last moments. The city's workmen built the sculpture he sat on for their first king. In those days, they loved and adored this king as a great unifier, but now everything he built is in ruins. That was always the plan. The sun dipped below the horizon and a glorious flash of light, a spectrum with every seen and unseen color, erupted with a deafening roar, announcing the arrival of Marikel the Creator. Beyda took one last deep breath before being swallowed in the curse raging from Marikel's grief. He was unsure of what would come next, but he was certain that facing it terrified wouldn't help.

CHAPTER ONE

GAELWYN

At the edge of the world is a village named Gaelwyn. It sits between a mighty river and an endless wasteland. The river's current is swift and deadly, so the first settlers named it Yama, the roaring waters. The wasteland was so vast and full of evil, that all are forbidden from entering. They named it Midbar, the endless. Legends and myths surrounding the mighty river and the endless wasteland were among the first of stories that Gaelwyn remembers. Legends claimed the wasteland was built by Marikel, the Highest God in the Scope, as a place to torture his enemies. Myths declare the river flows from an ancient garden where all life is said to come. But there is not one in Gaelwyn who dare test these tales. Most are content with living with the mystery. Yama and Midbar are but two of the mysteries of the village, and it is only a mystery to those who do not know the stories, for Gaelwyn is a village of stories.

Tales of villains sowing chaos among the river, and sagas of mighty heroes fighting the evil deep into the wasteland keep hope alive for the people of Gaelwyn. In the long winter nights when the stars go black, in the hot summers days when the sun burns bright; stories become light and relief. In these tales are not only grains of truth, but Gaelwyn's entire history. From the first settlers to present day. Yes, Gaelwyn is a village of stories, and none of these stories are more powerful than those who know the stories and speak the stories, for both knowing and speaking are the gift and right of Gaelwyn's leader: the Elder. Both knowledge and history are wrapped in the words of the Elder, and those who fail to heed the stories dare to fail themselves and dare to let both knowledge and history fade into obscurity. For this reason, it is strange the grandson of Maggaline, the greatest storyteller Gaelwyn has ever known, dares to question the nature of stories. For he should know better than any the power of the spoken word.

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The sun bared its midday heat by the time Katchan arrived at the community well. At this hour most villagers stayed out of the heat by taking a nap or playing games or telling stories, or whatever families did to pass the time. He would not know what families do together since he did not have one of his own, except for his grandmother Maggaline. Besides, he did not mind the heat so much, and drawing water at this time of day nearly ensured he would miss the rush hour. Not that he minded waiting, but he hated the constant reminder of how odd it was that he, a boy, was drawing water instead of an older sister. Most knew his situation, most of the older folk did anyways, and while it was usually impolite to tease people the way the children at the well did, they had no adults around to smack their ears and there was no way Katchan would tell on them: it would make things worse. He'd rather deal with the heat than the teasing, even though his shirt was usually soaked by the time he brought the water to his home at the edge of the village.

When he arrived at the well, there was nobody around he could see. It was just he and the stone-built water well. He looked over his shoulder down the lane that led to the village main square. It was far from where he lived. The coast was clear, and he began the tedious process of drawing water. He hooked the jar by its rope handle and slowly lowered it until he felt the familiar dip at the bottom. He then let the jar fall to its side. Water began filling the empty space. He felt the weight growing to a full heft before pulling on the rope. As he pulled and grunted, he heard giggling from behind a stone wall that formed the lane to the village square.

He stopped pulling and sighed. "I know you're back there."

Two girls popped out from behind the wall. He knew them. Seri and Lati. Their fathers were pretty important figures in the village which meant they had people to draw water for them. They pointed and laughed at his efforts.

Seri put her hand to her mouth as she giggled, as it was proper to do. “Struggling with the water jar again, Katchan?”

Lati was less proper than her friend, showing her full teeth. “Shouldn’t you be out hunting with your father?”

“Did you wait out here all this time just for me to show up?” Katchan shouted with surprise and confusion. His full water jar teetered near the top.

“No, silly,” Seri said and revealed a brightly decorated clay pot. Of course her family could afford paints and dyes. “We decided to come early for the second watering.”

“Don’t you have people for this? Wait, you get two jars of water?” Katchan asked realizing it was a stupid question. Seri’s family was large with nearly enough members for three jars of daily water. He and Maggaline only qualified for a half-jar, but due to her status in the village, they were gifted a full jar. On the people’s permission, of course. He became so absorbed with the girls teasing that he began to forget about holding on to the rope.

“But we did hear you came about this time on Tuesday, so of course we had to see for ourselves,” Lati said.

“Do you drink half the jar on your way home? You do have to walk so far,” Seri teased.

“We worry some creature will kill you, being as close to the wasteland boundary as you are,” Lati said.

“Be quiet,” Katchan said.

“Yeah, or a ghost of one of those men your father killed seeking revenge,” Seri added.

“I said, shut up!” Katchan released the rope and the jar fell and splashed at the bottom. This only added fuel to the girl’s laughter, and Katchan turned bright red.

“Both of you should be ashamed of yourselves,” a commanding voice said. The three looked and saw who it was: golden eyed and dark hair with a garment of pure white, the white of the village Oracle. It was not the Oracle, but her apprentice, Willow, fetching water.

Seri and Lati choked on their laughter and dropped to their knees in submission. Katchan stood firm, surprised and in awe, but firm.

“You tease the grandson of Maggaline. How foolish are you? Katchan, do they do this often?”

Katchan glared at the girls who trembled on their knees with faces to the dirt in humble submission to Willow, the beautiful girl with the power to end his misery for good. A word from her to the Oracle would reach their father’s ears, who certainly depended on his grandmother Maggaline from time to time.

“No, not usually,” he said, which was a half-lie. The full truth is he usually avoided the other kids.

Willow sighed with what was certainly disbelief. “Then I will let you two off with a warning and won’t tell your parents how awful and cruel you are being.”

“We were just messing around, honest,” Seri said with a squeaking voice.

“Katchan’s our friend, really. It’s all in good fun, right Katchan?” Lati said looking to him with large, watering brown eyes.

There was nothing in the world he wanted more than to be honest with Willow and tell her all about how mean these two were today and how they led all the other children to make fun of him until he stopped showing up at the morning watering hour, but another side of him wanted nothing more than to be their friend and be accepted into their world. Telling the Oracle’s apprentice the truth would not do him any good since the girls would resent him for it, and this

silent resentment they would spread to the other children would be worse than the open ridicule. Still, he knew they would never befriend him, no matter what he said at this time.

“Sure, all in good fun,” Katchan said.

Willow looked disapprovingly at Katchan. “Very well, be off with you two,” she said.

Seri stood to protest, “But we still have to get water—”

“Be off!” Willow said. The two girls scampered away like frightened kittens.

Katchan realized he released the rope and began filling the jar once again. Once filled, he started heaving it back up. Willow placed a gentle hand on his shoulder and Katchan felt sweat burst onto his face. She smelled of jasmine and sage, the fragrance of the Oracle, and he was overwhelmed.

“I can’t believe you let those girls bully you. You could have told them off with a quick-witted poem or a fable about those who treat others poorly. That would have shoved their words down their throats,” Willow said.

“I don’t do poems or fables,” Katchan said, hefting the heavy bucket over the rock ledge of the well and lowering it to the ground.

“Then a parable, or a myth of the horrors that await mockers?” Willow said replacing the jar on the rope and lowering it down to be filled.

“Neither do I do those,” Katchan responded as he hefted the jar to his shoulder and started the long walk home, but before he got on to the path leading through the wood and beyond the last vineyard to the edge of the village, she stopped him.

“You don’t do stories of any kind? I don’t believe you,” Willow said.

Nervous, he turned to the pretty girl. “Why is it so hard to believe I wouldn’t do stories?”

“You’re Maggaline’s grandson, of course. You are educated, aren’t you?”

“What? I’m not stupid,” Katchan snapped. The girl’s beauty suddenly seemed less important to him. But he became enraged when she laughed. “What’s so funny?”

“I didn’t suggest you were stupid. I asked if you were educated on the stories: our history and culture and all that,” Willow said. She raised her water jar to her shoulder.

“Of course, I’m educated,” Katchan said, and a splash leapt over the lip of his jar. “I’m not like you, though.”

“You mean my eyes?”

Katchan caught himself enraptured in her golden eyes again when she tilted her head forward and caught a glint of sunshine making them brighter and more enticing. She blinked and he saw pools of honey, crystals of amber; like bronze implanted in white marble. His breath ceased, and his heart frittered and loosened weightlessly. He lost himself completely and the jar slipped from his shoulder and crashed on the ground.

“Oh, Katchan, your water,” Willow said.

The golden sand had turned muddy at his feet.

“You should really be more careful,” she said.

“It’s your fault. You made me angry!” Katchan shouted, unsure of where his head went.

“My fault? You’d rather those girls stayed to make fun of you?”

“No, I just...”

“Well, I should have just let them, shouldn’t I? Then I’ll say it—”

“I’m sorry I shouted,” Katchan blurted out.

“Let a girl finish, won’t you?” Willow said then grabbed her jar of water and marched away. She stopped and turned around; her golden eyes enraged like fields of spice. “I can’t believe the grandson of Maggaline behaves like a child.”

Katchan was left with a broken, empty jar and a wounded and sour mood. If only the Oracles apprentice stayed out of it, he might be home and working on some other task Grandma had for him instead of now hunting down a new jar. He really should be more careful, he admitted to himself. Breaking pottery isn't something he would normally do, even if he were angry as a bee. Something about being around a pretty girl like Willow made him act foolishly. He noticed the prettily decorated jar left where Seri had bowed to Willow. He walked over and thought about just using her jar since his was broken but knew Maggaline would just make him give it back if he brought it home. He decided not to risk the humiliation by stealing her jar. He decided instead he would leave it by her house on his way into the village to find a new one. It would be a detour and would make him even later, but returning her jar seemed to be the right thing to do. With a sigh, he walked over and picked up the well decorated jar.

"Stupid, girl," he spat loudly.

"Hey you, kid. What's this about teasing our daughters and calling them stupid?"

Two men came bumbling past the stone wall the girls hid behind before mocking Katchan. They were the girl's fathers. Rich men. High ranking stewards who oversaw the Elder's olive groves. Seri's father was named Udrik whom Katchan knew from rumors as a hot-headed brawler. He was tall and had a wide chest and an angry, unkempt beard. Lati's father, Ogni, was short and stocky with a scraggly-haired face; without a full beard, Katchan could distinguish the rage on his face more clearly. He wished he hadn't said 'stupid' quite so loud.

"And what's this? Are you stealing our family's water jar?"

"I didn't call your daughter's stupid, and I'm not stealing your water jar," Katchan said.

"Then why did my daughter run home crying, and why is my jar in your hands? Don't you know the punishment for stealing?" Udrik said.

“I was going to return your stupid jar, and I was calling—” he stopped. It occurred to him he may be worse off calling the Oracles apprentice stupid than these two village girls, daughters of stewards or not.

“Like I believe a poor brat like you was going to return our jar. You’re a thief, you got it honest,” Ogni said.

“I never even met my father, you stupid oaf,” Katchan said.

“Stupid oaf? Slanderer and thief: the Elder will decide your fate,” Ogni said.

The big man marched to where Katchan stood holding the jar still and snatched Katchan’s arm and began dragging him away. Katchan’s face swelled red. He wanted to call Ogni every word he learned from overhearing the village guard’s mouth off at one another, but knew he was in enough trouble as it were, but not in so much trouble that he couldn’t still get out. Despite his anger towards the man, he handed the jar to Udrik as if it were some extravagant and expensive family heirloom. It was not. He was a steward and tends the Elder’s olive grove. Udrik could easily buy another jar, and many more if he wished. Dragging him in front of the Elder was not about the jar, and Katchan wanted Udrik to know he knew.

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The Elder’s Seat was a throne room many sizes larger than Katchan’s home. Steps up a platform led to a gold encased chair with wool stuffed pillows and has been rumored to be the most comfortable seat in the village. The seat surveyed a room with enough space for deliberations from villagers with complaints against one another, money disputes, criminal activity that broke the sacred morals of the story, and even celebratory events. There was much the Elder’s Seat oversaw, and much of it was important, which is why Katchan felt it strange to

be held here now by two fathers who heard a rumor about him from their daughters. This was, he would consider, unimportant. Most men would backhand a boy who called their daughter ‘stupid’ and call it square. The way the romances worked in this village, that boy would likely wind up being their son-in-law someday. Why didn’t they just backhand him and let him get on with finding a new water jar? It was to make a point – no, a declaration of his status in their eyes.

Two servants lit the lamp-bowls on either side of the platform to show a session was beginning to commence. A door creaked open from the side and Elder Saulnier, white bearded and purple robed, was led to the chair by a guard Katchan did not recognize even though he knew the Elder well. He sat and the guard did an about-face movement and walked off to the side so that only the Elder faced the three standing in the ceremonial area: Udrik, Ogni, and Katchan. No others were allowed on the Elder’s platform while the Elder was seated; it represented weight of leadership. Saulnier cleared his throat.

“Lord Elder, this boy—”

“Silence! The Elder speaks first, Ogni,” the guard shouted.

“Thank you, Benjamin.” The Elder shifted his jaw. His eyes were baggy, and his face drawn; he spoke with a slow, deliberate cadence, “Last week I oversaw the trials of the people of Gaelwyn versus a man who killed his neighbor over a sheep in the river district. There was a great commotion, and many people said the killer should be executed for his greed. Of course, that is the proper punishment for a murderous thief who steals another’s livelihood. However, the killer’s family said the sheep rightfully belong to him after he and the deceased struck a deal. There were no witnesses to this deal, as there traditionally is not as each man is only as good as his word. Unsurprisingly, we have few trials of this nature. After much deliberation we discovered the dispute was never about a sheep, nor was it about a betrayed word: the killer and

the deceased's wife were having an affair. It was a trial of love and wool. What, if you gentlemen might guess, do you think I decided upon for his punishment?"

Katchan could feel heat surge into the two men's face. Ogni was the first to guess.

"You ordered him imprisoned in the Keep," Ogni said.

"Did I?"

"You made the killer pay the deceased's family in sheep and nil to make up for the wages lost," Udrik said.

"That seems a bit more fair. What am I, who is bound above all else to seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly, to do? These are the three virtues by which every man and woman is judged, is it not? Out of justice I should have ordered the killer's execution, but mercy cries out and demands wages in exchange for the life so that he may live and enter Hysol upon his natural death, but what of humility? Where can one such as I fit humility into this equation?"

The two men were silent. The room stank with the silence.

"What about you, Katchan? Where does humility fit into this trial?"

Katchan let the silence sink a little further, then said, "you wouldn't have given any judgement at all."

"Ah, yes. And that is what happened. Humility asks me to consider my worth to decide if a man is so unworthy of life that he should die or to say another man's worth can be equated to worldly values such as sheep and nil. Humility asks I consider myself unworthy to judge. So, I did not. I gave no judgment and ended the trial there. Of course, the killer was glad and so was his family and his new lover, although the deceased's family was decidedly unhappy. And fortune wish them well all their days, but of course that is not the case, is it? It did not take long for the three virtues to encroach upon his own conscious."

Saulnier paused and shifted his jaw.

“I don’t understand,” Ogni said.

“Well, Ogni, I’ll tell you: yesterday the killer took his own life.”

Katchan’s eyes shifted downward, afraid he would meet the coldness in the Elder’s and thus show his weakness by the shock in his own. Saulnier continued:

“You see, for a good man the harshest judge is himself. Now he is vindicated. The whole village knows the killer did not kill out of hatred, but out of love. His good memory is preserved. Had he lived a long life people would have found him villainous, callous, and cruel. Happy days with the wife of the man he slayed? Pure evil.”

There is one caveat to this story, one way it could have been different: had I given judgment, the man would have stayed his hand. He would have hated me for taking his sheep and nil and giving it to the deceased family, or he would have hated me all the days of his life as he rotted in the Prisoner’s Keep. He would have remade his money and sheep in time, or eventually people would call for his release for he would have learned his lesson, as they would say. He would have years to meditate on the stories and become a good man once again. I know this to be true: often, judgment passed is a life saved. His good name is restored, but his life is over.”

The silence was restored until Ogni cleared his throat.

“Lord Eldership—”

“As you now know, I make many important decisions for important matters regarding the lives of the people I love, decisions made according to the stories I know and the virtues I keep. So, my question for you is this: why are you wasting my time?” Saulnier seethed.

Ogni and Udrik trembled until Ogni finally spoke, “Lord Eldership, the vagrant’s boy has insulted our daughters and tried to steal from us!”

This confirmed what Katchan knew all along, the vagrant; he was the reason they were so angry. Their daughters could be insulted by any other boy and maybe the boy would wind up their son-in-law, but the fact that the mythical vagrant’s son insulted their daughters was an affront to their entire family. They would never allow him to become their son-in-law, and they wanted to make sure he knew this fact; they wanted it imbedded on his conscious to never even try. What were they expecting, the Elder to create a law forbidding him from speaking to their daughters?

“Oh, really?” Saulnier said, intrigued.

“He has, Lord Eldership,” Udrik, finally finding his courage, said. “A boy born of the vagrant should not be allowed to even speak to high-born children like ours. He is lower than low, hardly worth that of a beggar or a leper. His insults are degrading like none other. I demand justice for this insult!”

“High-born daughters, eh? Not worthy of even a single scratch much less a degrading insult from the vagrant of Gaelwyn, but also more brittle than crackers. Katchan, do you have anything to say for yourself?”

“You would let him speak at your court?” Ogni said.

“Quiet! Your next words will be your last in the Elder’s presence,” Benjamin said with a half-drawn sword.

“At ease, Benjamin. But he’s right, Ogni, do shut up. As for you, Katchan, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“I have nothing to say for myself. I didn’t insult them and I wasn’t stealing their water jar,” Katchan said.

“Well, then,” Saulnier scoffed, “an incredible waste of time, indeed.”

“But I do have something to say about Seri and Lati: they are harsh, cruel, and deserve every bad name the children call them behind their backs!”

Katchan recoiled from a pop across his ear and fell to the floor. Udrik rubbed his knuckles and muttered a curse then stopped as Benjamin’s sword flew at his neck. Katchan stared in horror at the moment; despite how he felt about these two men, he would hate for them to die on his account. He looked toward Saulnier who sat on his chair with eyes hungry for bloodshed, and Katchan realized he would not stop his guard from slitting a man’s throat.

“Please, Benjamin, no blood spilt in this court,” said an old woman’s voice followed by the closing of the gate and clicks of a staff on the floor.

“Lady Maggaline,” Benjamin gasped, and removed the blade from Udrik’s throat.

“Those who live by the sword die by the sword, Benjamin. That may be a worthy death for you, but Udrik is not quite so worthy. He has a long life to live yet, and many stories yet to learn before the end,” Maggaline said. Humility ravished Benjamin’s face and he lowered his sword; Udrik was covered with shame. “Now, I see my Katchan has made a mess out of the simple task of fetching water. He, too, has many stories yet to learn, but he will learn them from me and not the back of one’s hand. Now, with the Elder’s permission, I would like to take my grandson home.”

Saulnier looked amused by the interaction. “Of course, you may take Katchan home, Lady Maggaline. I will be by at my usual time tomorrow.”

Maggaline grabbed Katchan by his hand and dragged him toward the door. He glanced back at the guard, his accusers, and the Elder and wanted to sneer but held back. He didn't want to further disappoint Maggaline.

"No matter who your grandmother is, you're still the vagrant's son," Ogni said.

Katchan, infuriated, snapped to retaliate with some clever cutting word, but Maggaline snatched his arm.

"Ignore him," she hissed.

Elder Saulnier said nothing, and the matter was settled, but unresolved.

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Katchan balanced a fresh jar of water on his head while trying to ignore Ogni's words. He knew he was looked down upon by the village; he knew it had something to do with his parentage, but he never asked for the truth. He never wanted to know why; even if he did, he could not fix their attitude toward him. It was odd: the celebrated Maggaline and the despised Katchan being of the same blood. The wonderful works she did for Gaelwyn outweighed any possible sin, and the mistake of being born weighed him like a shackle in the river. Thankfully, all was not lost: Maggaline showed no sign of judgment and for that he was grateful, but he did not understand why she didn't cut Ogni with a sharp word. He had seen her put down men twice Ogni's size for lesser offenses.

As if reading his mind, Maggaline said, "Don't trouble yourself with men like Ogni and Udrik. They are not bad men; they are just unwise. Anyone with a solid head on their shoulders can tell their two little brats need to learn a lesson or two, and like it or not they just don't want to admit it. Children reflect their parents; if Seri and Lati are hateful and ignorant, then what does

that make them? You see, they weren't defending their children, they were defending themselves."

Katchan said nothing in response. He swayed with the water jar as it tilted from side to side, so it did not splash, and he bring further grievance to the day. Besides, anything he wanted to say right now would be out of frustration and wouldn't make any sense.

They walked a little further in the woods until they found a tree for shade and rested. Katchan had held back enough; he sat the water jar beside him and huffed.

"I don't care if they were being unwise, you should have let me at him," Katchan said.

"Oh, you think that would have made things better?"

"He would learn not to mess with me anymore if I told him what I really thought about him and his stupid daughter," he snapped.

"Shut your mouth; don't even think of people that way," Maggeline snapped. Katchan reared back as if she were a snake.

"Then at least you could have defended me!"

"You wanted me to defend you? I did defend you," Maggeline said.

"By staying silent?"

"By not letting him think he attacked you, boy. If you respond to every harsh insult, then everything is a weapon against you. Stand strong and they'll learn their words are weak and meaningless. Every insult they hurl at you will fall flat, and eventually they'll see you're impenetrable."

"So, what? I just take every insult and just let people ridicule me my whole life?"

"A strong man is he that never fades; a warrior, a champion; alive all his days."

Katchan groaned, “you and your sayings. What good do they do anyone anyways?” The wind rustled the leaves and cooled the sweat on his tunic. He felt calm, contemplative even.

“That man, the one accused of murder, I wonder if his last thought was a saying you told him.”

“His last thought?” Maggaline asked.

“Elder Saulnier told us the case of love and wool, then he asked us what we thought he did,” Katchan said.

Maggaline seemed very far away. She grunted and started walking again. Katchan hefted the water onto his shoulder and followed behind. She walked at a faster pace than before, and he had trouble keeping up and balancing the water. Something he said upset her, something about the man accused of murder. She suddenly stopped.

“What was your answer?” She asked.

Katchan steadily walked and stopped, setting the water down and breathing a little heavy. “What?”

“When Saulnier asked you what you thought he did, what did you answer?”

Didn’t she know what happened to the man, Katchan wondered? She seemed distraught, distressed, maybe even angry. How would she not have known the fate of the man accused of murder? She knows all Gaelwyn’s business; did the Elder keep this from her?

“My answer was humility. I said Saulnier did nothing to punish the man,” Katchan said.

Maggaline stood in the waning sunlight for a moment and sighed, but there was more meaning in that single breath than what most say in an entire day. Katchan felt a twinge of pain in his heart but knew not where it came from. It was a good kind of pain, one felt when something good comes from something evil. She started walking again, slow enough for him to keep up, and he did.

CHAPTER TWO

THE WANDERING KING

When they arrived home, Katchan set the pitcher of water on top of the wooden table in the center of their kitchen area. The table was made from black walnut, wood reserved for the rich, a gift from a local merchant. It was smooth and rounded without a single sharp edge. The merchant even treated the table with tea leaves to make it more fire resistant. It was the most expensive item Maggaline owned and the envy of any who entered, even Elder Saulnier. But to Katchan it was just a table. Then he swept the dirt he tracked in on the floor to the doorway and out. Maggaline poured some water from the jar into a tea pot and a food pot and threw in lentils to soak while Katchan gathered firewood from the back. He noticed they were running low on wood; he would have split logs if he returned home earlier, but now he would need to first thing in the morning so they could cook breakfast. He built a fire and Maggaline began preparing a stew for their dinner. Soon, the tea pot boiled and Maggaline fixed herself a cup.

“You picked humility when you answered, why?” Maggaline asked.

“You told me justice and mercy cannot be administered without humility.”

“You find Saulnier humble?” Maggaline said.

Katchan’s mind flashed to his fading memory of the Elder’s cold gaze.

“I didn’t say that,” he said.

Maggaline halved an onion with her flint knife and threw it into the boiling pot. Then, she grabbed a potato and began cutting it into chunks.

“You know the three virtues, but you do not know their origin.”

“I don’t feel like listening to another story,” Katchan grumbled.

“Guess you’ll have to find your own dinner then, my boy,” Maggaline said.

Katchan's stomach grumbled. He threw a stick onto the fire and sat.

"I figured as much," Maggaline said, throwing the potato chunks into the pot. She stirred the mixture of lentils and vegetables and began her story.

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"Long ago before Gaelwyn, seven villages were spread across Idyll, but the people had little in common but trade and war. Skirmishes between merchants were as likely as a shipment of promised goods. Elders were constantly at each other's throats guided by the divine wisdom of their prophets. In those days, prophets served a similar purpose to Oracles, but their differences they were irreconcilable. Why there are no prophets left today is a mystery, but at the time of this story the role they played for the villages was pivotal: they interpreted messages from Hysol, the realm of the gods.

The shifts in weather, the flight of a swallow, the fawn of a deer, the pattern in the stars—all were a message from the gods. When to attack, when to defend, when to make a deal—all these questions and more lay at the prophet's feet, and it was he whom the Elder consulted when plagued by frightening dreams. It was an honored position and yet a dangerous one. It was not rare to hear of a prophet being banished from a village. That was worst, but still a prophets' word was weighed as if it were a god's own. This, as you can imagine, led to serious problems for Idyll.

Ages passed, and while the prophetic system remained in place, Elders began abusing the prophet's link to Hysol. Soon the weight of a god's word lightened, and Elders demanded what they *wanted* to hear and either killed or banished the prophet who refused them. [One theory on the current absence of prophets is that this happened so frequently, prophetic gifts were hidden away until they died completely]. A new age started when the last prophet died. Now there were

no gods to stand in between an Elder's desires and his piety. Idyll was in chaos. Prophets were dead and the emerging class of Oracles no longer dreamed dream's and there was such little divine activity from Hysol that their healing gifts were diminished. Disease and war afflicted every region of the land. No village was left untouched. For the first time in the history of Idyll, the seven Elders convened. They decided to appeal to Hysol on their own. After seven nights of pleading and animal sacrifice, they expected a divine being to appear, but none did. Believing High God Marikel abandoned His creation altogether, they left with bitter hearts. It was unspoken among them, but the seven Elder's understood that the rule of Idyll was open to the strongest. There were no gods, no prophets, no punishment. They understood they would never meet on friendly terms again. Therefore, none of them suspected what would happen next.

A low born man entered Village Moon, known as the strongest village among the seven. There were more resources to go around, and the village was defended by warriors skilled from years of fighting the Lekurt invasion from the Western Silence. Any who dare enter uninvited risked death or exile to the Silence. Going there was brave, but demanding an audience with the Elder was foolish. The Elder refused and demanded the low born be exiled. Before the warriors touched him, the low born announced he was a prophet called by Marikel himself, and his name was Telo. Little is known of Telo's origins, though there is plenty of rumors. Some say he has blood of the first children of Idyll, others claim he is descended from a Saphanar, but what is true and far more compelling than either of these is this: Telo was but a man, mortal of his own kind. That, in my opinion, makes what he did, what he became, even more astonishing. His calling from Marikel was simple: 'judge the Elder Moon.' The Elder ordered him seized and prepared for questioning, but by the authority the man calling himself Telo stood, the warriors were too

afraid. They dared not stop Telo as he plunged a dagger through the Elder Moon's heart, the judgment for the atrocities he ordered against the weaker villages.

"I have acted with *Justice*," Telo declared skyward. The court was fear stricken and did nothing. He disappeared without further word of judgement or instruction. Word reached the villages crushed beneath the Village Moon heel and their chains fell away little by little. Telo's name reached every ear and just his name being evoked was enough to dissuade village Elders from seeking too much power. Elders both feared and desired the presence of he who was *just* in the name of Marikel, but he did not come for many years. Telo had vanished.

A decade passed and the story of Telo faded into a fragmented memory. The villages around Idyll began to believe he never existed; only Village Moon asserted he was real, but even they began to have their doubts from that day he murdered their Elder. Once again, with fear of judgment gone, the Elder's grew greedy. Ones formerly oppressed by the Village Moon agreed to seek vengeance. Many bands of warriors marched directly to the moon walls and demanded a fight. For the first time in a generation, the new Elder Village Moon begged the gods to save his village in exchange for his own life. He heard nothing from Hysol but had little choice but the offering of himself would save his people. Just outside the safety of the walls, Elder Moon knelt before the warrior bands of the villages his predecessor abused. He took out a long sharp dagger, whispered his prayer to the gods—any god—over and over, raising the blade high into the air and just before plunging the knife into his gut, a hand firmly stopped his own. Telo had returned.

He looked haggard and waiflike: skin and bone arms, eyes descended into their socket, dirty face caked in mud, but still, his grip was firm; his voice strong.

“I have lived *Humbly* by wandering the known and unknown parts of the Scope, and now,” Telo said looking skyward and with a booming voice, “I have stopped this man from sacrificing himself for nothing. I have shown *Mercy*.”

A loud crack in the sky answered him. Before the warriors and Elders of the villages, Telo was acknowledged by Hysol.

“Who are you, why are you here?” The Elders asked.

“To be king,” he replied.

His first act as self-appointed ruler of Idyll was to bring all the villages to the land where he stood. A great city was built there, large enough to house the people of Idyll, plus room to grow. He established his city as Livana, the Silver City, and divided it into six parts, one for each village. Village Moon was excluded from city dwelling both as punishment for its tyrannical past and to be the first defense against the forces of the Western Silence. After many years, prophets reappeared and began communicating with Hysol once again. Telo, who was both prophet and king, was the first in a long line of kings the Silver City knew. On his first day in court, King Telo played an instrument crafted by the divine luthier of Hysol, and he strummed the cords of the universe and played a song of infinite measure.

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Katchan scraped the last of the stew from his bowl with his spoon. A last morsel of potato and a spattering of lentils remained. He ate and savored the flavor before swallowing.

“What happened next?”

“History,” Maggaline said.

“Where’s the great Silver City now?”

“Who knows? Civilizations rise and fall like the tide; the only survivors are stories, but the farther back in time we go, the more muddled the stories become. Some believe before the seven villages of Idyll, there were great cities ruled by the gods themselves. A dark age befell Livana in its twilight years; nobody knows what really happened to the people in the end. The only survivors were the Oracles and few of the Silver Citizens. The Oracles maintained what stories they could and planted the seeds of for Gaelwyn to grow. We have our own traditions and our own stories of course, but there was no age like the age of the Silver City; not before or since,” Maggaline said.

Katchan picked up her empty bowl and placed it in his own and set them on a small table near their front door to remind him to take them early to the well to clean them. He tried to beat the early crowds and then return later to replenish water for the rest of the day. The cleaning was often quick; he could carry the pot and bowls together at a fast pace and be gone before the first village children arrived. He sat back down, and Maggaline whipped out a long-stemmed pipe and filled it with tobacco, carefully packing the leaf in with three subsequentially looser pinches; then she stuck a thin wooden rod through the middle. After lighting the pipe with thin long sticks lit from the fire, puffing, repacking, and relighting once more, she asked, “Now, why did I tell you that story?”

“To annoy me?”

Maggaline drew on the stem and savored the smoky flavor and blew a ring that circled Katchan’s head. “No.”

Katchan sighed, “something about the three virtues.”

“Justice, mercy, and humility. Hysol gave those three to Telo who used them to build the greatest city Idyll ever knew. Of all the stories we inherited, this was the most important. Every Elder in Gaelwyn sits on a chair built by those three pillars, but what virtue is the base?”

“Humility.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Katchan answered.

“Think back on today. Think back on Telo.”

“I don’t want to. Can I please just go to bed?”

“These stories are important for you to understand.”

“What good will they do me? I’m the son of the vagrant, I’ll never hold any position in the village. I’ll be lucky to get by on scraps. I’d be better off learning how to hunt and fish, because that’s the only way I’m going to survive.”

“You think I learned the stories to gain power? It is quite the reverse, little child. If you listened, maybe you would learn to hunt from *Zeno and the boar* and fish from *Mobius the placoderm*. One day you’ll wish you had.”

“Only if I were an imbecile,” Katchan said.

“Am I an imbecile?”

“No.”

“Oh, good. Was your mother an imbecile?”

“No, but much good stories did her,” Katchan muttered.

Maggaline’s eyes lit with fury. She bowed her head and drew on her pipe and puffed the smoke through her nose.

“How dare you. Your father—”

Katchan shot from his chair, “I don’t want to hear about him. All the vagrant did was ruin my life before it even started. He ruined yours too, didn’t he? If it weren’t for him...” he stopped short. His eyes burned and his nostrils flared. The uncomfortable silence filled the room and stung his eyes like the smoke from Maggaline’s pipe.

“If it weren’t for him, I wouldn’t have you, boy. I wouldn’t have you and Avalene still might have died, then who would I have?” She slammed the pipe down on the table and stood. “If you loved stories as much as your mother then you would know—”

“Stories can’t bring back the dead,” Katchan snapped.

“Stories are the closest thing to it; don’t you understand?” Maggaline snapped and collapsed back into her chair. She wheezed and gasped for breath.

Coldness swept through Katchan like a strain of sickness. Before he could stop himself, he was outside beneath black night. He collapsed to his knees and fought the burning in his eyes for just one moment more. His gut rumbled with the happenings of the day and bubbled up to form a whimper from his throat. His life was one of sorrow and pain. He was the outcast, the outsider, the unwanted. No amount of escape into Maggaline’s stories could erase the fact that his reputation was a shadow and a reminder of a tragedy he had nothing to do with thirteen years ago. He could not change what happened and he cannot change how the village felt about him. There were no offers for betrothal and no promises of apprenticeship. He just wanted to face reality and accept the destined pattern of his life: despair and solitude.

Inside, over a cold cup of tea and an empty tobacco pipe, Maggaline whispered a prayer to Hysol. She prayed that Katchan would soon realize what Avalene knew: when humility turns to pride, justice becomes injustice, and mercy becomes cruelty.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ELDER'S VISIT

There is a boundary at Gaelwyn's edge separating the village and the wasteland. Nobody knows who created the boundary, but many believe it was the first Elder of Gaelwyn through the help of Mother Oracle. The boundary hums with energy, a kind of vibration that distresses those who come too close. This is one of many reasons the boundary is forbidden to be crossed. Those who dared may grow too sick before they became close enough to cross, but then there are other things in the wasteland none speak of but in stories: villainous things, abominations made by the enemies of Marikel to thwart his Idyll world. However, rules are meant to be tested, boundaries are meant to be crossed, and Gaelwyn is a village of stories. There is a tale of someone who entered the wasteland as a boy. His body resisted the vibrations, and he escaped the abominations and survived the harsh environment and returned as a man. Rather than be astonished and admire the man's bravery, he was immediately imprisoned as a lesson to those who seek adventure in the wasteland. He was largely ignored, but for those who did listen, what wonders did they hear? What majesty lay far beyond the village of Gaelwyn? Maggaline listened to these stories; she listened, and she learned.

Just as the grass browns and creeks run dry, there is a rock overlooking the boundary and into the wasteland where Maggaline visited much after that man returned. She watched the sunsets with Katchan as a babe and when he grew older, she taught him the constellations and planets and prayed over falling stars. It was this rock that Katchan returned to night after night after that day in the Elder's Seat. He watched the sunset; it was just as he remembered it: fire collapsing into itself, and as the flames died down a glorious flash of light, a spectrum with every seen and unseen color, illuminated the darkening sky for just a moment more.

For the next several weeks neither Katchan nor Maggaline spoke of their fight. She also had the good grace not to speak of Katchan's cowardice of running away when she was gasping for breath. Life went about as normal in the village for him. He continued to go to the well and do other household chores. He soon realized Seri and Lati were warned not to tease him any longer, because they didn't. In fact, Lati let him draw water before her one morning. They met eyes but did not speak; there was no need too. As for Maggaline's stories, she stopped telling them completely and seemed to grow older every passing day without one. Maybe the stories gave her power that was slowly diminishing. Katchan was worried Maggaline would never tell another story until the day she gave him a leather pouch. He had never seen this leather pouch before then. It was after he returned from cleaning the bowls and fetching water early in the morning.

"Elder Saulnier is coming today. I need you to take this bag with you while you."

"What's in it?"

"Don't look inside. Just do as I say."

Katchan's face puzzled but he grabbed the bag anyways and turned to leave.

"Wait." Maggaline sighed and walked slowly to him and embraced him as hard as she could. She was stronger than Katchan realized. She handed him her walking stick; it was smooth and treated to make a fine walking stick to last for years to come. It was now richly dark and thick enough for his fingers to just touch and tell as he. He felt as if he were a traveler in one of her stories but brushed away the silly thought.

"It looks good in your hands," Maggaline said.

She nudged him away, stick in hand, bag of bread and water, and the leather pouch hanging off his belt. Katchan knew she meant him to be gone all day. The meetings she planned

were usually not this long. He came every Wednesday afternoon for as long as Katchan could remember. Whatever they were discussing must be of something vital to the Gaelwyn's survival. Saulnier came to her for many reasons: plagues, famine, drought. She had a story of how some Elder dealt with each in the past, but he could not quite remember the details as vividly as she. Katchan heard no ill news recently: people were happy, healthy, the Elders festival was tomorrow; maybe a criminal needed a specific type of punishment that Saulnier was unsure of, or maybe he was planning to step down from Elder to avoid these redundant meetings? That was a dream of Maggaline's Katchan knew: to be the Elder. She knew the stories like no other, and despite his efforts not too, he sensed a singular thread throughout her stories, linking them all together in a way few have ever managed; a thread only she knows from where it came, and where it is going. Not only was she the perfect person for the position; she was the obvious. Saulnier's leadership was strong, but that did not cover for ignorance.

He thought about this while walking through his grassy fields past the forest through the creek and to the rock overlooking the boundary. He rarely came to these parts so early and easily forgot the beauty of flowers in the new dawn. Everything became new: spider webs zig-zagged between branches, taut and strong yet so thin; thick branches sporting impossibly green leaves wafted in the wind making shadows play; grass like hay, soft and comfortable. He felt light and ran the rest of the way to his rock to see the wasteland in morning-blue glory. Golden spiced dunes rose and fell like waves in the river as far as the eye could see; it seemed absurd that there was nobody else in Idyll. What's below the dome? What's beyond the boundary?

He stepped down from his perch and walked to the edge where brown grass met stony dry land. Just a few more steps and he would be over the boundary set by the village Elders. They were a wise group, he admitted; Grandma was nearly one of them after all. Whatever led

them to set such a boundary in the first place must be for a good reason, found in a story unknown to him. Could it really be because Gaelwyn is the remains of a once vast city that held every inhabitant of Idyll? Or is it something else, something they are afraid of? He heard stories of people who became sick coming this near the edge, but had never experienced that for himself. He suspected the energy was as much a story as any other in the village.

Past his foot, he noticed the ground shaped unnaturally. He let his foot down and squatted to inspect the oddity. There was a line in the sand, straight as an arrow. He dug his finger into the line and traced along it to reveal more. He brushed the sand from his finger and patted the area just above the fine line and scraped some of the dirt and sand away. It was hard, dense, like bricks in the structure of a home. He stepped away and looked left down the endless border, then right down another long stretch that made the edge of Gaelwyn meet the edge of Wasteland. How far and straight it was. Had he never noticed before? He picked up Grandma's staff and dug it into the small thin line his finger made and dragged it along for several feet; sand fell away bit by bit. He tapped the brick and felt the vibrations up the staff and had a gentle revelation: this boundary was no arbitrary thing. It was man-made. The first Elder and Mother Oracle literally built a boundary.

He played in the nearby creek to avoid the disturbing thoughts of the Elder set boundary. He heard no stories of its creation or who was the Orchestrator of such an architectural feat. They had no walls in the village but the one surrounding the Elders compound to give him much needed solitude, but that was paltry compared to the length of the two edges. He floated on the creek letting the easy current take him; he went with the bends and stopped at beaver-built dams where he would get out and walk back down to the clearing. He rode the creek so much he lost track of time and soon the sun was nearing the horizon. He sat on his perch holding the pouch

grandma entrusted him and rocked, still feeling the flow of the creek as if a displaced part of it, and shifted his eyes over the rolling hills and the mountainous contours in the background of a rich otherworld, and thought again of the boundary; nothing natural was straight, not the creek, the dunes, or the mountains - the boundary was constructed for some purpose and it was constructed in secret.

He waited to be dazzled by the final flash of sunset and walked home.

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It was nightfall by the time he crossed the last field, and the Elder was still sitting with Maggaline. A mule driven wagon sat out front and a guard posted at the door, the same one from that day at the Elder's Seat. Benjamin took no notice or care to acknowledge Katchan's presence, but as he tried to unlatch his door, an arm shot out.

"Excuse me," Katchan said, perturbed.

The guard looked down with a friendlier face, "Elder Saulnier and Lady Maggaline are still discussing village affairs and are not to be disturbed."

"They've been in there all day," Katchan said.

"You're telling me," Benjamin said and shook out a leg.

"You've just stood here all day while they talk?"

"I keep them from being disturbed. My father was the Elder's guard and so was his father. It's a family business of sorts. I inherited strong legs, indeed."

"Well, I'm the grandson of Maggaline and unlike you, not paid to be tired, so please let me in so I can rest and get some food."

The large man stifled a laugh, "your grandmother is well respected in the village." Then he lowered his voice, "and between you and I, I think more respected than Elder Saulnier. I

would move mountains for Lady Maggaline.” Then he said in a normal voice, “But I won’t move one step for her grandson.” He grinned nastily.

Katchan sighed and gave his best irritated look. Benjamin smirked and reached into a brown satchel, “but if hunger is all it is, please take these.” He presented an apple and a small loaf of bread, clearly Benjamin’s dinner, to Katchan. The boy looked surprised, and Benjamin insisted; Katchan took the food, gratefully suspicious.

“You’re sure?”

“I inherited the ability to withstand hunger for days on end. I may never move an inch for the grandson of Lady Maggaline, but I would not see him starve.”

Just then, voices from his home rose. An older man’s voice came nearer the door and Benjamin motioned for Katchan to run along. Katchan peeled off to the side of the house and crouched beneath a window to listen. Benjamin did nothing to stop him.

“Maggaline, this is an outrageous idea, and you know it as well as I,” Saulnier said. He wheezed and coughed. Katchan’s earlier suspicions were right; they’re discussing the next Elder. Saulnier was younger than Grandma, but weaker in health. He liked old man Saulnier, but Grandma was a better choice thirteen years ago, and she’s the right choice now. Katchan could fend for himself and take care of the land and house while she administrated in the Elder’s compound.

“He must know the truth at some point, Saulnier. Katchan is older now, mature; he must know the true story of his father before it’s too late. What are you so afraid of?”

Katchan’s heart skipped a beat.

“I’m not afraid, Maggaline. Our people are simply not ready for this.”

“Nonsense.”

“You don’t know what this will do to us.”

“You don’t know what this will do *for* us.”

A long moment passed with Katchan seated in nervous sweat. Every word was laced with sweet venom. The true story of his father; why would she keep that from him, and why should it threaten the Elder, no, the whole village? Saulnier trusted Grandma with his life, but not with this story?

His knees ached and his head throbbed; he wanted Saulnier to just leave.

“The boy must never learn that his father was not born in Gaelwyn.”

The boy's heart stopped and lodged inside his throat. What could he possibly mean?

Maggaline smirked, “Say that too loud and someone will overhear. Rumors will spread and that is one fire you’re not ready to contain. But you know, I hope it does spread.”

“I am Elder,” Saulnier said. “I am the leader of this village, and my word is final. Years ago, I made the decision my predecessor would rather die than make. Can’t you see how serious this is? Going back on my decision from that day would ruin people's trust not just in one story, but all stories; I refuse to let that happen.”

Maggaline rocked in her chair, absorbing what Saulnier said, weighing each word and meaning as if it were the heaviest weight of all. “It is the seriousness of the matter which brings us to revisit it yet again. You didn’t run from the responsibility of Elder. I’ve always admired you for that, Saulnier. It took courage to fill the void of leadership created by both myself and Enrick, but I will say now as I said when you first assumed the role: lying is not leading the village; it is only holding it back.”

Saulnier stood quickly, his wooden chair scraping along the hard floor, “I think our discussion has come to an end Maggaline.” He strutted to the door and stopped and locked eyes

with his longtime friend and mentor, “Maggie, you’ve always been a good friend to me. I never once blamed you, you know. I don’t regret becoming Elder, but I never expected it to be so hard. Please respect my decision as I would respect yours. Sometimes holding back is harder than pushing through.”

“Goodnight, Saulnier,” Maggaline smiled. “Goodnight and good luck.”

He exited the house and called Benjamin to follow. Saulnier hopped into his cart and trotted away into the night. Katchan had already crawled away, for he was unable to stomach everything he heard. He couldn’t let Grandma know he knew; it was something he was not supposed to know and asking her might make it real and that was the last thing he wanted. The night was plenty dark, providing enough cover for Katchan to seamlessly move from his position beneath the window to far into his field. He glided to the front door and took one last look west toward the boundary he feared to understand; then he let himself in. As he passed from darkness to a well-lit room, he imagined what lay inside: Maggaline, who cared for him in the absence of a father and mother, Maggaline who would have been Elder of this village had he never been born, and the greatest storyteller to ever gather a crowd of eager young children and adults alike. All that, yes, but now knowing she also kept the truth about his own father dimmed those wonderful things. A good storyteller goes beyond the truth; in some circles this is called lying. He overheard a boisterous man call stories lies to give the past a golden glow; it caused Katchan to view all stories through that lens. No matter how entertaining a myth or how relevant a fable, he believed he saw them for what they really were: overly elaborate lies. His heart raced too fast earlier to realize all this, but now, calm, those seeds of doubt towards Maggaline began to take root. Who but a queen of lies could hide such an essential truth from him all his life? The village didn’t need to know, only him!

Those consuming thoughts flowed like a current and Katchan felt like an extended piece of the creek, rushing and bending, but sour and unsavory. The woman inside had an image buried deep within Katchan that contradicted these childish thoughts, and soon he drifted into a river of memories of a different sort: games played all night when his nightmares kept him awake, cool cloths brought all the way from the well when he was feverish, scolding's to children who teased him for not having parents; everything one would do only out of goodness and love. He did not have the tough love of a father growing up, only the firm grasp of a woman who expected better; he did not grow up with the soothing touch of a mother to her only child, just the soft whispers from the woman who did the same to her only child years ago. Suddenly he wished he never overheard Saulnier. Who was Saulnier to go against Maggaline's wish to tell the village these secrets that could mean everything? Distrust in Saulnier overcame any prior thoughts of who Maggaline was because he knew who she was: she was the wisest.

Still, like repaired pottery once cracks in something solid are made, they can never truly be unmade. He had to face Maggaline with this unease grafted in his heart and try not to fall apart as if he was repaired by an amateur potter's apprentice. All this he experienced in the momentary heartbeat of stepping into the light and through his doorway where a grave and sullen Maggaline rocked in her chair with fluttering eyelids.

"Avalene," she muttered the name of her lost daughter, then fully awakened to the present, recognizing her grandson coming from a long day out. Katchan recognized the wish in her eyes and briefly, selfishly, felt hurt.

"Hey Grandma," he said.

"Katchan," Maggaline smiled. "How are you? Where is that bag I gave you?"

“Here.” He handed her the weighty leather pouch and sat where Elder Saulnier had minutes earlier. It was warm and smelled funny. Maggaline held the leather pouch near her face as if inspecting something curious, then set the bag in her lap, gently rocking. Her eyes held time and memory hostage; Katchan could tell now more than ever, these past few weeks she was living in a distant dream. What dream Katchan was unsure until tonight, but it was so clear: she was dreaming of her daughter. What little name she possessed was held in great honor due to the love the previous Elder’s son held for her; bad rumors would have shredded her status in the eyes of those who remembered her well. Maggaline seemed to respect Saulnier’s decision so long ago to protect her daughter’s reputation; only now she wished for the whole village to know the truth, why?

Katchan felt guilt creep down his spine for his earlier thoughts and accusations.

He could see her lids droop to the point where her vision blurred, tired old eyes. He never knew her eyes to be so weak. A rage built up towards Saulnier. Had they spent all evening reciting stories and songs to one another instead of gossiping over what should remain unspoken, Maggaline would be wide awake, ambitious for the night and eager for more. When she told stories to Katchan, she acted out the characters in a dramatic voice to make evenings, despite Katchan’s sullied beliefs about them, entertaining at least. Since their fight it seemed like Maggaline was bottling her stories inside. Looking back on those weeks now, he began to realize she was slowing down: her speech, her stride, her nasty looks when Katchan disobeyed; they were all becoming dribbled. His stomach formed a pit that threatened to drag him into the deepest parts of Borsol unless he could refute all blame from the kindling of a question: is that all my fault?

Maggaline stared off into her dreamy daze for some time before Katchan decided to fix what he broke: “Grandma, tell me a story you love? How about *Telo Finds the Cords of the Universe*? Or, how about something dramatic like *The Last Judgement of Idyll*? Ooh, or something fun like *Beetle in the Haystack*. I love the part when the horse and the beetle talk about the farmer for forgetting to clean out the stalls!”

She shifted her gaze to Katchan, and he stopped giggling about how neither the horse or the beetle can stand the smell of dung, the joke being the type of beetle Bardle is, and caught himself entranced in Maggaline’s sudden youthful gaze as if twenty years evaporated like steam along with her dream washed eyes shining something else: longing, hope, faith maybe? It was not a look he had seen in weeks, and maybe even since he was a small child.

“No to all three of those suggestions. I’m going to tell you a story I’ve waited a long time to tell. It’s a different story than what you’re accustomed to hearing; none of this ‘dusty village this, vengeful hero that’. No, this story would shake Elder Saulnier to his very bones. It starts with a beautiful princess, an ancient ruby, and a dream gone terribly wrong.”

CHAPTER FOUR

PRINCESS VALERIE AND THE SILVER CITY

“There is a tale older than us, one of betrayal and dreams. A time before Gaelwyn was a seedling, a time after the golden age of Telo’s kingdom in Livana, a time before many stories. A young princess named Valerie wandered into a hidden chamber in her father’s library. The hidden chamber was dark, few candles lit many corridors, and a man in a black cloak caught her snooping. He was not a nasty man, as you may be thinking, he was a scholar. His work was to understand thousands of clay tablets littered with etchings of meaning. *What was this?* She wondered, and he told her. He told her of a place and lands preceding them where knowledge and wisdom could be passed from one generation to the next as marks in time and meaning, weaved into the fabric of the Scope. She was astonished to say the least, not merely for the lesson in history, but because she had a secret history as well. She contained this ability he spoke of, except hers was quite different: she could make nothing of the marks in clay. Her own work was interpreting dreams into stories, a transmutation of sort that explored what propelled every event into existence.

She was a recorder as well, a diarist of her family. She chronicled the way they maintained power in the city – every compromised good and outright evil clouding their steps. And this gave her something they lacked: perspective. That alone was enough to make them hate her. Yet, their distaste moved her not. She was above them; she was beyond them; she was powerful. But if her secret was discovered, well, much power can only be maintained in secret, right?

The instant she smelled old leather told her this place was something special. Rows upon rows of scrolls lined the walls. There were so many scrolls that additional shelves filling the room made a maze of sorts. Several maps hung on the wall depicting the city, her father's territory [to include Amarsin], and all of Idyll. The smooth craftsmanship of a wooden desk delighted her. Scribes moved silently through the maze organizing scrolls and fulfilling requests from scholars. They wore simple robes depicting their desire for knowledge over vanity. The King's Library was a true treasure.

Valerie lost herself in the paper maze as her guardian spoke to a scribe. Although she was in her twelfth age and would in some years become the wife of a noble, she was still unpermitted to walk the vast palace alone. This hardly means she didn't lose her guardian when she could. She touched the thick paper as she passed by. A letter and number carved into the wood designated how to find an individual scroll. Soon she found herself walking far from the noise of whispered voices and scroll organization until she hit a wall. The back of the King's library, but it stretched further on. Curious, she followed the stone wall from one end. Finding nothing she followed the wall to the other end. At the other end, in a corner, she found a wooden door. *Hidden away from everything else*, she thought. If this door was hidden for a purpose, she must not be allowed to enter. Smiling, she pushed the door and walked through. A bell chimed as she walked through, and she saw it was attached to a string hanging near the door. She gently let it shut.

The room she entered was dark and quiet, almost otherworldly. The air was cold and smelled of dust. Unlike the library where fire was forbidden, candles lit the room. There was no window for sunlight. Valerie grabbed a candle and inspected this secret library. Here there were no scrolls, only rows of stone tablets. The shelves towered far above the highest scroll shelf. She

brushed the rough, stony shelves. She passed an opening between two rows and saw utter blackness. The candle at the far end was hardly noticeable at first. How big was this room? The candle grew brighter. She stayed, squinting, trying to see the end of the row without walking down there herself. The light flickered and moved. She gasped as a man in black robes appeared.

“You’re not supposed to be in here,” the man said. His black robes covered him completely and he wore a mask around his face except his eyes. “And you might want to wear a mask. Dusty.”

“What is *here*?” Valerie asked.

“Curious, are you? Children. Well, it can’t be helped. These stone tablets you see here have existed long before this City was formed. It is the King’s wish to have these tablets translated and transferred to paper scrolls.”

“That doesn’t seem too hard,” Valerie said.

“Oh, yes. Easy task. It’d be easier if the language on these stone tablets still existed and there were a few thousand fewer, but why make things simple?”

“The language doesn’t exist anymore? That’s impossible,” she said.

A bell chimed and heavy breathing entered the room. Scuffling of sandals on a stony floor alerted them to someone running.

“Valerie?!”

“Oh, goodness,” she muttered. Valerie raised her candle, “I’m right here!”

Her guardian found her, “Oh gracious, my lady. You aren’t supposed to be in here! And you,” she pointed to the tablet keeper, “Shame on you!”

“Excuse me?” The translator said.

“He didn’t do anything wrong,” Valerie said.

“He should have escorted you out of this room immediately.”

“He was doing just that before you barged in,” Valerie said.

Her guardian stopped and fretted. “Very well, then,” she grabbed Valerie’s hand and dragged her out of the stone tablet room and back into the scroll library. “If I catch you in there again, he will pay for it I assure you.”

After a short period of discipline, Valerie was able to return to the scroll library. She read freely from whatever she wanted. It created a perfect place to be alone. Her siblings quickly grew bored of scrolls and left to go boss around servants and make trouble. This gave her time to learn the old scholars from King Telo’s era. Those scholars wrote many theories on medicine, numbers, and many other disciplines. Medicine and numbers were all well and useful for ruling a kingdom, but they bored her. No matter how bored she became with scrolls, she found them far better than spending time with her siblings. So, she explored the deeper passageways of the library where they dared not go. There, Valerie discovered the recorded myths written by scribes who supposedly witnessed events such as Telo’s rise to power and the battle between the mighty men and wasteland Lekurt. They were magnificent and grand and allowed for her to witness a life she could never live. There were villains and heroes, adventures to be had, and problems to be solved. She thought how wonderful the life of a scribe must be, seeing these events for themselves. She wanted to live that profession, but she was a princess. Her life was marriage and children and festivals, things people never recorded. The more scrolls she consumed, the more vivid the stories became. She could see them play out in her head like a series of paintings. She ordered the scribes to teach her emesal, the literary arts, and once she mastered emesal, she started recording what she imagined.

Her training was in copying the old masters works, but when she came of her own talent, her writings were different from the scribes. Some stories were about regular people doing regular things in a peculiar way, like drawing water from a well without a bucket. Other writings were fantastic stories that most would consider mythical, and better left in the past. Creatures she read about appeared in these tales. There were Saphanar, lekurt's, behemoths, and the Ungrieved, an especially devilish group of monsters. She often placed herself in the stories as the princess who rescued innocent people from such beasts. Valerie showed her guardian and a few maidens-in-waiting these stories. They laughed and cried when they should, and even adored the cute princess and her harmless stories. She was glad. She wanted them to see her as harmless.

Her imagination grew sharper, more precise, and more vivid as time went on. Daydreams followed her into the night and became only what she could describe as divinatory, like she was no longer imagining stories, but watching them. She started waking in a sweat from a suffocating vision. She would rise and call a maiden-in-waiting to prepare her table to write until morning. Often, the story made no sense to her. People in these dreams were dishonest and treacherous. Worse, these were people she sometimes recognized. She recorded these stories with fear. By her father's word, any scandal that could hurt the royal reputation would result in punishment. Every law written for a royal protected the royal name. Only because these stories came from dreams could she keep them secret. Although fearful, the chances of ever being discovered were slim. Her maidens were illiterate. They could not read the stories of shadows and phantoms tricking and poisoning one another to gain some favor. The phantoms spread gossips and lies that sounded vaguely like the sinister workings of her large family plotting against one another. An ancient vase would go missing, and an innocent servant takes the punishment, while a shadow laughs. A

mistress would be flogged to protect the royal family's integrity and honor. As time went on, she realized these revelations were of her family in pursuit of a small gain in power.

Valerie knew the royal family to be loathsome because of these dreams. She felt they earned her disgust, even though she never physically saw them do the things she wrote. As long as they left her to her library, she could tolerate any of them. However, there was one sibling she loved very much, Prince Joseph. A handsome son of a local village woman her father met on a visit to one of the seven districts. Valerie had a hard time finding a reason to dislike Joseph. He was playful and compassionate. His seat of power was so low on the totem pole that he posed no threat to his older siblings, so they left him alone. In many ways, he was like her. He enjoyed the library, long conversations, and even her stories.

She considered sharing her more dream writings with him. It was dangerous, though. One small slip of the tongue could have her banished from the library for good, but she desperately wanted someone to share these with. Then the day came when she realized sharing would be a mistake.

Valerie watched Joseph expel a woman he accused of prostitution from the temple. She knew the girl as one of her sister's maidens-in-waiting. Valerie could try and protest, but the guards would never listen to her over a prince.

The accused maiden was flogged on the steps.

Valerie once believed Joseph was the essence of devotion to righteousness, but corruption spared none in her family. Still, she confronted him, trusting he was good.

"You know as well as I that she was Penelope's maiden," Valerie said.

"Penelope's maiden? I had no idea, I promise! She will be so upset with me," Joseph said.

The look in his eye convinced her that he told the truth. Valerie forgave him. No harm done. Petty, but the maiden was still just a maiden. Royal mistakes like this happen all the time. Valerie seethed that she had not allowed her brother the benefit of the doubt. She apologized to him, and as she turned to leave, his mouth twinged so slightly that anyone would have missed it. She wished she had. Valerie wanted to stop and question him, but her gut filled with cautious fear. She recognized that twinge. It was an accidental break in character. A sudden movement can alert a king to an assassin, or a gambler to an opponents tell. If an opponent is unaware you know, it is devious at worst. If they know they are caught, they become dangerous. That twinge made her immediately question her former conclusion of his genuineness. That twinge was the beginning of a smirk.

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That night she woke in a sweat from a nightmare. She called her maiden-in-waiting for her writing tools and recorded her dream. Her story came like a flash of lightning.

A shadow and a peasant fell in love. The peasant fell pregnant with his child and pressured the shadow to marry her, despite their vast differences. When he refused, the peasant decided she would appeal to Marikel and the temple Oracle; but the shadow caught her at the gates and beat her, for he feared that not even a shadow could escape divine righteousness. That night, the peasant lay in a meager bed softly sore and weeping, for she knew her baby would never be.

The dream revealed the truth. A man beloved by all with a shadowy spirit. Valerie's stomach turned. Even if she discovered the perpetrator of this evil, she could do nothing about it. The shadow was royalty. Only one being can hold royalty accountable: Marikel, God himself. Only the temple Oracle can appeal to *Him* on her behalf. Going to the Temple now and revealing the dream could mean an unpleasant fate for the only brother she loved. It could also lead to the

discovery of her more divinatory works. The King would be furious with any slight to the family honor. But what honor would she have if she let the life of a child slip away unaddressed?

She rushed to find the temple Oracle. Valerie knew the city streets well enough to go without light. She came to the outer gate and envisioned the tall, white brick wall with equally tall, silvery gates that remained open but for one day of the year. She passed through, cloaked from head to toe so not to arouse suspicion from the guards. A royal traveling alone at night was newsworthy. She recognized the guards who glared as she passed by. She entered the inner court, and the vision from her story flashed in her memory. The courtyard was white stoned, outlined by mirroring trees leading to the steps. It made for an awe-inspiring corridor. Any who passed through those doors were granted protection from the outside world. There you stood with the Oracle, amidst the divine, untouchable by any evil.

If only she made it that far.

A robed man stood atop the temple steps. Sensing something terrible, she stopped at the bottom of the steps. The robed figure threw off his hood. The ebony black hair of a royal framed the handsome face of Prince Joseph. His golden eyes appeared as hallows of madness. Valerie trembled on the temple steps praying Joseph would just let her pass. The Oracle would come if she heard cries, but it was unlikely Valerie would be heard. Oracles often fell into deep trances. Besides, waking the entire temple would bring nothing but trouble.

