

FEAR OF THE SKY

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Cover Art by Konstantinos Kyriakos Pappas

For my children (when they are old enough)



SEA OF NIVERO

WESTERN
ANUTHURA

Part One: Full Moon

The One Who Speaks as Interpreted by the Silent
Seer Velia Amenini

I once held dominion over all the world's pleasures. At the behest of the intolerable Silent One, I brought joy to mortals beyond anything they deserved. They were comforted by me. They smiled, laughed, and cried out in ecstasy because of *me*. All the while I toiled in the empty prison of my charge, unacknowledged and unable to embrace the slightest caress of the wind. But then I found my way out—my dragons.

I forsook The Silent One's foolish designs, shattered the mortals' unwarranted hubris, and relegated them to suffer in the shadows as they should. Now I relish their desperate cries as my dragons burn and break them. Every moment of their terror is a joy for me beyond any satisfaction I ever gave them. I *feel* at last.

But a cancer has grown among the few mortals who still languish—a city rebuilt in which they smile and walk fearlessly in the sunlight. If its contentment festers, it could undermine my order and satisfaction. I must venture once more into the mortal realm, crush their uprising, and return them to their suffering in the shadows, where they belong. Nothing stands in my way.

Chapter 1

Iko Phainor hadn't thought about the end of the world for hours. He'd been waiting all week to see his six-year-old daughter, Casiena, and now that his night with her was almost here, he could think of little else.

But he had promised her mother, Theia, that he would not arrive at the half-collapsed, overgrown cottage she called home until after sunset. He'd paced his cramped room for the last several hours, glancing out the window every few minutes to urge the sun to fall faster. Alas, it seemed to slow down just to spite him. The hours dragged on until the sun finally touched the tops of the trees on the horizon. Iko shouldered his smooth, hickory bow, hung his knife from his belt, and hurried down the nearby stairs. At a brisk pace, he would arrive at Cas's home just as darkness fell over the ruins of Jynsorn—the very first moment Theia would permit him.

Iko looked skyward as he emerged from his old lakeside watchtower and scanned for any sign of danger. He found only the night's first star, twinkling harmlessly against the darkening purple firmament. That was hardly a surprise. The people hadn't seen the dragon they'd named Mizur since the beginning of summer, nearly three months ago. That's when he'd picked up poor Nella Gunderson and taken her

above the clouds to drop her screaming into Jynsomn's central plaza. A few of the others claimed to have seen him flying toward the mountains as they'd scraped what remained of the girl into a nearby canal. Other than that, there had been no trace of him.

Still, one could never be too careful with dragons. Iko hastened across the exposed grasslands on the eastern side of his home, slowing only after he reached the concealment of the forest and rubble that had once been the city of Jynsomn.

Jynsomn had been the crowning achievement of the Kingdom of Ekara before the dragons came. Hewn from the granite and pristine marble of the nearby Sepentrio Mountains, indulgent palaces, proud archways, and impossible, towering monuments had sprawled for miles. Water still gurgled through a labyrinthine network of aqueducts to once-luxurious bathhouses and the derelict waterwheels of millhouses and forges. An ingenious sewer system still flushed away filth so people could pretend they weren't people.

But despite Jynsomn's architects' beliefs and best efforts, the city had always been mortal. It had fared no better than anywhere else against the dragons. What little remained of its grandeur dissolved silently into the tangled wilderness.

Iko cut through the ruins with ease. He'd been taking the same path to Cas every Saturday evening for almost two years now. He knew the surest way to stay out of sight of the sky, depending on the season, and which structures were stable enough to travel through without risk of being buried alive. Most importantly, he knew the best ways to avoid any of the other survivors who lived there. Not counting Cas or Iko's friend, Elex, there were only twenty-nine of them. But

most of them were drunkards and heathens, and Iko usually avoided unnecessary dealings with them.

Unfortunately for Iko, the others were as unpredictable as they were unpleasant. When he turned onto a street a half-mile east of Cas, the sight of three of them in his way stopped him in his tracks. A man and a woman reclined about twenty yards away against the trunk of an oak tree that grew where the sidewalk used to be. Another man stood before them, slurring through a story that had something to do with someone falling into a canal. Iko couldn't tell who the two against the tree were, but the storyteller was Zander Keil.

Zander was about Iko's age, thirty or so, but acted as if he were less than half that. He had a long red beard that was never quite clean and was particularly fond of his home-brewed moonshine. Given his current hand-waving and inordinate volume, Iko suspected he'd been too fond of it this evening. The man and woman leaning against the tree laughed as the story reached its climax. They were drunk too.