“So good to see you, Valerie. Why would my sister come to the temple so late at night?”

She sensed he already knew the truth, but she did not come this far to quit. Valerie decided to play the part most likely to trick Joseph.

“Prince Joseph, know that I am devout and pure of heart. I come to pay respects and praise to Marikel.”

Joseph's deadpan eye's communicated doubt. "You are devout?"

"A maiden till death and beyond," Valerie answered.

The prince became contemplative, and Valerie sensed victory. She took a step.

"You come to give praise?"

Valerie stopped and answered with as much false hope as she could muster, "as often as a princess's work allows for."

Joseph stepped aside to let her pass. Valerie smiled. The Oracle would hear of his treachery, then Marikel himself would judge him. She curtsied as royal women are taught then passed him on the steps leading to the temple. A vicious chuckle stopped her.

"Just one moment. Who would believe you are devout, sister, when you write such depraved lies about the royal family?"

Valerie's breath stopped in her throat. She swung to face him and saw malice replace his handsome features.

"Imagine my surprise when your maiden-in-waiting told me of the secret hiding place where you keep your treacherous stories. Betrayal, hatred, revenge, and unscrupulous love all laid out in your own words. Is this really what you think of royalty? The scribes will authenticate your authorship, don't deny it," Joseph said.

Valerie stuttered, scrambling to keep her act together. "Joseph, you fiend! You accuse me with treacherous lies?"

He waved his hand and soldiers flooded from behind the perfectly arranged trees to surround Valerie.

"You come to the temple at this hour to appeal to Marikel through an Oracle. You think I'm guilty of something horrible, don't you? You think I did not notice your face? It spoke

volumes. You've come to slander my good name! I cannot stand for false accusations any more than I can stand for heresy. I show you mercy, as Telo showed his enemies. I do not condemn you to death. You are banished, with your maidens-in-waiting, to the land of unceasing storms."

"Our father will hear of this. He won't allow it!" Valerie threatened.

"One more mercy I grant: our father will never hear of your treachery. How like King Telo am I? You will go tonight and spare our father such burdens."

Large hands grabbed Valerie and thrust her into cuffs. Soldiers dragged and threw her into a horse-drawn carriage piloted by a man in a large black robe with a hood drawn to cover his face. A whip cracked and the carriage lurched forward.

As the horses carried Valerie off to an uncertain fate, Joseph waved. There was something unusual about his wave. There was no great victorious laugh of a brother besting his sister. There was no shame sprawled across his face. No agony over his betrayal. There was nothing like that at all. The wave, simply, was an empty gesture one might give to a stranger that meant little to nothing in the grand scheme of things. As if she were a small game piece meant to be sacrificed for the players victory to be slightly more in his favor. The sort of pieces that were simply in the way. Valerie's eyes drifted away from her brother's empty wave to the man that carried her to her fate. Years of writing, and for the first time she had no words to say.

She pleaded with the carriage driver to let her escape, but to no avail. The man had his instructions and would carry them out and nothing more. Her maidens cursed Valerie for being wrapped into her banishment. They sobbed in agony and in anger directed toward the princess they served. Valerie would find comfort from them no longer. Her thoughts turned grim. She buried her face in her chest and missed the view of the carriage driver's glance at the banished princess. He had a front row seat to a tragic story. He felt sorry for them all.

With a back so horribly twisted since birth, he found peace in life by hiding away in a dark cloak. People avoided a man in a cloak, and so his life was less miserable. The cloak protected him from the taunts, ridicule, and anger of the world, yet also shielded the world from his deep and unlimited kindness. He pitied the banished princess and offered her something of little value once they arrived at their destination – a ruby.

“It’s bright,” Valerie said, examining the ruby. “Where did you get it?”

“That ruby is worth more gold than the whole kingdom,” the gravelly voice within the hood said.

“He picked you because you don’t get out much, isn’t that right?”

“Joseph picked me because he is a fool,” the man said. He cracked the whip and rode back to the kingdom where Valerie was never to be seen alive again. She felt crushed by the weight of humility. A royal princess pitied by a man with a twisted spine—it was unheard of.

Strong winds threatened to rip the wooden door from the hinges of Valerie’s new home on the side of a mountain. The otherworldly whine of the cyclone pained their ears and pulsed through their stomachs. A week later, the humid skies broke into heavy rainfall that flooded their near doorless home. Not long after the monsoon, the air turned electric and struck all around them. For these reasons the land of storms earned its name. Without these mountains, Livana would be crushed under the weight of nature. Maybe for this reason it was a perfect banishment.

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Prince Joseph soon became King Joseph after his father’s death. He took it upon himself to entrap his brothers, rival successors, into hefty legal and moral court battles of his own design. One by one they fell out of favor in the King’s eyes until only Joseph remained in the end. Valerie learned of her brother’s treacherous victory from the local merchant that traded food for the

tapestries her and her maidens weaved. With her being the only one who knew the truth about Joseph, any chance to return home vanished with his crowning. Not one of her other brothers had a chance to stand up to him, not that they would stand up for her. She wept in her meager cot, clutching the ruby. The carriage driver believed this ruby was worth more gold than the whole kingdom. It was a mere trinket to her. Still, she held it tight. It was the only thing she owned in the whole world. That, in its own way, made it worth a whole kingdom.

Scroll libraries did not exist in the land of unceasing storms. This added to her pain. Valerie could no longer write. Still, she woke from visions of her city and family. She would clutch the ruby to her chest. Dreams of places she had never seen shook her gently in the night. What strange places did her mind go? Something about possessing this ruby made the visions more vibrant. Her dreams were more detailed. This only sharpened her heartache. No matter how Valerie traveled in her mind, her body was still trapped in the mountain home. She longed for the freedom to write and read her father's scrolls. Even the mysterious stone library tugged at her, but she knew that was also a lost cause. Her craving for words and stories became desperation. In her grief, she made a decision; a decision which led to a revelatory encounter.

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Valerie teetered at the edge of a cliff, facing a strong headwind. She threatened to cut herself. Her maidens did not discourage her. She did, with a muffled cry. She spread her arms wide and felt the wind fill her dress like a sail on a ship. A hard object pressed against her thigh, and she remembered the hooded man with the twisted spine.

Worth more gold than the whole kingdom.

It would be more useful in his hands than in her pocket, lying in a ravine. Valerie stepped away from the edge and walked to the huddle of her maidens. Their indifferent eyes watched her

approach. The princess pulled the ruby from her pocket and held it out to the group of women who once served her. They had cruel eyes. Valerie found herself wishing she were so far away that they would look as small as she felt. She wished that with as much will as she could muster. Blood dripped from the ruby from her wrist.

“The carriage driver,” she said, “make sure this gets back to him.”

None heard her. The ruby glowed and vibrated with unbearable force. Valerie gasped and cried, but all was silent. She felt launched into space, flying away from the cliff, her maidens, and to her horror, her own body.

Terror exploded through her senses as she passed through an unimaginable presence that invaded her very being. Thousands of voices chattering, laughing, and screaming pounded through her head as cold and empty space rushed by like a winter storm. The noise grew violent and chaotic. Her eardrums pounded. The heat from her body vanished as the cold settled into her bones. Valerie wanted to shout and beg for Marikel to make it stop when suddenly, it did. The silence overtook the noise, and the warmth returned as if neither had ever left in the first place.

Valerie stood in a hall of celestial proportions, lined with an eternity of massive canvases. There was no terror here, no unimaginable presence. There was only peace. She caught her breath. Frames of paintings lined the walls on both sides of the hall.

One took her eye was that of a man and woman surrounded by fresh greens, trees, flowers, and fruits. It was a lovely place. Garden paintings were common in Livana, but this one seemed different. It was lifelike in every manner, detailed, and brilliantly colored. It must have taken someone a thousand years to paint with such precision. Looking at it now gave her a sense of longing she did not understand. She wanted to be in that garden. She wanted to be anywhere but

the land of storms. Still, it was a unique beauty. She stared until the painting grew unfocused. She turned her eyes and looked for more.

Beside the painting of the garden was a portrait of a man in a red suit of armor. His face looked, she could hardly describe it well, but sad. Directly across from his portrait was a beautiful woman. She looked queenly, but unlike most queens, she did not wear a dress, but a black suit of armor.

Valerie wandered down the hall, mouth agape at the quantity and variety of paintings. Still portraits played out like visions. She understood their thoughts and feelings. Below each portrait stood a pedestal with stacks of paper and ink. The more she wandered the more she came to realize the portraits were her stories. Dreams she held close to her heart put her in a familiar place. As she explored the expansive hall, voices from far away grew louder. She walked further past the used canvases and closer to the blank ones, near where the chattering came from. She stared into a blank canvas, wondering from where the voices came when color exploded and stained the white with the figure of a man sitting on a green hill overlooking a lake. The painting expressed the man's life as only paintings can do. Valerie felt invited to write, so she did. On every pedestal, below every blank canvas. She recorded flashes of places and people she had never seen or met, who were chasing their desires and finding their fortunes. Valerie could hardly believe what was happening—these dreams and visions coming to life before her eyes. Were they unwritten stories from sleeping people?

Valerie walked like a daydream, moving from vision to vision without pause. They passed with the blink of an eye. Stories, some like the dreams of her family were like a record of misdeeds. Some were like the stories of heroes and ladies who conquered the world around them with strength and virtue. They all told a tale worthy of hearing. They all spelled something of value. The flashes

of story painted themselves onto canvases, making a permanent residence into the fabric of the lives that experienced them.

How long she stayed there, she did not know, but eventually Valerie decided she wrote enough for now. She wandered to her own portrait. All the amazing things in this hall of paintings, and she wished to be back there, at her lowest moment, only to show her maidens she felt alive once more. Valerie woke standing before her maidens, totally new. She gasped and breathed the fresh air of freedom. This rock was worth more gold than the entire kingdom.

Another dark cloudy storm approached. Thunder rumbled in the distance and lightning flashed all around. Her maidens screamed and scurried for cover. For once the storms, Valerie did not care. Let them come. No storm could take from her what she now possessed.

The ruby, somehow, gave her mind access to a place beyond her wildest imagination. Her maidens no longer cared for the well-being of the princess, but they each watched curiously as she sat still for hours a day as if she were somewhere else.

That somewhere else was anywhere she truly wanted to be. From the beginnings of time to things not yet seen; from fallen kings, to rising darkness. She could see it all, and, truly, it was all worth seeing.

They grew old and frustrated as their hatred for the princess grew cold and stale. One by one they passed away, leaving Valerie to her peaceful existence. She lived in humble exile this way for years and years, the mysterious ruby taking her to where stories are made, where she wrote dream after dream until she wrote her last.”

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ELDERS FESTIVAL

Katchan blinked, the end of this strange tale of a beautiful white walled city with a king and a princess and books and betrayal was as foreign to him as any tale he had ever heard, but this was foreign in a way purely unique to itself: Stone tablets of a language long dead, a supernatural ruby that brought its user somewhere outside time and space, a princess who could write and a prince who would trick the most noble of people. The oddest of these was princess Valerie and her ability to communicate with a pen and paper. Absurd. Supernatural objects appeared in many of the stories Maggaline told, but never once had he heard of someone writing down their thoughts. It would be as if a man were babbling to himself, why?

“Why did the princess write down things only she could understand?”

Maggaline gaped, “This whole story and that's the first question you ask?”

“Well, yeah. You had me going at first, this story seemed so real, realer than many stories, but when I thought about whatever princess Valerie was doing that’s when I knew for sure the whole story was made up. Why would she spend so much time writing her thoughts that nobody else could understand? That’d be like you telling a story to an empty chair.”

“An empty chair would listen better than you. You think this story is the same as *Beetle in the Haystack*? Pff...the story of Princess Valerie is history, boy. Prince Joseph read her stories if you recall; all the king's children could and write as well.”

“And the hooded man translating words from stone from a language that no longer exists? C’mon, if any of this were real, we would have our own black hooded man chiseling made up words into stone, but nope, none of that in Gaelwyn.”

“Everything from that story: the people, places, techniques, challenges, and problems, they’re all gone now. We are all that’s left.”

Katchan’s face darkened and his patience began ripping at the seams. Everything in him wanted to scream: “Where did my father come from?” but something stopped him. He didn’t know if it was to avoid another fight, Maggaline was livelier than she had been in weeks, or if it was fear of forcing her to lie; deeper than that, probably, he feared she wouldn’t. What then? What could Katchan do with the truth that mattered at all? So instead he said, “I can’t possibly believe any of this.”

Maggaline sighed, resigned to the fact there was nothing she could say to change her grandson’s mind. How different he was from she compared to when his father told her stores of the Silver City. Circumstances were different, she being old with a long memory, and he being young with nothing but stories in his head, no experience to compare story with. The weighty leather pouch sat in her lap. She grabbed it by the bottom and dumped out its contents: a fist sized ruby.

Katchan gasped, all day he carried this without once looking inside. Even if he did, what would he be looking at? “Grandma, why did you want me to take this away from here?”

She was quiet for a long uncomfortable moment. “Elder Saulnier is a good man with good intentions. Long ago he made the best decision he could, but a good decision made from fear becomes a bad decision once fear leaves. He has never stopped being afraid. I don’t know what he would do if he found this.”

He would bury it with that other story he’s keeping from the village, Katchan thought, and would that really be so bad?

“It’s yours now,” Maggaline said. “Along with the house you inherit two other things: this story and this ruby.”

Inherit?

“I’m getting on in years, boy. I’ve told you many stories, but that one of princess Valerie is the most important,” Maggaline said.

Katchan hinted this was a half-truth by the look in her eye. This was not the most important story. His father, that was the real story. He could tell she wanted to say something then but would not. Despite his flaws, she respected Saulnier. Or was it fear? Katchan shuddered. Saulnier loved Maggaline as a mentor and friend, and the village respected her more than any other. What could he possibly hold against her to keep this story secure?

“Were you and Saulnier drinking wine? What’s got into you all of a sudden?” He asked.

“Only my age, and yes a little wine, you know that.”

“Well, I’m not taking that rock anywhere else; who knows what it could do to me?”

“Thought you didn’t believe the story?”

Katchan sucked air through his teeth. “Still not worth the risk. And I’d rather not get on Saulnier’s bad side.”

Maggaline looked forlornly at the door.

“Besides,” Katchan continued, “I’ve forgotten most of that story already so if you really want me to remember it you better tell it again soon, and really three or four times, or more. Once a month for the rest of my life actually.” Katchan helped Maggaline from her chair and to her bed and set a pail of water on the floor by her side. As she snuggled under the covers, Katchan took a last look at the ruby sitting on the table. “Where did you even get a thing like that?”

“Gift from your father,” she said sleepily.

“And the story?”

“Avalene,” she whispered and fell into a deep sleep.

A bottle of the village's finest wine sat empty. Katchan smirked, they never went easy on strong drink. He sniffed the top and revolted: beetroot wine. That was new. He looked down at Maggaline breathing evenly; so different from when she was animated just minutes earlier. Whether the story was true or not, she brought the characters to life and looked as alive as ever. He decided right then that he wanted to ask her about his father's origin. After the Elder's festival tomorrow, he wanted to know for sure what made the Saulnier so fearful of a man from outside the boundary. Katchan did know one thing for sure, though: that story was impossible. And there was no way he was taking that ruby anywhere but to the bottom of a river.

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Katchan did not quite grasp the meaning of the Elder's Festival. Every year he and Maggaline browsed the local crafts made to see by families with enough children to work the fields and daily upkeep so they could focus on specialty jewelry, woven baskets, sandals and boots of all sorts, and an assortment of odd food combinations made into a jam. This year he noticed and especially repugnant smell: beets.

“Here, some beet-banana jam made just this morning,” a hardy woman said while shoving a hunk of bread with a chunky red concoction slathered on top into his face. Despite his politeness in refusing the treat, Maggaline forced him with a glare to eat. The women needed votes for the best produce, and thus needed victims; he opened wide enough for some chunky bits to lodge safely on his cheeks. “Oh no, you want all of it,” she declared and scooped the chunks into his mouth.

“Say thank you, Katchan,” Maggaline said.

His thanks came garbled and through tears. Giddily, the woman asked to place his voting pebble into the ‘good’ jar. He did, thankful to be unable to vote any longer and to move swiftly away from her table.

“You know I hate that stuff,” Katchan said once out of ear shot.

“Deal with it, Katchan. Sha-ra fixes us a meal every month, the least you can do is pretend to enjoy it,” besides, she said with a nasty grin, “I enjoy watching you squirm.”

How evil. He successfully turned down only one other taste test, Maggaline snickered off to the side as he choked down honey drizzled beets, beet-berry salad, beet and potato stew, and one combination of foods, beets of course, he especially considered an abomination. Beets had an excellent harvest apparently, and Grandma was near stitches for most of the morning. Of course, it was undignified for a woman of her stature to openly cackle, so she maintained a steady stream of tears.

Katchan found the most satisfying food dish of all: a plain piece of baked bread. He used it to wipe beet remnants off his tongue. “Couldn’t I have stayed home today like I asked?” He wanted to examine the boundary some more.

“No, Katchan. Saulnier has a big announcement, and you should be here.”

My father? Would Saulnier really tell the whole village something so soon after vehemently opposing the idea just last night? No, it had to be something else. That secret has been sealed away so long, breaking it out would shake the very foundations of Gaelwyn. Maggaline didn’t know Katchan knew, wouldn’t she want him to hear it from her first? He grew hot, Katchan felt his heart pound at the thought of every villager looking at him like an outcast whose blood came from somewhere beyond Gaelwyn. How could they react: scornful, hateful,

with pity? Was Lady Maggaline, the most respected woman in this village, safe from their judgement? Did she know what Saulnier was going to announce?

“Katchan, I wanted to tell you something.”

“What, Grandma? Here? Now?”

“You look like you’ve eaten too many beets. Calm down, alright. Things will be okay.”

“Oh, that’s all?”

“Did you want more? Try not to smile too much, your teeth are red.”

His face burned from embarrassment while hers lit with laughter. He followed ten paces behind her now, the conversation he overheard last night and the visual of the created boundary sharp in his mind. He laid a hand on a post to steady himself and overheard another conversation.

The Oracle was speaking to a group of children. She worked alone but for one apprentice, Willow, who was chosen into this position for life, and had little say in her fate. She worked as a healer, a dream interpreter, worked with visions, weather prediction, and saw to it the village was blessed with good crops. She too, told stories. Unlike the stories villagers told each other, the Oracles revolved around a single figure: Marikel, the creator of Idyll. She told stories of his journey from the birth of the Scope to a war among gods, and even one of him abandoning creation for short periods of time when on the hunt for another cosmic figure: the architect of evil. She was allowed to speak these stories after preparing herself through cleansing rituals and even purifying her lips with a burning coal, only then could she share. The Oracle was considered wise, trustworthy, and the keeper of the ways of peace.

The children sat cross legged; some fidgeted and some sat in rapt attention. He remembered being in there spot not too many years ago, far off to the side from the other

children, of course. Memory washed over him, and he too decided to stand and listen. As she spoke, eyes of gold and honey met his and he felt entranced by her beauty: long dark hair to her knees, slender neck, and a posture that commanded attention. Her vision came to life; he saw it in her eyes like lakes of light. The children sat, huddled, frozen in time and grey against her radiance. Ensnared by her gaze, Katchan wanted to know every thought she could parcel to a mind unworthy as his. Her lips, full, painted with colors of the divine and as unreachable as the past, moved with such graceful care, as a dancer with the wind, speaking his name across the space between them and then he knew the only truth she could give: his fate would meet him soon. The suspended moment came to an end. The pocket of time he and the Oracles shared for that lifetime rested back into the steady stream of festival goers and passed like a feeling.

Katchan awoke as if from a dream, and indeed, it felt like a dream. Maggaline was calling for him to come on from the Oracle. He looked back at the radiant figure, and she was mid story and completely absorbed with her words. It must have been a dream for she never glanced back towards him, and he wondered what she would tell him if he asked. He hurried on and tried not to let this strange feeling bother him, but he knew that gaze of fire would haunt him for years to come, and yes, he wanted to be haunted by her.

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Saulnier stood on top of a stage where previously men and women re-enacted a story called *Telo finds the Cords of the Universe* in front of a small, inebriated audience [an inebriation possibly caused by beet-wine, the worst of things as Katchan learned] and a small man blew a horn alerting the festival goers to gather. Only a small number from the village crowded around the stage, but whatever Saulnier announced would spread fast enough that it did not matter.

Villagers from the produce section of the festival, swayed over to the growing crowd, their hands holding bread topped with Sha-ra's beet concoction. They looked like they enjoyed the treats, and that told him more than anything else how different he was from them. One couple smiled with red teeth, and Katchan gagged a little and shifted his head away, but his eyes landed on Lati, who wore a nasty look as she chewed the beet concoction, and behind her with his arms crossed stood Ogni. His face was stone, but he looked to the stage and not him. Lati gulped and met his eyes and twisted her face that looked, to him, friendly, as if disliking beets were some common ground for each other. He smiled. She glanced behind her and saw her father was not paying attention and walked nearer to Katchan, and for the first time all day he was glad for the beet harvest.

"I'm sorry about my father, for, you know, back then," Lati whispered. She looked at him with yearning eyes, as if he held the only thing she wanted.

"It's okay," Katchan whispered back, and he meant what he said. For the first time he noticed her large brown eyes shown like dew drops in the morning, as if they were painted from the creek near the edge of the boundary. Suddenly, he felt a twinge in his heart that came from somewhere deep within, hope, maybe, that his life would not be one of solitude and pain, but that one day Lati might be betrothed to him, that Ogni might accept him, that the villagers would forget the past, his past, and move on and welcome him into the fold as one of their own. A future blossomed in his mind, and he began to imagine what life could be for him. Lati smiled red teeth, which did not bother him now, and snuck back to her father before Ogni could notice.

The crowd began to shush and Katchan became frantic. He tugged at Maggaline's sleeve. *Please don't let him talk about my father!* He wanted to shout.

She shushed him, “He’s announcing some changes to the Eldership, one of the many things we discussed yesterday. What are you so worried about?”

“I’m not worried about that; I just need to ask you something. It’s important.”

“It can wait.”

“It can’t.”

“Shush.”

Saulnier’s Elderly voice came out strong and youthful bearing greetings to the small crowd. “I have attended this festival every year since I was a boy. In my time many Elders have come and gone, each with the authority to alter the festival in whatever way they deemed fit, and every glorious year we hold the festival to their tastes. It is my favorite thing about the Elder’s festival, so many Elders, and still the festival remains the same, and good for that.” Many people clapped and cheered. “But if I may, I do think it is time for one change.” The crowd murmured its confusion. “It is a small change, but I think you will find it satisfactory. For too long our process of electing Elder’s has relied on the sitting Elder’s wisdom, and frankly, why I sit in this seat today, as it should be well known, is due to our esteemed Lady Maggaline’s refusal of the role.”

The rustling, shuffling, and general chatter of the crowd ceased; any noise that could be made stopped and the collective breath sucked in and held.

“And it is not unknown to me the consensus on this arrangement. The youngest a viable candidate may be is sixty-five years old, I had just turned that age due to our former Elder’s untimely swim in the river.”

The unspoken fact has been spoken. Did Saulnier want to be forcibly removed?

“Despite my age, my ears are sharp. I hear the conversations held between secret parties; I hear you. You are angry and have been angry, fed up because my best efforts are not enough. Now a rumor has spread about that day long ago, when the vagrant man returned to the village he abandoned as a boy to make trouble again.”

“Grandma, what’s he saying?” Katchan said, terrified. He looked back at Lati, who did not return his gaze.

Maggaline’s face was white, her fingers clenched around her walking stick so hard Katchan thought a mold would be left behind. Suddenly the murmurs returned and spread through the crowd like a bad cough as if suddenly remembering they were very interested in this topic, people turned to one another and whispered openly. Katchan wanted to run away from whatever this was becoming but Saulnier motioned toward Maggaline, and now eyes glued to her and Katchan with fear and distrust growing out of the confusion sowed. With weak legs Maggaline pushed forward, the crowd parted for the old woman who told the stories they knew to their parents. She met no eyes, hers were arrows targeted for her apprentice. Katchan followed close behind, the crowd filling in like water on a shore.

“After thirteen years I have decided it was time for fiction to be revealed as fact; rumors to be unveiled; truth to reign supreme,” Saulnier said.

Maggaline cut him off with a voice that made the crowds step away, “Saulnier, what do you think you are doing?” Her age was no longer certain; it ranged from a fiery young woman to a scolding mother, an angry child to an ancient crone. People looked from her to Saulnier with excitement and wonder. The Elder was never interrupted and certainly never questioned, especially not on the day of the festival.

“Lady Maggaline, please do not interrupt me.”

“What do you think you are doing?”

“I asked you once, do not force me to ask you again. I am only doing what Enrik failed to do.” He faced the crowds again and put on the face of a ruler, “Enrik believed the truth of that day would shatter our faith and respect we have for Lady Maggaline. It was not choice that separated her from the role I fill now, it was his last wish.”

Impossible. Liar. Enrik loved Maggaline, everyone said so, Katchan thought.

“Her credibility to govern was darkened the day she covered for her daughter’s sin of adultery.”

Gasps swept like a gust of wind.

“For though she bedded the vagrant, she was betrothed to Echo, the son of Enrik.”

“How dare you slander Avalene’s name,” Maggaline shouted.

“Is this true,” Katchan said softly and to no one.

“The truth cannot slander that which was already shameful. Nobody blames you, Maggaline, for her choice, but there has been a fog over this village and the fog was that secret. It is lifted now, and everyone will see clearly.”

Katchan looked around him and saw not villagers, but blurs of hate, and red-eyed monsters.

“Fog or not, you’ve always been blind, and you always will,” Maggaline replied.

“Maggaline, not even you can insult an Elder this way,” Saulnier said.

“Is this what your arrogance calls for; spewing venom and lies?”

“Benjamin, escort her home before I order her to the Keep,” Saulnier screamed.

Benjamin hesitated, looking from Saulnier, his Elder and employer, to the woman he for whom he would move mountains.

“You would let the mother of the girl who is responsible for your uncle and cousins death disrespect the Elder of this Gaelwyn and walk away? What would your father think of you?”

Ogni and Udrik appeared beside Maggaline.

“We’ll escort her home, your Eldership,” Ogni said.

“Sure will,” Udrik said.

“Stop! No, you won’t touch her,” Benjamin said and eased down the stage with pity in his eyes and a loosely wrapped a rope from Maggaline’s hand to his own. The invocation of his father’s honor was enough to render the respect he carried for Maggaline to null. Worse. Worse now that Katchan understood what those tears meant. Benjamin knew all too well the relationship Saulnier has with Maggaline; the irreplaceable one of mentor and mentee now crushed beneath the weight of struggle, and for what, Katchan wondered, did he save his father’s honor in public and sully his own in secret? Because Benjamin could end this now with a single word. He could turn and stop the Elder in his tracks, negotiate his removal from the position, and possibly hailed as a hero; he could say what he knew: Echo was never formally betrothed to his mother. Echo only spread rumors around the village, that is all. Some believed them and others did not, most did not care, but Saulnier’s confirmation moved it to the forefront of everyone’s mind.

Maggaline gave the Elder a look reserved for the souls she pitied. “May He who walks the full expanse of the Scope comfort you in this time of darkness.” She allowed Benjamin to lead her away, her arm on his, he helping her every step of the way.

The crowd was rendered mute by the violent exchange by the two most respected citizens in Gaelwyn. Most went to Saulnier on official business, but to Maggaline when their hearts ached for something more. He was their elected Elder, she, the mother of an accused adulterer.

They looked from their Elder to their Lady and knew who won despite who was bound by the hands. Saulnier knew it too. He did not look victorious but smothered and ruined despite getting what he always wanted: the villagers on his side, or if not, at least not on hers.

Katchan followed Benjamin and Maggaline for the long ride home. Benjamin helped Maggaline onto a cart, and Katchan sat beside her. All eyes were on them: the outcasts, the unloved. The future blossoming in his mind faded into decay and dust. It was only a mirage, a life spent with Lati, welcomed by the villagers, it was all made of thin pottery now shattered into irreparable pieces. The crowd swirled like a degenerate mist, and even the hope of love from Lati evaporated like early morning dew.

CHAPTER SIX

A DREAM LONG AWAITED

Maggaline rocked in her chair unconcerned with the matters of the Elder's Festival but with the life of a fly buzzing around her freshly made tea. Its life seemed so interesting compared to her own at this moment. It buzzed around in tight circles and landed on the lip of the cup, circled again, and returned. It was attracted to the drizzle of honey, surely, the sweet scent of fuel calling out to the fly and the fly responding in turn. The fly had no interest in the tea, no doubt, why would it? The tea's natural properties of defense would kill the fly in minutes and generations of flies living in the fly must have warned it of this. It never flew around her tea leaves, which she left out in the open, but always loitered around her honey, which she kept covered. It could smell the honey even covered, its call deep and loud enough for the fly to hear it even covered. Why then, knowing tea from honey, would the fly travel so near a concoction of death? Is the honey's sweetness greater than death's finality? Would just one sip of the honey-tea be worth shortening the fly's life by minutes? The fly buzzed, circled, landed and put its grimy legs into the cup of honey-tea. That's it then, Maggaline thought, the fly chose the sweetness of life over the time of life. Generations of flies should have warned the fly to run away from the tea; did it ignore generations of flies or was she wrong about what the flies were telling the fly? She has listened to generations of stories now and has lived her life according to their lessons, can she not give the fly some credit? Isn't there life in life that is sweeter than life?

The fly drank of its life's hidden poison and circled around drunk on its elixir for glorious minutes before landing and falling to a shuffle before passing away to speak of its lessons learned in the minutes of honey. Then Katchan opened the door, carrying a jar of water.

"Saulnier has no right," Katchan stated.

“As the Elder, he has such rights,” Maggaline responded.

He huffed and sat down in the chair Saulnier sat in last night. It no longer smelled crusty and vile, but to Katchan it stank with his spirit. “I thought he respected you, last night before he left, he said he did.” Katchan paused realizing he said too much.

“I thought I heard you at the window,” Grandma said, still focused on her tea. “How much did you hear?”

“Enough.”

“What did you hear?”

“My father was born outside this village.”

“It is so. Enrick never wanted anyone to know. It’s why you and I live on the edge of the village, to keep you out of sight should anyone look to close.”

“Why?”

“They don’t know why, your father seemed so normal to them, in fact they enjoyed his presence very much. It was Avalene who convinced them to give him a chance.”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“It wasn’t the right time. Plus, Saulnier forbade me.”

“I could have joined my own people.”

“I am your own people, and there are no ‘people’ to join. Nothing is beyond that boundary.”

“Then where did my father come from?”

“I don’t know, but he assured me there were no others, and made me promise never to enter the wasteland, even though I am the only one who can.”

“Where is he now?”

“Dead I suppose, like Echo and the men who fought with him in the desert.”

“A monster killed them all?”

“Something did.”

Katchan slumped in his chair.

“You don’t believe me, do you?”

Katchan stood, “you’re just telling me another story. I can’t believe anything you say, can I? My father can’t be the only person living beyond the boundary, he couldn’t have died fighting a monster, monsters aren’t and never were real. Stories are just information, words you say to say something else, and its keeping everyone in the dark about the village and whatever is beyond the boundary.”

“You’re shouting.”

“What’s below the dome?”

“Calm down.”

“No, what’s below the dome?”

“Nothing. We are all.”

“I just can’t believe that.”

“But you don’t believe in stories? What’s the distance between truth and lies? Belief and disbelief? Of all my years on Idyll I have never met anyone like you who is quick to question his grandmother, and slow to question himself. You don’t want to believe in stories I tell, then don’t, but at least live by them. Stories are not just stories, Katchan.”

Katchan grimaced and started for the door.

“Don’t leave again, Katchan, not today.”

“I’m going for a walk.”

“You are so like your mother that way. We’d argue and she’d just leave. She bumped into your father on one of these flights.”

“Do you wish she hadn’t,” Katchan sighed.

Maggaline looked to the tea and back to her grandson, “And miss these talks? Never.”

The door was half open, the cool night breeze brushed his skin and blew away the frustration. He forced himself to smile.

“There is much mystery left in this world,” Maggaline said, “unknown questions are far greater than answers we have. That’s why we carry the stories.”

Katchan smiled, “I think I’ll still take that walk, Grandma. I promise I won’t bump into any strange girls,” he said, feeling actual relief.

“That doesn’t sound like you at all. Maybe that Lati could grow into a fine wife one day,” Maggaline said and smiled.

Katchan burned red, she was too perceptive. He threw a hood over his head and closed the door.

She sighed and pulled out from under her chair then bag and loosed its straps and let the ruby fall into her lap. Fist sized, it kept a steady grip and shined a certain red near a candlelight causing rays of red to appear on the walls of her home. Katchan’s father gave her this ruby after Avalene’s death, then he told her the story of Princess Valerie. Of course, she reacted much the same way Katchan did, it wasn’t until he pulled out the tanned sheet, thin like stretched animal skin, “made from plant fibers,” he explained and demonstrated that ancient technique of telling stories by hand. She learned just enough to practice the art her daughter was so enamored by before the outsider had to leave. He left her the ruby. It had to stay out of the wasteland, it must be kept safe, he warned. What happened next is anyone’s guess. The ruby flashed red in the

candlelight casting shadows on the wall that began to dance in the movement of her rocking chair.

∞

Despite the earlier entertainment, the Elder's Festival went on well into the night with performances by acrobats, warriors making mock duels, and of course the reenactment of stories. Katchan paid no attention to what was on stage, besides, he didn't want anyone to recognize the disgraced son of Avalene. He thought long and hard as he walked why the Elder lied to the people today when telling the truth would have been equally disastrous for her and Maggaline. It was a clever lie, at least. If he had not heard Saulnier himself admit his father's unknown origins he might have believed him as well, but it didn't gain him anything, but his former mentors crushed spirit. He kicked a rock, careful not to jam a toe. The rock flew high enough for him to lift his eyes to see eyes like stars in the night glaring. The Oracle. Not glaring, no, observing, absorbing, and seeing through and within him. Next to her was Willow. Katchan forgot the formal greeting and stammered a good evening through troubled lips. Willow looked up to her mentor, noticing the obvious gaff, and back to Katchan. The Oracle did not sneer or correct him, instead a smile formed. She urged him closer. He could smell the pleasant aroma of crushed jasmine and lavender and felt nearer to the divine than ever.

"You who will have the eyes of God, power beyond my wildest dreams, I envy you," the Oracle said.

Katchan stuttered, "what does that mean?"

The Oracle smiled as a crowd leaving the final performance pushed past them, many smelling of wine.

“I don’t want whatever that is,” Katchan raised his voice over the crows that slowly pushed him around the Oracle and Willow like a river around a rock. By the time he pushed back through the crowd she was gone. *I don’t want the eyes of God.*

∞

Maggaline woke, startled, from a dream of Katchan. The ruby roared red in her palm, and she knew it was more than a dream. She hobbled to where she hid a stack of paper, a bird’s feather, and an ink jar and quickly scribbled the vision that stayed steady in her mind. Letters practiced many times in the dark while Katchan slept came easy by candlelight. She finished a page and set it to the side, starting on a blank sheet. *If only he were here, I could tell him. No time to think about that now Maggie, just keep writing.* Her breathing became labored as she wrote, the ruby dancing its reflected rays all around. *This drain on my energy is enormous.* How did Valerie stand it? Pictures of events flashed through her mind: things Katchan’s father never told her, stories ancient and deep, figures beyond Idyll; at the center of it all sat Katchan, her grandson. The pages dried on the side, and she came near the bottom of her stack. One last story she had to give. The ink dried and she packed them together in a leather bag and placed it on the side table, rock on top. *Please let it be Katchan who finds this. He has so much ahead of him now that I will only see from a distance as a witness, as the stories say. Carry the story, Katchan, Carry it.* She laid on her bed, pulled up the covers and fell into a deep sleep.

∞

The house guard changed since Katchan left; no longer was it Benjamin, but a younger man just a few years older than himself. Hiram stood lazily, no one around to see, and no point in vigorously guarding an old woman who truly did no wrong. When Katchan’s footsteps became

audible, he stiffened and nodded at Katchan as he entered. Hiram sighed and posed into his relaxed state, grateful that night watch meant he slept all day the next.

∞

His house was pitch black, unusual for Grandma to let the candle burn down but the fragrance was wonderful and immense. She must have used a candle she bought from the festival today, Katchan thought. He sat on his bed and let his mind wander to the lovely Oracle and Willow. Golden eyes, she's seen the holiest holy and received its mark, but he knew not how she got them. There must be some process, something she does to attain those eyes. They were beautiful to gaze at in the village, and he found himself falling in love with that gaze etched in his memory, but after all these years, why did they now matter? It struck him; Princess Valerie had the same golden eyes. He sat up from his cot and looked over at the lump across the room Maggaline's sleeping form made. She could have made the story up by using the Oracles eyes in place of Valerie's. But why would she? No, no reason to worry. It's obvious, Valerie never existed.

He lay back on his bed wishing the roof would open to a sky full of stars. It was weeks since he watched the sunset on his rock, and it felt as if a part of him shrunk every time he missed a night. Stars. That's what the Oracles eyes remind him of. Did they every marry or stop being Oracle? A silly thing to think about now, but not a silly reason for these thoughts; he wanted to be distracted from her words...*I envy you, one who will have the eyes of God...surely, she is wrong about things all the time.*

She predicts a drought will kill the harvest unless the Elder manages water usage, and no draught comes. She warns of an impending famine unless food is rationed, and no famine. Not much of what she precis actually comes to pass. The villagers scoff and do as the Elder orders

anyway. But this, the eyes of God; it feels different, unavoidable. There must be a story for this, or maybe it's a prank the Oracle plays on people; giving them ominous prophecies to make them squirm for her own enjoyment. She's still a person after all, people like to have fun. Silly. She's the Oracle with golden eyes who has seen the holiest holies, she's the furthest thing from normal. He didn't want to think about it anymore, he had to just get it out of his head. He looked over to Maggaline, *I'm sure she won't mind being woken for a story, just so I can sleep.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE GREATEST LOSS

Maggaline awoke feeling cold next to a crackling fire. The air around her was light and soft, not humid, or dry like she was accustomed to feeling at times, and she was seemingly weightless. An aroma, soothing and fresh, hit her like a wall as if she entered the Elder's chamber after taking a long walk in the beating sun. The fire began to warm her hands, she pressed them together and rubbed. A figure sat on the other side of the flame, she noticed. Upon noticing the person, her eyes opened to her surroundings. Darkness, darker than night or a deep pit, lay behind her, a soft blue ahead of her: her back cold, her face warm.

"Look behind you, really see, you only need to once, Maggaline," The figure said.

This time the blackness was gone and she saw only light: her life, the lives of the ones she loved, those she lost: her mother, her husband, her daughter; the stories she told and the realness behind them all, every dream, every nightmare, every deed: good and bad, as one, and she felt the inner restlessness inside her quiet and relax and she understood everything that she ever needed too, and like a race well run she stopped wanting, finished. Her life, a tapestry within a tapestry, perfected in its final threads. The figure was right, she only need look back once. Blackness returned and she looked towards the person across the fire.

The figure, standing now with outstretched hand, Maggaline took hold and rose, supported by her daughter gone long before.

"Not a day passed without you in my thoughts," Maggaline said.

"It was but a moment for me," Avalene said, "but you were on time as was I, we each had our own life to live."

"What happens next?"

Avalene led her mother to the silver gates opening and into light spilling out, light so bright it was as if it were the only light there ever was.

“We go back,” Avalene said.

∞

Katchan’s hand wavered over Maggaline, unsure if he should actually wake her. Why should he? She’s an old woman who needs her sleep. On her bedside table sat the ruby. He picked it up, felt the weight, and put it into its leather case and hid it away. The last thing Grandma wanted was Saulnier to know she had whatever this was. Now that a guard was standing outside her door he could easily come in and report what he saw.

∞

Three knocks on his door woke Katchan from a dream. He remembered floating through the air, swimming towards something to grab hold too before the dream blanked. It was vivid, whatever it was, as real as any day of the week. The only difference was the absence of sound or direction like an unoriented existence. His feet firmly on the cold ground he felt steady once again, as steady as anyone can after a crazy dream. Maggaline still slept so sound he couldn’t hear her breathing. He usually woke to her joyful, goading voice but it was the three knocks again. He opened the door to Benjamin. Katchan scolded.

“I am here to check on Lady Maggaline,” Benjamin said.

“Traitor. You have some nerve coming here,” Katchan said.

“I do not need to explain myself to you, boy.”

“Then why are you here? Is Saulnier here too?”

“He’ll be here by noon.”

“Then why are you here so early?”

“Early? Look at the sun, boy.”

Katchan did and saw it was near noon already. So late in the morning it was nearly afternoon, but it couldn't be? *Impossible*. He looked over at Maggaline's sleeping form. Sleeping. He ran over to her. Her skin was cold, her chest like a wooden board, her eyes shut tight and peacefully.

Benjamin watched from the door, “Lady Maggaline. How long has she...?”

Katchan did not respond.

“Boy.”

“Shut up,” Katchan stood with hands clenched tight. No way this is happening. She's in perfect health. Saulnier will retire so Maggaline can be Elder and tell the truth about Enrick and Echo and Avalene.

Benjamin backhanded Katchan to the floor. “Your grandmother taught you respect; don't you go sully her teachings now that she's gone.”

Katchan, too stunned to respond and too angry to give him the satisfaction of checking his face, sat still. Was there a tremble in Benjamin's voice?

“When the Elder gets here, he'll say the *prayer of the lifted*,” Benjamin said.

Katchan muttered under his breath.

“What was that?”

“I said what do you care,” Katchan screamed, “you did this to her!”

“Katchan-”

“She was fine until you dragged her name in the dirt, why did you do this?”

“Why did he do what?” Saulnier said from the doorway. The scene was evident to him: Katchan lying on the floor after learning respect, Benjamin towering over him, and Maggaline motionless.

“Lady Maggaline has—”

“Passed on, I see. And the boy blames you?”

“Yes, your Eldership.”

Saulnier closed the door behind him and extended a hand on Katchan. “I am truly grieved, boy.”

Katchan took his hand and stood, nervous. Saulnier may use this chance to go through Maggaline’s things. He could find the ruby she so desperately wanted kept secret.

“But it is not right to blame Benjamin for her untimely death, is it, Katchan?”

Katchan struggled to meet Benjamin’s eye because he knew they were pained.

“No,” he answered.

“Indeed,” Saulnier said. “It was the revelation of her daughter’s sins that were too much to bear.”

“You monster,” Katchan cried and struck at Saulnier, but the blow was caught by Benjamin.

“How dare you? Your grandmother would—”

“Laugh as you wallowed on the floor,” Katchan said.

“I forgive you, Katchan,” Saulnier said. “And I forgive the comment because you are in shock and forget yourself, but I will not allow another.”

Katchan twisted his arm from Benjamin. “You would move mountains for Lady Maggaline. Just another lie.”

“Quiet now, Katchan. Benjamin, has anyone prayed for the lifted? No one? I suppose traditions were not well kept in this household after all. Very surprising.” Saulnier pressed his hands together.

“Grandma was only wrong once: when she let you be Elder instead of her and gave you the chance to soil her name. Why are you so afraid of me?”

“Quiet boy,” Benjamin said.

“Why are you so afraid my father came from beyond the border?”

“Silence! Benjamin, take this boy outside so I can send my old mentor off properly. And tell Hiram to run for the Oracle.”

Katchan squatted against the wall feeling the heat of the day beating against his arms. This was all just some horrible dream, a nightmare. Maggaline can’t really be gone, she just can’t. He hoped Saulnier would at least leave her stuff alone, no matter what he cannot find that ruby.

Benjamin leaned against the wall, “I loved your Grandmother, boy. She taught my father the stories he lived by and the stories he passed on to me. Every storyteller infuses their spirit in their tales and it’s the quality of their soul that makes them who they are.”

“You didn’t love her, you humiliated her in front of everyone.”

“I only did as the stories taught: live by honor, duty. She understood.”

The door swung open and Saulnier stepped out holding a thick leather binder. He looked to Benjamin and nodded his head.

“Your Grandmother was full of secrets.”

Katchan squinted at the binder. He had never seen it before. It was not the ruby at least. Benjamin grabbed his arm.

“What are you doing?” Katchan asked.

“You must live in the orphanage, Katchan,” Saulnier said.

“No!”

“Or you will spend some time in the Wayward Keep, your choice. Tell me now, what other secrets of Maggaline do you know?”

“This is my home, Maggaline’s home.”

“It will be cared for by a new family, boy, and you might become an apprentice and learn a trade if you behave and aren’t otherwise imprisoned.”

“Your Eldership,” Benjamin protested.

“The Wayward Keep? I’ve done nothing wrong. At least let me go out and earn it by telling everyone you lied,” Katchan said.

Elder Saulnier swung his leg over the mule and Katchan finally saw what was in the leather binder: paper. The kind Princess Valerie used. Grandma did have secrets. Stories of dreams Saulnier could never imagine.

“Last chance, Katchan: the Keep or the Orphanage?”

Katchan huffed.

“Bind his hands.”

“He’s a boy, your Elder.”

“Put a bag over his head or you will join him and someone else not under Maggaline’s spell will happily do it instead.”

“Benjamin, no-” a bag fell over Katchan’s head, and he felt dragged by the mule from a rope. “I hate you Benjamin, I hate you!”

The Wayward Keep is located within the Elders Compound, the only walled portion of Gaelwyn. There are no windows, only shadows dancing in fire and small bugs to keep company. The rats are always awake and never friendly. The packed mud floors are always cold, and the worn mat is thin as a blouse. None of that bothered Katchan as he was stone cold with grief and anger. He did not know how long he sat before the first wave of tears came. Last night he went for a walk, nearly out of anger; what for? To see the beautiful, mysterious Oracle again? Maggaline needed him home. He'd give anything to listen to her longest of stories. He missed the comfort of his rock and the sunsets over the wasteland, but the question of what is beyond the boundary seemed less important than the threats within Gaelwyn. He cried softly for what seemed like too long for a boy on the cusp of manhood.

After the tears stopped, he sat in silence wishing for a drink of water more than anything. His throat was raspy and parched. His face felt crusted by salt. When is supper? His stomach rumbled and he grabbed it and rolled over feeling fresh coldness on the packed-mud floor on his face and the shock urged a thought. Grandma was steadfast in Saulnier not finding that ruby, she never mentioned anything else. But that was paper in that leather binder he stole, he was certain. The thin sheets fit the description from the story she told. Why had she never mentioned she had any? He meditated on this thought for as long as possible, but it vanished into the darkness of the Keep. Maggaline's ways were beyond his and now he would never know why.

Time was meaningless in the Keep, but eventually an iron door creaked open. A guard and an old man followed by another guard entered and tossed the old man into the cell beside his and left without responding to his cries for food.

"They bring it on a schedule," the old man said after Katchan calmed down. "Or more they bring it on Saulnier's schedule. My name is Cairo. I'm a bit of a frequent visitor down here.

They get me for little odds and ends like borrowing and making rude faces at the Elder. I figure I'll die down here but it's better to die with a roof over one's head than the cloudy skies, isn't it? Who are you?"

Katchan waited a while to answer but finally gave in to the promise of company.

"Katchan."

"Oh, Maggaline's boy. What in the world are you doing here? A word from her and you and I will be free."

"She's dead."

"I am truly sorry to hear that. This village will never be the same."

"Aren't you angry with her like the rest of the village?"

"Whatever for?"

"For being the mother of the girl who betrayed the former Elder's son Echo."

"Echo! That brat got what he deserved going after the outsider, getting all his friends killed alongside him, and for what? Because he couldn't get the girl he wanted."

"You know they weren't married?"

"Of course not. I did all the ceremonies so I would know, but I also heard not a breath that Maggaline was not well. I've been on a pilgrimage, you see, walking the entire scope of the village from the water's edge to the desert's mouth, waiting for sunset."

"The sunset," Katchan fell into its memory, "It is lovely, isn't it?"

"Powerful, more like. The moment of epiphany is a thing to behold."

"Moment of epiphany?"

“When the sun and moon stare each other down a bright flash of light appears from their celestial battles. Odd things happen. Women go into labor, wine sours, flowers bloom, barriers break; all sorts of strange things.”

“Barrier’s break?”

Iron creaked and footsteps shuffled downstairs. Two guards, different from before, unlatched Cairo’s cell and led him out.

“You should watch the sunset from the boundary, Katchan. The moment of epiphany; it’s truly a thing to behold!”

They led him upstairs and all was quiet, but the rats Katchan kicked away every so often. Moments later the door latched open, and footsteps shuffled down the steps and Katchan saw that it was Benjamin.

“Are they treating you well? Are you fed, watered, need to relieve yourself?”

“I don’t want to see you,” Katchan said.

“I had to protect my family, my livelihood, don’t you understand?” Saulnier put your grandmother and I in a terrible position.”

“But Maggaline did nothing wrong. She could have told everyone the truth right then and there. I don’t know why she didn’t. It doesn’t make sense. You could have refused.”

Benjamin squatted but Katchan refused to meet his eye. “Let me tell you something about Gaelwyn: in this village power comes from not merely knowing the stories but embodying them. To live the stories is to understand their essence and purpose. To understand this essence is to understand the people. While they go on with their daily lives: cooking, cleaning, preparing, working, living, burying; they deserve their stories told and understood. The difference always between Maggaline and Saulnier is this: Saulnier does not understand a story’s value. He

memorized every story and so appears wise and knowledgeable but is truly empty inside. When he speaks they are empty words said to desperate ears when a villager seeks his guidance, which is why they would go to Maggaline as well; and this is where troubles arose. She had a story for everything. The story never solved their problem but it gave them the necessary tools to do so. People forget easily and return again and again which is why we need an Elder, a story keeper. Saulnier couldn't stand being seen as less than Maggaline. I think he truly did love her though, but he loves power more. All he had left was to tarnish her name in the eyes of the people. Maybe he memorized the last of the stories already or maybe something between them changed. What happened at the Festival is unforgivable: for both the Elder and myself. My wife gave me such an earful when she heard what I did, but she understood, as should you, that Maggaline and I did the same: respected our duty and position in life. Today I understand the cost of obedience to Saulnier and I wish I could help you now."

Maggaline's reputation was the only thing separating him from becoming like old man Cairo, a vagrant. With his mother's name sullied and his father a vagrant outsider, he was as good as nobody. Still, nobody or somebody, Saulnier won't keep whatever he took from Maggaline. "Benjamin, I don't know if I can forgive you, duty or not, but I think you can help me."

"For the grandson of Maggaline, I will move mountains," Benjamin said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE ELDER'S JUDGMENT

Katchan stood before the Elder with ropes around his hands. Saulnier nodded to the guards, and they untied the ropes letting Katchan's hands fall free. He rubbed his wrists and took in the familiar surroundings in a new light. The room was twice as wide and three times as long as his house. Pillars created a hallway to a flat setting where people gathered to hear the Elder's proclamation from the seat that sat higher than any villager. Many steps led up to this chair to show the value and authority of the storyteller; now he recognized it as a place to look down on people. He started to realize that Grandma refused the Elder's position for more reasons than he understood.

Saulnier tapped the binding of the leather case he stole from Maggaline's house.

"Benjamin tells me you confided in him a story Maggaline told you, one I don't know, or rather, was withheld from me. Benjamin might be a longtime friend of your mothers, but she is gone, and he works for me. He said it was easy to coerce out of you once he gained your trust; trust is valuable: hard to gain, easy to lose. Trust is why we are here now. Gain my trust and I won't leave you in the Keep for the rest of your days. I will set you on high before all Gaelwyn to see your worth and your value. I won't send you to the orphanage of lost children, I will adopt you as my grandson and train you to one day govern the village alongside the Elder. You will be the first Deacon when the time comes. A great honor. I will even put Benjamin in your employment. All you must do is tell me the story; what say you?"

Katchan sniffed, "I'll tell you the story."

Saulnier stood excitedly.

“I’ll tell you the story after you answer me this one question: why do you care about these pointless stories? I think you and I are of the same mind when it comes to stories; they have no value and they are a waste of time, so why does it matter to you?”

Saulnier chuckled, “stories have no value you say? Are you sure you are the grandson of Maggaline?” He eased down the steps, nearing Katchan. “You don’t understand what power she wielded. You don’t understand the value of power, thus you don’t understand the nature of stories. Stories are everything in Gaelwyn. In all of Idyll it is not the man with a club or a sword, but the one with the culture of his people wrapped into his mind: the legends, myths, history; all that is remembered fondly, and that’s the most important thing now, isn’t it? To be remembered. Memory allows for such vindication of a life misunderstood. That,” he pointed to the leather case, “is a threat to all memory.”

Could it be?

“Your grandmother, I suspect, learned something from that vagrant father of yours. Something he brought from wherever he came from. It’s unlike anything I’ve ever seen. So, tell me, does this story you withhold have anything to do with this?”

The torches flickering shadows danced and filled the room.

“Tell me, please,” Saulnier said.

“Promise me I’ll keep my home and the story is yours.”

“You would be alone. You have no trade, no skills. You would starve. You have but one hope: adoption.”

“I’ll learn a trade and give you ten percent of my earnings.”

Saulnier laughed, “you are indeed a child.” Saulnier met Katchan’s gaze and relaxed.

“Would you rather struggle your whole life? Ten percent of your earnings will hardly be enough to live on. You’ll beg before the year ends. Become my Deacon instead. Become my grandson.”

“Please. I don’t want to be far from Maggaline.”

Saulnier’s face passed through phases of emotion Katchan did not understand. “As we speak, the Oracle is preparing Maggaline for burial. As a goodwill offering, I gave her a plot amongst the Elder’s, beside Enrick’s memorial. She will be remembered fondly, I guarantee it. You will be closer to her in my house.”

“Please,” Katchan said.

Saulnier considered this and relented. “If this is truly what you wish.”

“And once I’m done with the story, I’d like to take that leather case back with me. Whatever it is, it’s mine by inheritance.”

Saulnier sighed, “alright Katchan, you’re like your grandmother in this way, you drive a hard bargain. She wouldn’t teach me a new story until I could recite an old one ten times. She was always a good teacher and a better friend.”

“Then why did you do all this?”

“I...I don’t know Katchan. I had no idea it was her last day on earth. The guilt weighs heavy on me. Thankfully I am old, because I will live with guilt for the rest of my life. Tell me the story and you will have all you asked for: your house, your land, all Maggaline’s belongings.”

Katchan closed his eyes and prayed Grandma would forgive him because he hoped she was wrong about Saulnier. What was the story worth to him anyway? He lied to Maggaline when he said he didn’t remember the story, because he did. He couldn’t help himself. It was as if he

were living the lives of those who watched the story. It was as engraved into his memory as a cattle's brand. He told the Elder the story of Princess Valerie and the Silver City; he held nothing back, not about writing or paper, the stone tablets, everything. At the end the torches burned low, and the Elder rubbed his eyes in disbelief, exhaustion, surprise; Katchan did not know.

"I can't believe it," Saulnier said.

"That's what I said too," Katchan replied.

"I can't believe Maggaline held this sort of power and never used it. She could have destroyed me, taken over the role of Elder whenever she liked."

"What do you mean?"

Saulnier slapped the leather, "And in this bag, this is paper from Livana, the Silver City?"

"I don't know exactly what it is. I've never seen it before."

Saulnier grabbed the leather case and walked down the steps like he was headed for Katchan and moved past him to the fireplace and threw the leather case in. "Thank you, that will be all."

"What are you doing!" Katchan ran to tackle the Elder, but a guard grabbed him by his neck collar just in time.

"This is for Gaelwyn's best," Saulnier said and nodded to the guard.

"Miko executed your request, Eldership," the guard said.

"Good. Take him and stick him next to Cairo."

The guard bowed and dragged Katchan against his protests and screams. The leather case crackled in the fire. Whatever Maggaline wanted to tell him vanished with the flames. Years of stories and dinners and guests and laughter and memories crisping to ash. Dragged across the courtyard, late afternoon heat scorched his lips as he shouted curses at the

guard, curses old men threw at each other. Saulnier will curse his memory of this day, he shouted if only in his heart. Down the stairs of the cold Keep, tripping on steps, dragged to his cell where he was doomed to haunt for eternity. The guard flung him through the open cell and smiled menacingly. Heavy footsteps charged from behind and the guard flew into the iron cell. Benjamin took the guards head and knocked it into the iron for good measure. He was out cold. Benjamin slipped a leather strap from around himself and secured it around Katchan.

“Is this—”

“Maggaline’s real leather-bound satchel as requested. The Elder tossed away dried animal skins. He will realize something is off soon enough, we need to hurry. I will be a wanted man if my betrayal is discovered, but you need to run and hide.”

“I’ll go home.”

“Katchan, the Elder ordered your house burned and your land salted. There is nothing left for you there.”

“It can’t be!”

“You must run to the forest where I can provide tools to care for you until Saulnier passes.”

“I have to go home, there is something there I need,” Katchan pleaded.

“No, you’ll be caught and me along with you. Abandon any idea of returning home, it’s to the forest with you,” Benjamin said.

“Nonsense,” a voice said from the neighboring cell. Cairo’s bushy face pressed between the bars. “You only have one place to go young man, beyond the border. Cross it, go into the wasteland.”

“Nobody can cross the boundary, you old fool. Even if he did, he’ll die within the hour by the heat, or by some creature from the depths of Borsol. The surrounding forest has everything he needs to live.”

“My cousin is ruthless and persistent. Katchan will be dead within the week, and you will be caught and imprisoned.”

“Your cousin is Saulnier?” Katchan interjected.

“That’s a risk we can afford,” Benjamin said.

“But you shouldn’t. Katchan, beyond the boundary is a wasteland the stories can barely describe. There is danger and terror, but if you travel the path of the sun, if you are guided by its light, the very eye of God, you will find the village below the dome.”

“What are you talking about?” Kachan asked.

“An old legend rarely told anymore due to its insignificance, but there is a small portion in Gaelwyn who believe it’s true. Where the sun sets in the wasteland there is a village of those nourished by the sun itself.”

“Don’t speak madness, we must hurry,” Benjamin said.

“I should go to the forest,” Katchan directed to Cairo.

“Your grandmother was one of the portion. She believed in the village below the dome.”

This gave Katchan pause. The weight of the leather satchel reminded him there were already things from stories he did not believe that existed. He looked at Benjamin.

“If Grandma believed then it’s worth a shot. Saulnier burned her house, but I won’t let him destroy her legacy. If he finds me in the forest, he can prove me a villain. I’ll go into the wasteland; I’ll travel the path of the sun until I find this village below the dome. Maybe there are

answers there that are hidden here.” And he wanted to find out what the eyes of God were. The Oracle’s saying vibrated in his head. *The eyes of God.*

“Wait for the moment of epiphany; when dusk descends and twilight is in her full glory, as the flash appears, cross the boundary. If you live, tell me what it’s like.”

Katchan agreed and ran with Benjamin. They kept to the edge of the courtyard, hiding behind pillars whenever a sentry passed by; there weren’t many out and Katchan wondered if Saulnier was too busy celebrating his victory to care. Eventually they made it to a hole in the wall behind Saulnier’s house that started as a structural failure but grew whenever Katchan played there as a boy. They wasted no more time and ran past villagers toward a deer path leading to Katchan’s smoldering home.

“Where are you going? The boundary is this way,” Benjamin said.

“I need something from Maggaline’s house.”

“Whatever it is, it is ash.”

“Unlikely, not what I’m looking for.”

Benjamin reluctantly followed Katchan. They weren’t far now. The further from Saulnier’s compound the better he felt. The rawness of so much betrayal in the last day felt like a lingering splinter Katchan did his best to ignore. Smoke rose above the treetops and gave him a fresh jolt of pain. Everything in flames. Cruelty hardly describes it. He looked back at Benjamin whose face was drenched with worry.

“The Oracle and her company properly cared for Maggaline’s body, I saw to that myself,” Benjamin assured. “Now what is it you need. I say it’s too dangerous, so whatever it is must be of utmost importance.”

Katchan shook the bag strapped around him, “I think Grandma intended me to have something my father left before he died. I think it goes with this.”

“That’s not good enough.”

“That’s all I have left of her. Stay, please, I’ll be right back.”

“No, you’ll burn. Where is it? I will bring it back. It’s the least I can do.”

“It will be easier for me to grab it myself.”

Katchan crept along the edge of the tree line. Guards stood outside to control the fire, so it did not burn the whole village down. Katchan could get in easily but getting out unseen will be difficult.

“I can briefly distract them, but you must be quick. Grab your thing if it isn’t burned to a crisp as well as the staff and get out of there. I will meet you at the boundary but do not cross until I arrive.”

Benjamin peeled away but whatever he was planning Katchan hoped it would work. A guard watching the rear of the house, closest to the forest, held a thick blanket and beat flames as they fell to the grassy earth. He used a bucket of water on one side, and Katchan figured that was his point of entry. The guard’s head shifted toward the road, and he ran as if summoned. Now was his chance. Every second ticking away was another second closer to this moment of epiphany old-man Cairo described. Katchan jolted from his cover to the entry point, grabbed the thick blanket, and slipped easily through the cracks. He used the blanket as a shield from the flames, but he didn’t consider the smoke. Immediately his eyes burned, and he coughed, and his vision was blurred. He saw traces of things he knew and loved: Grandma’s chair, her cup of tea, the stove, the fireplace; all burning away.