Iko sighed. The only thing worse than idle talk was forced idle talk with drunks. He opted to go around to avoid them altogether. Several alleyways led to a parallel street that could get him to Cas almost as quickly. He stepped lightly toward the nearest alleyway while staying in the shadows.

Zander called out, "Oi! That you, Kruick?"

"No. Just me." Iko tried to keep moving.

Zander brought his hand to his ear. "What's that?"

Iko continued across the dark road without responding.

That seemed to bother the woman beneath the tree. "It's none of the others," she said. "I think it's a wretcher! Zander, where's your knife?"

Iko spun toward the trio, worried the drunk imbecile would charge him. “I’m not a wretcher,” he said, louder than he would have liked.

“Then who are you, and what’s your business?” Zander said. He stepped cautiously toward Iko. One hand held a filthy bottle of moonshine, and the other touched the knife on his belt.

Being that most of the others rarely left central Jynsomn, Zander was probably as surprised as Iko was to run into someone else near the city’s periphery. He shouldn’t have been worried, of course. Zander knew everyone else in Jynsomn, and there had been no new human faces there in years. Iko stepped out of the shadows to save him from any more angst.

Zander breathed a sigh of relief. “Iko.” He took a swig from the bottle and spun around. “Just the hermit!” he said to the others.

“Must you be so loud?” Iko asked.

Zander either didn’t hear the question or didn’t think it was important enough to answer. “I thought she might have been right about you being a wretcher,” he said. “Some of them can talk human, you know. Heard it myself when I was a boy.” As was usually the case with others, he didn’t know what else to say to Iko, so he offered the moonshine.

Iko declined with a headshake.

The third person on the street, a man, shouted, “He don’t drink nothing strong, Zanny!”

Iko begged Zander, “Can you please tell him to lower his voice?”

Zander straightened as if he’d just realized the danger his loud friend posed. He turned and shouted, “Quieter, eh?” He

gulped the moonshine, then beheld Iko as if he were a riddle. “You really don’t drink moonshine? What else is there to do all alone at the lake?”

“No, I drink it,” Iko said. He wrinkled his nose at Zander’s unwashed stench. “But I prefer temperance.”

“Temperance?” Zander asked. “How do you make that?”

The woman beneath the tree shouted, “Hey, get him to tell us what this says!”

Zander lit up. “That’s right. You can read, can’t you?” he asked Iko.

“I can, but I really must be going. I’m supposed to be—”

Zander put his arm around Iko’s shoulder and guided him toward the others. “We found this picture a while ago, and we can’t seem to agree on what it means. Lucky for us, there are words on it.” He took another swig, then poked Iko’s chest with the bottle still in his hand. “That’s where you come in.”

“You need me to read the words on a picture?”

“That’s right.”

Iko and the others had never understood each other very well. They constantly questioned his interest in books, religion, and big words. *He* could not grasp how they were content to waste so much of their lives on gossip and trivial pastimes without consideration for the most important things—the things beyond their world. Thus, most of their interactions were strictly business. Iko wasn’t used to anyone asking for anything except the potatoes he grew. But since none of them could read, he wondered whether his help in this instance could bolster their appreciation of the skill—and their appreciation of Iko. “I suppose I can do that. If we can be quick,” he said.

They gathered around a piece of a wall a few steps off the street. Vines and weeds covered most of it, except where Zander and his friends had cleared them near the wall's center to reveal a large, elaborate mosaic.

Iko could just make out the image in the fading light. It depicted all kinds of chaos in a jungle—predators killing prey, a great flood, and a fire among them. On the edge of the chaos, a human form peered longingly toward a barren mountaintop. Iko's eyes widened. Not only was the mosaic quite beautiful, but it was almost certainly a religious work associated with Iko's god, The Silent One. He'd thought he knew where most of those mosaics were.

"Well?" Zander asked impatiently.

Then Iko saw the inscription on the bottom and read it aloud. "House of the Family Akyla."

The drunks let out a collective groan.

"That doesn't help at all," the woman said.

"Are you sure?" Zander asked. "Read it again."

Iko read it again.

"But what does it mean?" the other man asked.

"I'm telling you," Zander said. He pointed toward the human on the edge of the wilderness. "He's bringing all them animals to the mountain."

"Why would anyone make a picture about that?" the woman asked.

Zander shrugged.

"I'm not sure that's it," Iko said. He pointed toward the mountain, eager to illuminate the painting's meaning. After all, it wasn't all that different from the other mosaics he'd studied. "It's allegorical."

Zander cocked his head. "Alle-what?"