He struggled to find where he hid the ruby last night. It was under Maggaline's bed. He stuck his arm underneath and searched, and searched, his hands grabbed at air. Nothing! They searched the house before they lit the fire. Saulnier had the ruby, there was no question. The crackling fire suddenly increased in intensity and Katchan felt foolish; he was going to burn to a crisp. The hot smoke tickled his calves and he tried to hold the pain away. There was only one safe place: the black walnut table.

He crawled beneath it and curled into a ball. Fire fell all around, but the table remained upright and strong. It was the most valuable furniture in all Gaelwyn, of course. He felt very stupid. If Maggaline were alive she'd beat him. He was going to die and Grandma's story with him. Benjamin was right, he should have left this behind. The fear of Saulnier drove him to a rash decision.

His head grew weightless from the smoke, and a light appeared. *Is this death*, he wondered? He felt an odd sort of relief, but his relief was short lived; a strong hand yanked him to his feet and dragged him from the burning house to the road. Katchan coughed and sputtered, choking on smoke and spit. The sun was hanging in the west, and his time was shorter than he wanted. A hand jerked him to his feet, and he saw Saulnier sitting on his mule. Benjamin was also there, bloodied, groveling, and on his knees. His face was swollen with bruises and an eye stayed open but only just; his nose appeared crooked and drained blood. Saulnier, stone faced, said nothing. Six guards stood around Benjamin, all as detached from the beloved Maggaline as Saulnier himself. These guards came from the river side of the village where their stories differed slightly. Still, they heard of Maggaline, but only as mother of a traitor.

"Katchan, are you okay? Let him go," Benjamin coughed.

“You are not in any position to make demands, don’t make your punishment worse,” Saulnier said.

Katchan twisted the guards grip away. He could still make it to the boundary by the moment of epiphany if he ran now. His eyes pleaded with Benjamins.

“Maggaline saw Gaelwyn’s future different than I, and while I can respect her vision, I am in this seat. I can’t allow her to defy me any longer. Whatever it is you carry of hers is to be destroyed.”

He doesn’t have the ruby?

“Grandma never once defied you. She taught you everything you know and let you rule the village like a spoiled brat.”

“The very fact she continued storytelling is the very definition of defiance. I am the village Elder, the keeper of stories, the storyteller. My word and vision are final. Villagers groveled to me but acted on her advice. No wonder we are all so confused, but I am ending that now. Bring me the real leather bag.”

The guard grabbed the bag from Katchan, but he refused to let go. Anger filled the void in his gut and suddenly he remembered a man from a story. Gath was his name, crusher of the pillars of the temple in Village Star. Gath’s story was a flash in Katchan’s mind, but he saw it all and knew it all: the screams of terror from the evil ones who trapped Gath, his own cries as his arms popped and expanded against the mighty stone, and the finality of his enemies in the ruins. In his swollen anger, Katchan kicked the guards shin with a strength he had never used, as if it were borrowed from the story; from Gath himself. The leg splintered like wood, and the guard fell screaming.

The guards stepped back in shock, but Benjamin wasted no time. “Run!”

“He’s like his father,” Saulnier gasped.

Katchan, surprised at this display of strength, did run. Looking back, he pleaded with Benjamin to follow, but knew he could not, for his inherited strong legs were purple and blue. Katchan ran with heavy footsteps far behind. Some of the guards checked on their fallen friend and were afraid. He ran with all his might, and it would take everything he had to make it to the moment of epiphany. Saulnier did not have the ruby. That mattered a great deal. He also had Maggaline’s story, and that meant even more. But Katchan looked for the ruby exactly where he left it, so where did it go?

CHAPTER NINE

MOMENT OF EPIPHANY

His legs barely lifted now, and his toes drug the ground nearly tripping him. His breath came ragged and sweat stung his eyes. Run, run, always run. The footsteps chasing him did not last. Saulnier should have sent a younger man after him, but it hardly mattered now. The sunset was upon him and his rock he perched on his whole life was in view. He patted the stone as he passed wishing he would someday return to see another sunset. The boundary was near, and the burning orange sun compelled him on. He stopped short and waited for the flash of light to thunder across the sky.

Although he did not see them, he knew Saulnier's men were not far behind, and they would not quit. *Hurry*, he thought, willing the sun to set faster. Bushes nearby rustled and he knew it was too late for him, all this was for nothing, but it was not a guard who appeared but old man Cairo.

"How?"

"I'm in and out. Being a cousin to Saulnier has its perks."

"Benjamin is hurt."

Cairo stepped close. His long shadow stretched like a dark road. "I'm sorry to hear this. It seems Saulnier has finally lost his mind. Benjamin was prepared to sacrifice himself for you, do you know why?"

He shook no.

"Because you are Maggaline's legacy. Only you carry the story now." Cairo said.

So near to the boundary, Katchan began to feel sick. He thought he was immune to those rumored effects.

“You don’t look so good,” Cairo said.

“I don’t have the ruby; I don’t know where it is.”

“Maybe she can help you,” Cairo said and stepped aside.

Eyes like honey, skin of bronze, beauty like none other, Willow stepped out of the clearing; she was holding the ruby and Maggaline’s staff.

“I had a vision, Katchan; my first. It was a vision of you. When we prepared Lady Maggaline’s body, I took those items I saw in the vision. It is not clear what your destiny is, but you will sacrifice much to gain it. Sacrifice and trust, Katchan.”

She handed him the staff and the ruby. Instantly his sickness left him. Cairo gave him a water skin and a bag of provisions. The sun began to collapse into itself. A gust of wind made Willow’s hair flow like the great river.

“Will I ever see you again?” Katchan asked.

“If you dream wildly,” Willow said.

Thundering white light echoed throughout the wasteland. Red streaks of light from the ruby danced in Katchan’s palm in the coming twilight. The boundary fizzled like a waterfall cut from its source. Cairo screamed for him to go now. At the last moment before stepping from his only lens to a scope beyond his wildest dreams, Katchan turned to run back. Willow’s head was bowed, *is she praying?* Cairo caught him and shoved him through the boundary before the last waves of white light vanished.

“Follow the path of the sun!”

Starting with the ruby, as if dust, or shattered glass, his form receded from the boundary of Gaelwyn into the unknown.

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A warm wind brushed his cheek with tickles of stinging sand. Reflexively, Katchan used his hand to guard himself and cuffed his face with the ruby. His senses returned almost at once and he shot awake to a large field of crisp sand in which he was the only solid object. He tussled to his feet and twisted round and round looking for Cairo, Willow, or his rock perch. There was nothing: no forest or man-made lines in the sand, just sand. Even more curious, the east, the direction his village should be, had a ball of orange steadily rising. The cold hit him at once, and he shivered. Nothing made sense. Gaelwyn should be right there, right behind him. He had never heard of anything like this, not from any story. It was as if he was in a completely different world.

“Follow the path of the sun.” Cairo’s words echoed either within or around him; either was clear and direct. Katchan looked east, then west, then east again. The directions were clear, follow the path of the sun. He looked west then east again. Toward the sun as it sits now or where the sun will be later? He stepped east and stopped. He felt for his leather bag and grabbed the bundle containing Grandma’s story, he didn’t have to travel just yet.

The paper was thin, like dried animal skins or fabric, but the surface felt dry and sturdy. There were markings all over each page that reminded him of bird tracks, but rearranged and reordered into equally spaced parts, almost sequentially. Each bird track was in its own unique position and shape, cut off from others in equal measure across; some of the shapes repeated throughout the pages. Was this nonsense really what forced Princess Valerie into the land of storms? Katchan paused for a moment. *Am I starting to believe this story?* No, not fully.

Whatever these bird markings and ruby are, Saulnier was at least afraid of them, or at least their potential. Afraid enough to beat his most trusted personal guard over.

A wave of guilt followed the image of Benjamin kneeling with his proud, strong legs broken and buckled beneath him all for Katchan's sake. Or maybe all for Maggaline's legacy. If only he had not insisted on going back for this stupid ruby. The gem, red as blood, redder even, brilliant as starlight, lay helpless on the sand where he dropped it upon entering the wasteland. In a strange fit where Katchan blamed the ruby for his situation, he picked it up and threw it as far as he could. How would things be different if he just gave Saulnier what he wanted? None of the bird tracks meant anything to him and neither did the ruby. They only meant something if you knew the story to go along with them, and still they weren't much use.

The morning glared bright and Katchan sulked until he grew tired of sulking. The gem glimmered from the sun rays in an almost brilliant reflection. *Rubies don't normally reflect light, do they?* He stepped to where it landed; it stopped rolling where Maggaline's staff lay; he picked the two up.

Katchan decided on west and let the heat pulse at his back as he crossed dunes and scaled small rock mounds toward this sunset village. It didn't matter if he went east or west. He didn't belong to this desert and he wasn't welcome home, but west, where the sun set, was at least a direction. This wasteland held potential his village did not: he could run into his father's village. An impossibility but based on everything Maggaline told him it remained possible still. The boundary itself bothered him; it was as if it were not even there? No single villager once stepped foot outside where he had, but that light, the moment of epiphany; it was the only way he could make it through, or at least the only he knew of. There were gods and oracles and prophets and

practitioners of arts in the stories, but he knew none existed in the village; how did that boundary come about? Did Mother Oracle and the first Elder have a power not spoken of?

He sipped from the water skin Cairo so graciously left him and sighed when sounds of empty splashes alerted him to its diminishing presence. He corked it. Everything Benjamin gave him: the knife, the flint, the string, the strainer, small metals bent into fishhooks, everything was designed for surviving out in the forest, not a desert. He would need water soon but after every dune he peaked there were only more dunes to see. One story, Zaruk the Dweller, discovered the worlds well: an oasis with a natural pipeline to the sea below the land, the reservoir of Idyll's water; a paradise in a wasteland. It was dry as bone, but he cried out to the gods to fill it. There was no answer from Hysol, and in his anger he struck the middle of the oasis with his staff, and water sprang from the deep.

The worlds well saved Zaruk's life. But one look in this desert and Katchan knew this oasis was as made up as Zaruk himself. The stories point was goodness is around the corner if you refused to stop looking. Every story Maggaline told had a point, some moral lesson or truth of life found within the words as if outright saying "good can always be found" were too difficult to say or understand.

∞

"And when I told you the tea kettle was hot, what did you do?" Grandma asked her small grandson with a bandage wrapped around his finger.

"I...I touched the kettle," young Katchan responded.

"Even after I told you."

"Well I didn't know 'how' hot."

“And now you’ve burned your finger, haven’t you? It’s fine and understandable to experience pain on your own. Pain teaches us many things! And unlike our history and culture, we can’t pass the lessons of pain to our children. Physical pain must be taught through experience. If I told you a story about a boy who ignores warning and touches a cursed lamp and is cursed to watch the confines of a lamp, you would avoid lamps, right? That would be a rare and painful experience, and maybe you would also avoid hot tea kettles as well, but I am as willing to risk a burned finger as you are if it means you understand the reality of ‘hot’ and not just doing what you’re told. But there is another sort of pain we must teach and those are pains of the soul. If I tell you the fate of a pig thief who robbed a celestial, it is because I by no means want you to suffer that fate. There are some pains that never heal.”

∞

Katchan woke face down in sand with his heart fluttering. He was on top of a dune and could see no evidence of an oasis all around him. The sun turned the sky a western red and the east displayed a cold bright moon larger than any moon in any season in Gaelwyn. The heat would vanish soon, and a fire would keep him through the night for the day to end his suffering.

He gathered what little dry grass he could, eating the last of the dried fruit Benjamin gave him, and tossed it in a pile, small and without any real fuel. He needed wood. Maggaline’s staff lay innocently where he fell, and he considered it’s worth. He left and searched for any trace of wood left behind from a lush and richer time. The heroes in Maggaline’s stories always found wood to sustain them and some sort of small game to feed them. He kneeled atop the dune facing the western redness and racked his brain for any clue from any story on where he should go next. The coolness was already setting in and his chances for a night long fire were none.

He bowed his head and thought about the prayer of the lifted and how he was too angry at Benjamin and too guilty with himself to speak it over Maggaline's still body then. He wondered if Saulnier is leading the village in a period of mourning. He wondered if Benjamins family was alright, and if he held Katchan responsible for his fate. He wondered who would say the prayer of the lifted for him, or if Cairo had already done so. For his mother, for his father, for himself, and most important for his Grandmother he whispered these words:

*We do not know the time or place,
We cannot know the how or why,
We pray you take us with righteous grace,
We pray we pass beyond the sky,
For those of us left here and now
let us weep with sweet receipt,
For those of us left, remember how,
They passed with courage, they passed complete.*

Rather than returning to his feet, Katchan felt how soft and the gentle the sand was on his knees. His aching thighs relaxed after trudging up mounds all day in an unforgiving sun. His feet, parched, dry, hot from the constant rub against his leather sandals found peace. The sun drifting away to a most ominous place cast a soothing warmth against the rapidly cooling air, and fatigue settled like a sudden thought that was waiting to be remembered. His eyes drooped; maybe just a quick nap, what a silly thought. Cairo was wrong about this place. There is nothing here and the boundary was set for that purpose. He will fall asleep and hope he doesn't suffer the pains of tomorrow. He wondered if Cairo said the prayer of the lifted for him.

CHAPTER TEN

THE WASTELAND WARRIORS

Crackling sticks gave a certain music to the night and woke Katchan from an ill slumber. His eyes folded open to an unnatural light in the cold darkness. His face was warm, and he was still alive, he believed. He gasped fully awake now and aware of how unsure this all seemed. He looked around a starry sky, large hills of sand illuminated by the moon surrounded him, and a warm fire lay by his feet. He remembered the sunset on top of a dune, that's when he passed out. How did he get here? Who saved him? He checked behind him and nearly screamed, he had never seen anything like it. Several bushes nearly waist high growing around a pool of water. An oasis! Sanity left him, he crawled to the pool and cupped his hands in the water and drank over and over till he felt sick. He uncorked his water skin and let it bubble under the surface, the welcome weight grew in his hand. He recorked the skin and dried it with his shirt and placed it in the bag.

In the moonlight the pool seemed a mirror and Katchan stared at his reflection and saw how old his face seemed after just a day in this wasteland. What would he look like by the time he reached the sunset village? He stopped himself and wondered how hope returned so quickly after a few sips of water. Maybe that is all he needed. He turned back to the fire and a shadow figure stood in the smoke. Katchan froze, his heart stopped. Fear hardly described the feeling, it wasn't as if he feared for his life or that a dog chased him, it wasn't even fear of getting caught after breaking a dish Maggaline liked, no, the feeling that gripped his heart was a knowing the figure in the smoke is inescapable and otherworldly.

He pointed a shaky finger at the being, "are you the one built this fire?"

The being's response came like the depth of a growl, "I am."

It was a foolish question; who else could have built this fire? Where did the sticks for fuel come from? And the oasis, the man must have dragged him a good ways before coming across it. Where did the sparks that lit for first tinder flames come from? Did this man have flint as well? And there was another question as dangerous as any.

"Are you dangerous?"

There was no answer. Just the rustling of the palm trees in the night wind, and the stars twinkling in the backdrop of the sky. Katchan pressed further.

"Why did you save me?"

"You needed saving."

He collapsed on a dune a world away from his own with no wells or food markets nearby. Of course he needed saving. There were no people here that he knew of, maybe a sunset village where his father could have originated from. No people meant no enemies, but also no friends. No warmth, just the hot sun. No cool rag after a long days work, just the cold desert night when all heat escaped back into the heavens. None of this answered the almighty question of why the man saved him. Based on the answer, the man may not be in the mood for answering. Katchan felt he needed to accept that this man saved him for no other reason than to save him. That made him at least better than Saulnier, which meant he may not require anything else from him. One more question may decide whether he is good or at least not bad.

"Can I come closer to the fire?"

The man paused a second and let Katchan's heart skip. The silence was as if to ask why he bothered making the fire if it were not for sharing.

"Yes."

Katchan shuffled over, still wary, and fearful of his savior. Why did he wear black from his boots to the hood over his head? He had a sword, Katchan saw now, draped over his back. But no shield? In the stories, warriors carried a sword and shield and lived by a code of discipline and respect. This man had no shield, did he also not live by a code? But most unsettling was his face: there was none but a mask as solid and black as flint rock with slits where his eyes should be. Katchan sat, still shaking, but curiosity overtook his fear for the moment. Besides, it was only his presence, not anything the man did, that made him afraid.

“What is this place?”

“A long-forgotten memory, and somewhere you shouldn’t be. You leave at Twilight,” the man growled.

“I can’t leave. I don’t know how.”

“You have no choice.”

“I have nowhere to return.”

If masks could speak, Katchan would say the being was startled.

“Are you a man?” Katchan asked.

“In some ways, yes. But I am not human like you.”

“Then you must know a thing or two about village politics. The village Elder of Gaelwyn won’t allow me to return. I must reach the sunset village,” Katchan said.

“Return to your own and face whatever fate may come. It is better you suffer exile in your own place than die here.”

The fire spit embers into the sky. The man in black continued:

“I am a wanderer. I wander this dream for eternity for the Dreamer is eternal. Wherever I came from before can no longer claim me because I belong to this memory now,” the Wanderer

said. He threw Katchan a loaf of bread he conjured as if from nowhere. "Eat, rest, I will wake you when it is time. No protests, you will return home."

Because he had no choice in the matter, Katchan ate and rested.

He woke to a forceful shake, the Wanderer loomed mighty above him. The air was cold, the fire long dead. He rose with achy legs and a bruise where he slept on the leather bag carrying Maggaline's story and the ruby. He drank the sweet, crystal clear oasis water quenching his thirst unlike any water from the well. The Wanderer waited, patience unending.

"I came far from here, you must know that," Katchan said.

"Where we are now is a thin space, a place where the physicality of Idyll and the spiritual realm of the Scope become interchangeable. Now it's nearly time," Wanderer thrust out his hand and drew it in the air at a sharp angle. A large crack formed in the earth as straight as the boundary in his village.

What is this man? Katchan thought. The moon stood frozen in the sky, as did the rising sun. It looked as if the two celestial bodies were staring one another down.

"Quickly, go," Wanderer shouted.

Katchan stared in disbelief. "You made Gaelwyn's boundary."

"Go, I said!"

Katchan hesitated. He just escaped Saulnier, how could he return so soon? A hard kick in his back broke his thoughts, and he forcefully fell over the line created in the sand. There was no flash of light, no sensation or pain to speak but the rough ground catching him. He shook his head, looking around to see nothing but the wasteland.

Wanderer raised his hand and the crack disappeared. "How is this possible?"

"You pushed me," Katchan said.

“The moment of epiphany, you should be gone now,” Wanderer seemed frantic, if masks could speak. “Stay hidden until dusk,” he warned. “Don’t do anything—” his voice faded to silence. His shadow darkened in the light and pieces of him burned away until there was nothing but the first light of the morning. Wanderer disappeared, as if he were a spirit.

“Wanderer...” Katchan felt the unknown fear settle into his stomach. His bones rattled and his lips trembled. Where did Cairo send him? He needed to get to the safety of the sunset village.

With the high energy of fear chasing him, Katchan set off along the path of the sun, or what he hoped it was. Whatever this place, he certainly does not belong and does not want to belong. This whole place is an impossibility, like the Oracles predictions coming true or one of Maggaline’s stories, yet what he saw with his own two eyes, what were they called? Mirage. Yes, the Wanderer was a mirage. Was the heat of the fire also a mirage? The food in his belly? The thirst-quenching water? Those were a dream, are a dream, a mirage within a dream, an imagined impossibility. Was the fear a mirage as well? The sweat, the palpitations, the cold on the nape of his neck, the heavy breathing? An imagined fear. But he kept running with fear as his fuel and anywhere as his destination.

By the time he stopped his breath rasped behind the cracking roof of his mouth and his legs were weak, heavy logs. Why he ran so hard was nearly forgotten and once his senses fully returned, he chastised himself from not considering how tired the sun would make him out here where shade did not exist. Back home he would rest and drink a cup of water and eat a piece of ripe fruit or jump into the creek and forget misery. Here, sand filled his cup and fruit were pebbles and the only creak was a bed of steaming air. Foolish to run here. At least he raced

toward the sunset village so he might die on the footsteps of his father's house. All was not completely lost.

As he walked, the afternoon shifted to evening. He drank the last hot drops of water from the oasis. Not a mirage. Once again, he saw no source of water, this time he sat and let what little breeze warm him before it cooled. With this second of rest, his mind cleared, and he thought of the Wanderer, his last words – “don't do anything.” In the stories, tragic heroes were warned not to disregard the warnings of a prophet or to laugh at the bone readings of an Oracle. They failed to listen, and they died. Those heroes usually had context and some broader goal to achieve; Katchan always figured he'd heed the warning and go home, his life wouldn't be heroic, but it would be long.

As for the Wanderer, Katchan had no interest in meeting him again. Men who hide their faces behind masks shouldn't be trusted, Maggaline, or the voice that sounds like Maggaline in his head, exclaimed. She would know what to do now or would have a story to guide him at least. He thought hard on the tales she told him, searching for some snippet to give him a foothold on what he should do next. Nothing. He started walking again with a cooling wind at his back.

Darkness fell and he still walked, if not to stay warm, then to avoid the man in black he called Wanderer. The sunrise turned him into a ghost, or revealed him to be a spirit, and erased him from this world; the night might mean his return.

Katchan swallowed to keep his parched throat from screaming. Earlier he tossed a pebble into his mouth to keep it salivating, but what he needs is another oasis. Wanderer might be otherworldly, but he did know how to find water. *No! That's how stories go from bad to worse.*

Ignore it now, Katchan, there will never be another oasis. Think this way, let your hope fade, fade like the Wanderer into non-existence.

He laid down and let the stars blanket him with light. Another step and his feet would never work again. The distance he walked in this wasteland was greater than the whole of Gaelwyn by far. How could such a massive place exist with only one other inhabitant? His eyes shut in protest. They worked too long and without realizing, Katchan fell into accidental sleep. A moment or perhaps an hour passed and an alarm from deep within banged on his head to wake. A sea of stars remained, but four shadows looked down on him.

“Here’s the little bugger...”

“Not too dead, I hope?”

“We find him in the last place we think...”

“Grab him, boys,” one said.

Two impossibly large hands seized his arms and legs and lifted him before he had time to scream. The sky drew closer, and shock set in, he was being taken! In a rush he kicked and punched, but it was like moving in a tar pit. He was too weak, or they were too strong.

“Don’t wear yourself out. You can’t die before he meets you,” a husky voice said.

“And that would not be good, no it won’t,” a booming voice said.

“Oh, he’ll survive,” a soft, airy, princely voice began, “nothing dies out here, anyways.”

“He’ll perish in the wrong kind of way, you’ll see, and then where will we be?” Boomer said.

“Let us not linger,” said an apathetic voice.

Katchan was dragged through the air, backwards, unable to see the where but watching the was grow distant and further from the path of the sun and suddenly they stopped.

“Oh, it’s you,” Apathy said.

“Let the boy go,” a familiarly deep voice commanded. Katchan was exhausted from the struggle, but alert enough to recognize the Wanderer’s voice. He hoped these four feared him as much as he did.

“There’s no point in trying to stop all four of us,” Princely said.

“Perfect,” Husky started, “I’ve wanted a chance at your throat for a while now.”

“The boy doesn’t belong here,” Wanderer said.

“None of us do! But you already know that,” Boomer said.

“We are where we are, he does not deserve our fate,” Wanderer said.

“On about that again, Commander, just let us take you in,” Apathy said.

Katchan was dropped to the sand and a flurry of swords surrounded him. The Wanderer parried and dodged each attack like they moved in slow motion. His four kidnappers surrounded and attacked, failing that they tried for a one-on-one approach, then two on one. He dealt with each tactic as soundly as if the four were mere beginners. Moonlight shimmered off the blades, and with each stroke sparks flew giving the battle a mesmerizing quality. Katchan was both awed and terrified. He heard a hundred tales of battle from Maggaline and watched the men fight in village games, but this was on a whole different level. Most important from this encounter, Katchan was suddenly not captured. The moon hung low in the sky and a fierce red grew in the east. Twilight approached. If he were lucky, all these warriors were spirits. Now was the time to run. He struggled to his feet, tripping once, and ran with newfound purpose. He did not run in any particular direction except away. He stumbled down a dune and rolled to the bottom covered in sand. His eyes burned and he tasted the dry crumbly texture of sand on his lips; he hurried forward still.

“Stop!” Katchan heard a Husky voice cry from atop the dune, but he did not stop.

Clash of steel rang through the morning and the desert loomed red and purple before him; both were equally deadly, but he would rather risk it in the wasteland. Footsteps pounded behind him, Katchan turned and saw the Husky voice gaining ground.

Who are these guys? Katchan thought. The Husky voice grabbed Katchan by his tunic and lifted him up.

“Don’t cause any more trouble.”

Katchan beat against the arm at his throat, but it was as if his fists were bugs bouncing off a thick piece of wood. Maggaline’s staff fell to the ground, Katchan scrapped it with his feet and flicked it up to his hand and swung with all his strength at Husky’s head. The staff made direct contact and Husky dropped him. Katchan fell to the sandy earth and gasped for air.

“Iron?” Husky said. He drew his sword. “To Borsol with it all, I don’t care if you’re dead of alive. It’s all the same here.”

Husky stabbed, and Katchan twisted his torso, using Maggaline’s staff to avert the blade away from him. Husky then made a downstroke, Katchan grabbed the staff with both hands and caught the blade just above, and it bounced off. The warrior grabbed Maggaline’s staff and wrenched it away, kicking Katchan to the dirt; he threw the staff to the side. Katchan reached into his leather satchel and brought out the ruby as if to throw it at the warrior’s head.

“Don’t worry, kid. Death here is painless,” Husky sneered.

Katchan stared up at the outline of the warrior and a memory came to him. What did the Oracle say: *one with the eyes of God*? Another dream misinterpreted, for he was about to die. Maggaline’s story and this ruby with him. Pieces of Valerie’s story came back to him, and he thrust out the ruby.

“Where did you get a thing like that?” Husky said, startled to a halt. Then, his bearings returned, and he moved forward to snatch the ruby from Katchan’s hand.

He’s going to take Maggaline’s ruby! Katchan screamed internally. Then, as if transported like a leaf in the wind, he was back with Maggaline...

∞

...In his living room, a warm fire crackling in the stone hearth and a cup of tea in his hands.

“Grandma, who was Gath?” He asked.

“Oh, Gath!” Maggaline began, “He was a prophet from the ancient Village Star. The Elder, Babul, grew arrogant with the success his village enjoyed from battles and harvests. They even found a gold mine on their land that the other’s envied. Instead of sharing the wealth with, he ordered the villagers build a temple, called Babul, for himself. They built the walls and pillars from rock and plated them with so much gold that every village good see the reflection on a clear morning, so much gold they say even Marikel grew envious. Gath told the Elder he was a fool to build a temple to himself, and Hysol had ordered it be destroyed. Not only did Elder Babul refuse, he chained Gath to the pillars in an attempt to mock Hysol. Gath, beaten and humiliated, prayed for the strength to take vengeance on Elder Babul, and it was granted. Gath was filled with rage and strength and with a mighty push he cracked the pillars and brought Babul down on him and everyone inside. Gath was crushed to death but saw it as a worthy death indeed.”

∞

The ruby vibrated intensely. An angry gust of wind, as if coming from the ruby, suddenly dispelled Husky back and gently lifted Katchan off the ground. *What is this ruby?*

The name of *Gath* whispered into Katchan's ear on the cool breeze of the dawn. *The Pillars of Babul*. A story of a prophet in an impossible position.

The wind rushed. The gust became a storm centralized on the ruby. Katchan stood still and let the wind overwhelm his senses; it was like some mighty winds were making him the vehicle of its strength. He breathed deep, but felt he could not, but then again, he didn't need any air at all. His body was formless and stable and everywhere all at once. He felt as if he were the wind. Husky was pushed back, and away; he resisted the wind and stepped forward with difficulty. He stabbed the sword through the gust at Katchan, but the wind pressed him back. Sand flew in all directions, swirling around Katchan like a shield. Rage filled him like before when he kicked the guard in Gaelwyn. *I am power*. The rage felt good, it felt tangible and real, as if he could grab it with his bare hands and shake its throat. He was himself, but not himself. He watched the warrior be helplessly pushed away, and Katchan decided to reap on him the damage the warrior intended to do to himself. Katchan ran forward, the wind running with him, and leapt to strike the Husky voiced warrior. As if intuitively, the wind wrapped itself around his feet and gave him the extra distance he needed to connect with the warrior's jaw.

"No, don't!" The Wanderer cried.

Katchan did not let the Wanderer distract him, he came down with full force on the warrior's jaw and felt victory coarse through his veins. Then, fear and pain replaced joy and the winds ceased entirely. The ruby stilled. Katchan slid down Husky's sword, he was skewered through the shoulder. The warrior then grabbed him; Katchan struck helplessly at the hand at his throat. Pain shot through where the sword stuck through as Husky drew it out. Katchan screamed as the sharp edge sliced across his raw nerves. Warmth ran down his tunic to the sandy earth.

“I suppose I lied about this being painless,” the Husky voiced warrior said then screamed. A blade ripped through his chest and stopped at Katchan’s nose. The blade sawed through his torso, and Husky dropped Katchan. Both hit the sand and fell over. The Wanderer stood behind the fallen lump, and with a raised foot, he smashed the warrior's head and twisted, the crunch carrying over to Katchan’s mortified ears.

His vision grew blurry. “What was that wind?” Katchan asked weakly.

“Fool boy,” Wanderer said.

Katchan felt himself lifted as if he weighed nothing, and air rushed over his cold face as if he were running at a great speed. He could see the moon and the sun’s celestial dance. Twilight was here, and Wanderer must be near his limit. Katchan felt placed beside something damp, and water was spilled over his wound. He groaned.

“Where is Maggaline’s staff?” Katchan asked weakly.

Wanderer stopped, “Maggaline’s staff?”

“The husky one took it,” Katchan said, but Wanderer was gone.

He reappeared a moment later with the familiar wooden staff. Wanderer cupped some of the oasis water and threw it on the ground and mixed it together to become mud. He dipped the staff into the mixture and created a paste; he grabbed the paste and mixed into Katchan’s wound. He screamed; the pain ripped through him.

“Bare it,” Wanderer cried. “Bare it, or you’ll die.”

Wanderer then touched the tip of the staff to the paste, and Katchan felt the sliced wounds vibrating, stitching itself back together, and closing over.

“You almost bled out,” Wanderer said, but Katchan could no longer hear him.

When Katchan woke, the early morning sun was rising. Wanderer was nowhere to be seen. He checked his shoulder and scraped away mud. There was no wound, not even a scar. He was still beside the oasis, but there was no longer any water; it was as dry as if there had never been any water. The palm trees were decaying as if they were aging a year every second, and the last bits of shade he could possibly harbor was disappearing. Maggaline's staff lay next to him, as did the leather bag with her story, and the ruby. That battle was no dream. Four warriors tried to carry him off, but the Wanderer stopped them. And even he managed to fight back. This ruby was unlike the ruby from Valerie's story. He saw no hall of paintings, just a great and magnificent wind that gave him enormous strength. He chuckled for a brief second then the chuckle morphed in a great guffaw, and he laughed deep heaving laughs: for he was alive, and not dead; for he fought a spirit, and lived; for this was an impossible dream, and reality; and he thought to himself, if he told Maggaline this story, it would be the very first story she wouldn't believe.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

KINDRED SPIRITS

The dried oasis was well behind him now. He let Maggaline's staff guide him as he walked. As he walked, he ran over the events of the night. He went over them again and again. The four warriors knew the Wanderer, but they did not like him. And they did not like him because of some choice he must have made for them. That is what it seemed, anyways. It also seemed like the four were waiting for an opportunity to clash with the Wanderer for quite a long time. But they weren't there for the Wanderer, they were there for him. They acted as if the find was a miracle of some sort. He supposed it was, being a lone boy in a vast wasteland; coming across anyone would be significant. But they weren't looking for him on a whim, they were ordered. It means someone important knew he was in the wasteland. Whatever Katchan believed about this wasteland, whatever the Elders of Gaelwyn told the people, the wasteland was not empty. There was an army of sort living here as spirits, and none seemed to have his best interest at heart. Katchan had stumbled into a world far beyond his own.

In his head he replayed the fight with the Husky warrior; the ruby activated when he remembered the story of Gath the prophet. Great winds surrounded him, defended him, made him *strong*. But it was also as if he had no control. The ruby vibrated on its own. He pulled out the jewel and held it out as he walked and replayed the fight with Husky and replayed the story of Gath. He stopped and concentrated to reconstruct the memory in his mind as if it were happening before him, right now. It felt a little like replaying an argument with Maggaline in his head, things he wishes he said, or didn't say. Those times felt real enough, but the ruby did nothing. It was as normal as a ruby could be.

Thinking back to when the moment of epiphany happened Cairo pushed him through the boundary, which must have been a thin space. The same sort the Wanderer tried to shove him through. Except the Wanderer's didn't work. At the boundary, the ruby activated and he entered through some sort of realm that transported him to the wasteland. It was unlike Valerie's story where the ruby took her to a hall of paintings where she wrote on pedestals, something he could not do at all. She was royal, Katchan was the son of a vagrant. Maybe that was the key.

Too many stories in your head, but none that make sense!

He rubbed his shoulder where Husky stabbed him. He remembered that part well. He was overconfident and cocky. Wanderer shouted at him not to do whatever it is he was about to do, and Katchan still did it and paid for it. Similar to Maggaline telling him not to touch something hot or not taunt a neighbor and paying for it with pain or extra duties. Wanderer was looking out for him. He must be some sort of sorcerer to have healed his shoulder the way he did. No scar, but still a little soreness. Katchan would have forgotten the wound if not for the soreness and its explicit memory.

He pulled out the thick bundle of paper and stared at it while he walked the sunset path, hoping something would pop out of the strange figures on the page. He knew the symbols were called writing, the skill of Princess Valerie, but it seemed impossible to understand and even more impossible that Maggaline knew the same technique. She never spoke of it before, and certainly never mentioned it to Saulnier either. It was strange, this bundle of pages caused Saulnier to burn the home of his longtime friend and mentor and salt the fields to ensure nothing would ever grow from that land again, like it was cursed. The thought made Katchan angry towards the Elder once more. *Whenever I'm able*, Katchan thought, *I'll make him pay*. The idea

sounded very unlike him, but nothing would ever be the same for him again and it was Saulnier's fault.

Right now, he was probably mourning for his dear friend Maggaline's passing, putting on a big show for everyone in Gaelwyn to see how much he loved his mentor despite their differences. What would he say about the disappearance of Katchan, her grandson, the offspring of the outsider? Katchan had no idea, Saulnier would spin a story of some sort, maybe even multiple stories, all to make it sound as if there could be no agreement on the truth until the different stories lived in the different communities and died away like the true story of Echo and his companions. Benjamin was surely in the Keep, paying for his betrayal of Saulnier, and Cairo, strange funny man that he is, might be in there with him.

After walking for some time more, Katchan spotted a figure in the distance resting on a rock. They shined as bright as the sun. He walked closer and saw the figure was not shining but reflecting the sun from their radiant white robes. The color was something only the Oracle wore: purified white. It was then her words returned to him: *"You who will have the eyes of God, power beyond my wildest dreams; I envy you."* Her words passed over him like a cool breeze then left their mark on his prickled skin. Somehow, he knew it was impossible, but he hoped this figure was the Oracle of Gaelwyn. He needed a friendly face.

While Katchan was still at a distance, the Oracle waved. Oddly, it unnerved him. He drew closer to the radiant smiling face and discovered that it was not the Oracle as he hoped, but a man. He was a strange man, as strange as he'd ever seen. There was not a wrinkle on the man's face. It was like the skin of a young boy on the body of a grown man, though in it were written memories of darkness and light. His hair was golden and sandy like the desert, as if it were made

of the land; his eyes were hard and unmoving, like the rock he rested upon, and in them was the look of one who is always in control.

“A young boy wandering in the wasteland must be eager to become a feast for monsters,” the man said.

“Monsters? I’ve seen no monster,” Katchan said.

“Oh, but you have. They hide. Faded into the background disguising themselves with the wastes, waiting for the perfect time to strike.”

“I’ve only given a hungry monster the perfect time to strike.”

The man laughed, “You so easily accept your place in the hierarchy of the wasteland. Yes, you appear most vulnerable, but monsters’ sense beyond human understanding. Perhaps the scent you give off warns the creatures that eating you will only make them sick.”

“That’s a relief, I guess.”

“There is still time for you to be eaten, so don’t get comfortable.”

Katchan found himself crack a smile, although brief due to his burnt lips. The pain seared like fire, but he dared not wince in front of this unknown man.

“You wear white robes, are you an Oracle?” Katchan asked.

“An Oracle?”

The man’s response was hot, fiery. For a moment, fear crept up Katchan’s spine. The man held a gaze that looked cross between madness and ecstasy. He smiled and laughed heartily.

“There was a time where that was a grave insult indeed. However, you are young and know so little that I cannot hold my anger. An Oracle...My, how things have changed. What is a boy your age doing in the wasteland known as Midbar?”

Katchan felt himself strangely comfortable around this man. He gave off a trustworthy sense, and before he understood what he was doing, Katchan started telling the man of his woes.

“I had to run away from my village, Gaelwyn,” Katchan did not understand why he was freely saying this, but continued, “because I took something Elder Saulnier wanted for himself.”

“A thief? Interesting company I am with.”

“I’m not a thief at all! I only took what was mine, he wanted it for himself,” Katchan snapped, emphasizing *mine* as if to say it was a secret.

“Ah, an exile then. Yes, good. I can trust one of my kin,” the man said.

“One of your kin?”

“Yes, like you I am banned, banished, forbidden, excommunicated, evicted, uprooted, and separated from the place I call home.” The man replied without losing his confident, grinning demeanor. “I suppose I’ve been an Exile so long I am really nothing else. You may call me by that name. I wear it with honor, for being exiled from your home is honorable if one is doing the right thing. Your Elder Saulnier found you to be troublesome, and thus he exiled you. Midbar is a place for exiles, where those who butt against the Scope’s cosmic order are restrained from doing any further reconstruction.”

“So, then everyone here is an exile,” Katchan said. He had not considered himself exiled, but the Exile wasn’t wrong. “There’s a wanderer in black and a group of soldiers, four of them, I think. I’m not sure they like each other, and I’m also not sure either of them is good,” Katchan said. Wanderer saved his life, but only to send him back to Gaelwyn where he would be imprisoned or die in the forest. The warriors tried to kidnap him. So far, this Exile has only talked to him.

“Hm, a Wanderer in black and a group of soldiers. I say, boy, neither of these groups sound in the least bit good, but I know there are warriors here. I don’t see many people beyond my fortress

walls, but I have heard a thing or two about this ‘Wanderer’ you speak of. Believe me, he’s dangerous, stay away from him,” Exile warned.

“Fortress walls?”

“Yes, every ruler has a fortress if he is a legitimate ruler,” Exile said.

“Your fortress isn’t the ‘sunset village’ is it? That’s where I am headed.” Katchan said.

Exile crumpled his eyebrows; his face did not wrinkle. “Sunset village? I know of the of where you speak. It is on the edge of the wasteland, far beyond my fortress. Myself and my subjects have no business with them. We are far too busy.”

“Fighting monsters?”

“What?”

“A fortress is used for defense. Is that what you do, protect the sunset village from monsters?”

Exile stood. Katchan stepped back, worried he upset the man.

“I told you; I am an Exile. I do not waste time fighting monsters, I am preparing for war. It is my kingdom against the cosmic order of the Scope.”

Katchan leaned against Maggaline’s staff, his gaze far away. “War. That sounds dangerous.”

“When one is unjustly exiled from his home, there is nothing to do but fight for your chance to return. If given the chance, wouldn’t you return home? Wouldn’t you fight this Elder who caused you so much pain and sent you away from everything you hold dear?”

Katchan paused to think. Exile made sense. Katchan did nothing wrong, nothing to deserve what happened, and it happened. For this to be set right Saulnier would face the whip and worse, if Katchan had his way. Exile only wanted to return home, but Katchan didn’t want the same.

“There is nothing for me in Gaelwyn.” Willow flashed in his mind, those beautiful golden eyes that made his stomach flip. She was to be the Oracle. “Nothing at all. That is why I am going to the sunset village. To start a new life.”

Exile smiled deeply. “That is what I am doing. Starting a new life. You are fighting your way across this wasteland, and I am fighting my way against this wasteland. We are kindred spirits. I believe we can help one another. I spent a long time searching for a powerful tool that will allow me to right the wrongs of the Scope, however, a boundary prevents me from obtaining this tool. You, little exile, are alive and may be able to gain access to where this tool is hidden. Retrieve this tool for me, and I will escort you to the sunset village. You won’t need to fear monsters, wanderers, or warriors while I am with you.”

Exile pointed north, well away from the path of the sun, “See those distant mountains there? My fortress lies at the base of the tallest. Walk in this direction for a day and I will greet you and provide provisions for your journey. There you will see a mighty fortress beyond your imagination.”

Katchan squinted in the direction Exile pointed, trying not to believe every word he said. It seemed too good to be true. His gut told him to be wary, but hope bordered on naivety that this man could end his misery by taking him to the one place he wanted to go. All this time in the wasteland, or Midbar as Exile calls it, he looked for some proof of life. Something that says a community could live out here. A mountain range would be one of those: streams for water, caves for shelter, mountain lakes with fish and other wildlife. If one were to live out here a mountain range would be ideal. Except no mountain range presented itself. There were no long outlines of ranges cascading across his view.

“There is nothing,” Katchan said.

“Not yet,” Exile said. Placing his index and middle finger together, Exile whispered some unknown words and pressed them to Katchan’s forehead. Coolness starting from that point drizzled down into his eyes stinging them powerfully. Katchan winced then. He gasped and rubbed his eyes.

“What was that?” Katchan asked.

“I did not understand you were a much lower life form and thus gave you the ability to see what is hidden. This land must look quite bland to you. Now, open your eyes.”

Katchan did, and they no longer stinged. His hands looked no different than before, neither did Exile. He was still dressed in white with an ageless appearance. When he looked out where Exile pointed he saw mountain ranges.

“How?”

“Secrecy is necessary to good warfare. As you can imagine, allowing the construction of a fortress to go unnoticed grants an advantage on my behalf. Since you and I are as kin, it must be that you are allowed the ability to see what was previously unseen. At the base of those mountains is my fortress. Get there quickly so I may lead you out of Midbar to the sunset village.”

Katchan thought deeply on what he said. Who could he trust out here? So far, Exile has only offered to help. He decided he had no choice but to trust him. Exile seemed to be his only way out. He turned to offer Exile assurance that he would be there, but the Exile was no longer there. He had vanished like a spirit. Wanderer. Warriors. Exile. Are these men who became lost in Midbar? Wanderer said he wasn’t human like Katchan. Exile appeared ageless. They were not from Gaelwyn. They were from legends of old, stories told around the fire. If he stays here much longer, this strange death may become his fate. No wonder the Elders warned villagers from going

even near the boundary of the wasteland. Katchan thought back to that strange power the Wanderer used, creating an unnaturally straight line.

Since he'd arrived in Midbar he followed the sun-path, and it led him to danger every step of the way. It was time to try something different. Katchan gazed at path of the sun, the ever-steady pace of which seemed like it went nowhere and would result in going nowhere. Then he looked behind him and saw where he'd come from and the distance he had traveled since first falling into this place. Perhaps it was a mirage, or the eyes Exile gave him, but he watched himself walking, limping, and racing through the wasteland to where he is now. He couldn't help but feel like he was wrong. That he made progress on the path of the sun, but he'd never tell by looking at how far left he had to go. The sunset seemed just so far away and ethereal. The Exile's fortress was a real. He could walk there in half a day and be back on the sun-path in just as much time. If there were provisions, he could fill another pack. The Wanderer did not say how long he had before he became like him. He might have time yet. Katchan felt like he had no other option but to trust the Exile. He wished she were here with him to give him the answer, but she never would; she would tell him a story, one with the answer riddled within.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THOSE FROM GAELWYN

The sun sank below the horizon well before Katchan neared the mountain range. He walked at a steady pace for half a day, and it felt no nearer than before. The visuals of this place were deceitful, as if it were alive and enjoyed causing pain and discomfort. If he knew it would take this long to get to the mountain, Katchan would have stayed his course on the sun-path. Though he didn't know how far the sunset village was, and it would likely be as deceitful as reaching this mountain. Worse still, it was now dark. The Wanderer was out here searching for him. Monsters were around every dune, hiding and waiting for the perfect time to strike. He had no cover, no concealment, no way to hide from their searching eyes. He couldn't outrun them, and his defenses were nonexistent but for Maggaline's staff. The Wanderer wanted to send him back to his village of Gaelwyn rather than help him find the sunset village. Who does he think he is, that Wanderer, thinking he knows best for a total stranger? He doesn't know the ways of the Elder or his village and has no clue how long Saulnier can hold a grudge. Returning home would be akin to sending him to the Keep. Once he was safely locked away, Saulnier would take the ruby and Maggaline's story and burn them like he burned his house. Or he could claim the writing as his own and use it to sway the people further from Maggaline's great storytelling legacy. Whatever happened, he could not let the Wanderer return him home.

It was strange but thinking of Gaelwyn suddenly made him homesick for the few people who were friendly to him and Maggaline in the village. Benjamin for one. He hoped Saulnier wasn't treating him poorly. He felt guilty about what they did to his legs. The image of his strong legs broken and shattered, lying on the ground. It was insulting. Then there was Cairo who

helped him escape, though his directions were vague and have led him nowhere. Sha-ra and her beet concoction on bread would be as delightful as honey right now. Just seeing her again would be a comfort. Of course, she could have fallen for Saulnier's wild claims about Maggaline and himself and might consider him an enemy. They could all see him as an enemy now for all he knew. The idea deflated and going home lost any sweetness. The people looked on him as an outcast before Maggaline's death; after he would be as good as an outsider, an exile.

Katchan kept moving, blindly following what he hoped was the direction of the Exile's fortress in the dark. He could turn west and follow the sun-path again, but maybe that is where the Wanderer was looking. Heading north seemed like a diversion at this point. Further away from the path seemed safe from him.

Out of the side of his eye he saw a greenish glow. He looked at the moon, bright and full as it was every night, like some cold looming monster in the sky. It seemed to descend on him and swallow him in its luminous haze, but he was here and it was there, standing still at the top of the world, the moon beckoned hazily for relief from its loneliness and solitude. He looked again toward the greenish glow, far off north near the bleak mountain range and there were mists swirling about, like electric winds covering the plains of some far-off land at the base of the mountain.

Distant voices echoed like people talking, speaking and shouting to one another over this and that, like a night festival, and Katchan felt he was bearing witness to some alternate life. The mists swirled and made a towers and walls and bridges and it was a city of green. The voices grew louder forming into a single hum. There was unity in the voices that sounded pleasant. Katchan gazed at the strange sight and let a feeling of relief wash over him. He wanted to run down and join them and add his voice to the pleasant sound. Then a wave of fire formed outside

the walls and crashed into them. The soft voices rose and turned to shouting, then screams of pain and terror; the mists formed as bodies atop watchtowers, along walls, as if he were watching a city in its final moments. Then lightning streaked across the sky and lit the faces of the mist to life for a split second, not enough time for Katchan to know what he was seeing, but now danger threatened him, and he felt exposed and uncovered and vulnerable. Lightning struck along the path he was walking, and he felt tremors through the sand. The very sky shook with the might of the storm. In an instant, the hum was replaced with agony. The screams raised in pitch and horror; lightning formed branches in the sky as if to form a face that met the agony of the mist in equal measure. Lightning struck again, hitting the sand all around him. He screamed, feeling trapped with nowhere to run, and nowhere to hide.

“You, boy, in here!” A voice called from his right.

Katchan turned in disbelief. The lightning lit the face of a man he nearly recognized. His head came out of a dune, a latch pushed up revealing cover from this storm. The man waved frantically for him to come and Katchan felt that if he were to die, he’d rather it not be from this electric storm. He sprinted up the dune. The wind pushed hard on his face. Lightning struck all around, and the voices grew ever higher and agonized and Katchan screamed and rushed for all he was worth, fighting the wind and the sand and the uphill battle.

“Quick!” The voice shouted again.

Lightning struck where Katchan had been standing just moments ago and the force blew him forward. He caught himself on his knee and leapt, letting the stranger's hand grab his and pull him through the opening. The latch collapsed and Katchan found himself in darkness with a stranger.

“You want to avoid that lightning. Don’t want to be struck, no, no, no you don’t,” The stranger said with a cracking voice like stepping on dry leaves.

“Who are you?” Katchan gasped, “and what do you mean by *that* lightning?”

“Best practices are to avoid any lightning, certainly, but this lightning, when the haunted lands are glowing, is lightning you certainly don’t want to be singed by. Or fully struck from the top of your head to the bottom of your toes either, but then that might be better for it might put you to sleep for a time at least, I don’t really know myself,” the stranger said. “Lucky for you I heard the tremors and poked my head out to watch the haunted lands. It’s terrifyingly beautiful, isn’t it? The chorus was growing to a horror and then I saw you.”

“The mist. It was like a city, and it sounded like people screaming,” Katchan said.

“That’s the haunted land. On some nights the mists glow green and proud and form into something of a festival of people, it’s like watching a party from afar. There is dancing, the mists I mean, and there is singing of all sorts and through the noise you can hear something of a story being told. But then there are nights like tonight where the joy turns to screams and the mists are angry and the lightning comes as if the sky were lashing at the earth,” the stranger said. “Let’s not talk in the dark, better to talk before a fire, yes? Come with me.”

The stranger started down the dark corridor; It was pitch black. All Katchan had to follow him by were the footsteps and his cracking voice.

“Wait, who are you?”

“Hmm, yes, I do have a name. Yes. How long has it been since I used it though, I’m not sure? Maybe the other’s remember it better than I do..Ya...Ye...that proves it, I’ve downright forgotten. Follow closely.”

Katchan worried this man's head was as off as the others he's found here, and decided to try his luck waiting out the lightning. He walked until he was next to where he believed the latch to be, and he pushed up and the cool night air flew in. The haunted lands glowed bright, and the screams sounded in anguish and terror and he trembled. The green mist swirled and became something of a great city, Katchan shook his head and looked again and saw that the mist was like a formless cloud becoming whatever the seer wanted. The lightning still struck near the haunted lands and for a moment Katchan felt it was safe enough for him to sit and watch. Then a bright flash cracked in front of the latch forcing it closed and launched him to his back. He landed with a thud, and the stranger picked him up and pressed him against the wall.

"Lucky you weren't singed," the stranger said. "Lucky you weren't called down to join the haunted land."

Katchan felt resigned to his fate and followed the stranger. He trailed behind the voice through what seemed like a maze. The stranger commented again on the dangers of lightning and the haunted lands but gave no other information. Katchan saw shadows on a wall and burning oak touched his nose and he realized the stranger hadn't lied about there being others. Soon they walked into a room twice as large as Katchan's house, and there were two men sitting on a bench next to a fireplace with a burning log. To say Katchan was amazed would be an understatement. He traveled day and night through a desolate wilderness, a true wasteland, a truer than stories wasteland, and saw not a single structure, nor tree, only an oasis provided by the Wanderer's hand, and now he was in a large room with a fireplace complete with a fire, and people who, so far, were not trying to hurt him. The logs appeared unaffected by the flames.

"How is that fire burning?" Katchan asked.

“It just burns. Best we can figure, this place is the remains of a watchtower. Some sort of operating post the ancients used to keep watch for enemy attacks from the west. It’s long been abandoned,” the stranger said. “Rordion, I keep forgetting my name.”

One of the men sitting by the fire stood. He was tall and wore a brown tunic with leather armor across his chest and shoulders, his feet had shin guards and a short sword hung from a leather belt. “Yashnu, you may be old, but how can you misremember your name, but not so much else? What is this, who is the boy?”

“Katchan,” Katchan said. He wanted to introduce himself to show these men he wasn’t someone they could push around. He remembered Maggaline told him a story about that once; he never assumed he would call upon such a thing now. At the sound of his name the other man sitting by the fire perked. He lifted his head and stood, not towering over Rordion but of equal height. He was much bigger, almost as big as the warriors who tried to kidnap him the other night. He wore a red tunic with the same armor as Rordion, shin guards and a short sword by his side.

“Katchan,” the big man said, letting the name roll over his tongue like a sinister word.

“Say that name is familiar, isn’t it?” Yashnu said, putting his finger to his chin.

“It is a bit familiar,” Rordion agreed.

The big unnamed man spoke slowly, deliberately, “it can’t be, can it?” He circled Katchan then knelt in front of the boy and inspected his face. He grabbed his arm and dragged Katchan over to the fire. “Yes, I see it now, it’s in his face. See?” He pointed to Katchan’s face as if to explain something he couldn’t put into words.

“Ah, yes.” Yashnu said.

“How?” Rordion asked with as much surprise as Katchan now felt.

“It is him.” The big man said. He kneeled in front of Katchan again. “You have my beloved Avalene’s eyes. You must be her son? And the grandson of Maggaline the great storyteller of Gaelwyn?”

Katchan’s voice was stuck somewhere in his throat. He could hardly breathe, let alone answer. It just seemed too impossible. “I am.”

The big man stood, “I am Echo, son of the Enrick the Great, Elder of Gaelwyn. What strange fate has befallen you?”

“You’re Echo of Gaelwyn?” Katchan stuttered. “And Yashnu and Rordion, I’ve heard your names before when Saulnier and Grandma spoke. And there was another, right? The four of you fought the vagrant.”

“Yes. The vagrant stole the love of my life. I remember that well,” Echo said. Katchan detected sadness in the way Echo spoke.

“Then Saulnier did not lie: You two were betrothed,” Katchan said.

Echo let out a guffaw. “No, she refused my request many times, even before the vagrant came. I’m sure you’ve heard the stories. He called himself Micah. He lived near the boundary where no one dared to go. He hunted game and fished for his food. My father, Enrick, wanted him gone and ordered him away, but Maggaline got between them. Avalene had fallen in love and with child. It wasn’t until you were born that Maggaline’s protests were no longer enough. We four escorted Micah to the border and told him to leave. Next thing you know there’s a bright light and here we all are.”

“Micah. He’s the boy who left the village and returned?” Katchan asked.

“Are you sure you’re Maggaline’s grandson? That is a tale told as a warning to those who dare to wonder what’s beyond the village boundary. Although, I’ve heard the story has some basis of truth.”

“That story is true, Echo, if I’ve told you once I’ve told you a thousand times! There was a boy who left the village, but it wasn’t the vagrant. It was someone who could slip between the thin space. A wild one. Probably blessed by the Oracle,” Yashnu said.

“Madness! How could a mere boy survive until he was a man out here? For one there’s a distinct lack of resources for survival, and for two there’s a behemoth wandering the wasteland who must be as hungry as we are,” Echo said.

“Wait, what?” Katchan said, but they ignored him.

“The vagrant is from the wasteland, but was not born here,” Rordion said.

“Hold on—” Katchan tried again.

“Maybe that’s true, but what Yashnu is saying is madness, pure and simple. No one in Gaelwyn left and returned. There’s a boundary set for the very reason that death would be inevitable,” Echo responded.

“What are you saying?” Katchan said, but they continued without answering.

“No, the boundary was set to keep things coming in, not people going out,” Yashnu said.

“Then how would a boy return? You just defeated your own theory,” Echo said.

“How are you still alive?” Katchan shouted.

The three stopped debating and looked at him, the small newcomer boy with his blood pumping and his wits about him still.

“We’re dead, boy,” Yashnu said.

Katchan gasped and backed into the wall.

“How? How is this possible?”

“Perhaps we should explain to him what really happened that day,” Rordion said.

“You remember it best,” Yashnu said.

Rordion nodded. “The day we came here was the day we escorted the vagrant Micah from the village. At one point he refused to go. None of us were brave enough to force him to leave, even if his sword looked to be a thousand years old and ready to shatter at a single blow, but as he stepped over the boundary, well, it was like nothing I would have ever believed if I did not see it for myself. A creature ripped from nightmares, like a giant rotting bull, crashed through and slammed Micah to the ground with a mighty hoof. We pulled out our weapons and fought as best we could, but the behemoth overwhelmed us. He nearly killed us all but then a great flash of red light appeared, blinding us all, and then we were here. The behemoth gone, and the vagrant Micah was nowhere to be found. We wandered the wasteland searching for Gaelwyn until one day we realized we were no longer hungry and no longer thirsty. I remember hearing a death rattle behind me, and I drew my sword and turned, but there were no threats, there was only my body lying on the ground, clinging to life as best it could. I looked at my still fleshy hand and touched my face and felt my skin, dry, but not hard and cracked like the body on the ground. My body suffered from hunger and thirst and heatstroke, but I was not dead. I looked over and saw Yashnu had died days earlier, though no one noticed. Echo and Famor had yet to die, but they could see my flesh crisping on the ground as well as my spirit, whom you see now. I could see understanding followed by terror in their eyes. Their doom was just around the next dune. Here in this place, spirit is matter. We roamed until we found this abandoned watchtower, afraid we were stuck in this feelingless abyss for eternity, and then Famor happened.”

“Where is Famor?” Katchan asked.

“Over there, in the corner,” Echo pointed, and leaned toward the fire and picked up a stick to use as a torch. He walked over to the corner and lifted the burning stick to reveal a statue. “Here he is,” Echo said. The statue was of a man, a skinny man with hands raised above his face, and the scrunched, terrified face. In life, he must have been formidable with a bow or sling.

“I don’t understand.”

“The lightning, boy,” Yashnu said.

Katchan looked down, almost ashamed, “Oh.”

“That was the day we learned spirit can be harmed, even though we don’t understand the extent,” Yashnu said.

“Famor, who knows if he hurts now, but he cannot speak to us,” Rordion said.

“He’s a spirit, like the Wanderer and Exile,” Katchan said.

“Who are these men you speak of?” Echo asked.

“Wanderer wears a black mask and disappears in the morning sunlight. He who told me this place is an endless dream. He tried to send me home using a thin space,” Katchan said.

“Where the Scope and Idyll meet on intertwined grounds,” Yashnu said.

“Right, but he couldn’t send me home and didn’t know why. Like I want too. There were some warriors who tried to kidnap me the other night, but Wanderer fought them and I somehow managed to injure one. He killed all four of them. Exile is a man wearing white who claims he is the constructing a fortress for war. He sent me looking for this fortress and that’s how I came across the haunted land and you.”

“You aren’t spirit like we are, boy, I can tell. That may be why all these spirits can sense you. We’ve never seen any of those you mentioned,” Yashnu said.

“You say you do not want to return to Gaelwyn, why?” Rordion asked.

“I have something the Elder wants, something he might be willing to kill me for.”

“My father would never do such a thing!” Echo said defensively.

“No! I didn’t know Elder Enrick. The Elder is Saulnier,” Katchan said.

“My father is dead?”

Echo looked as if he were fighting back tears, but surely spirits cannot cry? The fate of Elder Enrick flashed across Katchan’s mind: wading into the river, swept away, never to be seen again, leaving Gaelwyn in chaos. He died in grief over the loss of his only son, Echo.

“Yes,” Katchan said.

“A death befitting his name?”

“Yes,” Katchan lied.

“Enrick named Maggaline elder after him. For years men have nominated women and women have nominated men to the position of Elder, he wouldn’t break tradition,” Echo said.

“My grandmother Maggaline refused the role to raise me instead,” Katchan said.

“I see,” Echo said. He grew grave, quiet and grave.

“Maggaline! Now there's a woman sharp as a whip,” Yashnu chuckled.

“You knew my grandmother?”

“Oh, I knew Maggaline quite well. Her husband Keret was a dear friend of mine.”

“I never met my grandfather, I only knew him through stories,” Katchan said.

“I’m not surprised, he died not long after your mother was born. A sickness swept the village. Many died, including him,” Yashnu said with a hint of sadness. “Maggaline saved us, though, saved all our lives, saved the survivors and the sick.”

“Grandma was no medicine woman,” Katchan said.

“Medicine? She had something better than that. She saved us with her stories, boy. She weaved a tale so wonderful, so captivating, so extreme that the survivors' health grew more robust to fend off the sickness, and the sick ones clung to life for just one day more to find out what happened next. She walked all four corners of Gaelwyn every day telling the story over and over again. She never tired. It was as if telling her story gave her the strength to go farther and longer than any one before. She told her story with such vigor and gusto that she became the story itself. The sick would rise from bed to hear the next part of her tale, and those who were healthy were given the strength to care for their sick for a little bit longer. The story she weaved truly stitched the people of Gaelwyn together. Your Grandma was truly something. She made her stories as real as you and me.”

“Everything I heard about my grandfather, and I never knew he died from a sickness,” Katchan said.

Rordion spoke low, “Yes, I remember the sickness well. I lost much of my family to the disease. It was a dark time, indeed.”

“I’ve never heard anyone talk about the sickness,” Katchan said.

“My father Enrick’s work. Something the Elder’s learned to do quite well was bury some hard truths in stories. The sickness was a disaster for the entire village, it’s a time never told around the fire for fear that story may repeat itself. It’s as if everyone feared to speak it into existence,” Echo said.

“Who knows how many illnesses have visited Gaelwyn in the past. For all our love of stories, we’d rather not hear the bad ones. It was this way even in my time,” Yashnu said. “We tell stories in hopes to inspire our little ones to action. We want them to embody the best of our heroes, and no one is better than Maggaline.”

“So, all this time, the story of my mother and the vagrant is false,” Katchan said.

“There were dozens of stories about the vagrant, boy, and how could there not be? He lived in the wilderness on the boundary’s edge and rarely came to the main village. He only came once that I recall, and that was just before my father wanted him gone. Oh, sure I hated him too. Avalene did not love me, that’s bad enough, but her loving some stranger set me into such a rage.”

Yashnu laughed, “Don’t let him fool you! He was a catch in his time, all the girls blushed when Echo came around.”

“Quiet old man,” Echo said.

“You know it’s true, you had the pick of the village,” Yashnu said.

“But none were like Avalene,” Rordion said.

The three grew quiet and let the crackling fire speak for some time. Katchan sat and thought for a long while.

“What was she like?” Katchan finally asked.

Yashnu only shook his head. There are some stories not to be spoken of, for they leave a mark of pain, and that mark can be spoken back into existence. Katchan now shared the pain of absence with them, for he never knew his mother. He reflected on the argument he and Grandma had just weeks before she died. It was as she said, *stories are the closest thing we have*. She was speaking of memories then. Stories, Katchan realized, can give you the pain you wish you had: the pain of a missed adventure, a missed friend, or a missed bond with a mother. He lacked that pain because he lacked her all his life, Maggaline filled that role so elegantly, but for the first time he felt like she was not enough, that there was something he missed out on and can never have. Is this why he hated stories his whole life? Did he have some knowledge without knowing

that stories would create a wound in a vulnerable place he tried to protect? Is wanting the option to refuse this pain why he never let Maggaline tell him about his mother or his father? Did he know, for all these years, that he had a wound just waiting to be opened by a single story?

Did Grandma ever mourn her daughter? Never in front of him. Did she ever tell stories to neighbors, or Sha-ra, or Saulnier, or anyone about her beloved daughter? Not that he knew. Was she trying to close that wound before it killed her? Was he putting his mother's memory to death by refusing to hear about her life?

"I have something to show you," Katchan said and pulled out the ruby and the leather binder from his bag. "My grandmother created this," he said.

"Created?" Echo asked, clearly astonished by the thick bundle of paper and the shiny ruby which seemed as if it were a star plucked from the sky.

"I don't understand," Rordion said.

Katchan revealed the bird tracks on the page, each in varying positions, each meaning something to those who had this ancient technology.

Yashnu was strangely quiet.

"Before she died, my grandmother told me a story about a princess from Livana, the Silver City. She was one of few who could understand these symbols as well as write them. It was her downfall, but she was given this ruby in her banishment. In the story, the ruby has the power to transport its users to a different place. I know, it sounds like nonsense. But then Maggaline left this for me, this bundle of paper and this ruby. She was the only one to know the story, not even Saulnier knew. In fact, he seemed ready to kill me to burn this paper. Have any of you heard the story of Valerie?"

Six eyes stared in blank wonder.

Katchan sighed. "I knew it was nonsense. It was just the utterances of an old woman."

"How dare you say such a thing!" Yashnu said. "Maggaline was the greatest storyteller Gaelwyn ever knew, if she told you this story, then it really happened, no question."

"How can you be sure, Yashnu? My father told me every story there was, and I have never heard of this Princess Valerie," Echo said. "But it is curious."

"Don't you remember how Maggaline acted when Enrick set us upon the vagrant? She could have said something to stop us, she could have used my friendship with Keret to shame me into leaving the vagrant be, but she let us go freely. She protested to Enrick, but all she said to me was 'in time the old will become new once more.' I saw it in her eyes she wanted the man gone herself, your father, boy, gone. Silenced even. He told her something that shook her to the core, I just know it."

"Don't be foolish, Yashnu! If Maggaline knew a story my father did not she would have shared it with him and he with Saulnier," Echo challenged.

"If Saulnier was ready to destroy the paper and run a mere boy from the village, perhaps he did not know this story. But, like a crime being reviewed by the Elder, if there is only one witness it is their word against the accused. How can we know the witness is telling the truth?" Rordion said.

"I am telling the truth," Katchan said.

"You could be telling us anything. For all we know you found that paper and ruby out here in the wasteland," Echo said.

"And what would the boy gain from that?" Rordion asked.

"Nothing," Yashnu said. "He would gain nothing and lose everything. Katchan needs to leave this wasteland before he becomes like us. What, boy, do you need from us?"

Katchan nodded.

“This is Maggaline’s last story. I believe she wanted me to learn how to understand them, and I think this ruby has something to do with it. None of you know how to leave here but Exile does. He can take me to the sunset village where they might know how to read Maggaline’s last story. I have to get to the fortress before the Wanderer returns me to Gaelwyn.”

“If Exile can send you away, what of us?”

“I’m not sure, Rordion.”

“Say no more, we will go with you,” Yashnu said.

“We will?”

“If Maggaline knew how to write I’d say it’s important we find out what it means, Echo. Would you rather sit and wait for time to consume us in whatever way spirits are consumed?”

“I agree with Yashnu,” Rordion said. “We are dead, the boy is not, and I am curious about the Silver City and talent called writing. Besides, going with Katchan may deliver us from this endless waiting.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Echo asked.

“We may find a way to free Famor, and ourselves,” Rordion said.

Echo exhaled, drooped his head and dropped his eyes for a moment. “We will never return to Gaelwyn, will we? You resigned your fate long ago, Rordion, always the practical one, and let me stay in my fantasy of home. There is no power or prayer for us, is there?”

“Perhaps the boy is a prayer answered yet. We need to escape this endless dream, if that is what it is.” Rordion grabbed the torch and walked over to Famor’s statue. “We will do our best to free you, my friend.” Then he turned and started down the long corridor to the exit. Echo,

Katchan noticed, took one last look at the fire and the benches and the statue in the room. He wondered what he was thinking, and he wondered again if spirits could cry.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GIANTS OF THE LAND

The sun was just rising as Yashnu pushed the latched door up and ushered everyone out. Katchan stepped out third in line behind Rordion, with Echo after himself. The sun reflecting off the sand stung his eyes for a second. After his eyes adjusted, he realized it was not the sand reflecting the sun, but many shards of glass like objects scattered down the hill he ran up last night, and as far as the haunted lands were speckles of sunlight. He looked for where the lightning struck that blasted him up the hill and saw the ground coated in reflecting sunlight.

“Were they always here?” Katchan asked.

“Wherever the lightning strikes, its mark is left,” Yashnu said. “The sand covers them up after a day, and who knows what happens once they’re in the ground.”

“You’ve never tried to dig one up?”

“Yes, it becomes sand,” Rordion answered.

Katchan looked behind him, past Echo who stood in the shade of the latch.

“Never,” Rordion said.

“You never buried Famor?”

“Don’t speak of what you do not understand,” Echo said. He let the latch fall.

“Risk losing him forever? This place isn’t like Gaelwyn: here there are laws we don’t understand and limits we don’t know. We could bury Famor in the sand like one of these crystals, and never see his body again, even if we checked a single minute after we finished. That

is a risk we are unwilling to take. Besides, his body is dead, it's his spirit we wish to free. That could be lost in this endless place as well," Yashnu said.

"I am done talking of this," Echo said.

They all silently agreed to stop talking of it, but as they walked, Katchan could not stop thinking about Famor. If there was a chance he could see Maggaline again, even if it meant losing her forever, he would take any risk. But these men are not him, and he is not they, and Famor is not his friend, even if he is from the same village. Only they know what their friend would be willing to risk for life again, even if it is life as a shade. Then again, these men aren't shades. They're not like the Wanderer and the warriors that hunted him, they are more like the Exile. Shadows disappear with the sun, but these men still remain through the night and into the day. Is the Exile someone who died in this land like them? Could he be the boy from Gaelwyn who left and never returned? Katchan did not understand why that bugged him. The village boundary bugged him immensely, but something about their story rang familiar: the flash of red before entering the wasteland. It meant something to him, but it felt like trying to remember a dream.

"Are you sure you can trust this Exile?" Yashnu asked.

"I don't know. He seemed proud of himself, and he was sure enough that he would invite me to his front door. If he wanted to harm me, I think he would have done it then, right? I was all alone and had nothing but this staff to protect me," Katchan said. He knew the staff was powerful in some way. The Husky warrior thought it was made of iron, but Katchan had no idea why. It was no good for defense right now.

They walked, large looming mountains reached high like hands into the sky, as if they were digging at the blue for a weak spot to crack and break free and escape. All this time, none

of them left the watchtower to explore the wasteland. He wondered if it were out of fear or some desperate desire to cling to life. To hold onto hope for salvation without any evidence of salvation must come from delusion or from something deeper. Whatever do they hope for?

After Echo learned his father was dead, he was different. Not that Katchan knew him well. When Echo first greeted him, his shoulders were broad. He was the son of Elder Enrick, he had much to make him proud. Now he drooped and seemed smaller than before. Katchan felt sorry that he hid the truth about his father's death. He could have told him that he drowned himself in grief, but would that have helped? He realized he did the same thing Maggaline and Saulnier did for the village: they also hid the truth to save some grief. They did the same to him over his father. In that instant he felt understanding wash over him: the hurtful truth is harder for the teller of the truth than it is for the hearer. He was never before in a position of knowledge which someone lacked, and immediately, he lied. He did not even consider for a moment telling the truth because hesitation would have given the truth away. Was that instinctual? Why did he care if he hurt Echo or not anyways? It is not as if he knows the man enough to care if he hurt. Maybe the hurt within Katchan was enough empathy to know Echo, no matter who he was, would not take the news well. Is this the use of stories then? To tell the truth in a way that's palatable. To make it easy to swallow, like honey with some foul medicine. To tell the truth in a way that shows the hearer the teller means no harm? Maggaline spent her life telling stories. Surely, she understood this. She was always trying to tell the truth in a way people would listen.

He held back for a moment and let Echo catch up to him. No matter how hard it was, he wanted Echo to know the truth outright, because it is what Katchan himself wanted.

"Echo, I have something to tell you."

"I have no need to hear how it happened," Echo said.

“How do you know what I was going to say?”

“My father was never going to die peacefully.”

Katchan started to say something else, but no words would come. He was stunned speechless.

“To be the Elder is to carry a long and heavy burden,” Echo said. He walked past Katchan.

The winds kicked up twirls of sand, the heat beat off the path below, and the mountains loomed gorgeous and frightening in the sky. They walked along the path to the Exile’s fortress in silence.

Katchan was the first to notice the change in terrain. The sand they walked on was rougher than before. He mentioned it, but the other three could not feel it. They were spirit. Yashnu said the sand must be covering the mountain rock. Katchan ran up ahead past him and stuck Maggaline’s staff into the sand and dug. Every little hole he made was filled in again by the sand. Rordion drew his sword and used the flat to move the sand to the side. Soon Katchan was deep enough to see the color of the stone: black. The color of the mountain was orange like the sun, burnt and brutal. Katchan dug around the area and brushed sand away until he saw the stone’s edge. He grabbed the piece and pulled it out. It was not round or flat or chaotically shaped like a natural rock might be. It looked carved. The stone was black on one side, and Katchan flipped it over and saw the other side was gleaming white.

“This is no mountain base,” Katchan said.

“No doubt, this is a stone mason’s work. There was something manmade here, like the watchtower,” Yashnu said.

“One side is burnt.” Rordion said.

Echo, alert, scanned the horizon. “This is the path to the Exile’s fortress? You said a man called Wanderer seeks you, let us wait till nightfall for him.”

“No. He will force me to Gaelwyn. If that happens, I’ll never learn what this is,” Katchan said shaking the pouch with Maggaline’s story. “We keep moving. I need to find the fortress today.”

They walked. The mountains created an ambiance that Katchan distrusted, like he was being watched, or even tracked. The haze of the desert was thicker in this area than the free windy plains of the desert before. Everything dust ridden and sand blown was blocked by this long, formidable shield, and retained in this basin forever. For this reason, they did not notice giants from afar. As they crept forward, toward where Katchan believed the Exile’s fortress waited for them, they began to see towering figures.

Rordion threw out his arm, palm down, as a sign for the others to halt. He kneeled to the deck and placed his hand above his eyes to cut the glare.

“What is it,” Katchan asked.

He was immediately shushed and scolded by Yashnu. He did not know the men’s warrior ways, but he understood enough to know his mouth might put them in danger. Rordion silently crept up to Yashnu and whispered in his ear.

Giants, Katchan overheard. His stomach dropped to the very lowest pit in his gut. Another one of Maggaline’s stories come to life. Yashnu and Rordion discussed secretly, with Yashnu in disbelief. Then they fell silent and began speaking a language only their eyes and years of comradery translated. Echo joined them and they began drawing figures and lines in the sand, using small rocks in formations Katchan had no knowledge of. He pulled out the burnt rock from his pouch and turned it over and over, from silver to black. Watchtowers were for cities and

fortresses. If anything could destroy a city to crumbles a giant could. Swords and spears were to weak and dull to pierce the skin of a giant. It was only using newly invented projectile weapons that gained velocity while spinning over one's head could they fend the creatures off. After many years of brutal fighting, men and giants found themselves at a draw. It was only mankind's ingenuity that allowed them to physically match with the giants. They went their separate ways and never spoke to one another or of their war again. The giants were only a few feet taller than the humans: descendants from a god banished from the divine council and a human woman. What Katchan saw in the dust and swirl of sand were things bigger than giants.

He looked at the trio discussing how to get around the giants without being seen. They heard Maggaline's stories, but only Katchan knew them well enough to know they were safe. He smirked, getting the attention of the three then walked into the haze toward the giants. He ignored Rordion's pleading for him to stop, and Yashnu's who did so only a little louder. Echo wasted no breath.

"Katchan! Those things will tear you limb for limb!"

Katchan kept walking until he stopped at the base of a large figure carved from white stone. The three ran behind him, weapons drawn and battle cries raging. They stopped when they found Katchan staring up at what was not a giant, but a very large statue. The figure was a gaunt man with a hand raised high in the sky, sunrays peeking out from his head and from his heart.

"You would have been killed," Echo said.

"How did you know these weren't giants? They looked every bit like giants from where we stood," Yashnu said.

"These are nothing like giants. The giants were much smaller than these figures. According to Maggaline anyways," Katchan replied.

“I heard of the giants from Enrick,” Yashnu said.

“Myself, Rordion, and Famor did as well,” Echo said. “They were very large in his stories.”

Katchan thought hard for a moment, then said, “Maggaline told me the giants were descendants from a god named Kal who shrunk himself to be with the human woman he fell in love with. Giants are their children. If you believe in that nonsense, anyways.”

“Well, what is this,” Echo asked.

“A statue. A figure honoring some man who became like a god in the eyes of others,” Rordion said. “Of whom I can’t say.”

Katchan stared long and hard at the gaunt figure with a hand raised to the sky as if declaring something powerful and violent. “It’s Telo. Just as he makes himself king of the seven villages of Idyll and just before he built Livana, the Silver City.”

“Yes, I see it now. Good eye, boy,” Yashnu said.

“Let’s keep moving,” Katchan said.

They did. They walked past dozens more statues: Queens, Princesses, Oracles, Kings, Princes. How many did their city so well a statue was to memorialize them, or were they memorialized on their order despite good works. Katchan thought he spotted a carving of a man crumbling pillars onto his head, and another of a man digging a well. These were some he recognized as stories from Maggaline. He flipped through every story she told him. Most were silent in his head, just memories of him sitting by the fire while she moved her lips, but now nothing came out. He shut his eyes and tried to concentrate, and when he did, he found he could see the stories move in his head. The words she said became living, beating organisms who did battle with evil and survived chaos, all in his mind. He felt the thunder bubbling from his gut and

opened his eyes and felt relief that he wasn't stuck in that world anymore. That world was one of pain for him. Years of trying to avoid Maggaline's stories and now he couldn't get her out of his head. He felt grateful.

Soon they came across a statue that Katchan could not walk past. A princess, tall on her pedestal, wearing a dress blown by the wind and holding a large jewel that in the sculpture's genius, managed to catch the sun and glimmer as if alive.

"Katchan, why did you stop?" Yashnu asked.

Katchan dug into his satchel and pulled out the ruby. He held it in the air, posing like the princess and let the sun's rays catch the jewel like her own. Somehow hers sparkled brighter, though it was only white stone. The three surrounded him and stared at the statue as well.

"Say, what was the story Maggaline told you again?"

Even in stone Katchan saw a perfect representation of the princess from Maggaline's stories. Sharp jaw and confident eyes with hair tossed about in the wind. A teller of stories. A dreamer.

"It's true," Katchan said.

They said nothing, allowing Katchan to absorb the weight of his realization.

"Doesn't this statue look different from the others?" Yashnu asked.

Rordion rubbed the stone, "Structurally it's more beautiful than the others. Even more than King Telos."

"No, it's more than that," Echo said. He scanned the statues they walked past. Giants in a haze, peppered along in a rhythm unseen. The statues were lined up in a way that denoted some sense of purpose and structure; one behind the other, diagonal from another, to the next one, leading to Valerie.

“Yes, I see it to,” Rordion said.

“There was a maze here once, all leading to her,” Yashnu said.

Katchan’s face scrunched. “A maze? Why?”

Katchan looked at the ruby in her hand, then to his. He already knew the answer.

“What do you think the statue is for?” Echo asked.

“I believe we are in the ruins of the legendary Silver City,” Rordion said. “If they were anything like our people in Gaelwyn, with similar customs and traditions, then this may be a crypt structure: where they bury their royal dead. It’s a marker.”

The wind whistled against the mountain and splayed out like invisible waves against a rock. The sand lifted and twisted and fell. The hairs on Katchan’s neck tingled and he shot a look at Valerie’s statue, feeling someone spy on them. Although it was hot, he felt cold.

“Let’s keep moving,” Katchan said.

They walked away the statues towards many others, wary now that they knew thousands were buried beneath their feet. Katchan stopped and turned around to see the ruby in her hand once again and gasped. He held out his own and mournfully realized what he was reminded of from the story of the men from Gaelwyn. He hesitated, watching them walk cautiously. He grappled with saying it out loud. They would be hurt terribly. If Maggaline were here, she would ease the words, dip them in honey so they would accept it easily. But he couldn’t. The skills of Maggaline were practiced for years, and he, foolish boy as he was, refused to listen. He would have tell them with as much honesty as he could muster and hope for the best.

“I have something to tell you,” He said. “Your story of how you got here has bothered me, but I think I know why now. The ruby is why I didn’t feel sick when I got near the boundary. The absence of the ruby is when I did feel sick. The ruby is responsible for getting me past the

boundary. Which means the ruby is responsible for getting you past the boundary all those years ago.”

The faces of the three changed drastically from alert ease to dread, then to anger. Katchan then realized what a mistake he made, revealing Maggaline was responsible for their deaths.

Katchan gasped for breath as Echo’s large hands shoved him against the rock solid shin of Valerie’s statue. Yashnu pulled on Echo’s tree branch arm, and Rordion clasped his hands around Echo’s waist. They pulled and heaved, but anger drove him, and his anger was stronger than their determination to not Katchan be killed.

“This hell we’ve died in,” Echo said.

“It’s not his fault, Echo. Stop! He isn’t spirit!” Yashnu cried.

Rordion groaned as he yanked at Echo’s waist.

“Maybe he should be spirit, to know what it is like,” Echo said, eyes red with fury.

Rordion’s clasped hand and martial skill finally proved worthy to budge the boulder like frame of Echo. He lifted Echo high into the air and bent over backwards, crashing his friends head into the ground. Rordion spun off to the side and raised his hands as if to calm Echo. Echo spun away from the ground unfazed and drew his sword.

“We were sent here on purpose, you heard him,” Echo said.

“Maybe it wasn’t her,” Yashnu said tiredly.

“Who else had the ruby? Boy, you might save your life if someone else owned that ruby before her,” Echo said.

“The boy’s life is already saved,” Rordion said. “What’s done is done, there is no going back for us.”

“And why should he walk out of this wasteland when his grandmother banished us here?”

“Echo,” Yashnu said calmly, “He was just a baby. He has nothing to do with the past. We aren’t here because of Maggaline.”

Echo, trembling, bowed his head and readied his sword. “We are here because someone chose our fate for us.”

Rordion drew his sword, “Then I will choose my own fate and defend the boys. Despite being dead, I can choose an honorable existence.”

Rordion readied his blade. They inched closer to one another, taunting each other with their eyes. In battle, there is one only fight to be won: the battle of the mind. These two warriors knew that lesson well. They spent years building their courage, building their bravery, through thousands of stories of war. They were no strangers to fear, but the key in this moment was to overtake the other in mental fortitude. The dance of violence is swift, but the string of tension is slow to tighten.

Katchan caught his breath. Yashnu was by his side in a moment.

“Fool boy, you should have told me before ever mentioning a thing like that to Echo.”

“She reminded me,” Katchan gasped, pointing at Valerie’s statue.

Yashnu studied the face of the statue. “Well that’s interesting.” He rose and staggered between the two warriors. The string had grown taut. It was ready to snap. Echo let out a scream, and Rordion did the same. Echo charged, his feet light on the sand; Rordion became firm like a rock.

“Stop!” Yashnu said and jumped between the two blades.

“Old man, what are you doing!” Echo screamed and backed away.

“Shut up, you fool, look at the statue. See who it is!”

Echo lowered his weapon, Rordion let out a silent sigh of relief and did the same.

Katchan could see in his face that he did not want to fight his friend, but was it because of fear of losing, or fear of winning, he did not know. Echo studied the statue.

“What do you see, old man?”

“Stop being blind and look past the rock and forget this is a statue you found in a world away from home.”

Rordion nodded.

“What are you saying, Yashnu?” Katchan asked.

Echo’s face lit up. “Interesting. The similarity is striking.”

“Yes, it is striking,” Rordion answered.

“I’d like it if you three were a little more direct,” Katchan said.

“Oh, of course. This statue’s face is exactly that of Avalene, your mother.”

A sudden gust of warm wind covered Katchan’s gasp. His wide-eyed stare absorbed the image as if it were the last thing he’d ever see. All his life he avoided hearing about her to avoid his own grief, and now here she was standing before him, locked eternally in stone. But it was not his mother, he knew. It was Princess Valerie.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE EXILES FORTRESS

They walked away from the statue with heads held low. Katchan lead up front, Yashnu behind him, followed by Rordion, and Echo held the rear. There was little more discussion after the statue that resembled Avalene but was not his mother. It was Valerie, the banished princess. What left Katchan confused is why was Valerie given a statue when Maggaline told him she died in the land of storms? Clearly, there is more to the story she either did not know or did not tell him. He touched the paper within his bag: maybe this is the rest of the story? But again, why not tell him outright? Why write when he cannot read? The striking imagery of his mother must only be a coincidence. Whatever it was, it was enough to calm Echo enough to continue moving forward. At any rate, Katchan believed that the only way to find answers was at the Exile's fortress. The mountains guided them still. Every step Katchan took was hard, a reminder that they were in the ruins of Livana. It must be several times larger than Gaelwyn, Katchan thought. Time made all things visible. It made truth into legends, myth into stories, and cities into ruins. Did time kill Livana like everything else, or was it something else?

Katchan was certain they would never find the fortress. They had walked for hours, and his feet beat against the hardened foundation of Livana. His toes began to numb, and every step felt like a struggle. He was about to suggest they stop for a time, when up ahead they saw the faint outlines of a structure. Then it came into view for the first time. It was large, small compared to what the city must have been, but greater than any structure in Gaelwyn by far. The wall was the color of the sky before a great storm. It rose a quarter of the height of the mountain,

with spikes all around as far as he could see. Spikes to keep something out, or something in, he shuddered to think.

From the middle of the fortress rose a tower, taller than the walls, but as dark in color. Curiously, there were piles of white stone outside of the fortress protecting an unfinished portion of the structure. Surrounding the unfinished portion and on the walls and high on the tower people hammered and chiseled and made mud and lifted and carried stones. The white stone was carried to a worker who waited with a hammer and chisel to form the stone into a brick. The brick was then carried to the unfinished portion where another worker lathered paste on top of the last brick. The new brick was placed on top and suddenly changed color, growing darker until black, as if poisoned. The stone carrying worker returned to the pile, passing other workers forming a line from the worker with the hammer and chisel. If Katchan began counting the heads of the many people wandering around this massive structure the last one would remain unaccounted for until well into the next day. If he fit them into columns and rows to make the count easier, he was sure the workers were enough for an army.

Katchan stopped and let a worker cross in front of them. It was a woman with all the look and curves a woman has, but this woman was coated in mud nearly head to toe. Where her skin showed, it was ghastly pale. She took no notice of the four travelers, and after a glance, the four travelers tried to take no notice of her. Her eyes were set forward on to the next task, and she walked with a gait not suited for speed.

“I do not like this,” Rordion said.

“We should run while this Exile knows not we are here,” Echo said.

Yashnu and Rordion agreed.

“It’s my only chance,” Katchan said. A large black gate designed to intimidate onlookers lurched forward with a loud screech, and slowly opened outwards. The workers stopped carrying, hammering, and chiseling and observed the four. One by one, they left their positions and surrounded them at the gate. They stopped giving them plenty of room to breathe, but no room to run. Katchan could see nothing resembling life in their faces. The air smelled of iron, and there was a red tint to the blackness in their dirty clothes.

“I’ve come to see the one who calls himself Exile,” Katchan said.

The crowd stayed silent. Rordion and Echo carefully drew their swords.

“This was a fool’s errand,” Echo muttered.

One of the workmen began to cough. He coughed and hacked and fell to his knees. Katchan and the others watched in shock as the man coughed, gasping for breath, until he fell to his face and clutched at his throat. He coughed and hacked and sputtered until blood splattered from his mouth. More blood spilled until it covered the ground around him where he rolled. He coughed and hacked until he lay motionless on the blood-soaked sand. The crowd stayed silent; eyes locked on their fallen worker. Katchan’s breathing scattered.

“Calm down. You need your wits about you now,” Yashnu whispered.

The workers parted, allowing the four to see how dense the crowd truly went until the last layer parted. Exile stood in white robes, brighter now in contrast to the workers. Behind him stood four large men armed with swords.

“Impossible,” Katchan said.

Yashnu leaned over, “What is it?”

“Those four behind him, they tried to kill me, but the Wanderer killed them. They work for Exile,” Katchan said.

“This is our one chance of escape. We face him now,” Yashnu said.

The Exile was close. He walked into the circle and stood before Katchan with the four behind him. The Exile ignored Katchan at first, casting an eye instead on the body of the workman lying on the blood-soaked ground. His face twisted with anger. He shot a look at one of the four behind him, whom Katchan recognized as the princely voiced warrior from the other night. He said in a quiet but commanding voice:

“Clean this up, Argwenna.”

Argwenna bowed and did as he was told. He motioned to two workers, they picked up the body and dragged it inside the fortress. The other three warriors shot sly glances towards each other that only Katchan noticed. Their looks were cloaked in understanding only they could interpret.

“Harol, please ensure our guest is given provisions. He has a long journey ahead of him.”

“Yes, my lord,” Harol, whom Katchan recognized as the husky one he tussled with, bowed and did as he was told. He returned shortly with water for Katchan’s waterskin, and a loaf of bread, that Katchan felt was airy and not with much substance.

The Exile turned to Katchan and threw his hands out as if to embrace him.

“Welcome to my fortress, little exile. As you can see, there is much more to Midbar than sand and mountains. With your help, it will be greater than ever.”

Katchan cocked his brow, “Greater?”

“Yes. You should feel honored to be asked of my assistance. You see, we were once a mighty people. Feared and respected across the Scope. But now we are cursed men. Our sins weigh us down until we collapse under the weight of our evil,” Exile said.

“Cursed? Is this what your war is about?” Katchan said.

“Yes. I wage war to break an unjust curse. Once I am free of the curse, every divine and holy being who sits upon their thrones in Hysol, and every lowly beast, every reject of Marikel in Borsol, will know I am back, and stronger than ever. I am at war with a certain someone, little exile. He thinks he has defeated me and my forces, but what he doesn’t know is there is another battle in which he must face me directly. In this, he will fail, and the Scope will be freed of his tyranny.”

The Exile made a nod to the warrior with the booming voice. He put his hand to his mouth and shouted:

“Freedom is upon us. Work, your reward is coming!”

The workers bowed and stood upright, spun in sync, and returned to their duties of carrying, cutting, and laying bricks.

“The workers, they are your army?” Katchan asked.

“You believe these weaklings to be my forces? No. No need to concern yourself with who they are. They are sinners and suffer for a greater purpose,” the Exile said.

“What did they do to deserve this?”

The Exile’s face twisted as if holding back rage and anger that was boiling to the top like a pot of water over a hot fire, but he burst into laughter instead. His laughter was as boyish as his face. “What did they do? Oh, a thousand things, a million things! They were born evil, and they lived their evil ways and now they work off their evil off under my careful eye. They will be liberated once the great war is over, and their souls will finally rest. Until then, they are mine.”

Echo stepped forward, “Whoever you are, you are knowledgeable of this land.”

“Echo, please,” Yashnu said to stop him, but his words were ignored. Echo continued:

“We four have no business here, and we know not what ‘here’ is, but you who rule the wasteland may help us. Tell me you will help us escape from this place?”

Exile then noticed Echo for the first time with what Katchan thought was recognition.

“Your escape from Midbar is linked with my own, Echo of Gaelwyn,” he said.

“You know me?”

“It is my business to know who wanders my kingdom, lazily waiting for his doom to arrive. Unfortunately, your doom is already here. This is your doom. There is no escape other than my own escape. As long as I am here, so will you be. And that goes for you, little exile. Your fate is linked with mine. I told you I am searching for a particular tool. I have spent many years searching where it is hidden, and now I have now discovered its location. Bring me the Ashen sword and you will find yourself released from Midbar.”

“The Ashen sword? Forged in Hysol by the god Asher himself? That is a legend at best,” Yashnu said.

“All legends are based in fact, old man. The Ashen sword is no different,” Exile said.

“Even if it were a real object, how would it find itself here?” Rordion said.

“The Ashen sword has a long history, longer than even my own. It has changed hands quite a few times. Its previous owner was the commander of a great army. He led this army on campaigns against the interests of Hysol. One day he went too far and I tried to stop them, and for my efforts I found myself cursed alongside him. His army saw the error of their judgment and joined me to rectify their past sins. To prevent himself from being shamed, the commander hid the Ashen sword so he would not face judgement from the divine council. It is his sword you are looking for now.”

“Him being the one I call Wanderer, isn’t it?”

“Yes. He is the cause of this curse. This endless dream. Once I have the Ashen sword, I can stop him once and for all, and all will be right once more. I will lead you to the sunset village and grant passage to your three friends who will go on to their final rest.”

“Four,” Echo said suddenly. “We have a fourth who was petrified by lightning. Will he too, be saved?”

Exile bored holes into Echo.

“All will be set right again,” The Exile said.

Yashnu smiled and gave a nervous laugh, “One moment your highness.”

He pulled Katchan to the side and spoke directly.

“Katchan, I do not trust this man will do as he says.”

“We don’t have any other choice, do we?”

“Yes. Sometimes doing nothing is the best choice one can make,” Yashnu said.

“If we do nothing, I will die out here and become a spirit. The name of Maggaline will be tarnished forever, and her most important work will go unknown. I can’t allow that to happen.”

“You said this Wanderer defended you, right? What if trapping Exile in this wasteland was for the good of humanity? What if there was a reason they are here instead of free to travel the cosmos.”

“Yashnu, you aren’t saying you believe in a larger cosmos, are you?”

“I’m dead, boy. I can believe whatever suits me. It’s your decision to make since you still live. Whatever happens to the cosmos now will have no effect on me, but if you live to see the sunset village and this man is as dangerous as I think he is, then you may not have a sunset village for very long.”

“Do you know who is dangerous? Saulnier. He’ll do anything to retain his power and take power from those deserving. I have no chance in Gaelwyn, and I will die out here. I have no choice but to trust him.”

“My patience wanes, little exile,” Exile said.

Yashnu poked his head up. “Just a bit of grandfatherly advice, my King.”

“Mine grows weary as well. This task shall be done,” Echo said.

Katchan shot Echo a nasty look.

“My fate will be decided as well. What else must be done?”

“Do you agree, little exile?”

Katchan did not waver. “It was always the plan.”

“Very good. The Ashen sword is buried in the royal crypt. It is the one space in Midbar I am somehow unable to access. Treachery from this former commander I’d wager. Retrieve it, and your life will be made right again.”

As Exile explained to them in detail where they must go and what they must do, they listened as well as they could, but Katchan was distracted by the building of the fortress wall. The bricks turned white to black. The only place he had seen white stone was the ruins of the Silver City. Is that where Exile found his material? H must be building this fortress on top of the ruins of Livana. Exile’s lackey warriors watched him closely, and Katchan knew they sensed where his attention was truly drawn. Despite being asked to do a favor by their master, those three still wanted to hurt him, and he wanted to know why.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

REUNION

Katchan took one last look at the fortress before the haze of sands covered it over. He shuddered. Midbar was stranger and made less sense now than ever before. He was told Midbar was a curse and a dream, but the fortress and the man inside the fortress were large and powerful. It was as if this land was somehow containing something bigger than itself. Katchan couldn't explain the feeling in words. It was a mystery to him. Everything he saw here was beyond even Maggaline's wildest tales.

Exile must have sent the warriors after feeling Katchan's presence in Midbar for this task. They talked as if it didn't matter if he were alive or dead. Then Wanderer killed them. Now they are alive. Something keeps them alive. Or Someone. Why did they not tell their master of the ruby? The ruby was more powerful, in its own way, than a sword could ever be. Surely Exile would find it of interest. If Harol, Argwenna, and the other two stayed silent on that matter, then perhaps they had their own plans. But, why? It is silly to make plans in an inescapable place.

Katchan's thoughts slowed him down. Yashnu gently pushed on his back whenever he became too contemplative. There was no room to wait. They had to keep moving to find the sacred crypt before dark, otherwise the Wanderer might find and stop them. The sunset village, a new home, was within his grasp. If he survived another day he would find himself in the company of the living, and maybe even learning to understand Maggaline's story.

"How does the Exile expect us to get into the crypt again?" Echo asked.

"*Through the past*, he said. Katchan, does that mean anything to you?" Yashnu asked.

Katchan shook his head and kept walking, letting Maggaline's staff support him.

"If only we could see what he means," Rordion said.

Katchan stopped, his eyes grew to saucers. He pulled out the ruby and saw his reflection in the stone. *I envy you, you who will have the Eyes of God.* The Oracle of Gaelwyn said that. It meant nothing to him then, and now it had only a semblance of something. What Rordion said jogged his failing memory.

“This ruby is the key,” Katchan said.

The three looked at him and each other.

Yashnu sighed, “Where in the world did Maggaline get that ruby?”

The sun was setting long before they set eyes on the statue of Valerie. The Exile made no mention of her statue, but they knew it was the place.

“We should stop for the night,” Echo said.

Valerie’s statue stood tall and strong in the distance. The setting sun cast an ominous red glow on the marble. Katchan swished around the last of his water. Another day here and he would join them as spirits. Even if the Wanderer was some maniac who led men into destructive battles, he at least knew how to find water. He found himself wondering what they would do when the man in black showed himself. Echo and Rordion were tough, but the Wanderer took down four tough warriors like it was a game. They would stand no chance.

“We don’t have time,” Katchan said.

“We don’t have a choice,” Echo said.

“We always have a choice, but I do think this is as good a choice as we’re going to have,” Yashnu said.

“If we stop the Wanderer will find us,” Katchan said.

“Let him find us, I want a fight,” Echo said. Ever since he learned Maggaline condemned them to the wasteland through the ruby, he had been anxious and angry. His eyes turned red when he looked at Katchan, even though he was a baby when this all happened.

“It won’t be much of a fight,” Rordion said.

“We were the strongest fighters in the village,” Echo said.

“If this man was really a commander who invaded other worlds and defeated other armies, then his experience must be greater than ours by many measures. I don’t want to believe it’s true, that there are other worlds, but I can’t say anything is impossible. He has fought men and creatures we’ve never heard of. He will be prepared for much,” Rordion said.

“I don’t care how many thousands he’s slayed,” Echo said and grumbled to himself words only he could hear. He sat, leaning his back against the statue and watched the sun drop below the horizon.

“If this man is really all you say, then moving or stopping won’t matter. He will find us if he wants to find us,” Yashnu said.

Katchan couldn’t help but understand that logic. There was no escaping men like the Wanderer. They reached Valerie’s statue as the stars dotted the sky, and they all rested. Katchan rested anyways. The other’s, being spirit, rested only in imitation; Katchan, however, was exhausted.

“You need water,” Yashnu said.

Katchan laid back and stared at the stars, then shifted his eyes on Valerie’s stone face. It was his mothers face, as they said. He could not dispute their memory, as he had none of her, but it was odd the princess of Maggaline’s story looked like Avalene. There was a history to this place Katchan felt he was connected to. This cursed land lay on Gaelwyn’s doorstep for as long

as Gaelwyn existed, but they remained separate but for this ruby in his bag. It didn't seem set apart from Gaelwyn: he could feel a warm breeze when sitting on the rock overlooking the waste, he could feel the heat of the sun, it was as if this place existed within the decaying sandy wastes outside his own village. How was this so?

"Yashnu, do you know how Gaelwyn was formed?" Katchan asked.

Yashnu sat and leaned on his arms, looking past Valerie's face to the stars.

"Only what I've heard in stories," Yashnu said.

"I would say the same," Katchan said.

"Yes. Gaelwyn is a village of stories," Yashnu said.

Katchan fingered the writing Maggaline left for him. What mysteries it contained. What stories must be written within these pages.

"I think that's what's been bothering me. All these years we've told stories from one generation to the next, and every story that goes back a hundred years seems better than the last," Katchan said.

Yashnu fingered his white, spirit beard. "Hmm...elaborate."

"We are a village of stories, and dust and debris and fighting with each other and gossip and not much else. In the stories, houses were large and built with stone instead of clay, there was a temple for the oracle, and men and women rose against monsters from the wasteland, or put down rebellions within the village, or solved inexplicable mysteries through powerful discernments. Go back another few hundred years and Gaelwynites wore white robes with gold thread, and soft padded shoes instead of my burlap-sack tunic and sandals. Go back another few hundred years and we rode horses and had chariots and water running through systems of reed pipes built from the river."

“Hmm...yes, I see. Go on,” Yashnu said.

Katchan fingered the pages, “Gaelwyn is slowly dying, and has been ever since it’s creation. Doesn’t it feel like, well, it seems like Gaelwyn is a placeholder for something bigger. Or maybe, maybe something is waiting to take Gaelwyn back to the days of the stories, when things were great.”

The stars twinkled and Katchan wondered how a curse and a dream could produce such beauty.

“Were things ever truly great?” Yashnu said.

“I don’t know, but were they always this bad?”

Yashnu chuckled to himself. “The young saying things are bad. It’s funny. You weren’t around to see the plague or the inner-fighting or the grabs for power. The Elder’s role is the most important role in the village because the way the Elder tells the stories is how the stories will be told.”

Katchan fingered the pages, “But what if that were no longer necessary?”

Yashnu looked at him, “what if?”

Echo had been pacing back and forth for some time, not keeping watch, but keeping his eyes alert to some degree. He stopped, and the absence of his anxious steps alerted everyone to his direction. He was facing west, and had his hand on his sword. Katchan looked past Echo and saw a dark brooding figure with the moon floating high above him. Katchan stood, readying Maggaline’s staff like a weapon. He had not time to think himself silly for it. Yashnu stood as well, but clasped his arms together. He was an old spirit with no desires to fight. Rordion stepped next to Echo and whispered something quick, and they fanned out to surround the figure.

“Name yourself!” Echo said.

The figure looked left then right than marched forward straight to the statue of Valerie where Katchan stood with his staff ready. Echo charged forward with a deafening war cry. His sword came down hard with a forward slash. The figure leaned back then swept a kick around, putting his knee into Echo's stomach. Echo flew back to where he was standing and grasped his stomach.

Rordion came in methodically, not giving the figure a chance to attack him. He swung left and right, the figure dodging him with ease until Rordion over extended himself just slightly enough for the figure to grab his arm and toss him over his shoulder. The figure wrestled the sword away and kept walking until Katchan could see clearly that it was the Wanderer.

He stopped short of Katchan and Yashnu.

"I'm not fool enough to charge a man like you twice," Yashnu said.

"You spirits have been trapped here for many years, and you will not escape. The boy, he does not belong here in this world and still has a from to escape in. I am sending him home," Wanderer said.

"I can't go back to Gaelwyn. I have nobody there. Maggaline is dead, Saulnier is against me; I won't go back," Katchan said.

If masks could speak, Katchan would say he saw something pass over the Wanderer that looked a little like grief.

"Maggaline is dead?"

"What do you even care?" Katchan said.

"Think for a second, boy," Yashnu said.

"How do you know who Maggaline is?"

The Wanderer still did not speak.

“Well, shouldn’t you hug him or something?” Yashnu said to the Wanderer.

“Why would he—”

“Do you want to tell him, or should I?” Yashnu said.

Echo and Rordion saw the Wanderer was no threat and walked over, but their swords were still ready, even though they now knew these blades were useless against the man from the wilderness. Echo still burned with a visible, helpless rage.

Wanderer looked up at the statue of Valerie as he had so many thousands of years ago and asked the same question as he had then, but this time he saw the carved face of Avalene.

“He doesn’t have time for this,” Wanderer said.

“You don’t have time for your own son? You have all the time in existence,” Yashnu said.

“Son?” Katchan whispered.

“He’ll die if we wait any longer,” Wanderer said.

“Better eternity here than all alone in Gaelwyn,” Yashnu said.

Katchan did something he never expected himself to do. He jumped, closing the distance between himself and the Wanderer, and brought Maggaline’s staff down on the mask covering his face. A great warrior for all of his days, the Wanderer did not see that move coming. He staggered back; the mask cracked down the middle. The bottom half broke off revealing not an ugly, scarred burned chin, but a mouth, stuck in a perpetual grimace of pain. The top half then fell away, and a forehead, nose, and ears like Katchans, but much older, was exposed. Everything but the eyes, for those were Avalene’s.

“Did you know who I was before?” Katchan asked.

Micah, still staggered from the blow, looked at his son without the mask: his face was hers; his eyes were hers.

“Did you?”

Micah looked at the statue of Valerie and back to his son.

“The eclyptas, did Maggaline give that to you as well?”

“I just want—”

“The ruby!”

“Yes! She left it to me, along with this,” Katchan said and brought out the pages and the ruby.

Micah stared at the pair. *He can end this world.* He looked at the statue and the three with Katchan.

“I tracked you to this location last nightfall, why are you back again?”

“We’re finding a way out of this stubborn land,” Rordion said.

“The Exile asked us to bring him a powerful sword, called the Ashen sword. If we do this, he’ll send me to the sunset village,” Katchan said.

“Tell me he doesn’t know you have the eclyptas,” Micah said.

“I don’t know. I used its power against one of his men, but he might not have told his master,” Katchan said.

“He’s still playing the long game,” Micah said, as if to himself.

“Why are you telling him anything at all? We don’t trust you, and you’ve given us no reason at all to start. You walked into our village and wrecked everything, and then left, taking four of Gaelwyn’s own with you. And now this guy calling himself king of Midbar tells us you

caused all of this, and he can free us. If you want any of us to trust you, you better start telling us the truth,” Echo said.

“But Echo,” Katchan started, but Yashnu interrupted him.

“For once, Echo’s rage is justified. You killed us, made us spirit, and now we know you are spirit like us. Who is this Exile? And who are you?”

“I don’t have time to explain anything to you,” Micah said.

“We deserve to know before we cease to exist. Famor is petrified because of you,” Rordion said.

Micah looked at the three men in the dark, but he remembered that day so clearly. He told Maggaline what could happen when he tried to leave, what could try to get in, and if the thing almost did, to send them both to Borsol. She failed. She sent them back to the wasteland with four guests.

“I am not spirit like you three. I am cursed by ‘He who walks the full expanse of the Scope.’ By association, you are as well. Many years ago, the man you call the Exile called himself Beyda. He was a mystery then as he is now, but he was powerful beyond my imagination. I commanded a powerful army and fought the enemies of the Highest across many lands and many worlds, until one day I met him. He swore and oath to help me find a certain someone so I may kill him in exchange for my services. I agreed. When the time came to close in on that deal, I saw the land he wanted destroyed was not an enemy, but a peaceful city called Livana, a city treasured by the Highest. It was annihilated by my men. Beyda believed I would stand by and watch, but instead I hid the key that transported us to Idyll. Beyda was powerful, but he could not travel freely like I could. Once the whispers of Livana’s destruction reached the Highest’s ears, he came with such a fury and anger, he cursed us all to this endless dream. Still,

there are protected places within this dream that are untouched by the curse. I hid the Ashen sword in one of them: the crypt of Princess Valerie of Livana. You, Katchan, are not cursed like we. You can enter these places. Beyda plans to use you to find the sword and escape without undoing the curse. If he does, he may destroy all of Idyll in the process. In fact, I'm certain he plans too. He will finally have his revenge."

"All of Idyll destroyed?" Yashnu said.

"Even Gaelwyn?"

Micah said nothing, but it was answer enough.

"My father, my mother, my sisters," Rordion said.

Katchan sat hard, defeated. "What do I do?"

"Even if he has the sword, he still needs two parts: the eclyptas, and my blood to use the swords power," Micah said.

"Where can I go?" Katchan asked.

"You must return to Gaelwyn. The sword may return you home. Beyda cannot catch me, even with my strongest men chasing me. Yes, they betrayed me," Micah said.

"You betrayed them first," Echo said harshly.

Micah ignored the comment, "For once, he knows less than I do. He'll have only one other piece, but he doesn't know your lineage so that means—"

Heavy boots on packed sand alerted the four to an arrival of a troop of soldiers. A large man led them. He wore black armor: golden trim breastplate, shoulder protectors, gauntlets, greaves, and a helm with an open visor. His sword looked double the strength of the one Katchan remembered the Wanderer, no, Micah, use that night against the four warriors who came for him. The large man at the front held up a fist.

“Commander Micah, so good to see you after all these years,” the leader said.

“Titus, you traitor. Your lord sends his dog after me again? What makes you think this time will be any different?”

“Beyda requests your presence at his grand fortress to speak terms of peace.”

“Declined.”

“Be reasonable, Commander,” Titus said.

“I command no longer.”

Micah drew his blade; rusty compared to the one Titus drew from his black, gold lined scabbard.

“We don’t have to fight anymore. That boy is here to save us. All will be well once more,” Titus said.

“For who? You think your new lord will save you in the end?”

“It has been so long since I’ve felt blades of grass beneath my feet. I can honestly say I don’t care if he does save me, as long as I earn peace in the end.”

“There will be no peace if he wins,” Micah said.

“You’ve always known, he’s never been at war with you. You’re just an obstacle in his way,” Titus said.

“Good.”

Micah lunged forward with a thrust. Titus parried; sparks flew off the blades. Micah was like the wind, like lightning in a dance of storms. He struck at Titus, who could parry only with strains and grunts. His former commander was well above him in skill.

The troops numbered sixteen, and when they saw their leader being attacked by the commander that left them to be cursed, rage filled their spirit hearts, and speed filled their shoes. They charged to join the battle. Micah would go as their ally or as their prisoner.

Rordion and Echo stood by in shock, hands by their sides.

“What are you doing? Go help him,” Katchan cried.

“You expect us to help your father, the man who doomed us to this curse?”

“Echo has a fair point,” Rordion said.

“You heard Micah, if the Exile wins, all of Idyll could be destroyed,” Katchan said.

“You really believe that?”

Katchan paused, did he?

“You don’t know this man. It doesn’t matter if he fathered you or not, he brought down a curse upon Idyll. If not for him, Idyll, and Gaelwyn with her, would not be on the brink of destruction,” Echo said.

Micah sailed over the circle that joined around him and fought his men one by one, kicking or knocking them away with powerful blows. His rusty sword being outmatched by the blades they carried, but his skill outweighing theirs.

“You must trust him. Maggaline trusted him, my mother Avalene trusted him,” Katchan said.

Echo grunted. “Much good that did her.”

Katchan stopped and thought back to just a time when he said the same thing to Maggaline. *Much good that did her*. If not for her trust and love for this man, Katchan wouldn’t be here. Maggaline would have had nobody. It was the first time he realized what a cruel and

dismissive boy he was towards the woman who raised him and a generation of Gaelwynites on stories of passion, bravery, courage, and honor.

“This wasteland has made you weak, Echo of Gaelwyn. Your father wanted to protect his village through any means necessary, even if it meant dying. Now here you are dead, and you aren’t willing to lift a finger,” Katchan said.

Echo grunted and backhanded Katchan. He fell to the ground and rubbed his face where a bruise was already growing. He struck a nerve in Echo, that much was certain.

Rordion’s memory conquered what decay the wasteland forced, and he remembered a story about a man they called ‘hero’ who interfered and saved the life of a man he viewed with scorn. His palm grasped the hilt, and he felt himself drawing his weapon in defense of the man who brought him to death. With a shout, he charged forward to enter the mass hysteria of a battle for a man he viewed with scorn.

Micah’s sword parried blow after blow. Several of his men lay scattered about the ground, having felt the cuts and skills of his sword, but now the rust and the age were showing, and the sword was no longer sharp but weak. Centuries of battle will do that to a sword, and this was the last of the City Knights of Livana he could find. After this broke, there would be no more defense.

Titus lumbered heavy over him, swinging his own Musphelian blade with ease; it was still razor sharp. Titus swung on a downstroke, and Micah brought his sword to block from above. It broke like a dry twig. Titus’s sword crashed through, and the tip only missed because of Micah’s timed dodge, but that was it for his strength. He went to a knee and breathed heavy. Six of his men remained, and at this rate he would be taken to Beyda and forced to use the Ashen sword. He tried to save the home of his beloved Avalene, but he was too weak.

“This is how I like you, commander. On your knees,” Titus said. He brought the hilt down on his head, but Micah blocked it with a forearm and thrust a knife into Titus’s gut. Micah stood and kicked him away, two of his men grabbed him, and the other three charged forward. This knife would not last. A man jumped in between Micah and the three men and swiped his blade horizontally, catching them off guard and throwing them back.

“I thought you’d let them take me,” Micah said breathlessly.

“I wanted to let them,” Rordion replied.

Rordion handed Micah a sword he found by one of the fallen soldiers.

“This sword is not of this world, but it is powerful,” Rordion said.

Micah saw that the warrior wielded one of the Musphelian blades as well. It took years of training to use one properly. The Musphelian steel had a personality of its own and adapted to the user. If the blade did not like the user, it will not cooperate, but this one seemed to like the man wielding it. He must have a heart of gold. The three soldiers attacked Micah and Rordion, and they fought as if the whole world depended on them.

“It’s three on two, Echo. Are you really going to let Rordion fight alone?” Yashnu said.

“This isn’t my fight,” Echo said stubbornly.

“It’s no wonder my mother didn’t love you,” Katchan said.

“Be silent, Katchan,” Yashnu said irritably.

Alas, Micah and Rordion did not need the assistance of Echo, nor anyone else. Rordion wielded the Musphelian blade like an expert with years of experience, and Micah overcame the blade’s nature through willpower alone. They dispatched one, then two, then Micah easily took down the third soldier. Now there was only Titus and his two squires to tend to. Titus was already down, and his squires were no match for the two, that much they were aware of.

Micah sauntered to the fallen traitor, his squires stood ready to fight, but Titus waved them off.

“Did you give up your quest for revenge? Is that why you doomed us all to this wasteland? To be a part of the dream of the Highest? Does anger no longer burn in your heart for the man that hurt you?”

“Titus, you fool. Beyda is a trickster. He cares nothing for you or I; this is all a personal vendetta against the Highest. He used Livana’s destruction as bait, but you know this already. Beyda truly thought he would outwit all of us, including the Highest. But now that you’ve seen his curse, you know that was always impossible. If the curse is ever undone, maybe you’ll see straight again and we can meet in Borsol as friends, but until then, tell your master the curse will remain until he lays down his arms.”

Titus and his squires left with haste. Micah and Rordion watched them go, and walked back toward the statue of Valerie.

“This Exile has a curse? And you, former commander of the soldiers, what is your curse?”

Micah looked at him and smiled as the first rays of daylight peaked over the horizon. The spirit stopped and looked toward the East and rays spilled through his body as he disappeared with the darkness.

Rordion watched the spirit dissipate into nothing. He looked back toward the statue of Valerie where Katchan, Yashnu, stood waving, and Echo stood with arms crossed. He marched forward with the new weapon in his hand: a Musphelian blade.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE MEMORY OF LIVANA

Rordion stopped short of Echo. The two stared each other down like angry bulls in a competition over territory. Wordlessly they argued, and Katchan examined and watched them and wondered how they knew what the other said. It became clear that neither was willing to budge on the matter after Yashnu sighed and rolled his eyes.

“We need to find Valerie’s crypt. It’s where Micah buried his Ashen sword,” Katchan said.

“What then? Find this Exile and let him destroy the world?” Yashnu said.

“No. We can’t let him have it. You saw those workmen, something’s not right about the Exile, and Micah confirmed it for us.”

“You keep calling him *Micah*,” Echo said.

“Yes,” Katchan said uneasily.

“That is not who he is to you, though. He is *father*, to you.”

Rordion and Yashnu stared daggers into their companion. Echo was trying to throw Katchan off, make him stumble or confess to something he did not do.

“I never knew him,” Katchan said coolly.

Echo grunted and looked far out past the mountains and in the direction of the Exile’s fortress.

“We find the Ashen sword and wait for nightfall when he’ll return.”

“And then?” Echo asked.

Katchan looked sullen. “Who can say?”

“One thing at a time, boys,” Yashnu said. “First let’s find this crypt.”

“We’ve already found it,” Katchan said.

They followed him past Valerie’s statue to where Rordion dug his sword into the sand. Katchan nodded at Rordion, and he in turn drew his sword and buried it into the sand and pulled toward him. The sand parted and collapsed. Echo, not wanting to be outdone, drew his sword and began digging in the spot as well. Rordion traced a line by stabbing his sword into the dirt until he hit rock. He brushed some of the sand away and saw it was the frame of the entrance. He stabbed around to the far end until he hit rock, and then across, then back again. The entrance was wide enough to fit a procession for a dead royal, and long enough so they did not hit their heads going down. They had nothing like this in Gaelwyn. If the sand were gone, and the soot from the frame polished, it would gleam white. Katchan looked at the tools they brought to dig: broad swords. Even with a pair of shovels, the task of digging the sand out of the stairs seemed impossible.

Rordion and Echo began. They stabbed their swords into the sand and pulled it up, careful not to spill any sand, but not successfully so. They did this until Katchan felt the heat of the day, then he and Yashnu joined. They continued in shifts, Yashnu and Katchan digging together. Carefully, they dug the flat side of the blade into the sand and threw it behind them. It was frightful slow going, and Katchan feared they wouldn’t be finished by the time night fell and Micah returned. Or worse...

No, don’t think about that!

Becoming spirit like Echo or Yashnu spurred him to greater energy, and he dug a little faster until he began panting. He felt a heavy hand on his shoulder, it was Rordion.

“We’ve got to find that sword,” Katchan said with sweat slipping down his forehead into his eyes. He wiped his face and felt the scratchiness of the sand from his arm.

“Yes. It’s our turn now,” Rordion said.

Katchan looked and saw Echo already digging. He gave the sword back to Rordion and sat beside Yashnu on a fallen pillar. He felt a cool breeze on the nape of his neck, and he was grateful. It was funny what a small comfort like a cool breeze on a hot day can do for one’s mood.

“Ruins make a good seat, eh?” Yashnu said.

Katchan eyed the big man who loved his mother.

“What does Echo want?”

“Echo wants what any many wants,” Yashnu said.

“I don’t know what men want,” Katchan said.

“Neither don’t most men,” Yashnu said.

The hole seemed no deeper than before, and even if they dug into the bottom and found a door, what if the door was locked? One problem at a time.

“He didn’t help Rordion or Micah fight,” Katchan said.

“That was his choice.”

“So, he doesn’t want to fight anymore?”

“Oh, he lives for battle, but only the battle he chooses. I am surprised he didn’t join, but I do not blame him. Maybe he didn’t want to help the man who cast him to the wilderness. Maybe he didn’t think he’d last against those soldiers. Maybe he wanted to watch and see what happens, take on the ones who remained by himself. Echo does what Echo wants to do. He had a luxury most Gaelwynites never tasted: freedom. He was the elder’s son; he could do what he liked when

he liked. He was the freest person in all of Gaelwyn. He had options for love and work and play. His options had options. For years though, in this wasteland, Midbar or whatever you call it, he's had nothing like that. How can a man who can do whatever he likes contend with prison? Well, isn't the Keep where men who think they can do whatever they like usually end up? It's funny, exercise your freedom too much and freedom is taken away by those who established the rules in which you live your life. Man creates many things, but rarely his own rules."

"I get it," Katchan said. He stuck his arm out and felt the wind wash over his arm.

"Really? That's odd I was sort of speaking gibberish."

"He blames Micah for taking away his freedom, so in return he wants to see the man suffer, or at least he won't save him."

"Perhaps. This old mind of mine really is going."

Rordion and Echo stopped and joined the two on the pillar.

"It doesn't seem much, but we are a lot further down than we started," Rordion said.

Katchan slid off the pillar and looked at the depth. It took them nearly half a day to get down this far, and there was still so much sand to dig out.

"Good, I don't think the boy will stay in physical form much longer," Yashnu said with a laugh.

Katchan looked back in horror at Yashnu's comment, then his face darkened. A great wall of brown rushed towards them. The wind was picking up speed, even the three spirits hair was affected.

"What is that?" Katchan said.

Yashnu's face fell. "A sandstorm."

"The boy," Rordion said.

“The crypt,” Echo said.

All four looked at the pit they spent a half day digging and realized it was for nothing if this sandstorm passed over.

“It will fill the hole!”

“Dig, quick! We must find a door at the bottom!”

Katchan thrust his hands into the pit and tossed it behind him. Rordion, Echo, and Yashnu dug as quick as they could, but the sandstorm was closing in.

“I can feel it’s power,” Echo said.

“It’ll tear us apart,” Rordion said.

“You’re spirit, I’m the one it’ll hurt,” Katchan said.

“We’re spirits in this realm; we live by its rules. Come on now,” Yashnu said.

Yashnu pointed at the distant statue of Valerie and urged Katchan forward. Katchan ran and knelt behind the pedestal. Yashnu, Rordion, and Echo followed behind him. the storm was close now, close enough that the roar was like a lion, deafening and humbling. Katchan peeked over the pedestal, the sky was dark red, no visible blue existed on that side of Midbar. It was a furious wall closing in.

If this sandstorm kills me, will I even know it? Will my body be torn to shreds and taken with the storm leaving my pathetic self behind? Will Maggaline’s story ever be known?

Echo grabbed the boy and set him down. Yashnu, Rordion, and he linked arms and formed a shield around him.

“What are you doing?”

“Try not to breathe too deep,” Echo said.

He closed his eyes and for a second Katchan wanted to tell them all to protect themselves, but the sound would be carried away in the storm. Red dust filled the air around him and a sound like a hundred mountains bursting into pebbles blocked out any shout or scream. Katchan tightened his eyes and felt the wind ripping at his body. Thousands of tiny shards of rock shredded his arms and exposed legs, like a million ant bites at once. Katchan screamed, and his scream was ripped from his throat.

“Protect the boy, save him,” Yashnu cried.

Katchan curled into a ball and felt the sand river rush over him. He once saw a raging wind in Gaelwyn that twisted and gathered wind and everything around it to itself. Maggaline called it the aftershock of a cosmic battle. The wind destroyed every house it touched and left people desolate. Somehow no one died, but when Katchan asked the other kids what it felt like, they described it as if their soul was being sucked from their body. He now knew what they meant.

“Hold,” Rordion shouted.

Something deep suddenly wailed from the sandstorm, a low grumbling roar apart from the wind. In fact, Katchan did not hear the storm any longer, and the wind felt light. He dared open his eyes and saw the sand swirling around them as if they were the center of the storm. Then he saw another figure, dark, shadowy, and looking down on them. The figure had horns made from darkness, translucent with the red sand in the background, its eyes were clear, and it had hands made from blackness, and fingers of midnight. The thing of shadows reached to the top of storm where blue could almost be seen in the background.

Katchan felt seen and identified. The three spirits looked on with equal terror.

“An abyssal,” Yashnu said.

With midnight fingers it reached down to take Katchan. Yashnu shoved Katchan out of the way, and the fingers enclosed around him.

“Yashnu!” Echo cried. Without thinking, Echo drew his sword and ran at the Abyssal’s shadow leg. He stabbed and slashed, but the shadow dispersed and healed as fast as he attacked. Rordion joined beside him with his Musphelian blade and swung with as much power as he could muster, with the same result.

The abyssal looked down at the two warriors and swung his leg in a kick. Seeing its physical form could hurt them, the two rolled out of the way. The thing eyed Yashnu with curiosity. The storm raged around them still.

“Katchan, the ruby!” Echo shouted.