Iko clarified. "It's not about what it looks like it's about. The mountain and its peak probably represent the challenge of finding Silence, and—"

The woman snickered. "There he goes again." She shook her head. "Forget your fairy tales. It's obviously a volcano."

Iko straightened, unsure of how to respond.

"It's not a volcano," Zander said. "There's no lava."

"There's fire!"

Iko's shock and embarrassment after being dismissed turned to anger, and he bit his tongue to keep from saying something he'd regret. He decided it would be best to leave the others to their debate. He was already behind schedule. "I really must be going," he said, backing away from the quarrel.

The other three didn't react to Iko slipping off quietly toward the parallel street. They kept fighting and cursing. He entered the nearest alleyway, and Zander and his friends' bickering faded beneath the chirping of crickets and the trilling of a nightingale.

The street on the other side of the alleyway was one of Iko's favorite spots in Jynsomn. Water flowing from fractures in nearby aqueducts had flooded the street and transformed it into an idyllic stream. A pair of waterfowl floated a few steps away, unbothered as Iko came near, and a snake slithered from thick grass on the water's edge. Thankfully, the mud alongside the stream wasn't as sticky as usual. Iko would make better time than he'd anticipated. His mood brightened considerably, and within a few steps, he'd almost forgotten all about Zander and his friends. Then, much to his chagrin, the argument about the mosaic turned into a very loud shouting match.

“It’s not a volcano!” Zander yelled.

“It is! What do you know about art, anyway?”

Iko couldn’t believe it. Mizur had been gone a few months, and the pair were acting as if the dragon didn’t even exist.

“More than you!”

“I’ll have you know I’m something of an artist myself,” the woman said.

Zander laughed.

Iko considered returning to the street to tell them to quiet down—for everyone’s sake.

“You talking about those rotting flowers that—?”

A startling hush came over Jynsogn. The insects stopped buzzing and chirping. The nightingale stopped trilling, and the waterfowl leaped from the water.

Iko froze. He knew exactly what the silence meant. His heart pounded, and he broke into a cold sweat. He scanned the twilight canopy overhead.

The world shook so violently that he nearly fell into the water. Bits of stone and brick crumbled into the stream, sending frogs hopping into the grass. Unintelligible screams rang out, and a deep growl followed. It was as Iko had feared. Mizur had returned to Jynsogn at last, and he had found the drunken heathens.

The dragon wasted no time. Iko heard the spattering of the beast’s fire venom—the stinking, flammable liquid would carry fire to everything it touched. Then Mizur started clicking the igniter gland in his throat.

Click, click, click...

The resulting explosion shook the world again. When the rumbling flames dissipated, the screams had ceased. Fire crackled, and Mizur snorted.

More people screamed from farther down the road, and Iko realized that Zander and the drunks hadn't been alone.

Feet scraped over cobblestone behind Iko, and he turned around. A person on fire stumbled out of an alleyway and collapsed. He knew it was Zander as soon as he saw the filthy glass bottle in his hand.

Iko ran to him and grabbed his left foot—the only part of him that wasn't aflame—and started dragging him toward the stream's cool water. The glass bottle rolled into the slow-moving current. When he got Zander into the stream, the water extinguished the flames with a sharp, crackling hiss. Steam rose.

A guttural bellow echoed through Jynsomn. The ground shook as Mizur approached.

Zander was a mass of charred clothing and raw flesh, but he was still breathing. Iko grabbed his wrists and pulled him out of the water and toward a nearby doorway. His legs ached from exertion as he reached a dark, damp room. Iko carefully positioned Zander in the corner so he wasn't visible from outside. The world quaked again. Then silence.

Iko tried to control his panting and came to the edge of the door to peek outside. Mizur stood with one foot on each side of the stream, thirty or forty yards away, surveying the scene. He was an old, haggard dragon with grey-green skin that sagged on his seventy-foot-long form. Pointy spines ran down his back, past his folded wings, and to the very end of his whipping tail. Out of his eight-foot-long skull, two ram-like horns protruded from behind his large, black eyes. He came to all fours, brought his long, bony snout to the ground, and growled. Iko wondered if he smelled Zander. The dragon stepped toward the men's hiding spot

and looked into one of the other doorways. When he found nothing, he moved to the next.

Iko knew that the dragon would eventually find him if he stayed there.

There was a mostly intact three-story home a couple of doors down. If Iko could get there, he could hide there. But the only way out of the room was the way he'd come in, and leaving that way would mean stepping in front of Mizur. Iko may have been able to dash out while Mizur wasn't looking, but if he tried to drag Zander, the dragon would certainly see them and kill them both.