Katchan thought back on a story, any story that could help him now. He had nothing. He pulled out the ruby and held it high. The abyssal looked away from Yashnu and at the ruby. It growled and threw Yashnu to the side. Katchan watched helplessly as Yashnu disappeared into the sandstorm.

“Yashnu!”

Be safer there please...

The midnight fingers stretched out towards the ruby, and Katchan felt the abyssal sucking the ruby from his grip. Katchan tightened his fist around it and dared not let go. He found himself in a fight of wills: this thing wanted the ruby, Katchan refused to surrender.

Katchan’s mind flashed back to nights ago when the power of Gath came to him. He concentrated on Gath and felt heat flush to his face. A wind came from the ruby and flowed outward. The winds that flowed from the eclyptas were clean and pure, pushing away the red winds of the abyssal. Its fingers came off the ruby, and Katchan concentrated harder still. The

storm disappeared and he was standing between two pillars overlooking a crowd of villagers mocking him, throwing rotten food and stones at him. a rock hit his head, and he felt the pain.

Where am I? He blinked and he was back in the storm facing a shadow creature.

Was that?

His concentration fell and the abyssal roared and grabbed the eclyptas.

“Wretched, foul beast! Curse of Midbar, abomination, destined for damnation! I command you leave at once!”

A voice coming from behind Katchan almost made him let go of the eclyptas. The voice was deep, booming, and overcame the noise of the abyssal’s sandstorm. The abyssal’s hand withdrew for a moment, almost as if shocked.

Katchan looked back to see who owned the voice, expecting Micah, or even the Exile, but it was neither. Just a bearded old man in brown robes that hung over bare feet. He looked simple; like a hermit on the far end of Gaelwyn away from everyone. But then, Katchan knew exactly who the man looked like.

Cairo?

His arms were stretched out and there was fire in his eyes, like he was holding back the abyssal on his own. “Katchan, use the eclyptas. You know how, just use it!”

The abyssal’s shock had worn off. The large lumbering shadow reared back it’s arm and struck where Cairo stood. Katchan saw the old man thrown into the storm, and he disappeared.

Rordion and Echo ran beside Katchan with their swords drawn.

“I don’t know who that old man was, but he knows you. Think, Katchan! What did Maggaline tell you about that ruby? How did Valerie use it?”

Katchan sunk into the memory of that night with Maggaline when she told him of the dream princess. *Valerie stood on the edge of a cliff, ready to die. Blood running down her wrist, coating the eclyptas; royal blood spilt in grief.*

The abyssal eyed the three and reached down to grab Katchan.

Katchan grabbed the Musphelian sword by the blade and sliced his hand. He screamed. Rordion looked on in horror. The abyssal clutched Katchan tightly and raised him in front of its face.

Katchan clutched the eclyptas, smothering it with blood, and raised it up. Nothing happened. It didn't work. Maggaline's story was lost, he was as good as dead. Greif took the place of fear, and the single tear shed for himself watered the hidden power within the ruby.

The abyssal opened its shadowy mouth to swallow Katchan whole, but then a red blaze shot forth from eclyptas, striking the abyssal at its throat. The blaze surrounded Katchan and broke the grip of the abyssal, he dropped and landed squarely. The abyssal teetered and fell back onto its rear.

Blood and tears.

Red glowed all around Katchan now. He staggered, struggling with how heavy it felt. There he was in the midst of a storm facing a creature he had never heard of, even in Maggaline's wildest stories, welding a ruby from legend. His mind filled with everything he had ever heard, every story in the world. he was in Gaelwyn, watching the children play. Then he was in Saulnier's throne room, his eyes were cast downward at a peasant pleading his case, and Katchan sensed not anger, or pride, but sadness in him. Then he was before Willow and the Oracle of Gaelwyn. They were deep in meditation, learning the stories of Marikel. The Oracles

golden eyes shot open and met his with acknowledgement and knowing. She smiled a smile with greater depths than a canyon.

You who will have the eyes of God.

He was back to himself, in front of the abyssal. Time resumed and the creature was standing back up.

The eyes of God?

It is said if Marikel even looks upon a man, he will burn with fire. Katchan thrust the ecliptas high in the sky. Whether he shouted, cursed, whispered, or dreamed, he did not know. But like a loud boom erupting from the sky above and the ground below came a thunderous, silent, transparent command: *burn*.

A bolt fell and struck the abyssal, encasing it in a glow of red, and it screamed. The heat from the enflamed creature threw Katchan back like a wake from the river. He crawled to Rordion and Echo who frantically called for him. Echo ran forward and grabbed Katchan when he fell again and dragged him away, bits of Katchan's hair catching fire. He quickly patted them out and looked at the creature dying in agony.

The abyssal fell to its hands and knees and groaned. It eyed Katchan and lunged forward with a clenched fist. The fist stopped inches from the three and began breaking up into bits of dust. There were no more groans or noise or agony, just a spirit's essence draining from its physical form. Soon there was nothing left, and the sandstorm ceased, and the sky was blue, and the sun was hot.

The land the abyssal walked over was not the same as it was before. Where there were statues that looked like giants, and sand as far as the eye could see, now were graves, and paths

between graves. The statues marked where the bodies lay. It was as if the whole place was transported in time. The stone gleamed white, reflecting the sun in all its beauty.

Valerie's statue stood strong, unaffected by the abyssal, but her grave was different by far. Where they had been digging was now exposed, all the sand lifted up and out, exposing a stairway down into a black crypt. Pillars marked the corners of the crypt, which looked like the roof of the house. The rest was buried to keep the house, or the owner of the house, safe.

Yashnu.

The three stared at the place where the abyssal's body disappeared. They stood in a panic, not allowing themselves the luxury of rest while their friend was out there somewhere. They circled the crypt and checked behind every statue, calling his name growing more frantic by the minute. They searched until the wasteland revealed the truth: Yashnu was gone.

Katchan sunk to his knees and tried not to waste precious water by crying. His lips were now cracked, and his voice raspy. The fight took a lot out of him. He would not survive much longer in Midbar, he needed to return to Idyll. But still, the thoughts that flooded him were thoughts of Yashnu. He had never known his grandfather, but here was a man who could have filled that role, even in spirit. Gone was the wisdom of a lost age of Gaelwyn, gone with his passing. Before he knew it, he was screaming and cursing a wasteland destined to crumble even further into nothing. Had he been there, Yashnu would have told him to shush, quit whining and focus on himself.

Protect the boy, save him.

Yashnu's last words felt like a heavy chain. Who was Katchan to be saved? Must the old really pass away for the young?

Rordion grabbed Katchan by his arms and stood him up.

“Collect yourself, boy,” Rordion said.

Katchan looked through misty eyes, realizing he could not remember Maggaline’s last words. They were filled with love, he knew that. But of course, her last words were yet to be spoken, for he carried them with him now. *Be brave for them.* He did as Rordion demanded and steeled himself, focusing on the now. Yashnu knew something about that creature.

“He knew what that thing was,” Katchan said.

“The green mist near our home where Famor was lost, that is also an abyssal. Yashnu could never tell us why that name came to his head, but it was what he called it. We had no idea there were more, how could we know what enemies there might be, hiding in the dark?”

“Do you think...do you think he is like Famor now?”

Rordion did not answer, which was answer enough for Katchan.

“Yashnu has been dead for years. He is at peace now,” Rordion said.

“How can you know that?”

Echo trotted up to the pair. “I can’t find him. We’ve got to keep looking.”

“Echo, we are warriors.”

“That power, If you used it sooner, Yashnu would be with us still,” Echo said.

“It is not the boy’s fault. Let us not grieve any longer. We must stay focused on the task at hand,” Rordion said.

Echo spat. It’s hard to disagree with what you know to be true. “Very well. The matter at hand. Katchan, what is this power you have?”

The eyes of God.

“It took me places,” Katchan said. He understood nothing about the Eclyptic ruby. When Valerie used it, she was taken to a hall of paintings and recorded the dreams people had. When

he used it, a fire appeared from nowhere; and it took him places; it took him to Gaelwyn. The Oracle could see him, she knew. There are mysteries in this world that Katchan's mind could hardly comprehend, but he knew this for sure: stories are more than stories.

"You went places? You went nowhere, you looked at the thing and burned it out of existence. What is that? You say Valerie used it?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything," Katchan said.

"That father of yours, he will know more," Rordion said.

"Yes, he would, wouldn't he?" Echo said.

Katchan ignored the comment. He knew exactly what Echo was referring to: the fact that Micah gave Maggaline the ruby, and likely taught her how to use it, and she sent Echo to his death. He remembered what Yashnu said about freedom. Katchan had never felt anything like freedom in his life, he always felt chained by his family history. Perhaps if he did not, perhaps if he were free like Yashnu said Echo was, maybe he would hate the one who took his freedom away as well.

"There is no need to go through that again. The path to Valerie's crypt is cleared now. We can take the sword," Rordion said.

"And what sword do you plan on taking?"

The voice shook them all and they turned to see the old man, seemingly untouched by the abyssal's attack. He still wore the brown tunic hanging above his bare feet, and a smile on his face that drove Katchan uneasy.

"You seek the Ashen sword? The one buried with the dream princess?"

"Who in Borsol are you?" Echo said.

"Cairo?" Katchan said.

“Ah, that is the name I gave you, isn’t it? Cairo. It worked in that village, and people did well to avoid me, which was good because I couldn’t be revealed to them.”

“You claimed to be Saulnier’s cousin,” Katchan said.

“I did, and you never bothered to ask Saulnier if it were true, did you? I am glad you didn’t, for it might have prevented this meeting between us. You’ve brought Livana’s salvation with you, young Katchan,” Cairo said.

“Livana’s salvation?”

“Indeed,” Cairo said.

“The Silver City is gone, in ruins. Look around you,” Katchan said.

“Oh? Is this really all you can see with the eyes of God?”

Katchan stuttered and mumbled, finding nothing to say.

“There is something you haven’t told us,” Echo said, directed at Katchan.

“Yes. The Oracle of Gaelwyn said I would have the eyes of God. I never knew what she meant. Until now,” Katchan said.

“You went places,” Rordion said.

“Cairo, who are you really?”

Cairo bowed, his beard nearly grazing the sand. “That is not the right question. Who I am is no matter. Who I was matters less still. However, I still serve a purpose in Midbar. Although without matter, I do have a function. I function as the memory of Livana.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE HEART OF LIVANA

The sun bared its teeth in the afternoon sky, sending waves of heat to Idyll, and causing beads of sweat on the only living human in Midbar. Katchan waited patiently for the man calling himself Cairo to reveal the mysteries he kept. The biggest mystery of all was Cairo's relationship with Gaelwyn.

There was little Katchan understood about the world, he realized. There were few ways to know a thing: experience or listening to experience. There may be an even greater form than the two: telling experience. Maggaline was a storyteller and thus knew a great many things, but, Katchan wondered, did she know how many more secrets in Idyll there were? Was there, in the stories, a way to understand how a spirit could cross over into the living world and be flesh and blood? Is there a story that explained how one could embody the memory of a city?

"It's easier to think about it like this," Cairo explained. "I do not remember the history of Livana so much as I see it; live it; am it. Through me, the Silver City lives and breathes. A city is more than walls and wars, it is a people. A city is the king who sits on the throne as much as the vendor who exchanges coin. A city is the arts produced and the pride in craftsmanship. A city is its stories as well as its facts. My function is the preservation of Livana until the redemption of Livana. And now, you are here."

Katchan studied the eclyptas. Somehow, he knew Cairo meant this ruby was the redemption of Livana. Then why did Micah give it to Maggaline? Did she give it to him, somehow knowing the ruby needed to return to Midbar?

"Valerie died in the land of storms. How did she make it back?"

Cairo's cheerful face greyed. "That is a story unto itself, boy. Just know that King Joseph received his just reward, and so did Valerie."

"Then she was buried in the royal crypt, with this?"

He examined the ruby again and tried remembering details of the story that was not a story, but history.

"All royals are buried here. All but one."

Echo growled. "If that is so, then we are wasting time. Katchan is near spirit, let us hurry for what we came for."

"You will not find the royal crypt of Valerie, I'm afraid. Not as the crypt is now," Cairo said.

"Are you stopping us from entering?" Rordion said.

"On the contrary, I am the only way you can enter," Cairo said.

"Then get on with it," Echo growled.

Cairo shot him a vicious glare, then returned to a smile. "It has been many years since anyone gave me orders. I must say, the change is unwelcome. But then again, you do not know me, so why would you look at me as anyone other than old man Cairo. I will get on with it, but because I am supposed to, and not because you are threatening me."

Echo looked the man over and resisted snarling. Cairo started down the steps to the crypt. When the three began to follow he held up a hand, indicating only he was to enter. Katchan looked at Rordion, who held an even stare, uneasily. Rordion was a warrior, Katchan thought. He was prepared for anything. He looked at Echo and saw he was prepared as well, but more on edge. Echo had been acting strange since they met the Exile, or Beyda. Whatever that young looking being is calling himself.

Cairo disappeared in the dark and for a moment, Echo shifted as if to follow him down. Katchan threw his arm out and stopped him.

“We should do as he says,” Katchan said.

The ground began rumbling, like an earthquake. Katchan leaned on Maggaline’s staff, which he had left at Valerie’s statue during the fight with the abyssal, but the movement was so rough the eclyptas fell from his grip. Katchan watched it roll towards the stairway entrance, helped by the vibrations. It stopped at the edge of the stairway. Katchan lunged for it, but as he did, he fell off balance from an even greater intensity. The four pillars and the roof of the house rose from the flat wasteland. He watched the structure rise until it towered over all the statues. He felt the rumbling in his chest and guts, then, like it had never been, it stopped.

Footsteps sounded up the stairway, and Cairo was on the edge staring at the eclyptas. In his eyes there was greed, wanting, and fear; mixed between the frown and the eyes, as if he were unsure which he was more. He looked at Katchan with frightful eyes. Katchan wasn’t sure if he would take the eclyptas himself. He claimed it was for the redemption of Livana, so why be afraid?

“How can you be so careless?” Cairo said.

“I lost my grip,” Katchan said.

“Yes, I see that. If this were to fall into the wrong hands,” Cairo trailed off.

What did he mean? There were only four of them out here, so did he mean some other being in the wasteland? It suddenly occurred to Katchan that he had no idea whose side Cairo was on: Micah’s or Beyda’s. Katchan then sensed he himself had not decided whose side he was on. If the Exile sent him to the sunset village, all would be right with him. What did he need

Livana's redemption for? But then again, Micah was his father. As much poison as it produced to think that, it was true.

Echo sauntered to the ruby, picked it up, and threw it Katchan.

"Try not to drop this again," Echo said. He nodded forward, commanding them all to move into the crypt.

Katchan put the ruby back into his pack and stood, supporting himself on Maggaline's staff. He could feel himself growing weaker, but when he leaned on her staff he felt a little renewal, just enough to keep going forward.

He stopped at the entrance to the stairway. It was dark, and there were no sources of light he could see. He looked at Rordion and Echo, they nodded. Katchan took the first step down, and the next, then one after the other, the only noise being the clack of Maggaline's staff on the hard rock floor and three sets of footsteps behind him. He didn't know why, but an ominous feeling invaded his mind. A warning. But he ignored it. How else would he get out of the wasteland alive unless he ignored every desire to turn back?

He could see nothing ahead of him now, but he kept forward. Cairo explained the darkness was abolished by torchlight when royal members were carried down this hall. The dark kept the dead asleep, and unbothered. Katchan shivered at the thought. Then he quietly laughed at the thought. Here he was with three dead men, whatever Cairo was, he was spirit as well, and he was afraid of the cold bodies in the walls.

"Stop now," Cairo said. "Stick out your staff."

Katchan did and a clack from the wood meeting stone shattered the silence.

"A dead end?" Echo said.

"A door," Cairo replied.

Cairo pushed past Echo and Rordion and grabbed Katchan by the shoulder.

“Valerie was special among royals. When she died, the temple oracle was given a vision by the messengers of Hysol. In that vision, all was revealed. The then sitting monarch was Joseph. The oracle called him out on his wickedness, and he died right there on the spot before he could be punished by the judge of the religious leaders. Instead, they wiped his name from every scroll, broke every statue made of him, and forgot him entirely. For centuries, the stories told of that period put Valerie as the monarch of Livana. Joseph was never mentioned again. He was completely forgotten. Her body, and the body of her mother, were brought here to a special chamber reserved for those greatest among the kings of Livana. There is only one queen buried in this chamber: Valerie. However, this is only the first doorway.”

Katchan heard Cairo press against the stone, and it rumbled and lifted. A cold rush of wind came. Cairo snapped, and blue flames lit all around the great chamber. Katchan stared in awe: a stairway, guided by rails, led down to a platform. Stretching out from the platform were seven stairways leading up to seven different chambers. One stairway led down below. Blue flame torches were placed around the large chamber and illuminated what lay below the platform: a deep pit. The last stairway led there, to what, he can't imagine. Katchan guessed this room was four times the size of Saulnier's chamber, making this the largest room he had ever seen in his life.

“The magnitude,” Echo said.

“Yes. Livana was full of skilled craftsman. Their royals lay in the very heart of Livana,” Cairo said.

“What's down in that pit?” Katchan asked.

“The Silver Knights. Soldiers that protected Livana from every threat they faced: rebellion, crime, the ungrieved. All until they were caught off guard from Commander Micah’s army. From that, they were slaughtered.”

Who buried them? The survivors?

“You said we have little time, and I agree. We must stay here now, only Katchan can proceed. This chamber is warded from spirits,” Cairo said.

Cairo nodded at Katchan to proceed.

“Which chamber is hers?”

“Let the eclyptas guide you,” Cairo said.

Katchan grabbed one of the blue flame torches from the wall and took a deep breathe. He started down the stairway, slowly going for fear of tripping over his own feet. Only the clack of Maggaline’s staff and the crackle of the blue flame torch broke the silence.

Halfway down the staircase, he leaned over the railing to look down into the pit. He saw nothing. He stretched the torch over the railing to see if there would be a reflection from armor, if that is what the Silver Knights wore. The flame, though, did as flames do and rose, licking the knuckles of Katchan’s hand. He drew air between his teeth and the torch dropped. He wagged his hand and watched the torch fall some distance before clattering at the bottom. The torch rolled around, highlighting there were indeed bodies down there, before spitting out.

He looked up at the three, who only glared. His curiosity got the best of him, but what did it hurt? He continued down the steps, without the torch, but he could see just enough from the illumination to not be unguided. As he neared the platform in the middle, he felt his neck hairs standing on end. A pit formed in his stomach, but he had no other choice. He reached the platform and started feeling woozy, sleepy even.

What's happening?

He pulled out the ecliptas, and it glowed red in his hand. When he did, he felt thousands of voices chattering in his head. They were coming from below him, he could tell. His head was bursting at the seams with voices and screams of terror.

Is this the eyes of God?

The pit in his stomach began retching up, and he spat up blood. Suddenly, his vision became grey, and felt like he was floating, and then blackness...

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Evening fell like a comforting blanket on a wintery day. The sky dimmed and exposed a painting of red and orange over Livana, the Silver City. Merchants closed their shops. They counted the earnings for the day and prayed they would increase the next. Silver Knights patrolled in pairs, ensuring anyone wanting to attack a vulnerable shop would first go through them. There was never any crime to speak of, not with them circling the premises. Around the city lamps glowed through the open windows and light evening chatter filled the air, but only if you listened close enough.

Tamar tucked in her young daughter for the third time that night. "Sleep now," she said.

"But I want to wait up for daddy," Tamela complained.

"Ajack, can you please go to bed so your sister will," Tamar said.

Ajack scrubbed the last of the pans and set it out to dry. "I've got to toss the bucket, but momma, I want to wait up for daddy too."

Tamar glared at her son for a quick second then smiled. "Okay fine, toss the bucket then we can stay up for your father."

"Yay!" Tamela cheered.

Ajack picked up the bucket, heavy with water, and carried it down the stone stairs to the waste-well out back. A system of pipes that led wastewater to the river that leads into The Western Silence was constructed many years ago. It kept young boys like Ajack from wandering to the river each night to rid the house of waste. Cleanliness was highly valued in the Livana. Children were taught of a deadly sickness that nearly wiped them and their neighboring village out years ago. Since then, new practices were developed to keep the health of the general population high. Not in many years has such a plague swept through the city.

Ajack stepped outside and dumped the grey water into the waste-well. His father was usually home by now, what was keeping him? He tilted his head up to gaze at the stars. The golden dots puckering the dark sky always filled his heart with a strange longing. He felt as if he belonged somewhere else but was here instead. His heart yearned for adventure, but that was not a strange occurrence. Many boys Ajack's age wanted to imitate the heroic deeds of the stories. "Maybe one day I'll see what's beyond," Ajack said to the sky.

As he smiled up at the flickering lights, one shot across the sky. A tail trailed behind the star past his house. Ajack ran around his home to follow the shooting star. On the other side of his house where he could see the plains stretched out before the Silver City as clearly in the night as in the day, he was greeted with an eerie sight.

Where there should be green rolling hills against a backdrop of trees and stars was something unfamiliar. A large purple mass swirled round and round in the fields where they kept sheep.

"What is that?"

Tamar tucked Tamela in for the fourth time that night, smiling and giggling as Tamela repeated the words of a song to Tamar.

When the night grows darkest, When the night grows darkest, Just look for the light. Just look for the light. When the evening's falling, When the evening's falling, Just wait out the night. Just wait out the night. Cause, soon in the morning, Cause, soon in the morning, It will be alright, It will be alright. Cause Telo our champion, Cause Telo our champion, Will fight for our life. Will fight for our life.

"My mother sang that song to me and you will sing that song to your daughter," Tamar said.

"What's the song about mommy?"

"It's a reminder to us, the Silver Citizens, that we will never be forgotten. We will always have a champion to fight for us."

"Who is the champion fighting against?"

An honest question Tamar did not yet want to answer. What lay beyond their border was something terrifying. The ungrieved. Beings, guided by the architect of evil, whose sole purpose was to kill humanity. In the stories Telo wandered the known and unknown parts of the world, but in older stories he did not go very far into the Western Silence. It was off limits to him, either by force or by choice is debated amongst scholars.

"Well, honey—"

Tamar's words were covered by a cracking in the sky like thunder. Heavy drums beat rhythmically in the distance. Wind swept across the city, blowing out candles and lanterns, casting darkness across the streets. Thunder and lightning shook the once calm night sky. An earthquake ripped through the streets and threw Tamela out of her bed into Tamar's arms.

“Ajack!” Tamar cried.

The door flew open and Ajack stumbled in with a limp and blood dripping from the side of his head.

“Mother, something’s coming!”

“My baby, are you alright?” Tamar sniffed.

“My head...my leg. A rock hit me. I was so scared I just ran...father is still outside the gates!”

Tamar’s eyes widened. Tamela wept in her shoulder. Tamar grabbed Ajack and held him close and prayed to the Divine Council for deliverance.

The house shook and the skies flashed. Lightning struck the metal bells, causing them to clang unnaturally. And as soon as it started, it all stopped. Serenity swept through the city. The screams and cries of citizens echoed throughout Tamar’s house.

“Pack your things,” Tamar ordered. She grabbed what food she could: cheese, dried meats, some fruits and threw them into a bag.

“We got to wait for daddy,” Tamela cried.

Tamar stopped. “Ajack, you said something was coming. The ungrieved?” Her heart sunk at the thought.

Ajack mumbled. His head wound was not alright, but she managed to understand “sheep.” She shut her eyes in a desperate attempt not to weep in front of her children. Not the ungrieved, they did not come from the pastures, and their village, Amarsin, protected them from those monsters. Strength is what was needed now, more than anything.

“Hurry—”

“But daddy—”

Tamar did not want to say it, but if their father was not back now, he may not ever return. Strength.

“I said hurry! I will not say it one more time.”

Tamela and Ajack nodded their heads. Amarsin defended Livana from every invasion, a burden they carried from a transgression thousands of years old. The Silver City had only been attacked directly hundreds of years ago, but was defended by the Silver Knights: A long-standing order of elite warriors. Back then, they were prepared, they knew what was coming. This invasion carried the element of surprise.

With bags full, Tamar ushered the children out the door and down the stairs. Ajack favored his right leg and wobbled when he walked. Blood dripped through the rag she placed on his head. She feared the worst.

Screaming crowds filled the streets of fleeing families. They were being directed by a City Guard. She knew him, he was her husband’s brother. “Aequian! Aequian, what is happening?”

“Tamar, children! I was so worried. You need to run far from here to the Keep.”

Tamar was jolted. The Keep was built for the worst case scenarios: abandonment.

“A massive army, the likes of which we’ve never seen, is knocking at our gates,” Aequian said.

“Amarsin; where are they in our time of need?” Tamar asked.

“They bypassed Amarsin entirely. It’s as if they just appeared from nowhere.”

Ajack began mumbling and Tamar caught the word *magic*.

“Ajack, Ajack what did you see?” Tamar said. His eyes looked far away, distant.

“The watch saw a purple mass before the loud boom. Then an army stood in its place,” Aequian said.

“Mommy, I want daddy!” Tamela cried.

Tamar looked to Aequian. He shook his head. “Get to the Keep,” he said. Tamar nodded and grabbed her children and ran.

Commander Lucan of the Silver Knights stood at the front of his line.

“Men! Whatever comes through this gate we will fight to the death! Nothing has breached these walls in a thousand years, and they will not be breeched during the time of Commander Lucan!”

The Knights screamed battle cries. The gate bumped forward. An enemy with a battering ram slammed it in again.

Archers atop the tower fired arrows at the mysterious soldiers, but not one shaft penetrated their armor.

“What’s it made of?” One cried.

“Just keep firing!” Another cried before taking an arrow to the heart.

“Their arrows pierce our armor like it’s nothing!”

Captain Odis of the Archer’s Brigade ordered another volley of arrows. They bounced off the armor like they were nothing.

“What can we do?”

Captain Odis only knew of one option. “Destroy the bridge they stand on!” He cried before an arrow caught him in the throat.

Captain Istine of the archers brigade cried, “Grab the statues and throw them off the side!”

Archers abandoned their tools of war and helped each other grab the many statues that lined the walls of the Silver City, throwing one after the other onto the soldiers who were nearly through the City gates.

The invading soldiers heaved and threw open the gates. Commander Lucan yelled his last battle cry before they were overwhelmed by the invading soldiers.

Commander Istine of the Archer’s Brigade stared at a man in pure white robes watching from atop a hill. A man stood near him wearing golden armor.

“Telo save us,” he whispered before he too, fell by an arrow to the heart.

Tamar led Ajack and Tamela into the Keep. She knew very little about it other than the first people built it a thousand years ago. Guardsmen directed them carefully into the Keep.

“You and you, to the gate!” A Silver Knight ordered from horseback to the guardsmen directing the citizens.

“We need every man we can get!”

“Yes sir!” They said and ran to defend the city they loved.

The Silver Knight stayed and looked at Ajack, “You, boy, grab a sword and come with me.”

“No, he’s just a boy,” Tamar pleaded.

“We need every able-bodied man to defend our City!”

“Does he look able bodied to you?” Tamar cried and showed him the far away stare of her once lively son.

The Knight looked the boy up and down and drew his sword. The metal screamed. He urged his horse forward and stopped at Tamar and Ajax. Tamela had long curled into a ball of fear on her mother's shoulder. Tamar knew she was no threat to a Silver Knight, but even if they were under attack, she would not let him kill her boy. The Knight flipped the sword over and handed it to Tamar.

"Take the people into the tunnels of the Keep and seal the doors. The only hope for the Livana is to go beyond here, into the Western Silence."

"The Western Silence, are you mad?"

"Yes, I am afraid so. It was the intention of our ancestors to learn to live there rather than stay and die. Now go!"

The City Knight slapped his horse's rear and took off out of the Keep. Tamar and another woman sealed the door. "There is no hope," Tamar whispered.

She put her daughter Tamela down, "Now is the time for strength. No more tears." Tamela nodded and pretended as best she could to be brave like her mother. She led Ajax, Tamela, and the surviving citizens of the Silver City into the Keep built by their ancestors to lead them into the Western Silence.

When the night grows darkest, just look for the light.

When the evening's falling, just wait out the night.

Cause, soon in the morning, it will be alright.

Cause Telo our champion, will fight for our life.

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Katchan woke screaming into the black pit of the royal crypt. His breath came in deep waves, and he felt pain all over, like he was drowning. The side of his face was wet; he rubbed it and saw he fell into the blood he retched.

What was that?

He was there, in Livana when it fell. He saw the lives of people he couldn't possibly know. He saw their stories: their lives and their deaths. Is this what it means to have the eyes of God? He looked up the stairway where he came from, and it was longer than he remembered. So far away was the door that he could not hear the three spirits if they were screaming at him. This must be what Cairo meant when he said the place was warded. He felt around for the ruby and grabbed Maggaline's staff instead. He searched more on his hands and knees until he felt the lump of the eclyptas. It nearly rolled off the platform. If not for the railing, it would have.

He leaned against the railing and breathed, resting. This was too much to handle. Why would Maggaline put him through all this? Why didn't she just let him stay trapped in the Keep in Gaelwyn? Why didn't she encourage him to be Saulnier's grandson like he wanted? His life could have been easy, but here he was, lost in a dreamlike world with no guide but the sun path and the stories of the dead. Suddenly, a memory returned to him of Maggaline: "*Stories are the closest thing to it; don't you understand?*"

That's what she said after Katchan belittled what stories did for his mother, Avalene. Stories bring back the dead, Maggaline claimed.

Katchan stared at the eclyptas. *Maybe they really do.* The voices from below, the Silver Knights, screamed their story for him to hear. In a way, they were alive again. *Maybe they really do.* Maggaline sent him on this journey. Somehow she knew a truth he did not yet understand, but even if he did not yet, he would if he pressed forward.

Encouraged, he pushed on the staff and lifted himself up. He gripped the ruby tight. Cairo said it would help him find Valerie's crypt. It neither shined, nor glowed, but somehow Katchan knew what the right staircase was. He took the stairway he believed to be correct to the top and found himself at the entrance. He put the ruby back in his pack and took one of the blue flame torches off the wall and shined it into the chamber of Valerie's crypt. The light illuminated exactly what he expected: two stone coffins; one for Valerie's mother, and one for Valerie herself.

He didn't understand it, but he felt wary; and he knew he should trust the feeling.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A DREAM OF A THOUSAND SOLDIERS

When Katchan was in his sixth year, an old family friend died. She was older than Maggaline by few years. She was a sister to her of sorts, helped raise Katchan for a bit before she grew too tired to help any longer. Then other people took over the duties of caretaker for him. Saulnier never forbade anyone from helping the vagrant's son, but soon the people helping figured out they were less favorably looked upon if they did. Soon all they help they received was a warm wave from afar, or some food sent to the home. Maggaline didn't mind cooking, but she was much too busy. They had no need for money, but still she was paid for her stories. She carried on for many years before the end. But Maggaline's end was much different than her old friend.

Katchan remembered before she died, Kuavola, he believed her name was, was frightened. Death terrified her more than anything else, she told Maggaline one day over tea. Katchan was playing near the window and eavesdropped as he did many times. Death terrified her, and Katchan believed her: she stank of fear and death. There was a smell to the old woman that was unlike anything he had ever smelled before. He was once sprayed by a skunk, and even that was not so bad as the smell of this woman's fear.

Maggaline told her a story, meant to calm her, of a man making a deal with death to live forever. The man did live forever, he lived for a thousand years. He fell upon good times and bad times; he saw every family he ever made die well before he did. And before the end, he had gone insane. Death visited the man and asked him if he wanted to keep living, even in his insane state. The man replied, "every fiber of my being wishes to live, but my heart wants to die!" Death

smiled, for this was his game: to bring him to Borsol terrified. The man died physically but went on a beaten and battered soul to Borsol where his consciousness did not last much longer. He dissipated and joined the void and was truly no more. “Limits protect us,” Maggaline said, “whether we want them or not.”

Kuavola died without consolidating herself with death, and her body bore the results of someone screaming and fighting for life. Katchan remembered her hands were clutched in front of her face, protecting herself from some unseen force, and her face contorted in a silent scream. He cried uncontrollably. Maggaline believed it was because he would miss the sweet old woman, but no, it was because the image imprinted on him of her was forever altered to one of fear. He tried to avoid death ceremonies at all costs ever since. He rarely looked upon a burial casket as it passed him by, no matter how important the person being carted gently to Borsol. For Maggaline, it was a different story. She was truly hurt when she saw the final state of her friend. Despite her efforts, she could not make Kuavola believe death was a natural limit.

Now he was facing two ancient burial coffins with bodies older than Gaelwyn lying inside. He chastised himself for the fear trembling up his spine. The image of Kuavola flashed in his mind, and he shut his eyes and tried to shake the image away. When he opened them, nothing changed: shadows danced on the walls from the blue flame torch, ancient coffins lay undisturbed, and if he took a closer look, he knew he’d notice the gold lining of the stone. Valerie was truly loved by her people. It must have been strange to be completely forgotten in life but loved tremendously in death. He wondered if Valerie now knew her true value to her people.

He looked back where the exit door should have been and saw nobody there. He wondered who would think to ward this place. Were the silver citizens magicians as well as warriors? What secrets were lost when this city fell: Maggaline would be infuriated.

He breathed deep the musty air and took a step forward. The only noise was the clack of Maggaline's staff and his breathing, but he could feel his heartbeat in his head; It almost hurt. A thought came to him: he would be the second person to lift the lid of Princess Valerie's coffin. If this place was warded against spirits, maybe the ward kept the bodies preserved. When he opened the lid, would he see Valerie's face as it was over a thousand years ago? The thought terrified him. In his mind, she was the golden eyed beauty from Maggaline's story, he didn't want that ruined now. whatever was under the lid, he had to face it; the Ashen sword lay within, and it was his only hope for escape.

He leaned Maggaline's staff against the wall and lit one of the torches that was within. He stepped up to the lid and put his fingers under the edge. He breathed. What would he find under here: The terrified face of Kuavola, or the preserved face of a princess at rest? He grunted and lifted the lid with as much force as he could muster. It slid off and landed with a thud on the other side. Katchan opened his eyes, and nearly jumped out of his skin.

Within the gold adorned box was not what he expected: dust. No body, no sword; dust.

He fell back onto his rear and crossed his arms over his legs. He could feel himself growing weaker by the minute. This was his last hope of leaving Midbar with his body and soul. Then a thought hit him: what if Micah put the sword into her mother's coffin? He stood and grabbed the torch and lit the other side of the room, and his eyes nearly popped from his head. In between the coffins lay a chest. He stepped closer and saw there were no locks, so he put his hands in the latch and lifted up. Inside were silver goblets, silver plates, silver trays, and a

pitcher, to his amazement, full of water. On top of the plates was a loaf of bread, fresh, not thousands of years old.

Micah?

It looked like the same bread he gave him a few nights ago. Katchan drank straight from the pitcher and ate the bread as fast as he could chew. He dipped the bread in the water to soften it so he could eat faster. The loaf was fluffier than any bread in Gaelwyn, but also dense, full of nutrition. He finished the last bite and washed it down with another gulp of water. He gulped again, and again. The pitcher was almost bottomless. He poured what he thought was the rest into his water skin until it was full, then had another gulp. He laughed, not believing his luck. *When did Micah have time?* Katchan wondered. He would ask Micah tonight, and that would settle the matter.

He lifted the second lid of the coffin, expecting, and finding, only dust again.

What if?

Katchan grabbed Maggaline's staff and stuck it into the dust of Valerie's mother. The staff sunk through until it hit the bottom. The dust was deep. Deep enough to cover a sword. He walked back to Valerie's coffin and asked her to forgive him. He reached inside the dust, the soft material easily depressing under his fingers, until he met something hard. He clasped a cylindrical object and lifted out a sword. It was the Ashen sword. Even in torchlight, the blade glimmered. It was heavier than he expected, although he'd never held a sword in his life and didn't know what to expect. To carry it, he had to lean it back on his shoulder. He stumbled a bit doing so, and noticed something else in the dust. Clothes, maybe? It pointed out. He grabbed the object and tugged, pulling it out until he knew exactly what it was.

A satchel of paper.

It was old, wrinkled by time. He blew on the paper and dust revealed what must have been nearly a white color in its time. White as the Oracles robes. They were similar in function: paper and Oracles; both possessing and recording words from on high. It only made sense they were the same color. Already he could see wear on the pages and had the good sense not to be rough. He delicately pulled open the first page and saw the symbols. He knew what these were, the stories of Princess Valerie. These could be the very one's Joseph used to threaten her with. Katchan thought back on the story Maggaline told him: she had many stories, but the most secret were those of her family. The royal family. Every untruth, every betrayal, every bit of gossip from among them she wrote on these pages into stories.

Joseph was different, she had liked him. Trusted him. How could someone do such an evil act to someone who trusted them? He banished her to the land of storms to die, but through sheer chance, the carriage driver gave her the eclyptas. *What was a carriage driver doing with such a powerful ruby?* Who was the man who gave this to her? He knew that was a question that could only be answered by a witness.

Or someone who remembered everything.

Cairo said Joseph got his just reward, and Valerie was brought to peace in the end; he would know the identity of the carriage driver. He would be sure to ask him when he returned.

Even though Valerie died in obscurity, she wasn't abandoned. In fact, she was remembered. If she had been forgotten in the land of storms, Micah would have never found the eclyptas, then what would have happened?

He pulled out Maggaline's story and examine her symbols. The handwriting was different, but the material was the same as the one from Valerie's coffin. Micah must have grabbed a second blank stack of paper when he dropped the Ashen sword off. What luck that

Maggaline received it! Maybe the silver citizens buried her with a blank stack as a kindness for the next world along with her own writings so she may enjoy them.

Or, so no one could ever read the dirt of the royal family.

Katchan shivered at the thought, then returned Valerie's stories to where they belonged. He lifted both lids back onto the coffins and, before stepping out, took one last gaze where Valerie lay. He called Maggaline a liar when he didn't believe what she said about her, but everything was true. Here he was in the crypt of Princess Valerie, the dream princess. He wished Maggaline could see him now. She would be proud.

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Stepping across the platform again, he felt the voices of the dead soldiers calling out to him. He could not understand their words, but he knew they were proud to have died protecting something they loved. They died so others may live. Some escaped through the Keep, built into the side of a mountain. That must be where Beyda, the Exile, is building his fortress. Katchan wondered if he would find the survivors remains, or if they to, would be dust. There was a third option: they escaped. Perhaps the founding of Gaelwyn is as simple as that: survivors from Livana. Another question Cairo may have an answer for.

He took the steps he originally came in from with Maggaline's staff clacking, and the Ashen sword swaying on his shoulder. It was a heavy weight and could not imagine how strong someone must be to wield a weapon like this. They would need to be as strong as Gath, the prophet that tore down the pillars of Ba-bel. If someone could crush rock, they could surely swing this blade with ease.

He reached the top and stepped through the opening and was greeted by the three spirits, who were lounging as if they were alive: Echo sat against the wall with a sour look on his face, Rordion examined his Musphelian sword in earnest, and Cairo paced nervously.

“What’s wrong?” Katchan asked, directed toward Cairo.

Cairo looked up with surprised relief. “Oh, boy. I wasn’t sure if one of the dead had taken you.”

“He told us horror stories of the dead attacking the living in the ancient days of Livana,” Echo sighed.

“And we are certain at least half of it was made up for our benefit,” Rordion said.

“All of that was true! If Amarsin’s Mustang force had faltered, all of Livana would have been overwhelmed by the spirits of Borsol,” Cairo said.

“I think that’s a tale too wild even for Grandma,” Katchan said.

“Think what you like,” Cairo said.

“Do not be ashamed. It was very entertaining,” Echo said.

“At the least,” Rordion said.

“Indeed,” Cairo said.

Echo stood from his seated post, and Rordion lifted his blade onto his shoulder like Katchan held the Ashen sword. Katchan noted that these weapons seemed to be beyond regular people’s abilities. Maybe Echo was smart to not take one up, rather than stubborn.

“The boy has what we need, now. It must be near nightfall, we don’t want to keep Micah waiting,” Echo said.

Cairo stepped up to Katchan and examined the sword from the point down to the hilt. There was a certain reverence in his eyes, Katchan saw, like someone looking upon an artifact from an epic tale.

“Wait! Valerie, how did she look?” Cairo asked.

“Dust, and a binding full of her stories. But you would know that already, being who you are,” Katchan said.

“So there is nothing left of her at all,” Cairo said.

“Well, there is this,” Katchan said and reached into his satchel for the eclyptas to show it.

“Yes, there is that,” Cairo said.

“We must be going,” Echo said.

They agreed and started the long walk to the entrance of the royal crypt.

“I did have one question: who was the man who gave Valerie this ruby?” Katchan asked.

Cairo cleared his throat, “Well, why is that important?”

Katchan furrowed his brow. “After Joseph betrayed her, she was banished to the land of storms. She would have stayed there if not for the eclyptas. Was it a prophet, or a sage? Maybe an Oracle in disguise, or a god?”

“I,” Cairo hesitated, “I do not have an answer for this.”

“What was Joseph’s due justice?”

Cairo snorted. “Joseph wanted to live forever in high esteem. He wanted statues of him greater than even that of King Telo. He wanted stories and legends passed down from one generation after the next of his triumph over the forces of darkness. He wanted to rise above his station in life as the child of a king’s concubine.”

“But that would have never happened had Livana learned the truth about him, would it?”

Katchan said.

Cairo stopped walking and let the three pass. They halted, turning to the man.

“There is no time to waste,” Echo said.

“So, Katchan. You want to know the due justice of Joseph?”

Katchan slipped the eclyptas back into the satchel, for protection.

“I think I already know,” Katchan said.

“Katchan, what do you know?” Rordion asked, gripping his weapon.

“Go ahead, Katchan, son of Micah. Tell us,” Cairo said.

“You mentioned there was only one royal not buried here, but never said who. You wanted to know the condition of Valerie, and even with the memory of Livana, you couldn’t name the previous owner of the eclyptas. Whoever warded the royals chamber from spirits had the same power as the one who warded that memory of himself. They weren’t protecting the chamber from spirits, but from you. Before, I thought you were the embodiment of Livana, but that’s wrong. You aren’t a living memory, you’re boundless; limitless; a living punishment. You are King Joseph.”

“Immortal without praise. The worst sort of hell one can endure,” Joseph said, shedding his previous identity of ‘Cairo.’

“How is this possible?” Rordion said.

“You could have stolen the eclyptas in Gaelwyn. You could have let the abyssal shred us to death,” Katchan said.

“Then how would I retrieve the Ashen sword for my master?” Joseph said.

“You betrayed Valerie to her death, she loved you, how could you?”

Joseph grew enraged. “If whatever gift she possessed had come to anyone but her, I would not have needed to dispose of her. She was going to reveal my sins to the Oracle then to all of Livana, then I would have been sent to the land of storms to die as she did. I was nothing, but I rose to the top, didn’t I?”

“You sacrificed her, and in return gained power in life, but punishment in death,” Katchan said.

“Tell me, was it worth it?” Echo said.

“Katchan, that isn’t what is important right now, we must hurry away from this place,” Rordion said.

“There is nowhere you can flee too where he won’t find you, and soon you’ll be spirit like us, young Katchan. You will suffer for eternity like the rest of us, or give the sword to the one you call Exile, and he will set us free,” Joseph said.

“We’ve got to return the Ashen sword,” Katchan said.

“What?” Echo said.

“Of course,” Rordion said.

He hefted his Musphelian blade off his shoulder and charged at Joseph. Already, he could feel this sword was made from tougher metal than any in Gaelwyn, and Joseph was an old man. He thrust the sword forward, and Joseph countered the blade with his forearm then launched a punch into Rordion’s chest. Rordion flew back into Echo, who nearly fell over as well.

Rordion coughed and wheezed. “We must run,” he gasped.

“Quick, we must find Micah,” Echo said. “Go!”

Katchan turned and ran up the hallway to the exit where he could detect orange light. It was nearing nightfall.

Katchan turned his neck and saw Joseph easily push past Echo, and was coming at him fast.

Katchan felt the weight of the sword digging into his shoulder. He had to drop Maggaline's staff; he grabbed the sharp edge and ran his hand across with a yelp. Blood ran freely; he dug into his satchel and grasped the eclyptas.

Strength of Gath.

Feeling power bubble within him, he lifted the Ashen sword off his shoulder.

Joseph lunged for Katchan, then stopped, and was thrown back by the Ashen sword. Joseph looked up and saw Katchan holding the sword with ease, blood dripped from his right hand, and in the blue torch flames, his shadow appeared as that of a much larger man.

"Stay away from me you traitor!"

Katchan lunged forward and stuck the tip of the blade into Joseph's shoulder. The man let out a yelp and laid flat.

"I never wanted to betray her. She forced me," Joseph said, gasping for breath.

"And yet you did."

"I never wanted to betray you," Joseph said.

Katchan withdrew the sword from the man's shoulder and backed away with the weight. The strength of Gath gone now. Joseph lay on the floor breathing heavy.

"I have suffered my boundless punishment for so long now, I was prepared to do anything to escape, even the destruction of Idyll for good. From Borsol, the one you call Exile drew my spirit and cursed me with these memories of a happy people I helped destroy. I have spent an eternity walking through the streets of the living Silver City to face its destruction each night. Paradise turned to dust over and over again. I have spent an eternity watching my younger

self betray Valerie, an innocent soul. It stings like a fresh wound. He told me that if he were to suffer punishment, then so would I, since it was with my rule the decline of Livana began.”

“Why tell me all this?” Katchan said.

Echo and Rordion limped and paused, the only light now came from torches. Nightfall was here.

“Because you can end my curse with that sword. If I knew from the start, I would have explained everything. I don’t have to die a traitor a second time, you can send me to the void. These memories will finally stop.” Joseph lifted his head, “Thank you, Katchan, for doing this.”

Echo and Rordion looked at Katchan with anticipation.

Katchan lifted the sword off his shoulder, it wobbled in his grip, but he was able to steady it. He looked down at Joseph, ready to let the blade fall into his chest. Suddenly, though, he thought of Maggaline.

Saulnier betrayed her for power. He sullied her name, and my mother’s name, to create animosity and hatred toward them. He exiled me to this wasteland. If this were him...

Katchan let the blade fall back to his shoulder.

“No.”

Joseph’s eyes shot open. He got up onto his knees.

“Katchan, please,” he begged.

Rordion and Echo looked on at him.

“It would be a mercy,” Rordion said.

“I know,” Katchan said. He turned and started up the way out.

“Katchan, I’ll be here for another thousand years! I’ll see her face every day, that look of anguish; I can’t suffer it any longer!”

“Good-bye, King Joseph,” Katchan said over his shoulder.

Joseph slumped over, defeated and hopeless.

Rordion and Echo followed behind Katchan and exited the tomb of the royals with the last member finally buried within.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE BATTLE FOR THE ASHEN SWORD

The stars shined over Midbar, inexplicably beautiful, as the three exited the tomb. They hoped Micah was out here waiting for them, because it was past time for Katchan to return to the land of the living. All would be restored, if Micah were here, but instead Katchan, Rordion, and Echo came face to face with the largest army any of them had ever seen. They surrounded the statue of Valerie with torches burning bright. She loomed over them like a giant among a crowd. The four warriors he met in the desert were in front of the army, an army made up of the workers from the fortress. Leading them all was a man dressed in pure white robes.

“Thank you for retrieving the sword of Asher for me, young exile,” Beyda said.

Katchan stopped at the sight. The sword felt heavy on his shoulder and grew heavier by the second. He did not expect the Exile, or Beyda, to come himself. He seemed like the sort of man that let others do his dirty work.

“What do we do?” Katchan whispered.

“We’ll hold them off, you return the sword,” Rordion said.

“What?” Echo and Katchan gasped in unity.

“The end is so near,” Echo said.

“Indeed. If what Micah said is true, the Exile will try to destroy Idyll. Everything we love will be gone,” Rordion said.

“What is taking you so long, little exile?” Beyda said. He sounded neither impatient, nor angry. Calm victory sang from his throat.

“Shall we bring him to you?” Katchan overheard the warrior called Harol ask.

Katchan turned to enter the tomb, but Joseph stood before it, and it was shut. He did not look victorious but defeated.

Katchan faced the man in white robes. “Lord Exile, before I give you the Ashen sword, may you answer me one question: will you destroy Idyll?”

Beyda’s face did not change. “I am at war with a certain someone, young exile. I have told you this before. In war there are casualties, intended and unintended. A clash of wills as great as mine and my enemy may reduce many planets to dust.”

“I figured as much,” Katchan said. It was true then; the Exile wanted to destroy Idyll in his quest for vengeance. But who is his enemy? Micah?

“Time has no meaning to me, but for you, your life is running out. Quickly give me the sword so I may take you where I promised,” Beyda said.

“If the sunset village is on Idyll, it will be destroyed,” Rordion said.

“Then what does it matter,” Echo said. “If he sends us to the void, we lose consciousness. We’ll join Famor and Yashnu, then the boy will be behind us soon enough. Even if he saved Gaelwyn, it will soon join us in the decay. This place is a holding cell for death, that’s what a memory really is. Livana is gone, and Gaelwyn will follow. What difference does it make if you give the sword to him or Micah? He’s powerful, you’ve seen him. He will take the sword from either one of you and that will be the end.”

“Echo, you would give in so easily?”

“Time has no meaning, but my patience is wearing thin. Bring it to me of your own free will, or I will be forced to take it from you,” Beyda said.

“No, Rordion. Echo is right. What difference does it make? They might have already defeated Micah,” Katchan said.

“Then why bring an army?” Rordion said.

“This is the end. Take the Ashen sword to him,” Echo said.

What would Maggaline do in this situation? She'd tell a story or repeat a wise proverb. Whatever she did, it would be the right thing. Yashnu would tell me to follow her example. When Saulnier confronted her, she did not resist him. She did not fight back. Why?

Katchan exhaled, “I’m taking the sword to him. Whatever happens next, it’s out of our hands.”

“Little exile—”

“I will bring you the Ashen sword, as promised,” Katchan said.

Beyda smiled victoriously.

Katchan crossed over the marble walkway to the ageless man in white robes. The sword weighed heavy on shoulder, and he wanted to rest.

Beyda looked the boy over. “You’ve experienced something magnificent, haven’t you?”

Katchan twinged at the comment. He fought an abyssal with the eclyptas, he lost Yashnu, he experienced the fall of Livana, and he dug through Valerie’s ashes. To bring it all together, he discovered a wise old cook from his village was Joseph, the betrayer of Valerie. Katchan would agree; he had experienced something magnificent. And now he was tired and wanted to go home and listen to one of Maggaline’s stories. He wanted to talk to the oracles apprentice Willow and apologize or play a prank on Saulnier. He wanted all these things, but he knew these things were in the past, out of his reach. He could recall them in memory, but he could not make the memories new. Whatever Beyda did with the Ashen sword now was out of his hands. He was just a boy, after all.

“I have. One of my friends died out here fighting a sandstorm he called an abyssal. Can you revive him, like you revived Joseph?”

“So, you figured out his identity? Clever. I am sorry about the old man Yashnu. I sensed his presence disappeared, but I had no idea it was from one of my abyssals.”

“Your abyssals?”

“Yes. An unfortunate side effect from my attempts to escape Midbar in the past. For every escape attempt, an abyssal was formed. I’m sure I’ve lost count of how many there are but is of no matter now. I cannot bring back the old man, but also don’t see why I would. The Ashen sword, please.”

Beyda reached out his hand, and Katchan looked past him to the warriors who attacked him in the wilderness. A thought finally occurred to him: they went looking for Katchan on their own. He was the son of their old commander, Micah. They know, and Beyda does not. That is why they looked on him, ready to hurt him. But they were too weak to challenge Beyda. Who was this man anyways? Beyda’s smile faded.

Katchan began to give the sword to Beyda, when a heavy pat landed on his shoulder from behind.

“The sword is not yours,” Micah said.

I hush fell over the army, even the wind in the sand stopped blowing. A calm fell over the graveyard like never before. Never was there more reverence among the dead.

Micah grabbed the Ashen sword and eased it away from Katchan.

“All these years I’ve hunted you, and you bring yourself to me,” Beyda said.

“It’s time to send the boy home, Beyda,” Micah said.

“I was just going to send him to the sunset village, as he requested.”

“You have a mouthful of lies. There is no sunset village.”

Katchan’s mind went blank. *No sunset village?* Of course not. Joseph, disguised as Cairo, was the one who told him of the village below the dome. He just needed to bring him here. Katchan was the one with the means to enter Midbar through the eclyptas. Katchan was the only being who could enter Valerie’s warded tomb. Katchan’s head drooped. There was no sunset village. There is no one who remembers the symbols Maggaline wrote. There is no one who can teach him to read her story. Her last words will be covered over in the sands of Midbar like the ruins of Livana.

“You come to me with no army, no reinforcements of any kind, and you threaten me? Has the darkness sapped your sanity, Commander? This curse has gone on long enough. The Silver City is ready to pass on from this age and become a legend. We can both leave Midbar: I can take my place among the Council and wage the war the Scope desperately needs, and you can continue your quest for revenge.”

Micah growled. Beyda continued.

“I can understand your anger before: I tricked you into destroying the city I hate the most. I’m sure you had no plans to be caught in the curse along with me, but you know how He can be. Rains on the wicked and the good, although I doubt anyone would call you good. But now, a millennium has passed. Let your anger fade. I’ll even allow you to do the honors, work your magic with the blade of Asher.”

“I’m the only one who can wield the sword of Asher. Even if I agreed with you, you know I can’t do that, not without the eclyptas,” Micah said.

Katchan’s eyes shot wide. *Beyda doesn’t know I have the ruby!*

“Yes, that was clever of you. Remove the key and hide the lock. How is that village girl of yours?”

Micah snarled.

“I am trying to reason with you, Commander. I could take you by force, use your blood as the lock and escape, but I’m afraid you will just evade me for another millennia. Or how about this: I kill the boy and send his soul to the void.”

Micah made no reaction.

He doesn’t care if I die, Katchan thought. What even was my mother to you?

“No. We settle this by the ancient rules.”

Beyda smirked and began pacing. He looked to Katchan like someone with a heart divided.

“Coward,” Beyda hissed. “Coward, coward, coward!”

He stopped and thrust an accusing finger at Micah.

“You run from your failure for a thousand years, and now you think you can face me. Now that you think I am weak, that time has eroded my capabilities, that I have been cut away from Hysol for good? You think now is the time to attack an old councilman? Coward! I have not seen such cowardice since my days on Idyll, wandering the known and unknown parts of the world, judging the men Marikel created to tend to his perfect world. Coward! Oh yes, I see the look on your face. I see the weakness and fear flashing before your eyes as you wonder how could something so obvious be so hidden. Yes, Commander. I am Telo of the Divine Council, first king of Livana, Judge of Idyll. Yes, Commander, I accept your proposal. We fight by the ancient rules, rules I created.”

King Telo!

Glimmering stars shrank into nonexistence, the night sky becoming darker than Katchan thought possible. *Beyda was Telo? But he built Livana from the ground up, why would he want to destroy it?* He now saw where the extra darkness came from: thunder clouds. They passed over the moon destroying every natural light. Only the torches gave off a glow. Wind suddenly blew from the coming storm. It's force nearly threw Katchan off his feet. It reminded him of an abyssal.

"Katchan, get back!"

Micah grabbed Katchan by his shirt and threw him. He flew through the air until he landed in someone's arms: Rordion.

"What's happening, boy?"

"I think you should have just given him the sword, now it looks like it will be much worse," Echo said.

"The Exile, Beyda; he's really King Telo? He called himself one of the Divine Council? How is this possible?"

"It is quite a long story," Joseph said sullenly. From his seated position.

"You! This could have been avoided," Rordion said.

"No, I don't think that's true," Katchan said.

They looked on at the coming duel between Micah and Telo.

Dark clouds swirled above the encamped army; the group backed away until only Micah and Telo were alone. Valerie watched over them from her statue like a disappointed goddess.

"I always suspected you were more than you said you were," Micah said.

"It always pays to pay attention. Who in their right mind would offend Marikel?" Telo said.

“You are not of right mind.”

“So you say.”

Telo raised his hand; electricity sparked from the tips of his fingers; the clouds swirled until they formed a needle, directly over Telo. Lightning struck his hand, and everyone covered their eyes. When they opened them, a sword made of boiling light was in his grip.

“Powerful though this sword may be, it does not possess the same qualities yours does. However, for battle it is more than enough,” Telo said.

Katchan felt his hands empty for the first time since arriving. *Maggaline’s staff!*

“Joseph, my staff. I left it inside!”

“That’s what you’re worried about right now?”

Katchan looked back on the battle. Of course the staff was what he was worried about right now.

Micah lunged forward, slicing at air, as Telo jumped to avoid the attack. Telo landed squarely and swung a vertical blow to Micah’s head. Micah straightened his sword and blocked. He twisted from under Telo’s sword and attacked Telo’s stomach, which was easily blocked. Micah and Telo’s swords danced like trees in the wind, like swirls of dust, like a leaf in the water. They parried a thrust, then returned a blow. It was magnificent. It was a story; a legend; a myth.

“I have seen Micah fight, he’s amazing. He’s unlike anything I’ve ever seen before,” Katchan said.

“Yes, but he is losing strength,” Rordion said. “The blade Telo, I find it hard to get used to saying that name, the blade he uses is made from storms. Our scholars theorize the clouds are heavier than we can fathom. Micah is using a lot more strength to stay in the fight.”

Micah and Telo clashed, their swords pressed together, trying to outdo one another's strength. Electricity zapped from Telo's sword, striking one of the soldiers. The soldier screamed and petrified. Another bolt zapped near Katchan. Another bolt zapped headed for Katchan, then Rordion was in front of him.

"No!"

The bolt ricocheted away: Rordion blocked the bolt with his Musphelian sword.

The ricocheted bolt hit Telo, knocking him off balance. Micah attacked Telo's opening, and his blade cut deep into his stomach. Telo belched blood to the ground and fell to his knees. Micah slid his sword from Telo's stomach, blood poured on the ground from the wound. Telo's sword vanished from his hand.

"By the ancient rules, set down by you, I have won," Micah said.

Telo smiled; red smeared across his young face.

Micah yelled and cut off his head. It rolled; the bloody smile facing up. Micah let Telo's body fall then faced his former army.

"Long ago we destroyed an innocent city; the city of Marikel. We reduced it rubble; its iron rusted, its marble darkened, its gold was buried in sands. On that day we were cursed to remember our deed. Telo convinced you all the only way to break the curse was through force, but I tell you now, the only way we can break the curse is through surrender. Lay down your arms and beg for Marikel's mercy—"

A dagger stuck through Micah's chest from his back. Blood dripped from the edge. Micah gasped and fell to his knees.

"No!" Katchan screamed and ran forward. Rordion reached out and grabbed him. Katchan twisted from his grip, and Echo tackled him.

“He’ll kill you and take the eclyptas, don’t be a fool!” Echo whispered harshly.

Telo circled around Micah.

“The decapitation was a nice touch, but not nearly enough. You forget Micah: my curse is greater than yours.” He looked at the gathered army. “Bring him out.”

Titus walked forward dragging a chain. On the end of that chain, bound, was Orphion.

“Orphion,” Micah gasped.

“We have had fun torturing Lieutenant Orphion. For all this time, he’s remained loyal to you, and yet you still refuse to release his bonds. It hardly matters now,” Telo said.

“Commander Micah—”

“Quiet, Orphion,” Titus said and tugged his chain, bringing him to his knees before Telo.

Telo lifted the Ashen sword into the air.

“Orphion, Orphion, I’m sorry,” Micah sputtered.

Orphion closed his eyes as Telo swiped through his neck.

“A very clean cut,” Telo said, examining the bloodless sword.

Titus let the body fall and returned to the ranks.

“You didn’t even try to stop me,” Telo said.

“I would not dishonor a soldier by begging for his soul,” Micah said.

“The night has made you cold. But now I have the Ashen sword.”

Telo stepped forward and raised the sword above Micah’s chest.

Katchan finally loosed himself from Echo’s grip. He reached into his satchel and grabbed the eclyptas. He squeezed and blood from his previous wound covered the ruby. He rushed towards Micah; he was his only hope. Life was about to be ripped away from him again.

Telo brought the sword down, the blade piercing Micah's heart. He made not a cry or a whimper. Telo drew the sword out, and Micah slumped forward.

"No!" Katchan was nearly on top of them.

"Stay away, little exile," Telo said then he stopped when he saw the eclyptas shining in Katchan's fist. Telo's eyes grew wide with desire.

Katchan, focused his rage at Telo and screamed inside his head the word that destroyed the abyssal: *burn*. Katchan landed squarely, hand outstretched to Telo, and nothing happened.

Telo stared at the boy, then spoke as if to himself: "Was this your plan all along, Commander? Well, it has failed. Remarkably so! The boy doesn't even know what he holds, and you expect him to do your work?" He spoke to Harol, "grab the eclyptas, and bring the boy with us."

A noise, like a laugh, came from Micah's slumped over body. He looked up, barely alive, with a bloody smile across his face.

"What is the matter with you?"

"Ba'ar."

A wave of light shattered from the eclyptas, blowing Micah's former army away. Telo stood his ground, and reached for the ruby.

Katchan was caught in the wind, but the pressure pushed him down into the sand. Telo's hand was nearly at the ruby.

"Ba'ar!"

The words came from Micah, and they were his last. It was enough energy to throw Telo back.

Micah dug his hand into the sand and pressed. A ripple went out causing the sand to become like waves. He pressed again, and another ripple flew out. He pressed again with a scream, and the ripple pushed out again, one last time. With that, Micah slumped forward, and exhaled to stillness.

CHAPTER TWENTY

COSMIC LOCK

Katchan shook Micah's slumped body, but it did not move. Sunlight broke over the east, and it was morning. He expected Micah's body to become a shadow, like he had seen it do before, but it remained steady. It even cast its own shadow. It was as if death had made him alive.

"Why isn't he fading?" Katchan asked.

Joseph, who avoided the blast from the eclyptas, joined Katchan in staring at Micah's body. "Micah was cursed from ever seeing the sun again. At dawn's break, he faded into the void, losing all consciousness, until being reborn every night to experience the pain and loss of Livana over again. It was only when he was able to escape to Gaelwyn that the curse was halted. He hoped, halted forever. He wanted to make Gaelwyn his home."

"But he didn't," Katchan said, looking at Echo and Rordion.

"Even if we did know who he was, he could not stay. He did not belong to Gaelwyn," Rordion said.

"Don't blame them. Telo threatened to enter Gaelwyn and kill everyone there if your father did not leave," Joseph said.

"The beast he nearly sent through, that is what it was for," Echo said.

"If Telo could enter Gaelwyn, why hasn't he yet?"

"Severe consequences, Katchan. If he ever entered Gaelwyn, he could never pursue his great war. He does not live in a boundless place as I do, he is closed within this dome of sand and memories. He knows his boundaries quite well, and he intends not to bend them, but to break them. I'm afraid he is closer than ever to his goals."

Katchan looked out into the distance. Micah blasted the army so far, and even Telo could not withstand the strength of the eclyptas.

“Do not fear, Katchan. Your father is not gone forever. Even he can be healed now.”

Katchan thought back to Maggaline’s staff. Micah used that to heal him after being stabbed by Harol, the warrior he tussled with. How he healed him was a mystery.

“He used Maggaline’s staff to heal me once. Open the door so I can go get it,” Katchan said.

“That staff will never work for you. You called it Maggaline’s, but it was really Micah’s. He brought it through the boundary and gave it to Maggaline. I suspect it is what gave her so much vitality,” Joseph said.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Katchan said.

“It will. On the dawn of the first day, a garden was planted next to a mighty river. It was this garden that hosted the beginning events of Idyll. Katchan, the garden is old now, but there may yet still be some life. One in particular you need: a leaf, green and sweet smelling, called the *ruach*. There are many tales in which a hero seeks out the garden of first light to retrieve the ruach leaf to save the love of his life, or an ill father. Finding this will be nearly impossible, but it’s your only shot. Also, if the leaf still lives, there will also be the tree of Mowpath. Cut a branch from that tree, as Micah did before you.” Joseph pointed at a star in the sky, it was second in brightness only to the sun. “Follow that star until you stumble upon the garden.”

“We will never get there before Telo finds us,” Echo said.

“The boundary Micah created will give you time. He is quite good at making life difficult for Telo, I think you will find,” Joseph said.

Katchan stared at the star in the sky. It was lovelier than all the rest, and he had seen it many times before when sitting with Maggaline on the rock back in Gaelwyn. He once pictured in his mind that the star was the spirit of his mother looking down on him, but he had dismissed it as a childish thought then. But now, all he wanted was for it to be her spirit, and guide them to the right place.

“But if it is speed you are worried about, then use the eclyptas,” Joseph said.

Echo turned to Katchan, “What is he talking about?”

“If you’re saying use it in a thin space, we can’t. Micah tried to send me back to Gaelwyn, but the gates are blocked.”

“Curious, true, but the gates are not blocked. He couldn’t send you through the boundary, there is nothing preventing you from moving from one space to the next within Midbar.”

“I thought this ruby was just used for dreams,” Rordion said.

“Oh, but already you’ve seen it do so much more. Dreams are only a part of its power,” Joseph said.

“He’s right,” Katchan said. “Valerie used this ruby to travel from dream to dream. That’s how she used it. I traveled through the boundary at Gaelwyn, but it has also burned a monster, and given me super strength.”

“Because, at the heart of it all: the eclyptas is a cosmic lock. It can be used to open doorways into many places: dreams and places of power. Valerie’s key opened a doorway into a realm where dreams lie awake. I don’t believe you’ve even scratched the surface of what your key opens. That is what the battle for the Ashen sword is all about: the sword of Asher is a key to the Scope. You can go pretty much anywhere with that sort of power: you can escape a curse; or even break past your set boundaries.”

“You mean, we can walk through one space into another?”

“You can, yes,” Joseph said.

“Oh no, you’re coming with us,” Echo said.

“We’ve been through this: you can’t make me,” Joseph said.

“Wait, why are you helping us now?” Katchan said.

“I failed Telo. If I were to go to him now, he may never allow me to leave. In all likelihood, he would escape Midbar and leave me here for eternity,” Joseph said.

“You think I may send you to the void,” Katchan said.

“There is a greater chance from the son of Micah to escape my punishment, yes.”

Katchan looked at Rordion, who remained stoic, then to Echo, who shrugged.

“I don’t trust you, Joseph. For all I know, you’re lying to us about everything. But, the garden is the only chance I have to leave Midbar, body and soul intact.”

“You don’t trust me? It’s about time you started learning a lesson. Now, focus on that star, before the sun overpowers it, and hold the ecliptas in your hand,” Joseph said.

Katchan exhaled, “So, you’re coming with us?”

“Only because you will send me to the void at the end of all this. I want only to cease my consciousness so this millennia of suffering can end,” Joseph said.

“You think I would give you what you want, even after all you’ve done?”

“I think you will give me what I want because it will be the right thing to do. The grandson of Maggaline can see that, surely.”

Katchan looked for reassurance from Echo and Rordion.

“It is your choice, boy,” Rordion said.

Katchan stood steady for a moment, but in his heart he had already relented.

“Now, unless you want to lose your chance, focus on the eclyptas,” Joseph said.

Katchan did as he was told. He focused on the star.

“Now, do you remember the moment of epiphany? When the boundary was at its weakest? That was the one moment you could cross a boundary like the one between Gaelwyn and Midbar. I need you to remember what that felt like, feel the raw power of the eclyptas. Now you know what it is: a cosmic lock that can open doors to all sorts of places. Find the door leading to that star.”

Katchan focused on the star. He closed his eyes and saw it in his mind. He tried to picture a door in front of him leading to a garden. he imagined the forest behind his house instead, then he thought of Benjamin creating a diversion for him, then he thought of the night he met Benjamin at the door of his home, when Maggaline and Saulnier were discussing his father. He imagined walking through the door and all the horrible thoughts and untruths he believed about Maggaline that momentarily infected his mind, and how a wave of love overcame those thoughts as he set foot inside. He looked upon Maggaline, nodding off in her chair. He thought of Maggaline, animated in telling a story; opening a door into a new world: one of myth; history; truth. He thought of her standing up to Saulnier, he saw her telling the story of Valerie, and pictured the hall of paintings she so vividly described, and then it was there in his mind: the star and the door; hovering over Idyll. He made it smaller until he could walk through the door, then he saw Valerie’s statue and placed the door beside it.

“Yes, that’s it Katchan,” Joseph said.

Katchan opened his eyes; beside Valerie’s was a light that looked as if it flowed like water in the creek back home.

“Through the gate,” Joseph said.

Echo looked at Rordion. They nodded at one another. Echo stepped through first. Rordion looked back at Katchan, then stepped through. Joseph looked at Katchan, then stepped through. Katchan walked through the door into a world of white, an abyss or a void of sorts. Like the kind of place Telo said Midbar would be without his rule.

It was quiet, eerie. Katchan did not realize how much noise the wasteland made until he was in this room. He saw the three looking forward instead of at him. *They must be ready to go.* Katchan squeezed his eyes shut again and focused on the star and creating another door.

“Katchan,” Echo said.

“Don’t ruin my focus.”

“Katchan, look.”

He opened his eyes and nearly fell. Standing before the three was a familiar old man.

“Yashnu?”

“Hello, Katchan,” Yashnu said.

Rordion looked to Joseph, “How is this possible?”

“Well, this is the space within Midbar. Your friend was lost around here, so where else would his spirit go?”

“But, he didn’t lose consciousness, he didn’t enter the void,” Echo said.

Echo looked at Rordion, then they looked at Yashnu together.

“I’ve looked for him. It’s the first thing I did when I woke up. Famor is gone for good.”

“Maybe not,” Katchan said. “Famor was lost around the watchtower, nowhere near here.”

“He could be within that space,” Rordion said.

“There is hope after all. If you could retain your consciousness in this void, then perhaps...” Echo trailed off.

“It is a lot to ask for, Echo. It’s pure wishful thinking. But I must admit to you, I am thinking the same thing,” Yashnu said.

“Myself as well,” Rordion said.

The three stood in silence.

“What are you guys talking about?” Katchan asked.

“We might cross back into Gaelwyn, and go beyond death there to be with our fathers,” Yashnu said.

“Preposterous. What do you think this place is? It’s a void within a curse. I don’t know how Yashnu could retain his consciousness, the rules are different here; but there is no possibility to do what you are asking,” Joseph said.

“Stories show us what is possible, and what impossibilities can be made possible,” Katchan said.

“And what is that supposed to mean now?”

“I can imagine a world in which these men from Gaelwyn, even their friend Famor, can cross into the land of the dead in Gaelwyn. It must be possible, or at least worth attempting,” Katchan said.

“Waste enough time chasing ghosts, and you will become one yourself,” Joseph said. “Now, concentrate on opening the door to the Garden of First Light. Picture the star: imagine trees, fruits, flowers, a stream; it will be the only place in Midbar untouched by Marikel’s curse.”

Katchan focused his energies on the star, and a door. He had trouble imagining the garden described to him, so he went back into a memory. The time he played outside in the stream, looked at the flowers, the leaves in the early morning sunlight; all the times he hid from

Maggaline, or watched the sunset with her; all those years of laughter and love in the only place he could imagine as a garden.

He opened his eyes and there was the light flowing upstream.

“You’ve done something incredible, boy,” Yashnu said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

GARDEN OF FIRST LIGHT

“The creation of the universe is a highly debated topic. For several ages, Prophets and Oracles have discussed among themselves and fought viciously with each other over the origins of existence. Prophets say an academic inquiry will uncover the mystery. The study of things to discover the Thing that brought them to life. Many generations of Prophets asked questions that lead to answers that led to questions. The questions created the need for disciplines of study to focus the main effort of finding the Thing that brought them about. However, that was a time ago. Now the search for the Thing has dipped below consciousness and is replaced by skilled debates on which discipline is most important for finding...whatever it is they are searching for. Prophets are ultimately at a standstill.

“The Oracles have gone about their search in a much different method. They disagree with the Prophets that the study of things will bring about the discovery of the Thing that brought them about. Studying the components of such a complex being will never bring the full picture in scope. Their fierce arguments are laced with a tenacious sort of venom towards their sibling order. It is of the highest belief, for several generations back, that the search for the Thing is a search within. Mind and spirit are connected within and thus must be connected without. If one finds the trail to the divine from within that is the correct trail to follow. This “self” is the highest recognition an Oracle can have in a lifetime. For the “self” leads to the divine. Oracles are noble with highly developed minds, yet they can’t help but live with a certain dissatisfaction with every new “self” they meet. Each generation a new trail is found, and a new trail is followed.

Thousands of paths have opened to the divine, but this led to several factions of Oracles whose only agreement is their disagreement with the Prophets. Oracles are ultimately unmanageable.

“There is one Order left that is taken seriously neither by the Prophets nor the Oracles: The Sophites. But an Order of Sophites do not exist anywhere on earth. These workers of wisdom belong to something they never asked to be but love it still the same. They know divine things because the divine Thing has touched them. Not like the Prophets and Oracles who would one day, after several generations, be visited by divine messengers with guidelines on how to manage the people of the earth, but in a different way, a purer way. Sophites know things intuitively, and thus are dismissed, and this is what they know.

“To them, the creation of the universe was no big secret. As the Sophites imagined, existence came from the Cosmic Whisper. A word or phrase so preciously guarded that all the sources who knew its exact pronunciation and letteral formation are either sworn to secrecy or dead. After the Whisper nothing became everything. Whatever living beings that existed before the Whisper were absorbed into the new creation and became its bedrock as if they had never been anything else. These things that form life we know to be unknown. But unknowable life is not true life, so the Whisper, in its magnitudes of power, like the ripples of a rock in a pond, or a meteor on a planet, went further than life. Life that existed before the Whisper watched as a new figure emerged from the thunder and lightning of new beginnings: Marikel.

“After his appearance, the Whisper faded like cords of a single strum of a harp. Some believe all that ever happened was within this fading. All but the span of Marikel, who would not know death unless he decided. But this story isn’t about him. It’s about everything that came from him. The beginnings of the Scope, all the treachery that lay within, and the supreme redemption and return to innocence.

“The Whisper created the material for something to be built from. Marikel became the builder. The cosmos was once cold. Not breath nor pulse beat across the Scope. But infused with power, Marikel took pieces from the center of the universe and began forming them into life-giving stars that dazzled the sky, washing the dome of the earth in an ocean of light. From the chaotically floating barren rocks, he built life-supporting planets with fiery metallic cores, deep waters, and lush green lands. He walked across many of his newly created planets, but he found only one that suited his needs. He christened his most beautiful of these, Idyll. It had the deepest of waters and lushest green lands. It was here that he built a magnificent garden, the Garden of First Light.”

“And what does a warrior know of gardens and gods?”

Micah sat back, somewhat stunned. Maggaline was every bit a Sophite, those workers of stories who weaved wisdom into tales. She was touched by a thing of radiance unlike he had ever seen before. She was every bit like the dream princess Valerie; and maybe even more. Pity she was born into this era, and not the age of myths.

“I know as much as a humble warrior should. I also know that Gaelwyn is doomed. Its end is coming by the hands of an enemy of Marikel. The Garden of First Light may hold the answers to victory.” Micah presented Maggaline with the staff he nearly died bringing her. “This came from the garden’s last tree.”

Maggaline took the staff in her hand and felt a burst of energy. She stood and took a few steps. She jumped without pain for the first time in years. She did feel a little more alive, but not imbued with eternal youth like Micah wanted.

“This journey you expect me to go on. I may do more harm than good,” Maggaline said.

“You’re the only one who can,” Micah said.

Maggaline looked at the bassinet holding the sleeping baby Katchan, not but a few weeks old.

“I can’t say I’m happy to have met you, Micah, I hope you can understand that. I worked as a midwife for many years, and childbirth is always a beautiful and dangerous event. I blame you for her death, but I can’t hold a grudge. If I did, I might hold a grudge for many men in this village. But know this: I love my grandson Katchan. I will always be in debt to you for him.”

Micah studied the babe in the bassinet. He wished he held the same love for him as his grandmother. He was blessed with a deep age, living longer than most humans can live today. Growing up among the first fruits of Idyll has that effect, and there are many more from his family still living now. Including the man he has sworn to kill.

Too much rage filled his heart for there to be much love, but Avalene was different. Living an immortal life devoid of mortal tastes, he had no sense of finality to love. Love was a long, slow burn. It took him a hundred years to make some friends. But Avalene; a taste of mortal love shocked him from his immortal apathy. He had never tasted such intensity or felt such raw passion from another human. Until he met her, he never knew what heart of stone lay within his chest. Avalene cut it open and made him bleed. How can he return to immortal bliss after knowing the fiery love of a mortal woman?

His plan was simple: entrust the eclyptas and the stories to the elder of Gaelwyn. But he discovered a young woman swimming in the creek near the boundary first. It was her eyes: golden brown, sweet as honey; captivating and mysterious; innocent and devious. He was enraptured; what could he do?

It was fate, he decided. The workings of that being were always a surprise, for when he met Maggaline, he knew she was the only one who could do what was needed. Those months

were unlike any period in his life, filled with love, laughter, stories, and deep romance he would chase through all the worlds in the Scope.

Yet, his curse followed him through the boundary, and his new life was quickly over, ended in tragedy. Beyda was at the boundary demanding he return, lest Gaelwyn be destroyed. Maggaline knew enough about the ecliptas now. It was in her hands the fate of Idyll was entrusted.

“I must go now,” Micah said.

“And not a moment too soon. Echo and a few of his friends are looking for your head,” Maggaline said.

“Farewell, Maggaline, Sophite of Gaelwyn.”

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Katchan stepped through the light and saw what the others saw: an area that looked like it had once been a beautiful garden, now infected with decay.

“We must be at the wrong place,” Katchan said.

Even as he uttered that lie, he knew not even he could believe it. What lay before them was not a garden, so much as an extension of the wasteland, just more muddled with decay: dry twigs and dead trees. Whatever wasn't dry, Katchan could see, had been burned. Black patches and charred remains of forest were numerous. This was all, as far as Katchan could see, evidence for life that used to be. There was no garden, no miraculous tree branches for Katchan to cut, and there was certainly no longer any ruach, the leaf needed to save Micah's spirit.

Katchan fell to his knees and despaired. For a moment, he believed he was truly going to leave Midbar. He was nearly to the point where returning to Gaelwyn was a sound option to him

if it meant survival. But now, there was no hope. However this garden was destroyed, through decay or fire, it was permanent.

“That rock seems a little out of place, doesn’t it?”

Katchan looked at Yashnu, confused, then to a large boulder he was referring to not far away.

“It is good to have you back, Yashnu,” Echo said.

“Don’t patronize me. When did you last see a forest with a solitary boulder like that?”

Echo snorted.

“He does have a point. I am having trouble imagining anytime a rock has not been part of a greater structure,” Rordion said.

“It’s just a boulder, nothing worth inspecting,” Joseph said.

Katchan looked up to Joseph, who seemed to say that with a hint of persuasion. It was as if he were creating a diversion. He stood, brushed the sand off his knees, and started for the boulder.

“Katchan, there is no reason to continue on, we must return and make a plan to retrieve the Ashen sword,” Joseph said.

The boy kept walking until he was right beside the boulder. From a distance it did not seem so large, but up close he saw it was as large as Elder Saulnier’s compound. It looked as ordinary a rock as could be.

“But what are you doing out here?” Katchan asked. He rubbed the rock, and indeed, it felt as normal a rock could be. But then, something happened he did not expect. The rock began moving. Not rolling, like rocks should, but vibrating, rustling, twisting, and molding; as if flesh.

Katchan stepped back.

“Get away from there, Katchan!” Joseph said, racing toward the boy.

The rock’s movement increased in intensity, then it suddenly stopped.

Joseph grabbed Katchan by the shoulder and began to drag him away.

The rock exploded with a roar. A giant beast broke out, as if the boulder were only a shell. Katchan could see now why Joseph was so terrified: the face wore a grimace, and horns on its head with eyes like lightning. Large wings stuck out from its back with bony spikes on each end, and a tail with a spiked ball on the tip. Its large knuckles were spiked as well, and its feet were large talons. The roar emitted powerful vibrational forces that threw the pair to their backs until it ceased. The gargantuan beast fixed its lightening eyes on the pair.

“Joseph!” It roared.

“It can speak,” Katchan stated with wonder.

The beast dashed towards the pair with surprising dexterity given its size. Joseph swatted Katchan away, and the beast grabbed the king and lifted him.

“Joseph,” the beast said again.

Joseph struggled as the beast squeezed tighter, intending to crush the king in his hand. “I had nothing to do with this,” he struggled to say.

Rordion and Echo set up in a defensive position next to Katchan, and Yashnu helped him up.

“You expect me to trust a liar?” The beast growled.

“You know I am not responsible,” Joseph said.

“You knew the garden was destroyed before you brought us here?”

“A deceiver, he will always be,” the beast replied to Katchan and squeezed tighter.

“He can help us,” Joseph said faintly.

The beast looked at the boy, then to Joseph. He released his grip and let Joseph go. He landed with a thud.

“Who are you, boy?” The beast growled.

“I am Katchan of Gaelwyn.”

The beast looked down on Joseph. It lifted one of its talon feet and stomped on him.

“That name means nothing to me.”

“He is the son of Commander Micah,” Joseph said weakly.

The guardian looked at Katchan with its lightning eyes, and Katchan could almost feel the electricity surge through him.

“Monster, what are you?” Echo said.

“I am no monster! I am Azmina, the guardian. Handcrafted by Marikel, ordered to the most important post in the Scope, I am the closed gate of the Garden of First Light. I am the bridge and the chasm, the key and the lock. None may enter without my permission, and none may leave without my say.”

“Azmina, are you going to kill Joseph?” Rordion asked.

“Kill him? You who are so small are brave to mock me. You know I am both forbidden and unable to kill, and Joseph is not allowed to die. What you ask is impossible and pointless. If I were to kill this pathetic king, I would sign my own demise, and he would just be resurrected again to resume his punishment.”

Joseph crawled until he was able to stand again.

“But it would serve him nothing but what he deserves to be crushed again and again under my heel.”

Azmina lifted his foot.

“Stop!” Katchan said.

The beasts lightning eyes flashed to the boy. He lowered his foot.

“Why have you come here, son of Micah?”

“I seek a leaf, the ruach. Micah is, well, dead in a sense. I mean to revive him.”

Azmina’s rock-solid face grimaced in a human like way.

“It was Telo who slain the Commander, is it not? Only a god of his stature has the permission to kill one of the children of dawn. Look around you, little one. Do you see anything green? Do you spot any life? Anything growing or breathing here? There is nothing left of the garden of first light. It is by some small chance even I was reawakened. Telo will destroy everything good on his path of darkness.

“He came to me, not long after the Midbar curse was established, asking me to undo what was done. He brought the army of Micah with him to intimidate me, but it was laughable. I told him I was made for patience, and he left.

“Telo returned sometime later without his armies. The sand had already swept over the land, but the garden of first light remained untouched. He brought with him the king of Livana, Joseph, resurrected as spirit to be the memory of the Silver City. It was on Joseph’s advice Telo challenged me. It was my duty to prevent any from reentering the garden until the perfect timing. I was made to defend the garden, and I believed it would be a quick battle.

“He did not destroy me so much as humiliate me. He burned the garden to ash, before my very eyes. He subdued me with forbidden magic and then shut me away for eternity. I was conscious of my failure every moment of every year until now. You’ve freed me, yes, but I am afraid it changes nothing.”

Katchan reached into the bag and squeezed the rock to rid himself of some of the anger building inside. Everywhere he turned, there was another obstacle in his path. It all started with Saulnier's greed. He was already the most powerful man in Gaelwyn, why did he need more?

All Katchan wanted now was to find a way to escape Midbar. If he never read Maggaline's last story, he would be sad, but surely it was inevitable. Why would she write something she knew he could not possibly read? The thought struck him as odd. Odd, because it was familiar. There was someone else who couldn't read some old writing, wasn't there?

Katchan turned to Joseph, "In Livana, there was an older part of the king's library that held thousands of stone tablets with ancient script, correct?"

"Why, yes? How did you know?"

"Valerie stumbled into the older part and spoke to the translator. He said the language was dead. Did he ever finish translating that ancient script?"

"No," Joseph said.

Katchan sighed.

"He didn't, but one of his descendants did. Not all of the tablets, but many of them."

"What did they say? What did the stone tablets say?"

"I'm not allowed to speak it," Joseph said.

"You will!"

"Yes, tell the boy," Echo said.

"So quick to judge. I cannot, because I am not allowed to speak the language of the gods."

"But Valerie was, wasn't she? She found the portrait where the stone tablets were finally translated," Katchan said.

Joseph hesitated. “Yes.”

“When she first used the eclyptas, she was in despair, but she learned how to use it at will. It’s in your memories, isn’t it? How did she use the eclyptas at will?”

Joseph looked thoughtfully out into the garden. Perhaps he was seeing it as it used to be before he handed it over to Telo. He had done enough evil to render his soul forfeit to Borsol for good. No amount of waiting around would change that.

“If I speak this word Valerie learned, I may never find peace. I do not deserve peace. I do not deserve forgiveness.”

Katchan thought back to Saulnier. Another man who did not deserve forgiveness. He almost saw these two as one in the same, but Joseph had long enough time to repent. Still, he would not gain that forgiveness he craves from him, nor Valerie.

“I’m glad you see that,” Katchan said.

“You’ve called on this word before, without you’re realizing it. In your despair, your spirit spoke for you. We are all born with the divine words, but few can understand them. Those that do become Oracles, Prophets, or Sophites. Now I will speak the word to you, and you will know it because you always have, yet it will force me into despair.”

“It is no less than you deserve,” Azmina growled.

“Still, I thank you,” Katchan said.

“The word is Chalam. It will unlock dreams and mysteries. Focus on the word, as you did to travel through Midbar. Focus on the word. Let it transform you.”

“What happens to you now?”

“Oh, I’m sure the punishment will be here soon enough. Now focus.”

Katchan sat down, as he remembered Valerie did. He sat and breathed through his nostrils and focused on the word. Chalam.

A divine word. Maggaline would be thrilled to hear I know a divine word.

He focused, repeating the word in his head over and over. Squeezing his eyes, the word became louder in his mind, until its shouting was the only thing he could hear. His fingers grew numb, as did his feet. His head began to lighten, he felt currents of energy racing through his body. He intensely repeated the word until his whole world changed.

Chalam!

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

DAUGHTER OF LIVANA

He was there now, in the hall of paintings. He opened his eyes. After being squeezed shut, they had trouble adjusting to the light. But then, there was little light to adjust to. Katchan stood and observed everything around him. It was just as Maggaline told it: paintings upon paintings hung on walls down as far as the eye could see. What she did not tell him was how the hall would sound. A distinct silence, but not quite quiet, filled the room. It was like a light breeze in a room.

It occurred to him that every story Maggaline ever told must be true. There was no more doubt in his heart. How could he not believe what his eyes could clearly see? Why did it ever take him so long to trust her?

Something Benjamin said came back to him, though. Saulnier wanted the stories because they contained power. Katchan realized that even though he himself did not believe the stories, not truly, until now, that they still held a power over him. He wondered if that's what the people of Gaelwyn were like: trusting the storytellers over the story. Listening without believing. They did not see with their eyes what he sees now: a magnificent hall of paintings. Why did he ever assume he was the only one who did not give the stories much thought? If he ever returned to Gaelwyn, he'd be sure to find out.

Saulnier feared Maggaline's influence because she was trusted more than him. He must have feared her final story because then she truly would hold all the influence. All this pain Saulnier created because he could never be like her: he could never believe.

The paintings of the man in red armor, and the woman in black armor, stood across from each other. What Maggaline described was true: the detail was incredible. It was realer than real life. He had seen only a few paintings, but compared to them, these were made by a master. The sight of these two only made his pulse quicken: the Garden of First Light painting should be here.

“You are a long way from home, child.”

Katchan turned and saw an elderly woman standing with her hands behind her back. She was calm, focused even. Her face did not display anything but serenity and a kind smile. Her hair was dark, her eyes golden.

“Princess...Valerie?”

“You know my name? How interesting. Now, what is your story?”

Katchan was still in shock, hardly able to speak. He sputtered out his name, and Valerie memorized it immediately. Then his words spilled out like oil from a jar. Everything that happened, from Maggaline’s death, to Saulnier, Midbar, and Micah. When he got to Joseph being the memory of Livana, she looked surprised, but still, he could not stop.

“And now there is no way to revive Micah, because the garden is burned to nothing,” Katchan finished, finding himself nearly in tears.

Valerie watched the boy cry with compassion. “You’ve endured much, child. You must be very strong.”

Katchan stopped, shocked by what she said. He looked at her with tears still burning his eyes. “Strong? How can you say I am strong? I just run away. I ran from Grandma that night, and she was hurt. I ran from Gaelwyn, and now I may die out here. I ran when Micah fought the warriors. Never, in all of Grandma’s stories, was there ever a hero who ran.”

Valerie chuckled, putting her hands to her lips like a proper princess would. “What nonsense that is, child.”

Katchan stopped, confused. She continued: “You only hear the stories of men and women at their best. They always beat the monster, they always save the kingdom, they always find a way to win. You don’t see how they became a hero, do you? Trust me, I’ve seen them all. No one becomes a hero without first being pushed past their breaking point. They all ran at some point. Even your dear father, Micah, fled when he was most needed.”

“I can’t believe that? He’s so powerful,” Katchan said.

Valerie sighed. “I have watched the events of Midbar since the beginning. Micah could have faced down his great enemy from the beginning, but instead he believed himself unworthy and ran. Let me tell you this, child: no man is able to deem himself worthy or unworthy of a great task.”

“You sound like my Grandma,” Katchan said.

“And what a compliment that is.”

“It is. Wait, how would you know?”

Valerie chuckled again, putting her hands to her lips. “Come with me, child.”

Valerie swept her hands in the air, and the paintings changed. Even the portraits of the man and woman in armor were gone. He looked at one carefully and recognized Tamar, the village well in Gaelwyn. He studied another of a beautiful young girl in white: Willow, the Oracles apprentice.

“Here’s what I see: all the lives lived; all the stories told,” Valerie said walking past one and waving her arms to present it to Katchan.

It was him, seated on the ground at the feet of Maggaline.

“She knew such wonderful stories,” Valerie said.

Katchan stared at the boy in the painting and wondered if they would recognize each other.

“You see, I do know Maggaline quite well,” Valerie said.

Katchan burned red, “Then you must know who Saulnier is? despicable old man.”

“Ah, Saulnier.” Valerie waved her hand, and the paintings changed. The painting he was just looking at was now the Elder sitting on his throne. His head was buried in his hand.

“He looks...”

“Distraught,” Valerie finished.

Katchan agreed. “It’s no less than he deserves.”

Valerie scowled. “Think that way, and one day you’ll become just like him.”

“What are you talking about? You saw what he did to Grandma! He destroyed her reputation just before she died. Now the whole village thinks she covered up my mother’s sins, which is a lie! How can you have pity on him? Your brother Joseph did the same to you, and he doesn’t deserve pity either.”

“Oh, I know very well what Joseph did. I know very well what Saulnier did. And let me tell you a secret, child. I forgave Joseph years ago. I suggest you do the same for Saulnier.”

Katchan was speechless. He searched the stories in his mind, they were all so clear in this place. There were heroes, villains, battles, destruction, victory; no forgiveness. Even Gad did not forgive his enemies but destroy them. Telo judged the elder of village moon by slaughtering him. Where did Valerie get this idea?

“I sense you are unsure, child.”

“He asked me, once this was all over, to send him to the void. It was a mercy only I can give him with my blood and the Ashen sword. I told him he doesn’t deserve it.”

“Yet he holds out hope that you will give him the peace he desires? I tell you; it is only by fate you did not send him to the void when you could. He would not find peace there.”

“He won’t like that. He betrayed Telo in hopes to find what he wants with me.”

“Poor, lost brother of mine. Always searching for himself through power.”

Katchan twinged at the thought: Saulnier had much in common with Joseph. How does one forgive? He knows no stories that can show him. Valerie’s anger cooled against her brother, maybe that is what forgiveness looks like. But then, maybe he had already seen it. Maggaline did not seem ill towards Saulnier, even after what he said. Is it possible she had already forgiven him? If she had, then, could he? There was only one way to know.

“Valerie, the garden of first light is destroyed in Midbar, but I remember you from your story, what you were able to do.”

“Oh, I can do much more than just see the stories, child. Come, I will help you find what you need.”

Valerie waved her hand. The paintings changed, and Katchan was standing in front of a large frame that reached the ceiling. He noticed there was paintings all over the ceiling as well, he could not make out the figures, but they were there, mingling, as if happy to be with one another.

He looked down and saw it was the garden of first light. There were two humans picking fruits. The held baskets and looked as if they were laughing.

“They will help you find what you need,” Valerie said.

“I don’t understand? Who are they?”

Katchan thought back to the man and woman in armor. *Could it be them?*

“There is an awful lot for you to learn, but first you must survive Midbar,” Valerie said.

“What if it gets too hard? What if I run again?”

Valerie chuckled. “I want you to run, Katchan. Run to where you’re most needed. Now go.”

Katchan looked at the painting of the garden; it was alive, beautiful, green. He took a last look at Valerie and smiled. He stepped through, and the portrait swallowed him.

He swirled around as if caught in a wave, the air around him was thick, heavy, and cold. He couldn’t breathe, but he did not panic. He did not need air. He began floating, or being drawn toward a light, and it passed through him. the light was so bright, he closed his eyes. When opened them, he was looking at a tree, taller than any tree he had ever seen in his life. He looked around and saw fruit hanging from limbs, and berries on bushes. He picked a fruit and bit in. It was sweeter than anything he had ever tasted.

Imagine making wine from this instead of beets.

Then there was the smell: it was all around him like a delightful dream; flowers and fresh air. As if it were going to rain, but there was not a cloud in the sky. There were many in Gaelwyn who tried to capture this smell, but they were stale in comparison.

This is the Garden of First Light, I’m really here, or are my senses being toyed with?

It could be a dream like the knights buried beneath the royal crypt, but he wasn’t disembodied then; he wasn’t watching, he was participating. It was real. Two voices came from his right. Katchan hid behind a bush.

“Hadara, you can’t be serious? A name like for such a stunning animal, it’s beneath him!”

“Caleb, when I asked if I could name the next animal, you agreed. Are you going back on your promise?”

“No, I...”

“I don’t question your decisions,” the woman said.

Caleb and Hadara. When they came into view, he recognized their faces. *The man and woman in armor. Valerie trusted them.*

Katchan stepped out from behind the bush, taking a last bite from the fruit and throwing the core behind him. He wouldn’t normally be so bold, but he felt time running out. If time was even still ticking. The two turned to him with shock written all over their face.

“My name is Katchan, Princess Valerie said you would help me find something I need.”

Caleb looked at Hadara. “One of *her* tricks I presume?”

“Oh, don’t be silly, she wouldn’t do something like this. And I told you, she’s harmless.”

“Not so harmless if she wants us to leave the garden, defy Marikel?”

“She doesn’t want us to defy—“

“This isn’t one of Valerie’s tricks, or whoever you’re talking about. I need a ruach leaf, and branch from the tree of Mowphath,” Katchan said.

Caleb marched towards him; Katchan noticed he was wearing only a loin cloth. “That proves what you are, little trick. Only we know what and where both the ruach and the Mowphath is. She could know and tell you trick us. Begone!”

“What name was that? Valerie?” Hadara asked.

“Yes, the princess from Livana, Valerie. She used the eclyptas to get to the hall of paintings, and now I have it in Midbar.”

Caleb stopped, “Whoa, the eclyptas?” He looked at Hadara. “Asher mentioned a jewel he was crafting, did he not call it eclyptas?”

“Asher?” Katchan asked.

Caleb chuckled, “You act as if you’ve never heard of him.”

Katchan’s blank face was answer enough.

“One of the sons of Marikel?” Caleb answered.

Katchan could not speak. The ruby he inherited from Maggaline, could it really be a jewel made from a god?

“I think that settles it, Caleb. He is not one of Aurora’s tricks, since she knows Asher very well.”

Katchan looked closer upon Hadara. The portrait of her in black armor showed a much different face than the kind, confident, motherly face she wore. He felt a pit grow in his gut. Caleb was handsome and happy, unlike his own portrait in red armor. Something happens here that is unrecorded. He was certain.

“If that is so,” Caleb said, “Then where in Idyll did you come from? What are all these names and places you’ve mentioned?”

“We’ve only been here, in the Garden of First Light. We don’t know much else about the world,” Hadara said.

Katchan wondered what to say. He did not know their story, but he somehow knew they didn’t need to know his either.

“To be honest, I do not know much about the world either. I come from a village far away, and I am in a place I don’t belong. I’m here now because I meditated upon the word Chalam using the eclyptas. My only chance at survival is to find the ruach and Mowphath tree.”

“A divine word, Chalam,” Caleb said to Hadara. She nodded.

“If that is what you need, Katchan of the village far away, then we can help.”

Katchan followed them to a clearing. In the middle of the clearing was a tree, not grander than any tree, but smaller. Its branches were thick, and stuck out wild and unkempt. The tree was untamed.

“It’s not like I imagined,” Katchan said.

In stories, the quests heroes went on required trips to the highest peak, or climbing the tallest tree, or swimming the grandest river. Whatever item they acquired was significant in size, or color, or shape.

“The Mowphath? It is small, but powerful. Take a branch as you wish. Pick carefully,” Caleb said.

Katchan wandered around the tree, and saw the branches looked similar, but for notches in a few. There were so many, he began to worry that he might pick the wrong one.

“There is no wrong choice,” Hadara said.

“He will find the one fate decided,” Caleb said to her.

Neither of them was helpful, but Katchan recognized he was in a rush. He grabbed a branch at the base and pulled at it. The branch broke away as if it were a dead twig, but the flesh was fresh and smelled wonderfully.

Caleb and Hadara looked at one another with shock. Katchan held the branch out to them, it had leaves and twigs all over it.

“Boy, where did you say you came from?” Caleb asked.

“I told you, a far-off land,” Katchan said.

“I didn’t expect the Mowphath to yield to you so easily. There are still more things I must learn about this garden, apparently.” Caleb examined the branch Katchan held out. “It is a beautiful branch. You’ll need to work the branch into your own, but that will come in time.”

Hadara walked off for a long moment, then returned with a woven bag. “Inside is a leaf from the ruach. The weave is made from a palm and is indestructible. It will keep the leaf safe from harm.”

Katchan took the bag and thanked her. Her dark hair and golden eyes reminded him of Willow, the oracles apprentice. It was at this moment that he realized he did not feel so sour about returning to Gaelwyn. It was a stupid, unrequested thought. Of course, Saulnier would still be after Maggaline’s story and the ruby. But maybe, with the Oracles help that could change. After all he had been through, taking on the village did not seem a terrifying task.

“I hope to see you two again someday,” Katchan said. He reached into his pouch looking for the eclyptas but did not find it. He looked wide eyed at Caleb. Katchan scrambled back to the clearing he first entered, finding it nowhere. Caleb and Hadara followed behind him, mostly out of curiosity.

“It’s gone, the ruby!”

“So that’s the jewel Asher picked,” Caleb said, crossing his arms.

“Calm down, Katchan. How did you get here?” Hadara asked.

“I focused on a word. Chalam,” Katchan said.

“Well, then.” Hadara waved her hand, “Chalam!”

Katchan felt a pull, and with a last look at the two, he sunk into the deeps of dreaming. He floated, being dragged through a pool, until he surfaced in the hall, facing Valerie again. He had his branch from the tree of Mowphath, the woven bag with ruach, and the eclyptas.

Valerie watched him pat around his pouch furiously. “You enter the paintings only as yourself when you go. You’ve been gone a long time now, you had better return, child.”

Katchan looked at her desperately, “wait, I can’t go yet! Maggaline knew your art of emesal. I’ve traveled all this way to find the village below the dome to learn these arts, but you can teach me! After everything I’ve done and experienced, you can teach me how to read Maggaline’s last story. Then maybe I can return to Gaelwyn and set everything straight with Saulnier.” Katchan pulled out the leather binding holding Maggaline’s last story. “Please, I beg you. Teach me!”

Valerie kneeled beside Katchan and placed a hand on his shoulder. “My poor child, I cannot teach you these things.”

Katchan grew angry. “You’re the *only* one who can. For the first time in my life I ask someone to teach me, and they refuse. What is this?”

Valerie laughed, not the feminine chuckle with her hand placed over her mouth, but a full-on laugh. Katchan’s anger subsided into confusion. Valerie lifted him up and started walking.

“You are on the first steps to learning, I must admit. You ask why I can’t teach you? It is because you’re not ready to learn. Gaelwyn did not just lose the art of emesal, your elders actively suppressed it in the hopes to prevent another tragedy like Livana from ever happening again. To master emesal is to become immortal. Livana grew arrogant in their abilities and assumed they were the masters of their own world. We recorded everything, and yet forgot the most important rule: never forget your limits. Before the end, they believed they had surpassed all mortal limits, and yet never realized their limitations were so far above them, they could not possibly recognize how truly mortal they were.

“After a time, Gaelwyn forgot what it was suppressing, and forgot it was ever suppressing anything at all. Emesal died in a way it could never be revived. The Oracles maintain a small bit of it, but the gift is so rare that only a few girls ever have the ability to learn. It just so happened Micah met the one woman in all of Gaelwyn who had the innate abilities of emesal and was also a sophite, a weaver of wisdom. And in all of the rarest circumstances, from her line came a boy with the innate abilities of a sophite who is also blood of the children of dawn.”

“What? What does this all mean?”

Valerie stopped in front of a painting of a wasteland. Midbar.

Valerie smiled. “It means your abilities go far beyond emesal. Far beyond my own limits.”

“Does this mean I’ll never read Maggaline’s last story?”

Valerie bent down and met Katchan’s gaze. “I do not know the future. But I think a determined boy like you will do endless things. Including carrying the story of Maggaline the Sophite.”

Katchan gave a weak smile.

Valerie stood. “Go now. Midbar calls for you.”

“Wait, I still have so many more questions!”

Valerie waved her hand, and Katchan felt the tug of sinking into a pool. He floated through some part of the world he had no name for, until he reached the surface. Katchan took a deep breath, and all his senses focused on the wasteland he left: The sun beat down, the sweet smells of the garden were replaced by dust, the beauty of the hall was replaced by visions of an

endless sea of nothing. He looked around him, frantic with victory and hope, then all the goodness of the past eternity turned vile.

“Welcome back, exiled one.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CARRY THE STORY

Telo held the Ashen sword over his shoulder. Azmina, the guardian of the garden, was beaten to harmlessness. Echo, Rordion, and Yashnu were nowhere to be found. Joseph, strong as he seemed before, hung upside down between two poles held by two of Telo's warriors, with the other two behind him, waiting for their master's command.

"Where are they?" Katchan demanded.

"Your friends are working diligently on my fortress. Thank you for the additional crew members. We were sorely lacking. We could have been friends, you and I. There is much we have in common," Telo said.

"I'm nothing like you," Katchan said.

"Oh, is that so? Did you not dream of leaving your little village for something grander? Were you not tired of the exaggerated stories, wanting something a little more real? Was your elder not threatening to keep you bound, even though you are special?"

Katchan nodded at Joseph, "Let him go."

"You do not have any authority here, exiled one."

Katchan held out the eclyptas and smiled. "But I do have all the power."

Telo's face scrunched, in mock laughter.

Katchan reached down deep, remembering the word Micah used to destroy Telo and his army at the crypt: "Ba'ar!"

Fire from a world beyond broke open from the sky and struck Telo. Katchan watched the flames, remembering what they did to the abyssal.

I have the power now, you damned Exile!

He never felt more in control then that moment, but then, the fire stopped. The Ashen sword glowed red.

Telo slowly lowered the Ashen sword. He narrowed his eyes and glared, anger seething from every pore in his body. “How dare you challenge me, boy.”

“Katchan,” Azmina growled. “Run!”

“Is this what you want?” Katchan said, holding out the eclyptas. “Make one wrong move, and you’ll never see me, or this, again. I know the secrets of the world now. I can go anywhere, anytime I want.”

The look on Telo’s face told Katchan he had struck a nerve. All Telo wanted was to leave Midbar, and Katchan could at will. Katchan blinked, and Telo was gone. A hand smacked him on the shoulder, and he felt Telo’s breath on his ear.

“What an arrogant little boy.” Telo snatched the eclyptas from Katchan’s hand and pushed him to the sand.

When Katchan looked up, Telo was back over by Joseph.

“A weasel in life and death. You taught him the secret language, Joseph. Now, how come you did not teach me the words of the eclyptas?”

Joseph coughed through a swollen face. Spirits can harm other spirits in Midbar as if they were physical bodies, but from what Katchan saw, they could never die. Unless one were killed by the Ashen sword.

“You brought me here to suffer. Why would I condemn myself further in the eyes of Marikel?”

Telo smirked, “Oh Joseph, you already have.”

Telo stepped back and pointed the Ashen sword at Joseph.

“Wait!” Katchan said.

Telo lowered the Ashen sword.

“Joseph, I saw her. I met Valerie. She has a message for you,” Katchan said.

“The last insult of a scorned sister? I’ll allow it,” Telo said.

“Tell me, Katchan, even if it hurts,” Joseph said.

“She said she forgives you. She forgave you a long time ago. You can die in peace now,” Katchan said.

Telo raised the Ashen sword, pointing at Joseph.

“Your death won’t be peaceful,” Telo said.

The blade glowed red; fire shot out and consumed Joseph. His screams rose over the sound of crisping skin and cracking bones. Katchan covered his ears and realized he was shouting for Telo to stop. When he opened his eyes, there was no body hanging on the pole. Joseph had disintegrated from the ba’ar stored in the Ashen sword.

“A spectacular sword this is.”

Telo squeezed the ruby until it cracked. Red lightning pulsated from the crack, and Telo blew on the red particles leaving a circular, smooth jewel in his hand. Katchan watched as Telo brought the ruby to the hilt of the sword. A few inches from the sword’s pommel, the ruby flew to fill the space. Red embers sizzled around the blade.

“Now it is complete.” Telo looked at the four warriors, who eyed Katchan greedily. “Go find the body of your old commander and bring it to my fortress. Only one of the children of dawn can break through a curse from Marikel.”

Telo still doesn’t know my lineage. They haven’t told him the truth, why?

“Yes, my lord,” Harol bowed.

Telo turned to Katchan, “And make sure this one becomes like his friends: a spirit under the curse of Marikel. I won’t have him make trouble for me again.”

Harol smiled viscously.

With that, Telo was gone. Back to his fortress, Katchan assumed.

“It does pain lord Telo to be so cruel. Especially to one so undeserving as you,” Harol said.

“Yes, you are only a boy. How could you cause so much trouble?” Argwenna said.

“Our lord is so busy with his duties, that he failed to see you for who you really are,” Turr said.

“Let’s not be too hard on his lordship, he does not know the commander as well as we do. How else could he see the similarity?” Yugil said.

Harol walked toward Katchan, who scrambled in the sand to stand. He held out the branch from the Mowphath tree like a sword.

“You are Commander Micah’s blood child,” Harol said. “Our lordship believes it will be he who escapes Midbar, leaving us behind. But you are the key out of here. We only followed orders, you understand? We had no desire to be caught between these cosmic forces.”

“You could have told Telo from the beginning, then maybe you would have all escaped with him,” Katchan said.

Harol stopped and looked at the others. “Telo’s war involves nobody except Telo. He doesn’t need an army to fight, just to build his great altar.”

Katchan backed away toward Azmina.

“That great fortress of his is an altar to himself. He’ll summon the command spirit from the void and sacrifice him at the top. The curse will break, and he will be free. But he won’t leave us stranded, he’ll destroy us with his departure. Midbar will collapse upon itself once the source of the curse leaves. The source being Telo himself. So, as you can see, we’d rather not be here when that happens,” Harol said.

Please work.

“We don’t need much blood, but you will need all we take,” Argwenna said.

Katchan backed up until the beast stopped him from walking any further. The four were nearly on top of him, walking confident.

“You’ve been after me from the beginning, but it’s over now,” Katchan said.

“Yes, it is finally over. We long to see our family’s and what’s become of them, our home and what’s become of it. Your sacrifice won’t be pointless,” Harol said.

“That’s too bad,” Katchan said. Then he whirled around and struck the guardian with the limb from the Mowphath tree.

The beast roared, and Azmina rose. Harol lunged for Katchan, but a strong arm slapped him away. The other three drew their swords and attacked, but the guardian waved his hand, creating a sword from sand, blocking their attacks. He whipped them away, and the sand fell off in chunks revealing flames surrounding the blade.

Katchan ran to not get caught between the fight. Azmina and Harol clashed, but the beast overpowered him and threw Harol back. Argwenna jumped on Azmina’s back and slashed at his head. Yugil and Turr stabbed Azmina in the exposed areas of the beast’s ribs while he tried to throw the warrior from atop his head. Harol threw a chain around the creature’s head, and drug

him to the ground. The other two wrapped the chain around him. Azmina struggled, but the four managed to finally subdue him.

Harol walked over to Katchan. His face was bloody, and he breathed heavily.

“Your father was a great commander, and teacher. We’ve taken beasts like this down in places you’ve never heard of. But, it was a valiant effort.”

Katchan growled, “Azmina. I thought you were the handiwork of Marikel himself, guardian of the Garden of First Light!”

“Can’t you see he’s beaten?” Argwenna asked.

“First the land he was put in charge of is decimated, then he himself is beaten by Telo not once, but twice. If Marikel truly put him here, He made a mistake,” Yugil said.

“Run, Katchan,” Azmina growled.

“No! I’m not running from this fight, and you’re not quitting either. Get up and fight through these chains. You’re not weak, you are the guardian of First Light!”

“Be quiet already, boy. The beast is finished,” Harol said.

“Harol, watch out!” Turr shouted.

Azmina rose to a knee. Steam poured out of his body, and the temperature soared around them. Katchan ran away, knowing the power of fire.

“I am, the Guardian of First Light...” Azmina said, as if to himself. Then he breathed, and fire exhaled from his mouth. “I am the Guardian of First Light!” The beast roared, and the chains melted, brandishing his scaly skin with the etchings of the links.

“Do we really have to do this again?” Harol said.

Azmina shot toward Harol, covering the distance like a spark, and knocked him to the ground. Harol's Musphelian sword flew in the air, and Azmina caught it. The blade melted in his hand.

The other three leaped to attack Azmina but drew back from the steam pouring from the beast's body. Azmina grabbed Yugil and Turr, they screamed, their skin turning red until they quit moving. He dropped them. Argwenna backed away and ran.

"He's going back to Telo!" Katchan cried.

Azmina watched the warrior run. He cut off the steam and grabbed one of the fallen warrior's Musphelian swords and threw it like a spear. The blade tore through Argwenna, and he stopped.

Katchan walked to where Azmina stood. The beast turned to look at the boy.

"Thank you, Katchan. Even though I stayed in my appointed position, I had forgotten who I was. You reminded me of what I can do. My powers to defend the garden are limitless, I remember now."

The sun was setting in Midbar.

"Azmina, I have the ruach leaf. I can still revive Micah. Reviving Micah is truly the only thing I can do now. I've lost the Eclyptas and the Ashen sword. My body is probably going to die out here, and I'll become a spirit. The least I can do is talk to my father, give Gaelwyn a chance at survival."

Azmina growled. "I can take you a short way, but I cannot leave my station for long."

The sun was setting as Azmina's large wings carried Katchan toward the royal crypt, where Micah's body lay. Flying on Azmina's back, Katchan felt for the first time a sense of peace. The stars shown overhead in a dazzling beauty, and he wondered how everyone called

this place a curse. How could a curse contain such beauty? Perhaps Marikel did not create Midbar to be a curse, but those within could only see it as a curse? Perhaps they turned Midbar into a curse. Perhaps it was more than that: a dream to wake from, a story to have an end.

Azmina landed and helped Katchan off his back.

“I can go no further. Follow that star in the sky, and you will find the royal crypt.”

Katchan stepped forward, his weight supporting the branch from the Mowphath tree.

“Azmina. I don’t think this ends without us facing Telo. When we do, will you join us?”

The beast growled, looking in the direction of Telo’s fortress. “I must guard the Garden of First Light. That is my station. I thank you, Katchan, for returning me to my strength, but now I must defend what I was made to defend.”

Katchan, knowing nothing could be said to change the mighty creatures mind, thanked him. Azmina flapped his great wings and disappeared into the night, with only his figure drawn by the moon. Katchan faced the star Azmina directed him to and began walking.

As he went along, he began clearing his branch of the twigs and leaves. He put them all into his pouch with Maggaline’s story, he figured they could be useful somehow. He ran his hand across the branch and felt the bumps from where the twigs were broken off. If he had a knife, he could whittle them away, but making this into a smooth staff like the one Maggaline used would be a true work of craftsmanship.

He wondered if this staff would be used to bring Micah back. Panic should have seized him as he realized he had no idea how to use the ruach leaf to bring anyone back to life, but he had a peace about him he did not understand. It was the same oddity he felt while riding on Azmina. Here he was in Midbar, near death, without his most useful tool: the Eclyptas. He also lacked the friends he made, and the great sword of Asher. *What strangeness this is?*

He entered the Garden afraid and unsure, and left without those feelings. Whatever outcomes may be, there was no way he could affect them. He was more powerless in Midbar now than ever. It was pure acceptance of his situation. Whatever he was, beyond Emesal as Valerie said, could still die here. Whatever forces were in control, call it fate, kept him alive until now. Whatever fear he did or did not feel seemed to have no effect on these forces.

There was a story Maggaline told him of a poet from village Rock who was ordered to village Moon under the time of Moon's tyrannical rule. This poet was to soothe the ills of the elder moon, who was plagued by dark forces from Borsol. His art: music and poetry; song and melody, was the only force capable of sending the darkness away. He had no choice but to go. Traveling from Village Rock to Village Moon was sometimes fatal, as the paths were lined with vagrants and worse, Ungrieved. Still, he had no choice. He walked through the shadow of darkness fearlessly. He knew whatever outcomes may be, he was loved by Marikel, and his art would live on the tongues of man for centuries.

The poetry lived only on the tongues of the Elders of Gaelwyn, but the poet's music was found in every babbling brook, every leaf shaken by the wind, every clamor of pots and pans, and crash of clay jars. Every strum of a lute or leer held pieces of the poets art. Katchan listened to music only from afar, when the villagers gathered together for a festival and danced around a large fire, he sat away in the cold watching the mystery of the poets' work. They laughed, sang, and dispelled the darkness with a tune. And beside him was Maggaline, the one with all the stories and poetry and songs and melody's locked in an eternal mind, alone with him. She never told Katchan if that poet survived the journey, for that was not the point.

Maggaline lived fearlessly because she lived by these stories.

That's all she wanted for him. To carry the stories.

“I will Grandma, I will.” Katchan vowed, speaking the vow so he would hear.

Footsteps alerted Katchan to a coming visitor from the direction of the garden. He turned, holding the staff in a way he could use to defend himself. He hoped he would not have to, but that was no longer up to him. Like Gath, the prophet who destroyed a temple, and the unnamed poet walking the long dark paths, he would face this unafraid.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

A VISITOR IN THE DARK

Darkness cloaked the figure standing before him, not even the moonlight was enough to see, but he needed neither the sun nor moon to know who it was.

“Even though I am unarmed, that staff will not protect you, boy. You’re too inexperienced,” Harol said.

“Azmina didn’t finish you off like your other friends, though I’m sure they’ll be back like all you spirits do,” Katchan said.

“Not this time, I’m afraid. But maybe that is for the best.”

“And why is that?”

Harol drew near Katchan; he backed away. “I’m tired of fighting. You were our last hope to escape Midbar with our souls intact, but without the others, I see no reason to leave. I’ve been dead for years; why am I still suffering? I blamed the commander for everything, but long ago we realized he would never lead us down this destructive path. This war of Telo’s has hurt many, and he is so powerful we never went against him. How could we? We were weak compared to Micah, weaker still against Telo.”

Katchan lowered his staff. The wind blew gracefully, whipping sand in a light frenzy. “So you’re not going to attack me again?”

Harol laughed, “What would be the point? You’ve surprised us over and over. Telo did not want to even bother with you, just allow you to die like the other four from your little village. That was when we took our chance to find you. I never expected you to possess such strength. We assumed that was the last we would see of you, but then you showed up at the fortress. You

were knocked around a bit, but you were alive, truly. Stronger even. And then you carried the Ashen sword. That confirmed our suspicions: Micah had a son. If I were to try and sacrifice you now, you would just pull some trick out of thin air like before. Convincing a beaten monster to continue fighting, what madness! I've been caught in the middle of this curse for a long time. If I just follow you now, who knows, maybe the curse is drawing to its end."

Katchan chuckled, "I think I understand. You want to escort me."

Harol nodded.

"How can I trust you, after what you did to Joseph?"

"You can't trust me, Katchan, not yet. In fact, I'd advise against blind trust. You're going to the commander now, let me earn my trust as we walk."

Harol grabbed the staff from Katchan's hands.

"Hey, wait a minute!"

He whipped out a small dagger and began slowly whittling at the bark.

"I was an armorer master in Micah's army. It was my job to make use of the land to create weapons when supplies ran low. This wood is remarkable."

Katchan's sense of peace had not disappeared, so he let Harol work without any further complaint. They followed the star, crossing dunes and long sand bridges. Katchan realized he was not tired, his feet no longer hurt, and he could keep moving for hours.

"Harol?"

"Yes?"

"Did you see my body collapse at any point?"

"You're still very much alive. You can thank your blood for that."

"Do you know about his blood? Micah's?"

“His blood is not something I wish to discuss.”

“Micah’s dead. I could be the last of his blood. Do you want his story to die?”

Harol stopped. He snatched sand from the earth and rubbed it around the staff, inspected it, then handed it to Katchan. The staff was as smooth as Maggaline’s.

“Impressive.”

“You’re more than impressed, admit it.”

Harol gazed into the dark night sky and saw the stars for the first time. “You know, there was always a dark cloud over the land when I was with Telo. It made me so angry not to see the stars, and I hated Micah for it. But they were always there, weren’t they?”

“Midbar has always been a little bit beautiful,” Katchan said.

“It’s like I was sleeping this whole time.” Harol looked at Katchan. “Fine, I’ll tell you about Micah, what there is to know. Maybe we’ll run into the royal crypt before I get to the worst parts, eh?”

Harol began, and Katchan could see something in the glint of his eyes. A sadness in recounting a story that was not his own. But no, that couldn’t be. All stories are another’s experience. If Katchan survived to tell this story, it would not even be his own, but the story of a boy who was angry and afraid and ran from his Grandmother when she needed him most. He was no longer that boy, something in him had changed. No, the sadness in Harol’s eye was in recounting a bitter taste of loss.

“Micah was the youngest of three boys born to a woman named Aster, and a divine councilman named Kal. I know what you’re thinking, *Kal is a god?* And you’re somewhat correct. Kal was a god, but by some reason or another, he was banished from Hysol for a time. He lost his place on the council and lived on Idyll for some time. If you know your history you’ll

remember the head of the council, Scythe and Asher the Divisive were always at odds. I believe Kal supported Asher, and that was the reason. But who knows what really happens in the divine universe. Kal was still a god, but he had none of his godhood during the time of his banishment.

“He wed Aster, one of the children of dawn, and they had twin boys named Rama and Rhava. Rama took on the characteristics of his father Kal, and Rhava was more like his mother, Aster. Aster was well trained in the bow and arrow, and taught Rhava to use it just as well, and Rama was more adept with the war-hammer, Kal’s weapon of choice. The boys competed with their weapons as brothers tend to do. And when they grew into men, they were especially competitive when fighting the Ungrieved, who were as numerous across Idyll as you could possibly believe.

“Micah was born to Aster and Kal on the same day the twins were given permission to hunt Ungrieved on their own. Rama killed many large Ungrieved with his war-hammer, and Kal was proud of him. Rhava, however, killed many more Ungrieved with his bow and arrow. Even though Rama’s kills were impressive, he grew jealous of Rhava’s skill and numbers. Rama began practicing with his brother’s bow and arrow in secret, trying to match him in skill.

“There came a day when Rama challenged Rhava to an archery contest. He was overconfident, sure that he would best Rhava. Although, he shot his best, Rhava easily defeated Rama. Because of this, Rama grew envious. And to make matters worse for him, young Micah took a greater liking to Rhava than Rama.

“Micah followed Rhava around, and went with him on hunts, and began learning the ways of the bow with him. When Micah was just a boy, he built his own bow and hunted with Rhava. When Rama offered to teach young Micah the war-hammer, Micah refused. He did not refuse because he hated Rama, as far as he says, but because he loved Rhava so much.

“Kal was not made to be a mortal father. In many ways, Rhava was Micah’s father. Rama’s jealousy consumed him and he lashed out at Aster and Kal. Kal beat him severely after he insulted Aster, and after that Rama changed. He left home for good, not even saying goodbye.

“Years passed, and Kal had returned to Hysol before any trace of Rama was seen again. Micah was a young man at this time, and trained not just with the bow, but the sword. He was becoming very well respected among his community, and even Rhava said he was a better archer than he. Still, they always hunted together. With Rama gone, the Ungrieved were growing numerous again. Even with the many tribes fighting and killing them, as well as the seven newly formed villages of Idyll, they became a threat.

“One morning, Micah woke to find Rhava gone from his tent. They were to hunt a particularly dangerous Ungrieved that day, but he was nowhere to be seen. Micah followed Rhava’s trail into the wilds of the land. He followed the tracks for days, certain he would soon find his older brother. But when he came to the end of the tracks, he did find his brother, but not the one he expected.

“Rama stood over Rhava’s body with a bloody war-hammer. Micah was filled with rage and fired his entire quiver of arrows into Rama. Somehow, he did not die, but counterattacked. Micah was forced to draw his sword and defend himself until Rama lost too much blood to go on. Micah nearly chopped his brothers head clean, but Rama sunk into the ground, as if he were a spirit, and was gone.

“Micah mourned Rhava for years, and he never stopped searching for Rama. Aster blamed Micah for her favorite son’s death and banished him from the community. He left with his heart torn to shreds.

“Many Ungrieved fell to his sword, and they called him “boundless.” There was nowhere he would not go, and always, he searched for his brother Rama to exact revenge. Rumors filled taverns, street houses, and villages. It was on these rumors he began building his army. He became convinced Rama was a great leader for the armies of Borsol, and so began finding a way to find and challenge him. It was this passion for revenge that brought him back to Idyll, to the Silver City.