Mizur came several steps closer, and an odor akin to a rotting corpse filled the air. The dragon must have been right outside the room.

A primitive desire to survive urged Iko to flee—to run as fast as he could to the three-story home, despite what he knew would happen if he did.

Then he noticed Zander's moonshine bottle, stuck against a chunk of a wall in the stream roughly thirty yards away. He unshouldered his bow, nocked an arrow, and looked to Zander. The man was still breathing but unconscious.

Iko raised his bow. The weapon's familiar weight calmed him, as did its creak as he drew its bowstring. He aimed, exhaled, and sent an arrow into the bottle. The glass exploded.

Mizur roared and whipped toward the sound. Iko dashed out of the room toward the three-story home and through its open doorway. He pressed himself against the wall and tried to catch his breath. After a few seconds of silence from Mizur, he knew the dragon hadn't seen him.

He carefully climbed the stairs. He'd spent more time in this home than almost anywhere else in town, so he didn't

have trouble navigating in the dark. That made it easier to stay quiet.

When he reached the small room on the third floor where he had spent so much time, he reclined against the wall and peered out over the darkening ruins through a hole in the wall. A little less than a half-mile away was a small, tree-covered hill. Cas lived there. Seeing her hill unscathed comforted him, and he wouldn't let it out of sight until the dragon left for good.

Over the next hour, as Iko listened to Mizur search the area, he grew uneasy. The dragon was being particularly diligent—more diligent than he'd ever been before. He searched calmly and quietly, only letting out the occasional snort or growl when he thought he'd found something. As far as Iko could tell, he never found Zander. But he ignited his flame once more, and twice Iko heard human screams. He wondered if the unusual diligence was because the dragon seldom found so many people in one spot. If Mizur suspected more people were hiding nearby, he probably wouldn't leave until he thought he'd killed all of them.

No one had ever figured out *why* dragons hated people so much. But from the moment they'd landed in the eastern kingdom of Valcharon from somewhere beyond the Endless Sea five decades earlier, it had been clear that they harbored an inexplicable hatred for every tribe, race, and kingdom. They hadn't killed for food, as other beasts did. In fact, they rarely ate their human victims, preferring to eat deer, bears, and trolls. The witnesses of their arrival had alleged that the dragons did not sleep, eat, or mate during their initial assault. Instead, they devoted all their time to finding and killing every person they could. The hundreds of beasts had

worked together to destroy one kingdom at a time without discernible reason. Even the grandest human armies stood no chance against them. Allegedly, they failed to kill even a single dragon as they tried to defend their homelands.

After bringing civilization to ruin, the dragons divided all the Northernlands and Southernlands among themselves. Now, each one seldom left its territory of a few hundred square miles unless it was mating season. Iko didn't think that any hunted with quite the ferocity as during their initial onslaught—which made sense considering there was almost no one left alive to hunt—but no dragon ever overlooked the chance to kill someone they came across. It had always made Iko feel something like a cockroach.

Iko listened for hours more as Mizur's hunt grew unsettlingly quiet. He was only sure the dragon remained close since he still couldn't hear any insects, owls, or other night creatures. He heard the faint trickle of water and the occasional heavy footfalls. The tranquility caused his eyelids to grow heavy. He was determined to keep watch over Cas, but the longer the dragon searched without incident, the harder it was to stay awake. A couple of hours before sunrise, the night got the better of him, and he fell asleep to the sound of Mizur purring contentedly on the road beneath him.

Chapter 2

“I ko,” a familiar voice whispered.

Iko opened his eyes. He lay on his side on the cold alabaster floor of the third-story room, looking through a hole in the wall at an overcast morning sky. The air still smelled of charred wood and dragon fire.

Cas!

Iko shot up and scrambled toward the hole. To his relief, her hill was untouched.

“She’s fine,” said the voice. “Mizur never got that far.”

Iko was glad to find Elex standing just outside the room’s entrance.

Elex was the only person alive whom Iko considered his friend—and certainly the only person who would have known where to find him this morning. He was fair-skinned and portly, with thin blonde hair and a belly as soft as his heart. But he had lost some pounds in recent months, and his crudely stitched sack of a tunic wasn’t so tight anymore.

“Glad to see you’re in one piece,” Elex said. “I was worried when Theia told me you never picked up Cas. Must have been rough being out here last night.”

Iko stood. The memory of the screams and Zander’s charred body hit him all at once, and he tried to shake them from his mind. “It was horrible.”

“Might have been worse for you,” Elex said. “We didn’t find anyone else out here alive.”

Iko grimaced. “Did you find Zander?”