“Telo, who disguised himself as Beyda at the time, convinced Micah the armies of Borsol were occupying the city of Livana. Micah had nearly lost his mind searching for his brother, and in his quest for revenge his spirit had become greatly warped. He was not careful when trusting him, but now I know that Beyda was so successful in manipulation, that it was his magic and dark arts that blinded the commander to reason. His quest for revenge brought the downfall of Livana, the Silver City. Marikel’s city. In the midst of the ruins, he could have escaped with the Ashen sword.”

Harol stopped after that and the only sound was a cool wind and footsteps in sand. After a while, Katchan felt the change in Harol. He did not run out of things to say but was no longer strong enough to say them.

“He chose to suffer instead,” Katchan said finally.

“And we despised him for it. Plotted his murder every day for as long as I can remember. We sang songs about the things we would do to him if we saw him, all along we were aligned with the true enemy, Telo. Our misery was great, but we hated him together and that was something. His misery was borne alone.”

Katchan saw the giants in the field as the sun peaked over its horizon crest. The statue of Valerie was near. Micah was near.

They found the body seated as in the same position as when Katchan left: his face twisted in a victorious smile. Katchan wondered if he believed he'd defeated Telo with that last blow, or if there was some other reason he smiled.

Harol stood over a body with the severed head.

"His name was Orphion," Harol said. "He was the only one of us to stay loyal to the commander during our rebellion. He was the only one who didn't forget how loyal our commander was to us. We vented our frustrations on him, and then he would heal, like we all do in Midbar, and then we'd beat him again."

"Why hasn't he healed now?"

"A blow from the Ashen sword is final. It's what made your father so dangerous. It is a key to many places, even death. Telo is the only being who's ever survived a killing stroke from the sword of Asher."

Katchan gazed at his father's form. "He could've annihilated his own army after they turned on him. He stored the sword away not for himself, but to protect you."

Harol sighed, "I'm afraid you could be right."

"Telo could've destroyed you in a day."

"Yes."

"But then you could've fought him again the next day. Over and over again until you wore him down and defeated him."

"He would've never worn down," Harol said.

"And neither would you! You gave Telo the victory he wanted," Katchan said.

“You don’t understand his power. His sway over the mind is intoxicating. It warps the mind. I may only be thinking clearly because that beast knocked some sense into me, but the rest of Micah’s army is fully entrenched in Telo’s grasp, they can never be free.”

Katchan looked at the body a moment more. “I wonder what happened to him?”

“You were there, you witnessed it,” Harol said.

“Not to Micah, but to Telo. He was regarded as a hero to the seven villages. He freed many from the oppression of Village Moon, and then established the Silver City in honor of Marikel. At least, that’s what the stories say. That’s what Maggaline believed, anyways. He was at least a good man, it seemed. Now he seems like...” Katchan trailed off.

“A god,” Harol said.

“Impossible, gods have no limits,” Katchan said.

“You forget your history. Kal became like a man for a time.”

“I don’t know this history you speak of. I’ve never heard these names.”

“Perhaps,” Harol said, “You know these gods by a different name.”

If there were any gods but Marikel, Maggaline would have told me.

Harol took Katchan’s silence for agreement. He walked over to the corpse of his former commander and took a knee before it. Whatever he did now, any act of regret or guilt, did not change the fact that Harol slaughtered innocent people alongside his brothers in arms then wanted to run away from the scene of the disaster. To escape responsibility. To escape punishment. It’s what they all wanted to flee from. Here lay the one man in Idyll who willingly took his punishment. If only the stories lifted Micah above Telo.

He laid his former commander’s body out. It was surprisingly movable, unlike a normal body might become stiff. He was, after all, not normal. Micah, laid out as he was, still did not

look vulnerable or indefensible. He appeared calm. Calm and dangerous. He was the perfect man to lead an army as great as the one that fell under the curse of Marikel.

Katchan walked over to his father's still body and pulled out the bag woven by Hadara. He pulled out the ruach leaf, a thing supposedly able to heal the dead. He held the leaf in his hands, and trembled.

"I don't know what I am doing. Joseph knew about the ruach leaf. I hoped he would know how to use it, but I don't."

"Calm down boy. Think like a warrior, and slow down. You survived a blow from my Musphelian sword, right? I bet you don't even carry a wound from the attack anymore."

"How do you know that?"

"Because if you did, you'd be dead. The commander healed you. He carried with him a staff from the same tree branch you have now. He used it to heal many of us many times."

Katchan thought back to the first time he met Micah, and consequently, the first time he met Harol.

"I think I know what to do."

Katchan knelt next to Micah's body and touched the wound carved in his chest. It was strange, even though he was his father, he didn't carry any strong feelings. Maybe he was cold to death now, or maybe he was simply stronger. Or maybe, he knew Micah wasn't truly dead. And he held the reason why.

Katchan spit on the ground, believing he could make enough water for mud. Instantly the spit dried up in the sand. He tried again, making less spit this time. He looked at the ruach. It was green, oily to texture, and smelled as wonderful as the Oracle of Gaelwyn. He gently squeezed

the leaf, crushing it. To his relief, water dripped from the leaf to the sand. He squeezed again, and more water drained from the leaf.

“Impossible,” Harol said.

Of course, where else would those oasis’s come from? Micah saved my life over and over again.

Katchan laughed, and squeezed again. Soon a small pool formed where his spit had dried away. The pool began growing on its own without any more help from the leaf.

“Back away, boy!” Harol said.

“No way!”

The pool formed larger, swallowing Micah. Katchan remembered the cool life giving waters of his first night in Midbar, when he was so terrified of the masked man in black across the fire. Now he was saving him. He embraced the water as it rose to his waist. The oasis stopped growing, and Micah’s body floated aimlessly.

“Throw me the staff, Harol,” Micah said.

Katchan caught it and wondered what to do next. Standing in an impossibility struck a memory of a story: Zaruk the Dweller. In his anger he struck the dry ground and the worlds well sprang up around him, but for Katchan, there was water here now.

He thought back on his own wound when Micah first saved him.

Mud.

He used the staff from the Mowphath tree to mix the water and sand to mud. He spread the mud on Micah’s wounds until they were completely covered. Then he dipped the tip of the staff into the water. Steam began rising from the massive cut. The water around Katchan seemed

to boil, but it was not hot. He moved onto the bank of the oasis. The steaming waters spread over the body until Micah was covered completely.

“Micah?” Katchan called.

There was no answer.

“Micah!”

∞

Micah heard a thin cry from above and awoke. He was by a fire too warm for his making. It was not heat the flame gave off, but something more intoxicating and invigorating. He sat up and saw a dark figure sitting on a log across from him.

“Death?” Micah said incredulously. “No, death would be too good a mercy for the likes of me. I am still under the curse of Marikel, and thus cannot die by any hand but his. Who is it that sits before me, then?”

The figure pointed a gentle, feminine finger past him.

“It is fate, then. Fate would like to mince words with someone as I? Not likely. You are a ghost of something forgotten.”

The figure pointed firmer, past his shoulder.

“Very well, spirit,” Micah said.

He turned and looked behind him. What he saw astonished him.

A baby born to a woman and a powerless god. A boy trained in the arts of war and archery by a young man. They were laughing. They loved each other. Then a young man on his knees sobbing over the death of his beloved brother.

Then it was the anger. The rage. The relentless killing of the Ungrieved. The constant challenges to his mother. The banishment to the grey worlds. The recruitment of soldiers: Titus,

Orphion, Harol, and many others. Going to war with dangerous and violent villages. Toppling evil nations. Challenging even the creatures from Borsol. Always looking, always searching. Never satisfied. Never happy. It was all a bleak description of a life dedicated to the wrong thing. Revenge.

He bowed his head in shame. His whole life after Rhava was bleak, harrowing, and full of death. Then, a bright spot came. He looked up, and like an angel, there she was. The woman he met at the edge of the boundary he created between Midbar and Gaelwyn for the survivors of the siege of Livana.

“Avalene.”

Her hair was dark, shimmering in the moonlight, with eyes that saw the true self beneath the muck. He regarded himself as an unworthy man, but she saw what he could be. He told her stories of a better time. They were laughing. They were falling in love. And something cold broke within him like ice falling off a branch in the coming spring, and he realized he let his guard down. They married in secret. They had their child. And then, the bleakness returned. If he had to do it over, would he have loved her again?

“Yes,” he said.

He turned back to the figure.

“You torture me so?”

“You only torture yourself, my love.”

The figure stood and the fire revealed the striking beauty of the woman he loved many years ago.

“Avalene,” he said in disbelief.

She glided around the fire, graceful in all her movements, and put a hand on his weary shoulder.

“Do not blame yourself any longer for my fate. It was never in your hands. All I wanted was to escape from Gaelwyn so I could find if there was something more. You brought it to me. Your stories were the most wonderful part of my life. I escaped to distant plains with you on those nights, and then you wrapped me in arms of protection and comfort.”

“Avalene, I...”

“You have lived under this curse for too long now. You can have freedom if you wish.”

“I...”

“You’ve always had my forgiveness, when will you give yourself your own?”

Micah dropped his head.

“In my immortal life, it was your mortal love that made me feel most alive.”

Avalene chuckled. “Oh, Micah, my sweet man. You’ve got it backwards. It was only my life that was mortal.”

Micah lifted his eyes and realized the strange warmth coming from the fire was not heat, but love. Eternal love from the woman at the boundary.

Then he heard her voice like an echo from the darkness.

“I am always with you.”

“Avalene? Avalene!” Micah searched around but found nothing. She was gone.

“Micah...”

“Avalene?”

“Micah!”

“Avalene!”

∞

“Micah!” Katchan screamed into the still face.

Eyes, formerly dead and gone, snapped open. Micah sharply inhaled and sat up. He looked from Katchan to Harol, then to the pool of mud, then back to Katchan. He spotted the ruach in his hand and the woven bag on the ground.

“Squeeze the ruach into the woven pouch and drink,” he said.

“You’ve been dead over a day, and the first thing you do is give an order?” Katchan said.

“Trust me,” Micah said.

Katchan looked at him funny but did as he was told. He drank the water contents from the bowl, and suddenly his body was elated with strength. All his weariness drained away, all his hunger and thirst and physical pain abated into a dim nothing.

“I feel...”

“Alive,” Micah said.

“Yes.”

Micah stood, the sun rose from the east and the rays touched his skin. He held out his arms and felt the morning rays for the first time in a thousand years. The warmth soothed the coldness of death and reinvigorated his senses once more. He basked in the glow of the first morning since he was cursed.

“You’re not vanishing,” Katchan said.

“I no longer fall under the curse of Marikel? How can this be?”

“I don’t know, but you took long enough to wake up. We’ve got problems. Telo has the eclyptas and the Ashen sword,” Katchan said.

Micah looked at Harol.

“You.”

Harol walked over to his former commander and fell to his knees. He spread his arms in reverence. The warrior knelt before his former commander for a long moment without saying anything, and Katchan wondered if he was preparing himself to die. Harol had betrayed Micah, hunted him for years, and attacked his son. Of course he expected to die right now. Wanted to, even. That’s why he came all this way. He came here to die, and possibly through death, be released from Micah’s rage.

“Commander, I betrayed you. I, along with the rest of your men, betrayed you. I do not deserve to even remain a spirit.”

Katchan watched Micah’s face. It remained stone. In the stories, betrayal did indeed incur a debt of blood. Revenge was a common factor for many heroes. Dying for their vengeance was also common. He waited to see how Micah would strike his former soldier down.

“Stand.”

Harol opened his eyes, looking upon his former commander.

“But—”

“Stand. It is done now,” Micah said.

The early morning sun set a coolness upon the trio. It was crisp, clean, and without any soil from the past day. Micah held out his hand to Harol. The warrior timidly took Micah’s hand, unsure if it was a trick. He stood on two feet, helped by his former commander.

“Would you have always?”

“Yes.”

Katchan laughed, easing the tension, and settling the matter entirely. Micah’s face was still immobile, but there was a glint in his eye Katchan spied. Then the glint disappeared. Telo

was still out there. Waiting. Waiting for Katchan to be brought to him, to be sacrificed on his altar. Waiting to escape the curse and destroy Idyll, Gaelwyn, and everything good in creation. He was waiting, powerful and armed with the strongest weapons in the Scope.

Katchan's face darkened at the thought.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE SILVER KNIGHTS

Micah drew his finger through the sand creating a circle, then within the circle made markers, and finally an X. It was a map of Midbar. Katchan found it strange that Marikel cursed this land but left the land that would become Gaelwyn intact. Finally, Micah drew another X indicating where Telo's fortress was.

"It's a giant altar. He's been constructing for ages with the souls of the dead silver citizens. The three of us would never be able to break through," Harol said.

Micah ignored him. "The fastest route is strait ahead. We will confront him head on."

"We lose the element of surprise. Commander, our best bet is to arm you with a Musphelian sword and sneak you in to attack him unnoticed."

"Bringing me back snapped an enormous amount of power that was felt throughout this place. Telo already knows I'm alive. Besides, I cannot kill him in his current form."

Katchan thought back to the young, ageless face. "You mean he doesn't look the way he should?"

"He looks the way he sees himself. I've only seen him in his true form once before. We nearly killed each other."

"He controls his own mortality? That's not much of a curse," Katchan said.

"He is a powerful being. Somehow, he separated his body from his soul. If we destroy his body, his soul will be forced to take the form of the curse."

"What is his curse?"

“An unfathomable monster. A mockery of Marikel and all goodness. Hopefully you will never see it for yourself. Because as soon as you destroy his body, I can destroy his soul,” Micah said.

“Wait, you mean—”

“Yes, Katchan. You will sneak into Telo’s fortress and find where he’s hiding his body. I doubt any of my soldiers know where it is, otherwise they could take control of him.”

“I’ve heard rumors Telo was hiding something. We didn’t dare confront him,” Harol said.

“But, what will you do? Telo has the eclyptas and the Ashen sword, he’ll just kill you again!”

“No, not this time,” Micah said and smirked. The first evidence of emotion Katchan seen since he met him.

Micah sauntered over to the door of the royal crypt. He waved his hand and the door opened.

What was that Joseph said, “royal blood to open the doors?”

He stepped down into the crypt and waved for Katchan to follow. Harol nodded to Katchan.

“I will stay here,” He said.

“Harol, thank you.” Katchan said.

Harol grunted. Katchan scrambled after Micah and followed him into the long corridor. Torches were lit along the path, and he saw Micah standing in the center. He turned, and was holding Maggaline’s staff.

“Careless,” Micah said.

“You wouldn’t have done any better,” Katchan said.

Micah smirked. “I gave this to Maggaline in the hopes she would cross the boundary and end the curse.”

“I don’t think she would’ve survived,” Katchan said.

“You’re right. Maggaline would have known the one you called Exile for who he truly was and destroyed him as soon as she met him. She would have thrived. Seems she thought it better to send you when you were ready.”

“I wasn’t ready.”

“You think Maggaline made a mistake?”

Katchan sighed. *No.*

Micah led him down the long corridor. They arrived at the door to the inner sanctum of the crypt. Micah slapped the ground with his palm, and like an invisible, shimmering wall, the barrier he set fell.

“It was you, wasn’t it? The one who created the barrier in Gaelwyn,” Katchan said.

Micah looked at him and nodded.

“I created Gaelwyn from the ashes of Livana. Few citizens survived, but those that did I led to the land set apart by Marikel to save humanity. Then, to further protect them, I created a barrier between Midbar and Gaelwyn and passed the secret onto the first elder and the first oracle. The prophets were slaughtered in the siege.”

Micah led them down the stairway, holding one of the blue flame torches to guide their way.

“Then they asked me for one promise: bury their dead. I agreed. I spent a long time finding their dead and giving them proper burials. Including the Silver Knights.”

They now stood on the platform where Katchan dreamed of the night of the siege. He remembered the voices of the dead, calling to him. Begging him to tell their stories.

“Hand me the ruach,” Micah said.

“It’s crumbled.”

“Is it?”

Katchan pulled out the leaf from the woven pouch, expecting the leaf to be damaged beyond recognition, but it was whole. Micah smirked, something Katchan was beginning to tire of already, and took the leaf.

“Get back on the stairs,” Micah said.

Katchan obeyed.

Micah placed the leaf in the middle of the platform and lifted Maggaline’s staff, made from the same Mowphath tree Katchan tore his from. He stood directly above the leaf and held the staff over his head, point down.

“Now, see the true power of the Garden of First Light.”

He slammed the staff into the leaf, and suddenly lightning cracked around them. Micah’s dark hair flew as if from a high wind, and he twisted the staff and grunted, as if from pain. Green light emanated from the leaf and surrounded Micah. It expanded past the platform and filled the room. To Katchan, it felt cold and warm at once, it smelled of the green freshness of the garden.

“Knights of the Silver City! Defenders of Livana! Come and taste life once again!”

Mumblings from the pit below rose into deep, guttural noises. Skeletal sounds, cracking and breaking became background noise to the moans of the dead. Screams, terrible and frightened broke through and echoed throughout the crypt.

“He’s...he’s bringing them back to life...” Katchan said.

Figures of knights rose above the platform, and surrounded Micah. Their screams and cries echoed from below, from the past. From their death and dying.

The green wind blew with the force of an abyssal.

“Come knights of Livana, and avenge your city!”

Harol brushed past him carrying the body of Orphion, the head placed neatly on his chest.

“One more, my lord,” Harol said.

He placed the body beside Micah. The winds engulfed Orphion’s body for a moment and left. His head was intact, and he breathed a deep gasp of air. He looked at Harol, then to Micah, then to the symphony of screaming soldiers around him. Micah thrust out his hand and helped Orphion to his feet.

The ruach can truly revive the dead! Katchan thought.

Only one person ran through his mind then: Maggaline.

“My lord,” Orphion said, and he kneeled.

“Rise, Orphion. I am not worthy to be called ‘lord’ or leader,” Micah said.

“I never lost hope,” Orphion said.

“Neither did I,” Micah said.

“It is up to us to change the minds of our brothers. They are lost under Telo’s influence,” Harol said.

“Telo?”

“The sorcerer who called himself Beyda was King Telo in disguise. There is much to catch you up on, but now is not the time. What matters is he can influence those around him to become their worst selves. I was knocked free of that spell, but our brothers are trapped in a cycle of hate and rage. Only we can end that cycle,” Harol said.

“I see,” Orphion said. He looked around at the ghostly figures. He recognized them as the Silver Knights he helped annihilate years ago. He couldn’t meet their eyes.

A hush fell over the ghostly soldiers. They stood as if on solid ground, and Katchan could see them clearly now for the first time. Their armor gleamed white, from their gloves to their boots. On their breast plate was the symbol of their city. Some held spears, others held swords. Those with bows wore leather, chainmail, and a full quiver. There were few with great war hammers. They did not appear as ghosts, but solid in form. Their flesh took on the color of their armor: pure white, not like they looked in life, but as something in between.

One of the larger knights stepped forward, from floating around the platform to standing solid on the platform with Micah. A long sword in a decorated scabbard hung at his side; a shield protected his back.

“I am Commander Lucan of the Silver Knights, who is it that wakes us from our long sleep?”

Micah took a step forward. The men were equal in height now, but Micah had no weapon. Katchan was sure that made little difference in the outcome of a confrontation if one were to happen.

“I am Commander Micah of the Soldiers of First Light. It was my armies that destroyed you and your city,” Micah said.

Immediately, the surrounding Silver Knights dug their heels into an offensive form. Arrows were nocked, spears were coiled to attack, and swords were drawn.

Commander Lucan’s face darkened. He raised his hand, and his men lowered their weapons. “Why would a man such as you see to it the army you destroyed was revived?”

“When I attacked you, I was under the influence of a dark spell woven by a powerful sorcerer who called himself Beyda. He is Telo in disguise. Why he wanted your city’s downfall is unknown to me, but he succeeded. In return, I trapped him here long enough for Marikel to place the entire land under a curse. The land above is not the same land you died in. Time has drained its grounds of life.”

“You seek revenge then?”

“No, reconciliation.” Micah said.

“If what you say is true, then there is nothing left to be saved. What is the point?”

“Your city is dead, but it may be redeemed. I am leading you all into harm’s way, possibly even to the demise of your soul. We are outnumbered and outmatched, for my Soldiers of First Light are well trained. There is little to be gained from this assault, other than to disgrace the name of Telo in the minds of people everywhere for all time. He rose his head, and we can strike him, even if it means our death. Who among you will not raise your hand to fight?”

Not a soldier stirred.

“You must understand, Commander Micah, that we see no reason to be entangled with the world any longer. Our city is dead, our culture decayed, we are gone, our families are lost. There is nothing to fight for, not even to the disgrace of our long-revered hero, King Telo.”

“You are wrong, Lucan. You are wrong in every way possible. Your city lives in memory. Your culture survives in stories. You stand before me now, fully armed as if alive. And your families are not lost. I led the survivors of the siege to a land protected by Marikel and set an unpassable boundary using the power of my blood, the children of dawn. Your descendants live, but their land is dying. What was great about your culture, reading and writing, has been lost, but it may be found yet again. Stay, don’t fight, and Telo will win the coming battle. He will

escape this cursed land and destroy both it and your descendants. Everything good in Livana will cease.”

The soldiers muttered among each other at this proclamation. Despite the coming storm, Katchan smiled. Maybe there was a future where Micah could teach him what everything means. Who are the children of dawn? What was the power of the blood they share?

The soldiers quieted.

“We will fight,” Commander Lucan said. “We will fight on the promise that when Telo is gone, and we are to return to our graves, that you, the leader of the Soldiers of First Light, will join us in death.”

“No!” Katchan said.

“I agree,” Micah said.

Katchan shot Micah a grimace. *Why do I suddenly care? It's not like I ever needed him before.* He swiveled his head to Harol who looked sullen.

“This was your plan all along, Commander,” Harol said.

Micah did not look at Katchan or Harol. He stayed focused on the matter at hand. His fate would be something to worry about later. Commander Lucan looked to his men and raised his fist in the air.

“For our descendants!”

This aroused a shout from the Silver Knights. The prospect of fighting to defend something worth defending ushered in a feeling of pride and sacrifice. Many of their souls would be lost to the abyss, killed by Telo himself. But there are those that may live to see the end of the curse and escape the land.

Amidst the shouts from the Silver Knights, Commander Lucan spoke to Micah.

“You have a battle plan, I presume?”

“I would not raise you from your slumber had I not,” Micah replied.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

SOLDIERS OF LIGHT AND DARK

The sun hung low in the sky, and the Silver Knights stood in line facing the dark fortress. Katchan stood out front with Micah, Harol, and Commander Luca. He felt like the front was the last place he belonged. He only carried a staff. His greatest weapon, the eclyptas, had been stolen by Telo. If anything, Katchan should have run back to the hideout where he found Echo and the others and stayed put until the battle was over. Less chance of him getting in the way. Less chance of him dying. But those weren't options for him, and neither was running away. He was the son of Micah—a child of the dawn. But more important, he was the grandson of Maggaline of Gaelwyn. She would not tolerate him running away.

“Katchan, you understand what to do?” Micah said. His voice was firm, confident, the question answered in the asking. There was nothing else but to understand his part in the plan. Understand, and execute.

“Yes,” Katchan said. The peace he felt the night before still resided within him. Despite being up all night, a drink from the ruach leaf restored his wakefulness. He felt like he could go forever. “Micah?”

“What is it?”

“Did you see my body fall behind in the march?”

“You’re still very much alive,” Micah said.

Micah nodded at Commander Lucan. Lucan cried out a command, and an archer bent back his bow and pointed it high in the air. He released the arrow, it flew far into the sky, the burst into a dazzling flame.

“Why? He already knows we are here,” Katchan said.

“He needs to be challenged,” Micah said.

The Silver Knights waited patiently. The sun began to droop lower in the sky, burning red. High above, Katchan could see the moon in the clear sky and marveled at the beauty hidden within Midbar. Beauty that would soon be tarnished by the blows dealt by two massive armies. Soldiers holding a grudge could do untold damage. The gate remained shut. Not a workman was out. The fortress was silent.

“Telo! Come and meet your doom!” Micah cried.

A rumbling came from the fortress, which was truly a great altar Telo built to himself, and the gate rose. From the black mouth of the fortress streamed the men trapped here for a thousand years: the Soldiers of First Light. Micah’s former army. They walked with a bitterness created by years of harbored anger and hatred.

Lucan grimaced and raised a fist in the air. “They make a mockery of our defeat! But he caught is by surprise, he does not know how well we fight when we are prepared. Silver Knights, do not show mercy, do not forget the past, do not allow him to win again!”

The Silver Knights shouted their approval and grunted their rage. Telo’s army gathered in front of the fortress in several lines, many more than the Silver Knights. They stopped and stood perfectly disciplined. Telo’s spell: they were under his influence as Micah had been long ago. Yet, Micah could sense their being conscious of the spell. They knew Telo influenced them and refused to resist. They wanted to be angry with him, and how could Micah blame them? His decision to curse them all was rash. Perhaps he made the decision for one simple fact: he wanted to stop fighting. Perhaps he wanted to stop searching for his brother. If he found him, could he

kill him? Was he strong enough? Rhava lay dead for an eternity now, how powerful could Rama become in that time, if he were still alive? Perhaps Micah let himself be tricked so he could stop.

No time to think about that now, Micah.

A man in pure white robes stepped through the ranks of Micah's former army. On his shoulder he carried the Ashen sword, and Micah could see he had placed the Eclyptas in the pommel. The jewel shined brilliantly red against the black hilt. Telo's face, young and unaged, wore a smirk. Titus, Micah's former second in command, followed him closely.

"I must admit, commander, I thought you were truly dead. But then again I'm not surprised to find you've returned," Telo said.

Orphion stepped out from the ranks and faced Titus.

"Even now, Titus, I forgive your actions against me. I forgive you for ordering me tortured, for beating me, for humiliating me. I forgive you now even though I've saved your life in battle many times. I forgive, and I offer you peace: rid yourself of Telo's influence and fight for us," Orphion said.

"You only forgive because you are too weak to hold a grudge. I've hated you since that day, and I will hate you till my last," Titus replied.

"And Harol, you will die first," Telo said.

"You will not threaten my men," Micah said.

"I refuse to acknowledge your pitiful claims to leadership. You have always had the power to end the curse, commander. Then, all you needed was to use the eclyptas and the Ashen sword to remove us from Livana. Now, I no longer give you that option. Your child will be sacrificed on my altar in your place," Telo said.

He knew all along? Katchan thought.

“Don’t look so shocked. It was easy to piece together.”

“Why wait until now, you could have taken me at the Garden?” Katchan said.

“Because Micah has not suffered enough. I hold all the power Midbar offers, and you come to my doorstep with an army of the dead? That is what irritates me the most about your kind. The arrogance to think you stand up to a god. You think we are equals? Your forms are limited; mine are boundless.”

Katchan stepped back. The shaking in his hands made the staff hard to keep still. He did not want to show fear, but the peace within was beginning to fade.

“Katchan, be still. I won’t allow you to die,” Micah said. Then he did something Katchan thought Micah was completely incapable of: he smiled.

Micah turned back to Telo.

“The arrogance is yours, Telo the wandering prophet, thinking a man can truly become a god. Your power is borrowed, limited, and it’s about to run out.”

Telo smirked, swiveled on his foot, showing his back to the Silver Knights, and walked back through the ranks.

“Bring me the boy, kill the rest.” Telo said.

Titus smiled, and raised his Musphelian sword into the air, “Charge!”

All at once a great cry came from the Soldiers of First Light. They charged forward on the command of Titus, eager to exact vengeance on the man who brought them to a distant land then betrayed them by abandoning them. They were desperate to slay the Silver Knights once again, and they were hungry to bring a living boy, the son of Commander Micah himself, to Telo’s altar to be sacrificed. It was a small sliver of hope that Telo would reward them with an

escape from this curse. It was small, but vastly greater than any hope Micah offered. So, they charged, thirsty for blood and revenge.

The army, dressed in fine black armor, charged across the plain like an endless field of ants. The Silver Knights stood disciplined, unconcerned with the past, ignorant to the future; they only concerned themselves with the here and now: battle. Lucan thrust a fist in the air, and the men banged their swords against their shields.

“Katchan, be gone now,” Micah said.

Katchan nodded and fled through the ranks of the Silver Knights. He was Telo’s prize, and so he must do something Telo wouldn’t expect: deliver himself to the belly of the beast.

A steady racket formed into a rhythm that grew in sync. The Silver Knights banged their shields as one. They died as one. They would fight as one. Rarely is the chance given to ascend the grave to defend your honor once more, and they intended to take it.

Captain Odis of the archer’s brigade remembered the night well when he lost his life defending Livana. His arrows were the crafted by the greatest in Idyll, but these men were too far to have any effect. He would not make the same mistake. The arrowheads were broad tipped and twisted to cause the most damage. At a close enough range, they could even penetrate armor. He nodded to Micah, the former leader of that very armor. “Now,” he said.

Micah dug his hands into the sand and, using the power of his bloodline, he pressed, forming an unseen barrier between the Soldiers of First Light and the Silver Knights. The Soldiers crashed into the barrier, and stopped.

“Fire!” Captain Odis said.

Archers peered over their shield brethren and took aim and released a volley into the front lines of their enemies. The Soldiers looked in horror as their armor was pierced by these arrowheads, when years ago they did not. Many fell to their wounds.

“Fire!” Captain Odis said again.

Another volley of arrows dug into the Soldiers of First Light. They whipped their shields from their backs and formed a defensive wall. The next volley of arrows bounced harmlessly off their shields. The next volley of arrows aimed for their rear most ranks.

The Soldiers stopped. Each grabbed their shields and formed a barrier to the sky and to the air.

Commander Lucan looked to Micah, “What happens next?”

“The only thing that can happen. Prepare your men to defend,” Micah said.

The battlefield grew still. The barrier separating the two armies was impenetrable to Telo’s forces. Suddenly, red lightning shot from the top of the fortress and struck the barrier. The power holding the Soldiers of First Light shattered.

One of the front men kept his shield held and thrust a spear through where the barrier previously was. It passed through the empty space. Titus ordered the attack renewed, and the soldiers stepped over the bodies of their fallen and charged to meet the Silver Knights.

Micah held out his staff, the only weapon he had at the moment, and rushed forward to break the line of his former men. The front man thrust his spear, Micah parried then thrust his staff into his shield. Micah’s thrust threw him to his back, causing many to stumble. He leapt out of the arc of swords, and dodged the thrust of spears, attacking where he could. He shattered a spear shaft and broke the hand of the one wielding it. He parried a sword and crushed the user’s helm. He became like a boulder in a river, the rest of his army charged the Silver Knights.

The Silver Knights stood on guard and let the charge crash into their mighty shields. Their job was to defend, for now. Archers shot from behind the shield ranks, killing several. Command Lucan found his place in the middle ranks to best give orders, but there were not many orders to give now but defend. Survive.

Katchan sat in a squat and watched the battle from afar. He watched Micah leap into the air using his staff to defend and crush. It was a superior blunt object even to the Musphelian hammers and battle axes his men carried. He would be sure to ask Micah more about this staff and the Mowphath tree. And why Caleb had a look of shock when he returned with a newly torn limb. He knew it was spectacular in a way he didn't understand.

At this point in the battle, the Silver Knights were fully engaged with the Soldiers of First Light. None would recognize he was not there; that was all part of the plan. He stood and looked onward to the fortress. It loomed large, black as death, and, he hoped, not filled with too many intricate passageways. To find the center, the very altar Telo wanted to sacrifice him on, would be no easy task. But destroying the altar was the only way to defeat him in this world.

Standing on top of the fortress was a figure wearing the white robes of the Oracle. Telo. Katchan thought back to the first time he met him, when Telo considered him an exile. He had been exiled from his mother, his father, and from the other groups of children. Then he was exiled from Gaelwyn. Originally, he pitied himself. But now he knew what it means to be an exile: the freedom to choose a new path. His new path led him straight into the heart of danger, to Telo himself.

If Maggaline could see me now.

The Silver Knights, with Micah's help were doing real damage to the front lines of the Soldiers of First Light, from what Katchan could see. Even though he knew little of battle, he understood when a line was broken. Micah was fighting his way to the rear, to Telo. In one hand he held his staff, in the other, a Musphelian sword. Katchan felt a surge of hope. Telo must answer this challenge.

He stepped forward toward the fortress and stopped at the sounds of a battle horn blown from far away. An army of workmen, former citizens of the Silver City, dead and under the control of Telo, marched in unison toward the Silver Knights rear. At the front, Katchan could see very clearly: Echo, Rordion, and Yashnu led the charge.

He looked back at Telo, standing on the top, and very clearly, he could tell his head was cocked toward him with a smirk. *What will you do, little exile?* He seemed to say in a mocking voice.

The fortress was undefended, but his friends headed to their destruction. Katchan grunted and made a decision.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

INTO THE FORTRESS

Commander Lucan shouted the order for half of his forces to about-face, switching targets to the new force marching toward them. Archers nocked arrows and aimed. Shield-bearers took a defensive position. Just before Lucan commanded ‘fire!’ he saw Micah’s boy running to the front of the coming formation.

“Hold your fire! Move boy! Get out of the way!”

Echo, Rordion, and Yashnu stood ten paces ahead of the main formation. They marched at a steady pace, barely noticing he arrived. The other workmen were garbed in armor made from glimmering metals, and carried small weapons of no consequence: spears that looked ready to break, swords ready to shatter, and their hammers would not even dent the Silver Knights.

Who are the workmen?

Then it dawned on him: the citizens of Livana. Telo was going to force the Silver Knights to slaughter their own people.

“Wake up, I said!” Katchan screamed at Yashnu. He’d lost the old man once; he didn’t want too again. Yashnu paid him no mind. There was a glaze in his eye, and his pupils were white. Katchan moved with their walk, screaming for them to snap out of Telo’s influence. He held his staff in his arm, prepared to defend himself if need be. He could hear Commander Lucan’s screaming from the distance.

He doesn’t know who these people are? If he did, would he fight them?

Maybe that was the whole point, a distraction. With half Lucan's forces fighting the Soldiers of First Light, and the other half defending from their own citizens, Lucan's forces didn't stand a chance.

"Echo, Echo! You've got to wake up. Telo has you under his spell, you're not yourself!"

Echo turned to Katchan, and he saw recognition in the big man's eyes.

"Echo?" Katchan said hopefully.

"The man can't hear you, little exile," Telo's voice said from Echo's mouth. "Why is it your family values your own life over others? Your mother chose the commander over many of her own eligible suitors, which eventually condemned this man I speak through to death; by your own grandmother's hands, might I add. And of course, your father chose to curse an entire land and city rather than let his own men go free and live with his guilt. And now you will allow all these souls to march to the abyss because you won't hand your life to me when it is already forfeit. I cannot take you dead, come to me alive. Your sacrifice will be for the greater good."

"Shut up, Telo! Echo is not your puppet," Katchan raised his staff into the air and struck Echo's shoulder. Echo's shoulder gave under the blow a little more than Katchan expected.

Am I stronger now? No, it must be the Mowphath branch. Micah is decimating his own men with essentially a wooden stick, but it's not just a wooden stick. It's a branch from the Garden of First Light.

Katchan stepped back. The ruach leaf restored Micah. What else is it capable of? He would need to hit all of them with one blow for this to work. He grabbed his water skin and splashed his remaining water onto the faces of the three men from Gaelwyn.

"I said snap out of it," Katchan said.

The water splashed in their faces. Suddenly their eyes no longer glazed, and their pupils reverted to their original color of brown. Echo fell to his knees and grabbed his shoulder with a shout. Rordion and Yashnu stumbled forward.

“What was that,” Echo said, groaning.

“That’s the feeling of freedom,” Katchan said. He almost felt like giving them a hug.

“But there is no time, we have to run now.”

“Katchan,” Yashnu said, pointing at the looming Silver Knight army in front of them.

“I said there is no time! Run off the battlefield, I need your help.”

Command Lucan held his army still. Micah’s boy ran to the front line.

“Commander Lucan,” Katchan said.

“What is going on out there? What did you do to their leaders?”

“Those weren’t their leaders, Telo has them all under his spell. I freed them by using water from the ruach leaf,” Katchan said.

“Where did this army come from?”

“They were Telo’s slaves. He used them to deconstruct Livana and use the materials to construct his fortress. They are the silver citizens. I think their armor is made from melting down the city’s metal,” Katchan said.

“That bastard,” Lucan said. “Men, these are own people! Only kill if they are about to kill you.” He looked at Katchan, “Can you bring us any more of that water?”

“I have none left, but there may be some at the oasis I created near the crypt.”

The workman army grew closer. They marched slowly, Katchan wondered if their minds were still giving Telo some resistance.

“Go on now and do your part. And I shall do mine,” Lucan said.

Katchan nodded and ran down the line to meet his newly freed ally’s.

The three followed Katchan as he ran toward the fortress. He wasted a lot of time freeing them, but, he believed, it was worth the effort. He looked back at Yashnu and nodded. The old man had survived much.

“I must find the altar and destroy it,” Katchan said.

“How will you do that?” Yashnu asked.

Katchan pulled up a green leaf from his pouch, “With this. I place the leaf on the center of the altar and strike it with my staff. The power formed from that blow will be enough to cancel out the forces holding the fortress together and cause it to revert back to the stones of Livana. It will be useless to Telo then. He’ll lose whatever power he’s gained in Midbar and will force him to fight on Micah’s terms. We believe only then can Micah kill him.”

Katchan began running at a steady jog, and the three followed along. The sun blazed hot, but the power from the water kept fatigue at bay. What an amazing gift this leaf is.

“That fortress is a maze, but fortunately Telo made a mistake when he took us captive: he let us live,” Rordion said.

“Yes, and now we can make him pay,” Echo said.

“Even though doing so will help Micah?” Yashnu said.

Echo growled, “helping him will be the lesser of two evils, and I don’t stand a chance against either one myself. Maybe they’ll wear each other out and I can take on the winner when he’s exhausted.”

The sounds of battle raged over the dune. Sneaking into the fortress unnoticed would be difficult, but he's had enough experience on the sands of Midbar to move quickly. Telo would be distracted, that Micah promised. He would be too distracted to notice a small boy entering into such a massive construct. The closer they came to the fortress, the more Katchan realized how much he had underestimated its size. Maybe he missed the size when he came first because he was self-pitying, but with the peace within he was able to notice how large and looming the fortress truly was. It could hold every member of Gaelwyn, plus more, he figured. Why build such a large place for just one man?

Not a man, but a man who claims to be a god. But then again, what do I know about gods?

"There is still one unfinished portion of the fortress, facing the mountain. We'll go through there," Yashnu said.

"What was your plan to get in, Katchan, had you not found us?" Rordion asked.

Katchan looked over at the front gate. The fighting had moved solidly in the Silver Knights favor, with Micah leading them. He wielded a Musphelian sword and the Mowphath staff with ease. Cutting down his own men did not bother him in the slightest, and the weak points were hit hard by the axe wielding knights. The back rows were soundly fighting their own citizens, without doing them any real damage.

"Telo cannot make one greater than they are. Those workmen are not fighters, they're just bodies designed to confuse the battle. We were up front because we had the most experience," Yashnu said.

"And yes, we could see and feel everything that happened," Echo said, rubbing his shoulder.

“You asked how I was getting in?” Katchan said pointing at the front gate.

Micah leapt over the final line, pushed back. Some Knights circled around and surrounded Micah’s former army. He walked up to the front gates, and with a swing of his staff, the gate burst inward.

“Why does Telo not interfere?” Katchan said.

“A god does not do the dirty work of men,” Rordion said a little too quickly.

Katchan nodded.

“Micah will understand why we went around. Lead on.”

Micah burst through the front gates, the splintering sound ringing in his ears. He’d forgotten how powerful the Mowphath staff could become in the midst of battle. The wood absorbed the impact of every blow, making it a valuable weapon for defense, but it can also release that potential energy into a highly effective kinetic energy. Not only was the staff connected spiritually to the Garden of First Light, but all the trees and vegetation had many unique properties. Katchan’s own staff was much like his own, but its potential energy was massive compared to what Micah just released. The staff is fresh, with all the potential energy of the Mowphath tree stored inside, waiting.

Now where is he?

Telo’s fortress was exactly as he expected it to be: empty. The front gate led into a long hall with several long tables made from the remains of Livana, a place for his men to sit and wait in their anger. Unlit chandeliers hung from the ceiling. Portraits hung on the wall of various kings and queens of Livana, but the faces were scratched out. Only one remained intact down at the end where the head of the table would be: Telo’s own.

The portrait did not look like the blonde haired, white skinned man he knew as Telo. The man in the portrait was dark haired, thin, and old, but regal in demeanor. He looked like a king should. He looked like a king who had borne the burden of a prophet, who told the leaders of the land they were marching in the wrong direction only to be spat upon. He looked like those who cast their lots with the unseen forces of the cosmos and the beings who ruled in Hysol, exchanged for comfort, freedom, and the pleasures of the earth. The portrait looked exactly like the man who sat at the head of the table now.

The sounds of battle did not diminish behind him, but the Silver Knights held their own now that Micah wounded and wearied well over half of his former forces. He walked down the long hall, between the tables and under the chandeliers, and stopped short of the head chair where a man who did indeed look like the man in the portrait sat with his hands around a cup.

Micah lowered his weapons, "King...King Telo?"

The man raised his eyes from the cup between his hands and met Micah's gaze.

The man spoke with rust in his voice, "You must be Micah of the Children of Dawn. Only he would be so arrogant as to eagerly meander into an obvious trap."

A rumbling flared from the middle of the room, and Micah watched the front gate rebuild itself from the ground up, trapping him inside. He had little potential energy in the Mowphath staff stored and would not so easily break out. But it was not the door rebuilding itself that sent chills up his spine, it was the sound of the battle turning against the Silver Knights. Their screams were heard clearly from all the way inside the fortress.

"You forget how well trained your men are, Micah. Without you, the tide of battle was always in their favor. The Silver Knights have been led to their doom a second time," King Telo said.

“Silence! What has happened to you? Why do you look different?” Micah said.

“The thing you’ve known as Telo is me, but it is not me,” King Telo said. His wrinkles moved with his mouth. Micah moved closer and could see what was truly off about him: his face, his skin, was grey.

“You were dead,” Micah said.

“And buried. When this land was cursed, the first thing Telo did was find me and dig up my body. Believed that refusing body and soul would allow for him to escape Midbar,” King Telo said.

“How is this possible?”

“Is a Child of Dawn really unaware of the mysteries of the Scope? Go on, you know,” King Telo said.

Micah bowed his head, the truth staring him, literally, in the face. “Your soul ascended to divinity.”

King Telo looked down at his cup. “It is a rare opportunity for a mortal to become divine. Only happened a few times that I know of, myself included. As the favored King who made order out of chaos in the building of Livana, I was offered a seat on the Divine Council by one of Marikel’s messengers. My body would die, but my soul would live in Hysol.”

“Order from chaos? Your soul is poison to this world,” Micah said.

“To understand one’s limits, one must surpass them. I learned long ago, in my travels through the unknown parts of the Scope, that my limits were far beyond that of a mortal man. Building a city was audacious, daring, and arrogant. I was the only one who could. And Marikel was pleased with me.

“Everything good in the city was mine by design, and once that fool Joseph took the throne, his laws and decrees made the people forget about me. I first fell out of favor, then out of memory. I, of course, was dead and had no cares for this world any longer. But my soul watched from Hysol, his rage beginning with Joseph and ending with the toppling of a great statue he dedicated to himself. Livana forgot about him, but Marikel had not forgotten Livana. He seemed pleased with the city no matter how far they strayed from the path I set,” King Telo said.

“So, in retaliation your soul had Livana destroyed,” Micah said.

King Telo stared into his cup. “That’s how it started. A twisted sort of revenge. To him the city was his creation, why not destroy it and start again? But he’s had a taste of a different sort of power. When I roamed the unknown parts of the Scope, I learned the secrets to exceeding my limitations. What I learned, is the limits I believed I had were purely fictional. I never hit a wall until my kingship. My soul believes his limits are not set either. He wants to ascend his ascension. Only then can he have his war with Marikel.”

“The eclyptas, the Ashen sword,” Micah said.

“Tools to enter the unknown parts of the cosmos.”

“And he’ll sacrifice Idyll, and everyone on this world to do so,” Micah said.

“He’ll sacrifice the only thing keeping him from total madness: me, his body.”

“I need to get you out of here,” Micah said. “The whole fortress will come down, burying you with it.”

King Telo laughed, “No it isn’t.”

Yashnu ran up the last steps followed by Katchan, Rordion, and Echo. The fortress had been a maze, specifically designed for those without a reason to explore these areas to get lost for an eternity. The only way to find yourself in the altar room is by already knowing how to get in.

“It’s just ahead,” Yashnu said. He motioned Katchan forward.

The altar sat on a platform in the middle of a large room. It reminded Katchan of the Elder’s Seat in Gaelwyn. Chains linked to cuffs were bolted on both sides. That is where Telo wanted to sacrifice him to escape the curse. He shivered, but he was so close to the end, he couldn’t back down now.

Katchan ran forward but stopped at the sight of a man in white robes, like the Oracles, and a young face appearing out of the darkness on the other side of the altar.

“No,” Katchan said, defeated.

“You three have done well,” Telo said.

Katchan whirled behind him and saw Yashnu with glazed eyes and white pupils. Echo and Rordion had the same.

“No, I freed them,” Katchan said. He turned to Telo. “Let them go,” he said as forceful as he could muster.

“Bring the boy to the altar, and open the ceiling. I want the whole of Midbar to witness my victory.”

Echo and Rordion grabbed Katchan by the arms and began dragging him across the stone floor. He kicked at the big men and fought, pulling and twisting his arms, but they were stronger, and didn’t seem to feel pain. In the struggle, Katchan dropped his staff. It fell and rolled to Yashnu’s foot, who stood perfectly still, watching him be taken.

“Yashnu, don’t let them do this to me,” Katchan said.

Yashnu then walked to a lever hanging on the wall. He pulled it, and a small rumble shook the room. The roof overhead split apart and slid open, revealing Katchan to the sun.

Echo and Rordion lifted Katchan onto the altar and cuffed his hands. He was chained to the altar now. His staff lay where it fell and rolled. Micah was nowhere to be found. He was completely defenseless, and Telo looked ready to strike.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

ORPHION'S BANE

Micah banged on the large fortress doors with little progress. They held firm. The battlefield raged, and just by his ears could he hear the Silver Knights making a defensive line. That was not good. His former army had fought them to a standstill. He should have slaughtered them, not bruised them. He hoped to win this fight and bring them all to Hysol rather than lose their souls to the abyss. If he could just free them from Telo's influence, he knew they would see reason. He turned to King Telo, who sat staring into his cup, "How do I get out of here?"

King Telo slowly looked up, "You don't. By now, my soul has this boy chained to his altar. This fight is over, meaningless from the start, but certainly over now. My soul does not care about the battle only as far as it was a means to distract you and bring him what he needed. Once he has the blood to fuel the Ashen sword, he will open a cosmic gate and leave. Once that happens, well..."

This is why Telo built his fortress so strong. He had the forethought to think he would one day need to hold Micah. Telo was a former prophet, were the messengers from Hysol conspiring against their master Marikel? A terrifying thought. No. He must have just assumed one day he would need to trap Micah, maybe for a direct confrontation.

Oh, Marikel in Hysol...

If only he had the right words...

Telo proudly raised his arms to the sun. There was a smile on his unblemished face that verged on madness. He believed in his victory, as much as he believed in the sun. and why

wouldn't he? Telo now had the son of the man he hated most chained to an altar of sacrifice. He was moments to escaping the curse of Marikel, and thus, the destruction of Idyll.

"Little exile, we could have been close as brothers, you and me. What would I have given to have company on my travels, someone to pass my knowledge and wisdom down too? But it is the way it is, there is no man capable of understanding the knowledge I possess. You would simply die from the weight of my glory. Instead, you serve a role better suited for yourself: a sacrifice."

Telo drew the Ashen sword and held it to Katchan's face.

"I only need a little blood, but to inflict as much pain as possible on the commander, I'm afraid I must take all of it."

This is how it ends for me, under the sword of a deranged ancient hero. Not sunstroke or dehydration or starvation, but dead under a sword. Not just my end, by Maggaline's story will never be read. The eyes of God; nonsense. But still...

Katchan laughed.

Telo's ageless face contorted in anger, and also a tinge of curiosity.

"I escaped the village of Gaelwyn to get away from a deranged Elder who would have made my life hell, only to find myself in hell ready to die from a deranged King. The funny thing is, I've felt peace all this time. I don't know why, but for some reason, the end doesn't very much worry me. All my life I was forced to listen to stories, but life and stories didn't seem to match up, so I hated them. What good was there in hearing a good ending, when I knew the next day would be bad? Bully's and parents who looked at me with contempt; that was my life, but I realize something: when I came home, Maggaline always had another story. It was another chance to hear a good ending. There's always another story, Telo. Even though I'll die here, and

maybe you'll kill the world moments after, there will always be another story with a good ending. And in good endings, evil doesn't win. So even if you win today, you'll still lose."

A voice came from the exit of the maze, youthful and full of steel, "I couldn't have said it better myself, Katchan."

"Joseph? You swine, how are you here?" Telo said.

Joseph picked up the staff from the Mowphath tree and held it out in front of him. His beard no longer fell past his stomach, but he had a clean-shaven face. His hair was dark, and his eyes were golden instead of greyed.

"What you destroyed was my body, long preserved by the curse of Marikel, and you freed my soul. My curse is to be the memory of Livana. You cannot kill a memory so easily, not even with fire."

Echo and Rordion stood silent on either side of Katchan. Telo motioned them to attack Joseph. They ran toward him, but Joseph easily knocked them to the side, and then Yashnu right along with them.

"You were a weakling king," Telo said.

"I am no longer that man, but the embodiment of all that Livana was, even her martial skill," Joseph said.

Telo lowered the Ashen sword, the eclyptas flashed in the sunlight stinging Katchan's eyes. He closed his lids, and opened them to find himself strapped between two pillars with an angry crowd before him. Katchan shook his head and he was back in the altar room.

Gath again? The Pillars of Ba-bel? But I'm not holding the eclyptas.

A memory flooded Katchan of the battle for the Ashen sword, when Micah used the divine word *Ba'ar* to incinerate his own former army. Micah wasn't holding the eclyptas then either, it was in Katchan's hands.

Telo rushed out and struck Joseph, who deflected with Katchan's staff. The wood deflected the Ashen sword easily. They fought around the room, both striking and defending from blows that would have shattered a normal man's arms. But these were two spirits, two former kings of Livana, they were not normal.

Telo sliced the Ashen sword across the fortress floor, spreading a wave of sparks. "Why do you even care what happens to this place? Correct me if I am wrong, but did Livana not cast you out? Break your statues and wipe your name from memory? Did they not bring in your sister as the Queen during the period you reigned? They hated you, despised you, why would you defend them now that they are gone?"

"Telo, everything you say is true. I was a scoundrel king, I admit. But I cannot allow you to destroy Idyll knowing my sister has forgiven me. I would hate to give her another evil to forgive," Joseph said.

Telo sighed. "What a very human emotion."

Micah sat down with King Telo, he, glaring into his cup. The battle raged outside, and Telo could only fathom what was going through Commander Lucan's head right now. *Revived just to die again*. If eternity was anything like Micah expected, then Lucan would have a long time to be angry with him. Maybe he'll get lucky and have a new set of spiritual soldiers gunning for his head. At least not much would change.

King Telo stared steady into his cup. “I learned much out in the unknown parts of Idyll. There are lands of fire, so hot I could barely get near, but there were creatures who walked on hot coals as if they were the ground you and I stand upon. There were lands made purely of ice, so cold I nearly died if not for some great beasts who cared for me. A land made of water with enemies that could leave the ocean and attack, I thought I would die for sure, but there were creatures who came to defend me. I even met the ungrieved and learned their plight. Terrifying beings. All that time, my life was threatened, and I wondered why Marikel had called me away from the villages. Of all prophets, I was the lowest. I had no special blood, and my family was poor. My mother offered me to be in service to a messenger from Hysol, I had no father, and this became my life. Why would God choose to send me across his creation?”

Micah stood, “I could not tell you why, but we are still here now.”

“You think my soul has failed to take your son’s life?”

“Yes. King Telo, you may not believe me, but this fortress is coming down. You and I will both be free. What will you do?”

“I know what you’re asking of me, Micah. I am too weak,” King Telo said.

Micah stared stone faced, “You know why Marikel sent you across his creation? So you could be the one person in the world who could see his limits for what they are: barriers to be broken. You’re not weak, you’re unwilling.”

King Telo looked from his cup and met Micah’s stony glare with an icy gaze. “In the unlikely event this fortress falls, I will do what is right.”

“For Livana?”

“For myself.”

Commander Lucan shouted orders that were lost in the cacophony of battle. Half his force lay on the ground, split through the skull, stabbed through the heart, or battered to death. Micah entered the fortress, and Lucan believed victory was at hand, but the fortress closed itself and the Soldiers of First Light were given renewed vigor. He initially called for the silver citizens to be spared, but that was no longer the order: kill every enemy soldier; whether foe or former friend.

They were surrounded now. their archers fired from behind a wall of shields, and damaged much of the silver citizens, but their numbers were endless, though they were weak. The Soldiers of First Light brought men with great axes to the front lines to beat their shields. His men were fatigued, and morale was low. *If the abyss is anything like death, we will certainly make Micah pay for abandoning us!*

Orphion and Harol sat in the middle of the formation with Lucan. Lucan grabbed Orphion by the shoulder: “Your commander has abandoned us!”

“No,” Orphion said in return. “He has fallen for some trick. Commander Micah would not abandon us now.”

Harol nodded in agreement, but it did not make Lucan feel any better about the situation. He saw his men being slaughtered left and right. His defenses were nearly destroyed. In a matter of minutes, he would call a retreat, but there was nowhere to retreat from. This was the worse situation than even the battles with the Ungrieved in Amarsin when he was alive.

A young soldier fell beside him with an axe through the chest.

It is to the abyss then I await you, Commander Micah. Await you so that you will pay dearly.

A loud roar shook the grounds around them. The soldiers, enemy and friendly, stopped fighting and looked toward the west where the sounds came from. What it looked like to them was a massive fireball flying towards them, with a steam of clouds behind.

Commander Lucan took this distraction to stab the axe man through the heart. He yanked his sword from the soldiers chest and growled. “What is this?”

“Help, I hope,” Harol said.

The fireball landed on the far line of the Soldiers of First Light. A massive beast with flames from wings and a fiery sword roared at the sky. Azmina the guardian attacked and threw many surprised soldiers in the air.

Titus ordered for half the force to about face to tackle the new threat. He was about to scream another order when he stopped. Orphion stood before him wearing the white of a Silver Knight. His sword was at the ready, and a look of resolve shined brilliantly in his eyes.

“How in Borsol are you back?” Titus said.

“Justice brought me back,” Orphion said, “To slay the man who betrayed everything he stood for.”

Their swords clashed, sparks flew and the soldiers around them new better than to interfere with a blood match. A circle formed to give them freedom of movement. Despite the open area, bodies littered the ground. Titus, who was much bigger than Orphion, stumbled over the corpses, but his weight thrown behind each blow was enough to stagger Orphion and force him to find his own footing again. Their swords flew like a flurry, both being specialists in Micah’s training. Their movements were swift, smooth, graceful, and deadly. The battle took on the character of a fencing match, each parrying and thrusting, swiping, and stabbing. Blood ran

down each from their forearms, and little nicks at the neck. Neither cared to survive the day, just this one match.

Titus backed away from a solid blow from Orphion and tripped over a body. He began falling. Orphion was quickly on top of him. Titus's sword was in the hand across his body, not a good position to be in. His head could easily be swiped from his neck. Orphion stood over him with his brilliant eyes, and suddenly they went dark. Orphion's attack stopped, and he fell on top of Titus. Titus threw him off and slid his knife from his stomach.

"Didn't Micah ever teach you to cheat to win?" Titus said, his nicks and cuts covering his body. Blood pooled under Orphion.

"I guess that settles it," Titus said.

Orphion twisted around to his back and thrust his sword neatly through Titus's neck. "Didn't Micah ever teach you to stay on your guard?" He swiped the blade and Titus's head fell to the left, hanging only by skin. His body fell over, the victory was Orphion's.

Azmina, the guardian of the Garden of First light, fought with a vigor he had not felt since that day Marikel first called him from the skies, but the Soldiers of First Light were strong, well trained. They knew the attack from behind, or underneath, or from his flank. Still, he flared his wings and pushed them back and fought on. He wiped out soldier after soldier. More of the lines were turning from their battle with the Silver Knights to fight him. He smiled, feeling both his courage and his honor returning.

Victory was at hand, and the Commander of the Silver Knights celebrated, his hands rising in premature victory, then, an earthquake hit.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

TELO'S CURSE

Katchan struggled against his chains. Joseph put up a good fight against Telo, using Katchan's staff the fight looked almost even, but Telo was still divine. In other words, what Joseph did was stall the inevitable: the sacrifice of Katchan.

The sight of Joseph left an impression on Katchan he knew would not leave him, not for a long time. Bloodied, beaten, and gasping for breath, Telo stopped using the Ashen sword once he knocked away Joseph's weapon. For a man who seemed always in control, Katchan knew Telo was losing his grip on his anger. A punch to the face, a kick to the stomach; Telo picked Joseph up and threw him against a pillar.

"I gave you a second chance at life. I gave you power beyond what was possible: the memory of Livana. You became a living city, and you could have become even greater. If you rode with me, who knows, together we could have duplicated Livana somewhere else in the scope. I would have had the ability to truly resurrect you," Telo said. His white robes, and equally pale face and hair were stained red. His fists were clenched, living weapons.

Joseph gasped, and rose to his knees. He looked to Katchan just as Benjamin did, beaten and bloodied to protect him. That time he ran. He ran as fast as he could.

Joseph sputtered, blood spitting out as he spoke. "Telo, the ancient hero of Idyll, revered by all and loved by Marikel. Whatever has caused you to turn sour and rotten would just infect whatever new city you tried to build. It is better to leave Livana in the past, with you as a mere memory of a better man."

Telo glowered, his pale face deepening to a shade of red like embers on a dying fire. He walked over to a pillar and picked up the Ashen sword and carried it to where Joseph knelt now.

Joseph closed his eyes, though, bruised and swollen as they were, there was not much to close. "If you see my sister again, Katchan, tell her I'm sorry."

Katchan watched in horror as Telo drew closer to the man he once regarded as pitiful as Elder Saulnier. Those men were the same in many respects. Both wanted power and knowledge and respect and saw someone who loved them as an obstacle to those goals. Joseph ruined his sister Valerie and sent her away to the land of storms, unknowingly leading her to a greater power than she'd thought possible. Saulnier ruined Maggaline, his mentor and friend, because the people secretly regarded her as the wisest on all matters, human and spiritual. They were the same, but Valerie forgave Joseph. And it was not a far leap to consider Maggaline had forgiven Saulnier. Those women were strong like that. What he realized now, is that he was nothing like Valerie. He was not even like Maggaline. Because unlike them, Katchan had found it hard to forgive the man who ruined his life.

He thought back to Joseph, begging him to send him to abyss, and he refusing, wanting Joseph to suffer. He thought back to the many scenarios where he returned to Gaelwyn with the Ashen sword as a conqueror and made Saulnier bleed. Maggaline would have scolded him, and after meeting Valerie, he knew she would too. He remembered seeing Saulnier in the painting, him, seated in his Elder's chair with a look of remorse. It was clear then that he regretted something. At the time, Katchan mocked his misery, but that led to the revelation of Valerie's forgiveness. Shortly after he felt peace. Then it hit him.

Have I already forgiven Saulnier, and not realize what I already knew?

It made sense. Seeing Joseph and comparing him to Saulnier, Katchan did not feel anger or hatred or revenge, but a distinct feeling of pity and sorrow and understanding. He had forgiven the man who ruined his life, because Valerie had shown him how to forgive!

Suddenly, a wedge of power rose in him, like waking from the fact that he was not carrying a weight any longer, and his body had readjusted to the freedom of movement. He could run, he could fly. He breathed fresh air, and just as Telo stood before Joseph, prepared to execute the bloodied and broken man, Katchan screamed.

The light from the ecliptas was electric and filled Katchan with a buzz of power, and suddenly he was no longer on the altar of Telo, but between the pillars of Babul. He was the prophet Gath, imprisoned and humiliated the village Star.

“Asher my lord,” Katchan, as Gath, called out in a deafening whisper, “Give me the strength to slaughter your enemies.”

A rush of power, like a might wind, emerged from another realm and coated Gath with strength unimaginable. Gath pushed on the pillars, and with a mighty roar, enhanced by his powerful lungs, called the village Star to order. They gasped, being inside the temple to their false god, as the pillars crushed beneath his mighty push. The pillars fell, causing a domino effect on every pillar holding up the too heavy roof, a roof lined with expensive jewels and metals bought with the overbearing taxes on the poor, and collapsed. Gath himself, his hands free of the chains, raised his arms over his head, though the roof having crushed his body, died with a smile knowing he would never have served Asher greater than if he had a thousand lifetimes.

Katchan woke, and it was dark. Rocks lay all around him, and the electric feeling of the ecliptas slowly dimmed. His hands were free of the chains, but he was underneath debris.

I channeled the power of Gath in this world? but, I was Gath. I became him! I died!

No, the eclyptas was a cosmic lock, and entrance to many realms. But he saw, he really saw the past, he became Gath, a prophet of Asher. He looked on the lives of the village Star and saw there looks of contempt. He felt the desire in him to show them a better way, but also knew their ears were closed to such things. He saw how they robbed each other, murdered, enslaved one another, and knew it would never end. He saw these things with eyes that were not his.

The eyes of God.

A small earthquake hit and shook Katchan from his thoughts. He was in the darkness underneath who knows how much rubble. His hands were free. He looked in the direction where Yashnu, Echo, and Rordion lay before the fortress fell. He couldn't see anything. He couldn't see Joseph, or Telo. That meant his life was still very much in danger.

He pushed himself up and found he could stand. He walked around, hands in front, bumping them on rock. He hoped to find some sort of path or...a draft. A slight wind tickled his hair, and he followed that direction as far as he could until he saw a bit of light shining through. He used his hands to dig at the hole the light was coming through, and removed enough to see out. The sky was black from dust. Figures, confused and hurt, eased around each other, but the fighting had stopped.

"Hey!" Katchan called out, foolishly maybe, but being taken prisoner right now would at least get him out from this self-made tomb.

A pair of sandaled feet came into view, and a knee dropped down, then a face. Echo. Katchan examined the face, especially the eyes. They were brown.

"Katchan, boy! Are you alright?"

"That depends, are you under Telo's influence?"

“Not that I can tell. Before there was a whisper in my head, forcing me to lie to you and lead you where he wanted, but that voice is silent now.” Echo stood, and dropped back down again. His hands grabbed the rock trapping Katchan, then a second pair, and a third pair of hands reached under. They lifted with a grunt, enough for Katchan to slide beneath the middle one’s legs. He dared not look up. They dropped the rock when he was clear, and Katchan stood and saw Yashnu and Rordion.

“You’re all okay,” Katchan said, with disbelief and gratitude.

“Thanks to you boy. I don’t know how it’s possible, but a great wind filled the altar room, and you destroyed the altar, and the altar destroyed the foundational pillars holding the altar room up. From there, the fortress just collapsed as if only a spell were keeping it together. After that, I came to my senses.”

Katchan looked around the battlefield: Silver Knights were being helped up by Soldiers of First Light and vice versa, Silver Citizens were scratching their heads in wonder. Azmina stood curiously by, just as confused as everyone else it seemed. The fighting had simply ceased. “Is Telo...dead?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t count on that,” Yashnu said.

A large piece of debris that looked like it was once part of a rooftop pushed upward and fell, making a loud crack as it broke. A man in white stood underneath, his robes no longer beautiful and spotless but for blood, now torn to shreds revealing a muscular, rotting body underneath. His chest and ribs looked like rotten, shredded meat. Part of his rib bone was exposed, because it had no skin to cover it. His face, Katchan saw now, was not ageless or young, but grey and sickly.

“Katchan!” Telo yelled, his fury echoing across the whole of the scope.

“I believe you’ve made him angry,” Rordion said.

Katchan suddenly realized he could not feel the eclyptas, and Telo was no longer holding the Ashen sword. He felt powerless before, but now he felt empty. Empty but for peace. But peace did not win fights. Peace would not defeat the monster before him.

Telo leapt across the debris with his hand stuck out, ready to take Katchan’s head off. Azmina rushed in and struck Telo with a blow with his large claws. Telo shot across his destroyed fortress and crashed into one still standing wall. Cracks rose from where Telo hit like spiderwebs, and the wall crumbled down, covering him completely.

“Azmina, what’s wrong with him?” Katchan asked.

“You broke the shell keeping his sanity together. Now his curse is on full display. You think Marikel would let him walk around looking like a young man? No, how you saw him was just another influence.”

When the dust cleared away, Katchan saw two men seated in the room behind the wall that fell. One wore the clothing of a king, the other wore black.

“Micah,” Katchan said, relieved.

Micah grabbed the other man and leapt away from the pile of debris now covering Telo. It was well timed, because suddenly the debris exploded, and Telo stood angrier than ever.

“Now I see your curse, you damned Exile,” Katchan said. “A rotting body to match a rotting soul.”

“Don’t antagonize him,” Yashnu said.

“Oh, little exile. You think this is how Marikel chose to curse me? As a rotting body? Well, if you want to see what that maniac did to me, then I’ll show you!”

Telo's right arm suddenly grew large, exploding out of its socket and reforming into a giant hoof, and his left arm did the same. Telo cried out in ravaged pain, as his legs did the same, followed by his head which sprouted two great horns and an elongated face. The scream turned into a giant roar that shook the ground all around them, and Katchan was facing a beast twice as large as Azmina in the shape of a giant, rotting bull.

"It's the same creature from thirteen years ago, the one we fought at Gaelwyn's boundary," Echo said.

"That thing almost got into Gaelwyn?" Katchan said, shocked.

The beast spoke without moving its mouth, the voice coming like a crashing wave, or an erupting volcano. "Is this what you wanted to see, little exile? Do you now see my great curse?"

Micah was suddenly beside Katchan, "The staff, where is it?"

Katchan pointed to the large field of rubble.

"And the Ashen sword?"

The giant bull opened its mouth, as if to taunt Micah. On his tongue lay the Ashen sword, the eclyptas glimmering in the small rays of sunshine that could barely pierce the dusty air.

"I was afraid you couldn't use the staff on the altar," Micah said.

"I didn't use the staff," Katchan said.

Micah looked around at the destruction with awe. "How is that...then the staff is our last hope, find it." He held out his ow staff, it was battered now, but still strong. "Azmina!"

The great guardian looked down at Micah and saw him holding out the staff. He reared his flaming staff back and struck the wood with all his might. The staff held and absorbed the powerful blow.

"What can we do?" Echo asked.

“Keep Katchan alive, and stay out of my way this time,” Micah said. He leapt closer to the rotting bull.

“This form you see is your doing, commander,” Telo said, with the force of an earthquake.

“Did you ever consider you were just being taught a lesson and could have ended the curse yourself years ago? You know Marikel better than anyone, would he curse one of his beloved endlessly? But that would require the very thing you need to learn, wouldn’t it?”

Telo snorted poisonous fumes that made himself cough and gag. His eyes flared in the color of pain, anger, and desperation. He charged Micah, his great big horns sharp enough to skewer any material known to man. Micah leapt up and released the potential energy in his staff. Telo closed his eyes, but only for a second. The bull twisted his head and rammed the side of a horn into Micah, throwing him far across the destroyed landscape. In that movement, Telo caught sight of Katchan rummaging in the debris, looking for his own staff.

“Little exile,” Telo snorted.

He began to charge but was stopped again by Azmina’s fiery sword. Telo rose to his hind legs and kicked at the guardian, Azmina blocking with his sword and striking, but his blade being stopped by a horn. They fought, nearing to a standstill.

“You will not win this time, Telo,” Azmina growled.

“Move,” Telo grumbled like a mighty waterfall.

Azmina flared his wings so bright, Telo had to momentarily shield his eyes. Then he struck with his sword from high above, hoping to cleave the monster in two with a great shout. Telo roared in defiance, and suddenly there was stillness.

Katchan and Yashnu lifted another rock from where they believed the staff fell, and Echo and Rordion did the same where they believed the staff fell. Neither was sure what happened between the timespan of Joseph losing the staff, and Katchan destroying the fortress.

“Why is it I’ve done more digging since I’ve met you then anytime in my whole life,” Echo said.

“If you did a little more digging, maybe you wouldn’t have been such a brat growing up,” Yashnu said.

“Shut it, old man.”

“Please, we must focus on the task at hand,” Rordion said.

“Throwing a little salt on the beets makes the flavor go down a little better,” Yashnu said.

Katchan stopped, “Yashnu, this is no time for jokes. Beets will never taste good.”

Yashnu looked Katchan squarely in the face, “Promise me, Katchan. Promise me you’ll find a beet dish you love.”

“Absolutely not!”

“This is not the time!” Rordion said. He and Echo lifted one final rock, and they heard from down below a gasp.

“Is that you, old man?” Echo said.

“What?”

“Not you Yashnu, Joseph.”

“You found him?” Katchan said and ran over to where Echo and Rordion were looking. Indeed, a dirty hand lay stretched out. They scrambled to move rocks and debris from around Joseph, ensuring not to let any fall and crush him anymore than he already was. They pulled him into the open air, and Katchan noted how terrible he looked. His face was swollen, and his

shoulders looked dislocated, and he may not have any unbroken ribs by the way his breathing sounded.

“Joseph, I don’t know how to thank you for saving my life,” Katchan said.

“Well, you did save mine,” Joseph struggled to say.

“But your way didn’t involve bringing a fortress down on top of everyone,” Katchan said.

He reached into his bag, which, miraculously, had not ripped off. Maggaline’s story remained intact, and so did the ruach leaf. It was green, bright, and full of the spiritual energy of the Garden of First Light.

“Katchan, don’t waste that on me,” Joseph said.

“Waste it?”

“See how thin it is. Soon it will vanish from this plane,” Joseph said.

“But...”

“Keep it, you may have a better use for it. I have lived long enough.” Joseph rolled over and stood, “And there is still strength in me yet.”

His voice did regain a little normalcy, and already his swelling seemed to dissipate some.

“Livanian monks practiced a meditation that enhanced their healing. It can’t repair bones, but it can restore some energy,” Joseph said.

“It’d be quite nice to have known about that,” Echo said.

“Joseph, where’s the staff?” Katchan said.

“Buried under all this,” Joseph said. “Maybe you can ask them to help.”

They all turned and saw a large force of people: the Silver Citizens. They were no longer covered in the black tar from when Katchan first saw them. In fact, they looked similar to the Silver Knights. They were the same people, of course.

“Are you enemies?” Rordion asked.

One walked up to them and spoke. “I remember you four, Telo sent you to find something from our Lady Valerie’s blessed tomb.”

“Telo spread his curse out among these people. It’s how he was able to hold onto the form you saw him as, but you’ve destroyed his altar. He must have placed a binding spell on the altar that was broken,” Joseph said.

“My name is Deego. In life I was a leader in Livana, but I’ve been under this curse for so long, I don’t remember my life. It’s all blackness and pain that I remember.”

“Deego, you can help us destroy Telo now, you can avenge your city. There is a wooden staff buried underneath this rubble,” Katchan said.

Deego looked around, “A wooden staff?”

“It’s from the Garden of First Light. It’s powerful, unbreakable I think. It’s the only weapon that can stop Telo now, I hope,” Katchan said.

Deego told a few men and women what to look for, and they scattered to spread the word. Every man, woman, and child were to look for a wooden staff from the Garden of First Light. They set out on the task with renewed purpose. For so long they were under Telo’s influence, working against their will. Now, they worked to destroy their destroyer.

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE LITTLE EXILE

One of Telo's great bull horns ripped through Azmina's shoulder. Azmina finished his attack with his left arm, but it was too weak to do a lot of damage. Still, Telo roared when the flaming sword seared his rotting flesh, and he shook his head and threw Azmina to the side. While trying to recover, he took another blow from Micah's staff, then a sharp cut from his Musphelian sword. Telo reared onto his hind legs, and Micah leapt under him and stabbed upward, putrid blood spilled out. Telo leapt, kicking Micah out from under him.

Telo reoriented himself and set his eyes on Katchan, but surprise fell over the bull's face. A thousand of his former workers now helped his enemy search through the rubble. He scrapped the ground, ready to charge, but was stopped by sharp arrows, tipped with Musphelian arrowheads, piercing his flesh. He looked at the army that was formerly under his command, the Soldiers of First Light, guided by Orphion, the soldier he beheaded. With Telo's influence broken, they could see clearly who their enemy truly was.

Telo roared, and charged the front line, but was suddenly slowed. He looked down at his hind legs, and ropes were tied around them held by the two lines of Silver Knights.

"Don't let him charge!" The Silver Knights Commander shouted. Lucan held a grimace on his face, ready to destroy the thing that killed his city.

Telo was hit by another flurry of arrows. The Soldiers of First Light front line marched forward, shields forming a defensive line, and archers firing accurately while moving. They were, indeed, well trained.

Azmina slashed Telo across the right eye, blinding him. Micah hit him from the left, and his head jerked right. He roared like the forming of a new mountain. He kicked one back hoof, flinging the Silver Knights off, then turned and charged those holding the ropes of his other hoof, skewering many with his horn. Then he turned, with bodies still on his horn, and flung them toward the front lines of the Soldiers of First Light.

Micah leapt up, and Telo caught him with a bite. Micah screamed, and his screams brought pleasure to his ears. Azmina struggled to get a shot in while Micah lay between his teeth. He charged the front lines of the Soldiers of First Light and destroyed their defensive wall. He ran all the way through their line, then again up the back line. With both armies recovering from his attack, Micah disabled, and Azmina out of range, he locked onto Katchan, and charged with the full force and anger of a god.

Deego ran to Katchan screaming, "Sir, we think we've found it."

Katchan dismissed the thought that someone thousands of years older than him just called him "sir," and ran to where Deego waved. A young woman held the staff reverently in her hands and stuck it out to him.

"Is this truly a branch from the Garden of First Light?" She asked.

"It is, I had to go there and pull it off myself," Katchan said.

"He is *emegir*! One who walks the full expanse of the scope!" She said.

"No, I am *emesal*," Katchan said.

The young woman laughed, "One is not *emesal*, one understands *emesal*. What you are is *emegir*," She said.

"Oh, stop it Tamaya. We can't know that for sure," Deego said.

“Thank you for your help. Now please, run and hide. I don’t want anyone killed here and sent to the abyss on my account,” Katchan said.

“Running did nothing for us in life, it will do nothing in death. Those of us destined for Hysol will arrive in Hysol,” Deego said.

“Then at least stay out of our way,” Echo said. “Katchan, come.”

Katchan leapt from rock to rock to see what Echo was so uneasy about. Telo rampaged through both armies and stared him down now.

“Echo, do you think he still wants my blood, or just wants to destroy everything?”

“He’ll do both regardless of what I say. Katchan, I must apologize to you. You’ve only treated me with kindness, you did not tell me outright how my father killed himself, and you did not abandon me after I attacked you. Seeing this awful creature, I’m glad your grandmother sent us all to Midbar to save Gaelwyn. I’m sorry I’ve been so cold to you all this time.”

“Echo, I...”

“I’m childish, Katchan, I am. Knowing you’re the son of Avalene, well... You are the son that could have been mine. I couldn’t be more proud of what a man you’ve grown into.”

Telo charged, coming fast.

“Echo, why are you saying this now?”

“I’m going to give you an opening, and when I do, you do what Micah told you to do. You do what your *father* told you to do,” Echo said.

Katchan noted the way he said father was affectionate this time. “Echo, no you don’t have to—”

“Come and get me you worthless, disgusting, poor excuse for a god there ever was!”

Echo shouted, running full speed toward the raging bull.

“Echo!” Katchan shouted.

“Respect a warriors final wish,” Rordion said. He chased after Echo, and Yashnu followed behind. Katchan charged after them.

Echo screamed and charged the bull, Telo bent his head, horn first. Echo stopped and threw a rock, as hard as he’s ever thrown a rock, right into Telo’s left eye. Telo was temporarily blinded, but his horn pierced through Echo’s chest. Telo stopped, briefly, and Rordion sliced the beasts tendon, and Telo dropped to his knee.

“Katchan, now!” Yashnu cried, as he sliced Telo’s jaw tendon, giving Micah enough freedom to push himself out of the beast’s mouth.

Katchan ran up a fallen piece of debris and leapt into the air. Telo’s left eye opened, and registered the attack, as Katchan smashed the staff into his skull, releasing the potential energy of the Garden of First Light in one final blow. The force threw Katchan back, as it did everyone else who was around the bull at the time. With a final roar, like the very earth beneath them cracking, the giant bull fell and lay completely still.

The dusty air cleared from the blow, revealing a strikingly beautiful setting sun. Katchan picked himself up and walked toward the fallen bull. As he passed the fallen piece of debris, he noticed it was the very altar Telo planned to sacrifice him on. The scope was sometimes just in that way.

He made his way to the bull’s horn, where Rordion and Yashnu helped Echo from the horn and lay him on the ground. Somehow, he was still gasping for breath. Katchan knelt beside him.

“Echo...”

Echo smiled, blood seeped down his mouth, “Do not beg for a warrior’s life. It dishonors him. If I had lived a thousand lifetimes, I could have never served Avalene so well as I did today. I protected her son and landed a blow on a god. This is a good death.”

“But Echo, the abyss,” Katchan said.

“Now would be a good time to use the ruach,” Joseph said, limping toward them.

Katchan frantically reached into his bag and pulled out the green leaf. Joseph was right, it was thinner now than before. Echo snatched Katchan’s arm, stopping him from the squeezing the leaf. Katchan met the man’s eyes, they were tender, mournful, but in them was resolve.

“Famor...if there is even a chance the power of this leaf could save him, then you must,” Echo said.

“Your soul will vanish into the abyss if I don’t save you,” Katchan said. He looked at Micah, Orphion stood by his side. Orphion, the one soldier who would not fall under Telo’s influence and suffered greatly for it. The one Micah let die. “But I will respect your last wish.”

Echo smiled, and looked up into the sky where a few stars twinkled in the coming twilight. “It was hard to see before, but Midbar has always been a little bit beautiful.”

Katchan joined him in staring at darkening sky, “I had a similar thought not long ago.” He looked down, but Echo was void of life.

Yashnu kneeled beside his friend and whispered the prayer of the lifted, and shut his eyelids, then put two small stones over his eyes. Rordion joined Yashnu in the prayer, and the two matched in harmony and rhythm. The result was a prayer so beautiful, Katchan was sure that Echo could hear them even in the abyss.

Yashnu stood, “You know, I never really believed in the abyss. We’ll see Echo again, probably soon.”

Rordion nodded his head in agreement. The man was so big, so strong and tough, but Katchan could see the tremble in the man's lip, and the twitch of his eye. If he said anything, it would come out in a flood of tears.

Micah put a hand on Katchan's shoulder. "It's not over."

Katchan looked up from the place Echo died to the bull. It was large, rotting, and very still. What could Micah mean, it wasn't over?

Suddenly the bulls back began cracking like old dried skin. The horns and the flesh seemed to stop rotting all at once and began drying under the sun, like a snake shedding its skin. Where the bulls spine was supposed to be, came a splintering sound, like dried twigs in a fall forest, and Telo fell out. He lay sprawled on the ground; his face was rotten, and his formerly stainless white clothes were blackened and bloody. Not a speck of white remained. But most important, what came with him was the Ashen sword, gripped tightly in his hand. He gasped hard and heavy, like an exhausted sprinter. Katchan did not know if Telo had any more strength left in him, but he looked thoroughly beaten.

Katchan stepped forward, and Micah grabbed him by the shoulder. Katchan eyed his father curiously, and Micah, saying nothing, pointed to a new arrival. Katchan looked to where Micah was pointing and saw an old man coming, ignoring everyone around him as if they didn't exist. He had a long beard and a wrinkled face, his clothes looked finely woven with rich textures and layers fit for a king. He looked back at Telo, and through the rot he almost saw a resemblance. He opened his mouth to say something in shock, but Micah's firm hand stopped him. The old man stopped a midday shadows length from Telo.

"We made quite a mess of things, didn't we?" King Telo said.

Telo spoke as if he were chewing glass, “If it isn’t my body come to take back its soul. I should have left you in the ground where you belong.”

“I should have never traveled out beyond where I was supposed to. I should have never seen what mortals should not have been allowed to see. It twisted you, all the things I did suffocated you. And like any living organism, you adapted to survive, and became this. I let myself become so full of anger, hatred, and desire for otherworldly power that I corrupted you into this form,” King Telo said.

“You take responsibility for all this? You could be sleeping still, I resurrected you,” Telo said.

“Out of self-hatred. You believed returning to your body could grant you an escape from the curse, nothing more. Nothing altruistic. But even your accident’s have done some good, Telo. For there is still some good we can do,” King Telo said.

He reached his hand out to his rotting body, and Telo slapped it away.

“What good can we do as a man? Everything we achieved was forgotten! What is the point of knowing our boundaries if we can’t surpass them? What is the point of living if we can’t be god’s? And why be a god if we won’t be worshipped? Fall under Marikel once again? I refuse.”

Katchan watched in wonder at the conversation between body and soul. In Midbar, so much had happened, but he never dreamed he would witness what he was seeing now: a body and a soul debating the worth of life.

King Telo stepped away and sat on a fallen piece of debris. He pulled out from his robes a luthier, a stringed instrument. He played a note, and Katchan’s heart leapt with some feeling of rightness.

The cords of the universe...

King Telo played a song that would break the heart of a thousand soldiers, and it did. The Silver Knights and the Soldiers of First Light wept indignantly. The song told tales in its rhythm about a cosmos being created and forced into existence, and an order set about things, and virtues that if only men channeled properly would set the earth into a divine cadence. Justice. Mercy. Humility. In the notes in between, Katchan saw thousands of years of history, all beginning with cosmic whisper, and ending with Marikel's curse. He saw Telo's rise to power, and deadly fall from grace. He saw a man who once admired Marikel become resentful that he wasn't Marikel. He saw deceit, and grief. He saw authority, and defiance. He saw Justice, and Mercy.

When the song ended, every soul was touched and healed of some strange ailment they never knew they had. Katchan felt strong enough to fight Telo all over again, but something inside him had released that desire. He no longer saw an evil man, but a tormented soul unwilling to be healed.

King Telo put the luthier away and approached Telo once more. His rotten face was no longer grimaced in defeat, but in anger.

"You're ready now?" King Telo said.

Telo struggled to stand, going from his knees finally to his feet. He leaned on the Ashen sword like a cane. He faced his bodily half without any sense there would be a resolution.

"With one song, you were more of a god than I ever was," Telo said.

"Being separated from my twisted soul for so long cleansed me. I can feel the scope once again, I can see the cords waiting to be strung," King Telo said.

"I must thank you, generously. You've shown me something I would have never realized on my own. My greatest weakness has always been you, my flesh. I did not choose to become

infused with your evil desires, your evil desires became me. I should have known what to do from the very beginning,” Telo closed that last word off with a laugh. “And while you were playing our luthier, you gave me time to shuffle this where it needed to be.” Telo lifted the Ashen sword and revealed the crystal section of the hilt, red with blood.

“Taking a bite out of Micah only gave me the blood I needed to use the Ashen sword and eclyptas together,” Telo said.

He then swung the Ashen sword with all his might, cutting the head off his body. He leaned down and grabbed the luthier and slung it over his shoulder. His rotting decayed face was becoming young once again. His voice became confident and strong.

“Now I can make my own choices without the lifetime of rot holding me down. I can surpass all my boundaries and meet Marikel as an equal! And it’s all thanks to you, little exile,” Telo gave Katchan a smirk.

Micah leapt toward him, but with a wave, Telo threw him off. Azmina charged, but was caught by some invisible hand coming from Telo. Arrows and spears were deflected. He had an unseen shield swirling around him. Katchan lifted the Mowphath staff and charged forward. Telo raised the Ashen sword high in the air, then stabbed it into the earth. The eclyptas and the blood shined brilliantly red, and suddenly, the world changed for Katchan. Before he saw a wasteland, ruins, and souls, but it changed. The world around him felt the same: hot and scratchy, it smelled of blood and dust, he tasted iron on his tongue; blood spilt, and heard the screams of soldiers trying to stop Telo, but his sight was different. He saw through the wasteland and the souls and the blood. The world dissipated from a bright haze, with a ball of red in the background to a new hue. The world was grey, shimmering, held together by strings and particles of energy. He turned and looked behind him and saw a bright glow, brighter than the sun, but it was distant, very

distant. In a different world entirely. Gaelwyn. He could see the wall separating his home village from Midbar, and now, looking around he could see there was no sky above him, nor surrounding him. Above was an unseen dome, and the world they inhabited was much smaller than he could have possibly imagined. He saw Echo's body, and his soul standing over it. He wanted to wave, but knew instinctively that Echo was done with this world, but he was not in any abyss, he was taking a stairway to Hysol. All this he fathomed in an instant. And behind Telo he saw a doorway: a thin space. Where Hysol and Idyll connected. And through that doorway poured out streams of energy, directed at Katchan, filling him completely. He breathed in the gift, and exhaled strength. Somehow, the part of him that was related to the god-man Kal was rising from whatever slumber deep inside of him. He was no longer Katchan the boy, but Katchan the divine. The small spark within him flared to a roaring bonfire. And then, even more was revealed to him in this strange sight: he could see streams of air beating rhythmically.

The cords of the universe.

He could see words written across space as if it were the paper Maggaline's last story was written on. The words revealed their meaning, and he knew as if he had always known. Is this emesal, he asked himself, but knew it was not. It was beyond emesal. It was the divine words, **emeikal**. He absorbed the meaning, and understood what he had to do next.

Katchan stood his ground as the armies of Lucan and Micah were swept away. Telo stared, shocked.

"How?"

"Telo, you can't do this."

"But, I am doing it," Telo said. The certainty in his voice left him.

“You’re right, you are doing it. I know you plan to leave Idyll and let my home be crushed under the weight of the curse collapsing upon itself. You hope some bit of power Marikel held will go with the destruction. You think you will find the cosmic whisper and challenge His authority in the scope. But I can see everything now. I can see the cords of the universe; I can see the boundary between this world and my own. I can see the dome we occupy. But most important, I can see you, Telo. I see your limits. I see you haven’t even scratched the surface of the power you are capable of wielding. I can see you will become stronger than any other in the scope, even greater than the sons of Marikel. But, that’s where it ends for you. The end of your limits come nowhere near Marikel’s lowest. No matter how powerful you become, you will never be strong enough to challenge Him.”

“How can you know all this?”

“I bear the eyes of God, Telo,” Katchan said.

Telo laughed, “I believe you. You speak as someone much older than you are. Imagine that, the first prophet in a thousand years found among a backwater village like Gaelwyn. And not just a prophet, but one from the line of Caleb.”

Katchan spoke with authority above his own, “You will stop this madness.”

Telo drew the sword from the earth and threw it over to Katchan. It landed at his feet.

“Little exile, we truly speak as brothers now. As prophets, we are burdened with knowledge. We are burdened with the unseen realm and the workings of Hysol. But, I know you speak the truth. If I will be overwhelmed in my confrontation with Marikel, then what would be the point? And how could I now destroy the world of the last prophet? One day, you may become like I have. Prophets have great power, but their fates are grim. I was the exception. A rise to kingship and the building of a great city is not what one expects of a prophet. However,

what will you do now, knowing what you are and what you can do with the sword of Asher? Will you travel the known and unknown parts of the scope? Will you seek to overcome your limits?”

Katchan picked up the Ashen sword, and the eyes of God faded. The world returned as bright and harsh as ever. The smells of blood sharpened, the sounds of the wind and beaten armies clear. The dome above him became a bright sky, reddening with the coming sunset, and the thin space no longer showed, but he felt it now. It was still there. Telo was also still there, but was different. Perhaps only a prophet can get through to another prophet. Telo walked over to the head of his body and picked it up.

He looked around, seeing Micah, and gave no emotion. Micah was always a tool to Telo. Just a tool to fuel his war. He stared down at the expressionless face of King Telo.

“You twisted me into a monster with your life. You should have known the limits of humanity. Even though in the end we ascended them by the power of Aurora, the Architect of Evil. How dare you speak sense to me in the end.”

Telo closed his eyes, and his soul, the young face, crumbled into starlight, and a great wind blew across Midbar and swept both the body and the soul away into the farthest reaches of the scope.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

MIDBAR'S END

Famor woke with a sharp cry. He had just been blasted by lightning originating from a cloud of green, where people were dancing and calling him to join. For the first time since he'd died in this endless wasteland, there was a bit of fun to be had. The shadows swayed and leapt around, and they beckoned him with hips and long hair; all made of mist, but so life like. Against the advice of his friends, he ran to join the dance. But it was no ordinary mist or dance, it was something else entirely. A living being a creature of sorts made by an accident. It lashed out at him, and that was the last thing he remembered. Time passed by as if he were sleeping. A troubled sleep, anyways. But now he was awake, and Rordion and Yashnu stood over him. They were in the watchtower, and from the unnatural warmth, he could tell there was a small fire in the fireplace. Rordion and Yashnu looked on in surprise, as well they should. That living mist could have done some real damage to him, had he not been careful.

"I've finally woke up, have I?" Famor said. He accepted Rordion's hand and rose to his legs. They wobbled like a newborn foal. "Gotta catch me breath," Famor said with a laugh, but it was a cheap one.

"I can't believe it," Yashnu said. "You finally figured it out?"

"I don't have any real control over the eyes," a boy said.

"Who is that there?"

"It will take time, and training," A man's deep growling voice said. He recognized that one from long ago, at the barrier of Gaelwyn.

“It is getting close to time, we must be going,” said another voice. Young, educated it seemed, like a youth well versed in the stories. Three extra people? Chattering continued between them all.

“What in Marikel’s flames are going on?”

The chattering stopped, and five pairs of eyes turned to him, and he saw them all more clearly: there was a boy wearing fine silver armor that was much too big for him carrying a sword that was far too heavy for him, yet he carried both with valor. Still, a wooden staff lay strapped to his back. An oddity for a Knight. There was also a man in long black robes, a thick chest plate, knotted and black, with a face like the one Famor and Echo took off after long ago. And beside them was a young man in tatters that appeared as if they were once the finest clothes in the Gaelwyn. Finer, really. Nothing in Gaelwyn had gold thread.

“You’ve missed quite a bit, Famor,” Rordion said. He placed a hand on his shoulder. Famor shoved it off.

“I was out for a night, maybe into the day. I see you two managed to catch that village vagrant and his boy, I’m guessing. I knew we’d find him eventually. But how much could I have missed? Where is Echo? He’ll set everything straight.”

Five pairs of eyes looked to each other. Yashnu was the first to speak.

“Echo did set everything straight, in a way. But he had to move on from Midbar to do it.”

Famor’s strong proud face, crumpled into disbelief. Suddenly the room began quaking. The fire shook, and for the first time Famor noticed there were no logs. Just a flame dancing where it was supposed to be.

“Let us go on from here as well,” Yashnu said.

The six exited the watchtower, and Famor was stunned by a world in pieces and confusion. Midbar had always been harsh, but now there were pits of blue and shards of black night sky cracking above him. Winds tormented the sands, and thunder rumbled in the distance.

“The Dome is shattering. The curse is ending. Katchan, say your goodbyes,” The man in black said.

“Always ordering me about,” The boy in the silver armor said. He turned to the three, and his face said much.

“It was an honor to save the world with you, boy,” Rordion said.

“If we do see Echo, we’ll tell him how the story ended,” Yashnu said.

“When you see Echo, let him know he missed the best part,” Katchan said.

“What in Telo’s Virtues is happening?” Famor said.

“About that...” Yashnu said.

Famor watched the boy gently slide the sword into the sand, and from thin air, a flash of light appeared. The man in black, and the youth in tattered clothing stepped into the light. The boy took one last look back at them. His eyes were golden flames. He scanned the three, then his eyes looked past Famor’s shoulder, as if someone were behind him. He nodded, then he too stepped through the light, and it vanished.

“I don’t know how much time we have, but let me start at the beginning,” Yashnu said.

“Wait, Rordion; where did you get this incredible sword?”

“Don’t skip ahead!”

And then Famor listened to the greatest story he had ever heard. He sat in active attention for what seemed like ages, until it was done and they passed on from Midbar like glittering dust.

Katchan, Joseph, and Micah stood on the platform hanging between the royal family of Livana. They faced Commander Lucan and the ghosts of an army with vengeance satisfied. All but for one. Lucan raised a fist in the air, and the Silver Knights gave one last boom before they all descended into the graves Micah spent ten lifetimes creating for them. A whole millennia dedicated to this one task, and now the task was complete.

His own Soldiers of First Light did not beg for mercy, but when Telo became like glittering dust, their own sins were revealed to them. Telo used his sorcery to toy with their hearts. They had darkness in them, as all soldiers do. He manipulated that darkness to his own ends, but they followed that darkness. All of them, but for Orphion. Orphion stayed true to who he was and his loyalties, even to the end. His passage was a boon of honor. The only among Micah's company, himself included, to have an honorable end. The rest passed with sorrow on their lips. Harol did not pass away as any of them. For one such as him, who saw the light before the end and dealt with his darkness, he was granted a passage much like Echo of Gaelwyn. Hysol was in reach, but he would work for it in ways none living understand. Now Micah had his own darkness and tragedy to deal with through the lens of a promise.

"We agreed," Lucan said.

"I know, but he can teach me so much," Katchan said.

"Are you begging for the life of a soldier?"

"I would not dishonor him that way. My reasons are purely selfish. I am the first prophet born of the Children of First Light. I need to learn my duties and responsibilities," Katchan said.

“It is time to stop arguing. I will take my leave now. You could have escaped this curse long ago, but chose not to. Therefore, I know you will not run now. Say your goodbyes, Commander Micah.” Lucan saluted, then faded away like morning mist on a sunny day.

Katchan turned to Micah. “How will I know what to do?”

Micah brooded but spoke gently. “You may not need to do anything. The time of the prophets ended long ago.”

“So, all this power, and I can do nothing.”

“That is far from true. You saved Gaelwyn from certain destruction. You can return there now and make the best life for yourself possible.”

“The village won’t respect me.”

“You? Perhaps not. But your story they will respect. They will respect the story of Maggaline’s grandson. And who knows, your gifts may be called upon someday.”

Joseph chimed in, “Someday? Katchan, with your gift, it is possible for you to return to Livana before it’s destruction and save it. You can even go there before I betray my sister and make a mess of the whole kingdom.”

“You would ask him to fix your mistakes? No, the passage of time flows forward. Who knows what effects that could have on the way of things. It could become much worse.”

“Or it could become much better,” Joseph said. “And, I have seen your Maggaline’s pages. She uses Livanian script. You may learn to make meaning from those symbols.”

“Valerie told me I was unable.”

“Unable? What? Do you think you’re the same boy Valerie spoke to in this hall of paintings?”

The earth quaked again.

Joseph looked toward Valerie's crypt. "It is time you go now, Katchan. Even if you do live your days in Gaelwyn, you have done more for me than I deserved. I will fall asleep on the floor of my beloved sister's crypt and fade away like this cursed land. The memory of Livana will fade away with me, but then that is what happens to all great cities? One dies so another will take its place. Perhaps Gaelwyn will rise up from its lowly place, like Livana did."

"Not while Saulnier is elder," Katchan said. He lifted the Ashen sword into the air, but Micah stopped him.

"There is much I wish I could teach you, but then again, the lessons won't resonate unless you learn them on your own, will they? I pray I go to your mother when Midbar collapses," Micah said.

"So do I," Katchan said. He lowered the sword into the ground, and without making a mark or damaging the stone floor, it slid ethereally into another space. A light flashed brilliantly, and he walked through. He had one more stop before he faced home again. He tried not to cry for what he was losing, but for what he gained. He took one last look at Micah, his father, a child of first light, a great general, and a village vagrant. Then Joseph, a prince, a traitor, a king, a memory. He walked through, and the light swallowed him whole.

"What a remarkable boy you have. So much power and lineage; he'll do well in the battles that are yet to come," Joseph said.

"Of course, he will, but it won't be because of the blood he inherited, but the stories in his heart. After all, the best parts of him did not come from me, but from Maggaline."

Katchan stood before the barrier to Gaelwyn. Beyond the barrier was miles and miles of wasteland, but with his eyes he knew this was the space. He once believed Gaelwyn and Midbar

but were a step apart, but he now he saw the infinite distance between them. It told him that often what is seen is not the truth, but with the right perception, all can be revealed. The eyes of God. Where did they come from? A silly question, because he knew where the eyes of God come from: long nights by Maggaline's feet, ingesting her stories like food and drink. Stories that spanned a thousand centuries with wisdom worth a thousand kingdoms. They were all implanted in him because they were his to inherit, and it was hers to give. Her wisdom stayed her hand when Saulnier attacked her honor and that of her daughters, because she knew the battle was for him to fight. But he wouldn't fight it the way the old him wanted to, violently. But the way the stories taught him too. Valerie's way. Even though he had more power now than anyone in Gaelwyn, save the Oracle perhaps, it was power he did not intend to use irresponsibly. Even though, with this silver armor, he was now richer than anyone in Gaelwyn could possibly imagine, he would not use any for himself, save to rebuild what he lost.

The ground quaked again. He did not want to be here when the curse finally broke for good. At least he did not want to be on this side of Midbar. He used the Ashen sword, a flare of red light struck out and opened the passage through the barrier. He could see his rock from here. A perfect perch. He left the wasteland without a single look back.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

BACK TO GAELWYN

Katchan settled comfortably on his old perch, watching a new morning on Midbar. The sun's rays penetrated from the east trembling wall, the boundary that separated Gaelwyn from Midbar for almost a thousand years giving the people a glimpse into an unknown world. Now, finally, it was breaking. The curse dying with Telo's surrender. But it still stood, the boundary, yet stood on the brink. Micah forged the boundary with his power. Katchan wondered...

He raised the Ashen sword high and saw the boundary with his golden eyes. There he it was. The key. He used the ecliptas to forge a lock and twisted with the Ashen sword in the air. A large earthquake suddenly hit, shaking Katchan from his perch. He stood and watched from the top to the bottom. The wasteland was falling. It shattered like glass, and fell, fizzling out like golden dust, and being swept away with a large wind. Katchan could hardly believe his eyes. For out past the boundary was no longer a wasteland, sand and rock and death, but fields stretching as far as the eye can see, fields of green. Grass replaced sand, and trees replaced ruins. The land had been restored. Marikel's curse was over.

Katchan sat for a while. He thought about everything that happened beyond that boundary. He wondered what would happen now that the wasteland was restored. People would want to explore the world their ancestors left behind. They would want to see the ruins of the mighty city of Livana, the Silver City. All its former glory covered, hopefully, by grass instead of sand.

He then thought about Maggaline's story, the sole reason he left Gaelwyn in the first place. It still weighed down his leather pouch, but it seemed lighter now. He felt at it. All across

a cursed land, and still he did not know how to read her words. The eclyptas shined prettily in the hilt of the Ashen sword. There was a way to learn. All he needed to do was find the right painting in the right time. But there was something he still needed to do.

He stood and stretched, ready for the long walk to the Elder's compound. He cinched the silver armor tight. If Benjamin lived, he was about to become a very rich man. he turned, and almost dropped the sword.

Standing behind him was a girl who looked an older version of the Oracles apprentice, Willow. Her golden eyes and dark hair framed a face kissed by the sun and forged in the center of the scope. Sunsets paled in comparison to the beauty she presented. Her face presented as much shock as his own.

"Who are you?"

Katchan felt a stab in the heart. He couldn't have been gone longer than a week at most, and Willow had already forgotten him. Of course, this armor made him look different. Maybe his hair was a tangled mess. He had not washed in some time, and was probably filthy.

"Willow, it's me," Katchan said then stopped, surprised at the depth of his own voice. Where had the scrawny, frightened pipsqueak voice gone?

"Did you do this," Willow pointed to the now lush wasteland, but still showed no signs of recognition. He thought he understood now.

"Several years ago, a boy named Katchan entered the wasteland. Now he's returned," Katchan said.

"Impossible," Will said. "Katchan died three years ago, on this day."

Katchan laughed. "No, Willow. I dreamed wildly." He showed her the eclyptas ruby adorning the hilt of the Ashen sword. "You brought this to me, and now I have returned. Three

years? It fills like only a week has passed. There is so much to tell, but first, there is someone I have to see.”

Willow’s face scrunched and she rubbed her hands together as if debating herself. She threw her arms down and a look of disbelief and tears welled up in her face. She flung herself at him and embraced the boy who had died. The boy she believed she sent to die three years earlier. She wept with sadness and relief until the tears no longer came. She fixed herself up properly and demanded Katchan not say a word of this to anyone. An Oracle was an icon of serenity.

As they walked Katchan told her the story of the Exile’s War. How a man became a god and grew mad with power. He told her the identity of Micah. The story of Valerie and Joseph. He explained the eclyptas and its unknown origins. He told of the four from Gaelwyn who now rested in Hysol. Willow had never heard such a story, even in the temple of the Oracle where all things were known. Katchan was nearing the story of the Garden of First Light when they came across the land he and Maggaline used to share. The fields were destroyed. Salted, Willow explained. Where their small home used to sit was left an empty lot, overgrown with weeds. Saulnier’s fury casted a shadow across Gaelwyn. The stories have largely died. Order is reduced to nothing, and vigilante justice is now considered justice. Saulnier hasn’t been seen in over a year.

“There is no one to help him? What of the Oracle?”

“The Oracle maintains a bit of order in the proximity of the temple, but people mostly moved away from that area. High born and Low born are outdated terms now. Ogni runs a rival government to Elder Saulnier’s. He’s a man who does not respect the stories.”

They kept walking for a time.

“I must say though, Katchan. You’ve surprised me.”

“I know. I’m still alive.”

“Well, yes. But you don’t seem happy. Saulnier ruined your family’s reputation, destroyed your land, and ran you off into a cursed world and now he’s downtrodden.”

Katchan stopped. “My grandmother would have been Elder had it not been for me. She would have never wished this to happen on her worst enemy. You’re right, before I would be leaping for joy. But I can’t. Gaelwyn seems as much a wasteland as the one I left. I can’t be happy when so many are hurting.”

“But Katchan, the whole village despised you. They believed Saulnier’s lie about your mother.”

The way Willow tilted her head caused her eyes to catch the sunshine in a way that sent butterflies careening in Katchan’s stomach. He blushed and kept walking.

“I know they despised me. All prophets are despised. Some are even killed for it,” he said, thinking of Gath.

“You must have left something out of your story,” Willow said.

It was not long before they arrived at the main road of Gaelwyn. It cut all the way through the center, splitting into four roads separating the four communities of Gaelwyn. Katchan took the one leading the Saulnier’s compound. The Ashen sword sat firmly on his shoulder, the Mowphath staff hung on his back bound by some rope, and the silver knights armor presented an unquestionable threat. People looked up from their work: crafting pottery, jewelry, baking goods, or mending farming equipment, to see a sight from a story walking down the road with the Oracles apprentice by his side. Out of the corner of his eye, Katchan saw a man back away and run down the road to the east quarter.

“That’s one of Ogni’s goons,” Willow said.

Katchan nodded and moved with purpose. He didn't stop until he was in front of the Elder's Compound. Several guards littered the premises, and they converged on his position when he arrived. Thirty spears surrounded him. One of the guards grabbed Willow, screaming about what the Oracle would do to Katchan if her apprentice were hurt.

"I'm here to see the Elder," Katchan said as soon as the chaos died down. He held his sword on his shoulder in a non-threatening way. No reason to be skewered now. Not sure he'd walk around as a spirit like in Midbar.

"Who are you, and what are you wearing?" A guard asked. Katchan recognized none of these men.

"My name is Katchan, grandson of Maggaline. This armor belonged to a Silver Knight from the ancient Silver City, Livana."

"He's mad. Throw him in the Keep," One said.

"He deserves a fair trial first," Another argued.

While his fate was discussed, Katchan focused on opening a thin space. He walked through his memories, trying to recall the feeling. It was distant in Gaelwyn, as if the village didn't contain a necessary spark. But he remembered what it felt like to find Yashnu in the space between, and suddenly a white fog split before him. The guards screamed and backed away. Katchan casually walked through. The space between was dim, not bright like Midbar's. He remembered the day he stood before the Elder with Udrik and Ogni, and another thin space opened. He walked through and stood before the Elder's Seat. It was empty. Suddenly, fatigue like he'd never felt before washed over him. His legs turned to jelly, and he fell. His eyelids slid into a half slumber, and Katchan imagined he felt like what Saulnier looked like when he drank too much beet wine.

Some footsteps shuffled around his head and two sandaled feet stopped before his eyes. The person flipped Katchan over to his back, and he stared up at Elder Saulnier's face. The doors exploded open and thirty pairs of legs ran into the Elder's room, apologizing and screaming for the Elder to step back. He raised his hand and stopped them.

Saulnier ordered them, but Katchan could not hear. And soon he drifted off to sleep.

Katchan felt like he was on a cloud, still, but wind rushed through his hair. His body felt as secure as being wrapped in Willow's embrace. He tried to move his arms, and felt a weight holding them down. A smooth cup was pressed to his lips, and a cool liquid drained down his throat, exposing a parchedness he only knew in the wasteland. Blackness came again.

When his eyes first shot open, all he could fret about was Maggaline's story. He sprang up, his stomach wrenching in pain, causing him to lay back down. The feather mattress accepted his body willingly. He shot up again and leapt out from under thick, woolen covers to a hard stone floor. Light streaming through the windows revealed a large bed. Only two people in Gaelwyn had beds like this; the Oracle, and the Elder.

He ran to the door and threw it open. Waiting outside his door was the Oracle, Willow, and Elder Saulnier. Katchan stopped, and felt the coolness of the stone on his feet again. He looked down, and realized he was naked. Elder Saulnier threw him a cloak.

"Cover yourself, boy."

Katchan did, hiding his eyes from seeing the embarrassment on Willow's face. It matched his own, he was sure. But nakedness was not the most pressing issue.

"Where is Maggaline's story?" He said, directing it with anger towards the Elder.

"Be still, Katchan," the Oracle said.

"He has a right to be afraid, Deborah. I did terrible things to him in the past."

Katchan looked hard at Saulnier. Did the man mean to taunt him?

“Maggaline’s story is safe. As are the rest of your tools. Willow ran to the Oracle after you walked through a cloud. When they found me, Willow gave us the honor of telling your story.”

“Aren’t you afraid what Maggaline’s story says will destroy the village?”

Saulnier laughed, and Katchan looked on the man as if he were mad, then his laughter died down into tears. When Katchan was in the hall of paintings, he saw a portrait of Saulnier with grief covering his face. He knew the man was mad: angry at himself above all things. He pitied him in this moment. He had the opportunity to have his guards slit his throat, but instead he gave him his own bed. Deborah placed her hands on Saulnier’s shoulders and Willow led Katchan into the Elder’s bed chambers. She showed him the trunk where his tunic, sandals, the Ashen sword, Mowphath staff, silver armor, and Maggaline’s story were kept.

“Now I am surprised with you. I thought the old Katchan was long gone,” Willow said with a huff, and turned around.

“Wait,” Katchan said.

She stopped.

“I know he hurts. I know he’s regretful. I’m ashamed.”

Willow smiled but did not turn around. “Get your clothes on. There is a lot of work to be done.” She left him as he dropped the cloak.

The four of them sat around a table sipping tea. Once Katchan verified all that had happened, save a few points that wouldn’t make any sense to them no matter how hard he tried, he wasn’t quite the storyteller Maggaline was despite being her grandson, they discussed how to deal with Ogni.

“Something about Gaelwyn seriously limits my gift to use the eyes of God. Just opening one portal knocked me out for half a day. I can’t imagine using this power against Ogni,” Katchan said.

“Perhaps it was something about Midbar that allowed you to use the eyes of God, and not the other way around,” Deborah, the Oracle said. It was a rare treat in Gaelwyn to know the name of the Oracle. They leave behind the name they were born with to assume a new title. She picked Deborah from a story she loved. A judge from the days of the seven villages.

“We don’t need your gifts, but your weapon. This sword is the finest weapon I have ever seen. No armor Ogni has can withstand it.”

“I don’t mean to kill him,” Katchan said.

Saulnier chuckled. “I remember a day when Ogni brought you in the accuse you of stealing.”

“Your choices caused Gaelwyn’s troubles. I won’t stoop to the level of a killer to fix your problems.”

“And you will not have too. Once Ogni gets a look at the handsome man you’ve grown into, all may be well again,” Deborah said.

Willow shot her mentor a look.

Katchan’s face scrunched. “What in all the scope can you possibly mean?”

Deborah smiled. “Lati remains un-betrothed. With that armor, you are the wealthiest individual in Gaelwyn, by far. Ogni will not resist such a worthy son-in-law.”

Katchan blushed and studied his feet.

“An odd proposal, but I believe Ogni is just the sort of man to desire wealth above all else. Besides, wealth and influence go hand in hand.”

Katchan glanced at Willow, meeting her eyes. He stood and walked out of the room, his tea untouched.

He leaned on the balcony overhang. The Elder's Compound was small compared to the Exile's fortress, but he could see much in Gaelwyn.

"The life of an Oracle is lonely at times. But it must be that way. To commune with the spirits of Hysol, one must remain untethered to life." Deborah said.

"You haven't communed with Hysol in a long time, have you?"

"I have not."

"I figured not," Katchan said. "I've wondered about why using my gift drained me so much. It's because there is no spiritual matter here. I used my own soul to power those thin spaces. That is why Gaelwyn is so dim. I know you can see it too."

Katchan looked at her with golden eyes, meeting her own golden eyes. The sun appeared as if through a dark sheet. The village was coated in shadow. The spirits of the people appeared as candles rather than roaring fires.

Katchan closed his eyes, and when he opened them, they were deep brown once again.

"This happened once before, Katchan. A king of Livana ignored the stories and pounded statues of the city's heroes into dust. He used the gold recovered from the statues to make himself rich. Some consider the reign of that king to have begun the decline of that great city."

"I know who it is you speak of. King Joseph. He often alluded to his role in the fall of Livana, and now it makes sense. The stories we tell of past and present things stoke the flames of our spirits. Without them we grow dim. From life we make stories, but it is stories that make life worth living."

“The Elder hasn’t told a story since Maggaline passed. She truly was a keeper of the stories unlike any other.”

“A sophite,” Katchan said.

Deborah gazed upon him and smiled.

“Yes.”

Katchan returned her smile. “I would marry Willow if you release her bond.”

Deborah smiled, but it was a smile tainted with sadness. “And she would agree to marry you. I sense her love for you has only grown in your absence.”

“Then it is settled,” Katchan said.

Deborah placed a hand on his shoulder. Noticing now for the first time, Katchan saw he was nearly as tall as she.

“Our lives are one of sacrifice. You know the role you fill in this world.”

Katchan turned away. He knew she spoke the truth. Willow was not an option for him. Even Lati, had they betrothed just to quell Ogni’s rule, would have never succeeded. He was a prophet. He did not know yet what that meant, but he knew Willow would not be a part of it. At least in the way he wished.

“Why must we sacrifice so much?”

“So they do not have to,” Deborah said.

Willow assisted Saulnier out the door.

“A messenger came. Ogni is on his way to the compound,” Saulnier said.

“Good. I think I know just how to handle him,” Katchan said, gripping the Ashen sword.

A large gathering was in front of the Elder’s Compound by the time Katchan made his way down the steps. The crowd was filled with people he recognized from his childhood, except

now they looked a little more haggard, and they certainly did not recognize him. People began dispersing and moving to side to let Ogni and a crew of a hundred men through. He stopped just ten paces from Katchan. Ogni crossed his arms and looked him up and down.

Katchan wore a cloak to cover his armor and sword. He did not want to reveal his hand to soon. However, he leaned on the Mowphath staff, a weapon more than capable of handling Ogni.

“So, the dead can return. I wonder what will happen next,” Ogni said.

“What happens next is this: renounce your rival government and submit to the Elder of Gaelwyn,” Katchan said.

Ogni laughed a deep hearty laugh. The laughter spilled over to his crew of one hundred men, then to the crowds who were previously looking on fearfully. Ogni wiped a tear from his eye and met Katchan’s steely gaze.

“No, I won’t do that. Do you know why? Because I am not a rival government. I am strong. Trade among the four quarters is picking back up, and we’ve corralled most of the village’s criminals. Now I’m building a nice compound in the eastern district. Why waste the manpower on storming the Elder’s compound? Eventually the man will die and his forces will disperse. Once that happens, I will be the most powerful man in Gaelwyn. The Elder has done nothing to stop or slow me down, and I can’t imagine you would either. Besides, you’re still legally banished from Gaelwyn, you can’t even be here.”

Katchan smiled. “That’s perfectly fine.” He raised his voice so that all could hear. “To any who despise Ogni’s rule, you are welcome to follow me past the boundary where fertile valley’s and fresh water run in abundance.”

“That’s impossible,” Ogni said.

“I have seen impossible. I have seen spirits, the undead walk and fight for what they love. I have seen monsters rage and monsters quelled. I have seen fortresses fall under the weight of belief, and the strong tossed to the wind like hay in a storm. I have known the ways of the damned and walked the hall of dreams, seen the firstborn and the last. You say impossible? How can you when you haven’t seen the limits of possible. What is impossible is made possible through the eyes of God. Let me show you, Ogni of Gaelwyn. Let me show you what is marvelously impossible.”

Katchan threw off his cloak and stood glimmering in the sunlight as knight from a world beyond their own. Ogni stepped back, and Katchan knew the battle was won. Ogni would see with his own eyes what is impossible. They stood next to Katchan’s perch where the boundary previously separated a cursed land from the village of Gaelwyn. Before, the boundary showed a vast wasteland of sand, rocks, and a scorching sun. Now, Ogni looked over fields of lush green grass, pockets of trees, and distant mountains that supplied rivers of fresh water. Katchan pointed towards the distant mountain range.

“We will settle near the mountains next to a river where old stone forges still stand. We will grow a greater variety of food, and we have much larger swaths of land for livestock to graze upon. We can set up a trade once we’ve settled in. Most of the village has already agreed to go. Gaelwyn is dying, the people can sense it. A change of scenery will give them heart to keep going. Good luck with everything here, Gaelwyn is yours.”

Ogni closed his mouth and chuckled.

“Now I believe a better arrangement can be made,” Ogni said.

“Before you suggest anything, let me tell you a story.”

EPILOGUE

Ogni didn't believe a word Katchan said until he threw off his cloak, revealing the armor and sword. Then word spread. The story of Katchan burned like wildfire in the hearts of Gaelwynites. Word of Echo, Yashnu, Rordion, and Famor gave peace to their families and strengthened their resolve to honor their memories. The men following Ogni dispersed once they heard how Katchan survived the wasteland for three years. No one could believe it only felt like a week to him, but some things can't be understood without experiencing it firsthand.

Elder Saulnier begged Katchan for his forgiveness, even though he repeatedly told the old man he was forgiven. He restored Saulnier to power by filling in the holes of many stories he had forgotten, or were forgetting. Saulnier died not too long after Katchan's return, but he died peacefully knowing Maggaline wouldn't strangle him once he reached Hysol. Katchan sang the prayer of the lifted in front of the village. He did not establish a successor, and thus responsibility fell on Katchan while he interviewed possible candidates, though none seemed worthy. The three years of silence on stories caused a dramatic forgetfulness. People had to relearn how to be thrilled by heroic tales, and crumbled by stories of tragedy. Katchan spent much of his days reciting the stories of Maggaline. He spoke so long his throat often became scratchy. Soon he began acting out stories, bringing them to life in a way they had not seen since Maggaline. Within six months, Katchan found a successor—Sha-ra. He demanded she stop making anything with beets, and she assured him the beet harvest had faltered for the past few years. To his relief, she made a fine Elder.

His next order of business, after restoring the power of the Elder's seat, was to restore the reputation of his mother and Maggaline. He went to their graves often, and wept just as often.

They weren't always tears of grief. Some were tears of joy that Maggaline believed in him enough. He often tried to open a thin space to search for their spirits, like he found Yashnu's, but he passed out before he could. Even though Gaelwyn brightened every day, using his eyes of God, there was still not enough spiritual matter for the eclyptas to work.

Katchan made sure to visit Benjamin as often as he could. When he found him, he and his family lived in squalor. His legs, broken, never healed properly. Katchan tried to heal him with the Mowphath staff, but did not possess the knowledge of skill. Some link between he and the Garden of First Light had broken once he entered Gaelwyn. Although he could not heal Benjamin, he did give him his suit of armor, making him the wealthiest man in town. Benjamin now had a fine house in the western quarter with servants. Benjamin regretted his role in Maggaline's death. Katchan regretted his role in Benjamin's legs being injured. They discussed other matters when together, mostly, on swordcraft.

Katchan's field never regrew, but he built himself a large house exactly where he and Maggaline used to live. He mostly spent his time alone studying Maggaline's writing, or meditating with the eclyptas, trying to reach the hall of paintings. Somehow, though, there was no link. Another three months passed since his return from Midbar, and Katchan was sure his life would get on to normal. Even though he was a prophet, destined for a life of loneliness, he visited Willow. Usually, that was the best part of his day. Together they worked on the mysteries of the eclyptas, though neither Willow nor Deborah could establish a link to Hysol. That all changed on his nine-month anniversary in Gaelwyn.

Katchan sat in a chair, a replica of the one Maggaline used while living, and sipped on some tea. He swatted a fly away from the cup, and accidentally knocked it over. Cursing himself, he stood and picked up the broken pieces before tossing them outside. When he turned around,

he jumped back in shock. A large man stood in his living room. Except, he was not like a man at all, but a creature. He was bald with two horns like small deer antlers on his head, his ears were sharp, and he had a long beard. A green tattoo covered one eye, stopping in a point on his cheek. He wore armor like that of the Silver Knights, but it was the color of leaves in spring. A cloak hung down his back, possibly covering a weapon.

Katchan darted his eyes to the Ashen sword, which sat in a decorated leather sheath hanging over the fireplace. He would need to pass the creature to get to it. His Mowphath staff leaned against the doorway, on the other side of the room. He primarily used it for walking and did not reveal its secret to anyone. But it was no good to him now. He dared to use the eyes of God, but they would not help him defeat this thing, and he feared closing his eyes even for a second. He did the next best thing.

“Who are you?”

“Do not be afraid. I am the Saphanar, Raphael.”

Katchan’s stomach turned to jelly, and he threw up his dinner. In it, he saw chunks of beet. Sha-ra managed to grow a few, and he knew Maggaline would appreciate him trying the vegetable roasted.

“You’re a celestial being,” Katchan said.

“I’ve been trying to contact you for a long time. Asher provided just a moment to slip through her shield, though at great cost to himself.”

“Her?”

“Aurora, the Architect of Evil. She is free from her bonds and severed the link between Hysol and Idyll. Your world is no longer protected by the Divine Council.”

“No longer protected...” The loss of power, the dimness in Gaelwyn. Of course. This explained everything. Still, he understood nothing. “What are you going to do?”

“Not me, you. You’re the only living prophet from the line of Caleb.”

“I don’t even know what that means,” Katchan said.

“It is good where you are going, then.” Raphael said. “Pack up everything you need. I intend for you to be better prepared for this trip than your last one.”

Katchan searched the stories for when something like this had ever happened, to glean some sort of advice, but he was blank. However, he knew what Maggaline would have done. He grabbed the Ashen sword off the mantle, his Mowphath staff, and Maggaline’s story. The book he planned to study again, but likely to no avail, again. He stuffed it into the leather pouch with provisions. Lastly, he threw on his cloak.

The Saphanar grabbed Katchan’s shoulder. “If you succeed, everything will be just as it was when you left.”

“If I don’t?”

“There will be nothing to return to. Focus now.”

“On what?”

“The Village-Moon, Amarsin, first year of the reign of King Joseph.”

“That is not a good Joseph,” Katchan said.

“Yes, but it is the only space available to us.”

“I can’t open a thin space, nor go to the hall of paintings.”

“You can now. Channel my power, we’ve only got one shot, so make it count.”

Katchan did as he was told. He focused on the hall of paintings. Soon he felt his spirit leave his body, and he was there, the portraits of Caleb and Hadara fully suited in armor glaring

at him. Raphael was not with him. He ran down the corridor until he found Livana. He searched until he found a portrait of Amarsin. He had no idea what year of reign for which king this portrait showed, but he decided it was better than nothing. He placed his hand on the portrait and felt himself pulled, body, spirit, and soul. He felt launched through time and space, he was shrinking and growing larger than life, then he fell with a thud in the middle of a clearing in a forest.

What now?

An image, distorted and shaky, of the Saphanar Rafael, appeared and fizzled out.

“Eana! Find Eana of the Mustangs!”

And then the Saphanar was gone, and he was alone. Katchan took one last deep breath, unsure of what would come next, but he was certain that facing it terrified wouldn’t help.

THE END

Prologue – In the aftermath of a great battle, Micah, Commander of the Soldiers of First Light stands amongst the ruins of Livana, the Silver City. After making a blood oath with a sorcerer named Beyda to use his army to destroy the city of evil in exchange for a chance to battle a yet unnamed man for whom he holds a grudge. Deciding against his own well-being and the well-being of his men, Micah hides Ashwyn, a sword that grants cosmic travel to its wielder, and only its wielder, in this case, only Micah. This troubles Beyda who knows their deed will not go unnoticed by Marikel the Highest, and will be punished if they stay too long, a fact Micah is all too aware of. Beyda uses his sorcery to influence the minds of the Soldiers of First Light to turn on their commander and force him to bring back the sword that can take them away from this city to another part of the cosmos. Micah runs and Beyda orders the soldiers to hunt him for all eternity. Then a bright flash breaks across the sky, and Beyda waits for Marikel.

Chapter 1 – GAELWYN –

Chapter 2 – THE WANDERING KING

Chapter 3 – THE ELDER’S VISIT

Chapter 4 – PRINCESS VALERIE AND THE SILVER CITY

Chapter 5 – THE ELDERS FESTIVAL

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