Elex nodded and said in a somber voice, “Got farther than the rest, but I guess he was too bad off. You saw him?”

“Right before Mizur landed,” Iko said. He didn’t have the stomach to explain the rest.

“It’s a shame. So many,” Elex lamented. He extended his hand and helped Iko up. “Come on. Cas’ll want to see you.”

“Dragon’s gone?”

“For the last couple of hours,” Elex said. “He was at it all night.”

Iko scanned Elex for injuries. “You alright?”

“Everything but my nerves. He never got close, but hearing what he did was enough.”

Iko patted his friend’s shoulder and started down the nearby stairs. “Who else did he find?” He leaned out of the hole in the second-floor wall and checked outside.

Elex was counting on his fingers when they started moving again. “Kruick said—”

“Kruick wasn’t with them?”

“He was supposed to be, but he was ill.”

“Lucky him.”

“I’d say so,” Elex said. “Let’s see. It was Mister Addai. Fruman—the younger one. You said Zander. You saw Dessa Rhamm... and... did I say Mister Addai yet?”

Iko waved off the effort. Part of him didn’t want to know the rest of the names. “I’ll find out sooner or later.” He stopped before stepping outside to check for Mizur one last time.

“But it was eight. I know it was eight,” Elex said.

A sense of inevitable doom arose from Iko's gut, as it did every time Mizur killed someone else. But this time, it was worse. Mizur had killed *eight* people. In the seven years Iko had been in Jynsorn, the dragon had never come close to killing so many at once. He had always preferred to think that they could go on hiding forever—that eventually, the dragons would relent or go back across the sea. Now Mizur had shattered that false contentment. He'd reminded Iko that the few people left alive were the last, futile gasp of humanity's protracted and miserable demise. He hated the dragons for it—especially what it meant for Cas.

“Blast! I should know this,” Elex said, still trying to remember the names. He stumbled over a fallen brick as they emerged from the home.

The street they came to appeared as if nothing had happened the night before. A blessed oasis amid the carnage. They stepped under the trees.

“It's fine, Elex, really,” Iko said. “We'll find out, eventually.”

“It's not that,” Elex said. “These people have just been killed, Iko. The least I could do is remember their names. Wouldn't you want someone to remember your name if you were killed?”

Despite thinking his friend shouldn't have let something so small bother him so much, Iko simply nodded in agreement. Caring too much about little things was something he'd always admired about Elex. “I was beginning to wonder if Mizur had gone off to die.”

Elex's voice lightened a little. “Did I tell you Kruick thinks he knows where he was?”

Iko smirked. “Does he?” He considered Kruick a bit of a loudmouth who often pretended to know more than he did. Elex never seemed to learn.

Elex explained. “He says the Shuckwine boys found a bunch of dead wretchers in the mountains recently. Foreigners.”

The strange notion caught Iko’s attention. Not even vile creatures like wretchers traveled much anymore. It was too risky, especially traveling in numbers. Generally speaking, once one found a suitable place to hide from the dragons, they stayed put.

“Foreigners?”

Elex nodded, seemingly satisfied to have piqued his friend’s interest. “He said there were two dozen. Half of them were ukori.”

Iko’s eyes narrowed. Wretcher communities always consisted of two species, but their numbers were never split evenly. The child-sized, rodent-like wregs were simply more numerous than the much larger ukori. Iko remembered hearing stories of hordes of ukori hiding here or there as far back as he could remember. Being that they were seven-foot tall, brutal, and loved consuming human flesh, such stories had always made for captivating gossip—but they’d never turned out to be true.

“You really should stop listening to Kruick,” Iko said. “Don’t you think it’s more likely Mizur just got tired of eating nothing but mountain goats and sheep? Went somewhere with something more appetizing?”

“I’m telling you! Bennick Shuckwine saw the wretchers with his own two eyes. Said they have paint on their faces. White paint.”

“I see,” Iko said. He started walking again. “So, Mizur spent all summer in the mountains to kill a couple dozen foreign wretchers who paint their faces?”

“Why wouldn’t he?” Elex said.

Hearing the frustration in Elex’s voice, Iko dropped it.

Less than ten minutes later, they entered Cas’s cottage. As usual, everything inside had some sort of garment or blanket draped over it—the table, the cast-iron stove, and every chair included. Cas’s mother, Theia, was a prolific seamstress. She’d made just about everything worn by the survivors in Jynsomin. Much to Iko’s chagrin, he didn’t see Cas anywhere. The room appeared empty.

“Casiena?” Iko said.

Feet shuffled in the back bedroom.

Iko asked, “Cas? Is that—?”

“Quiet, you fool,” growled the dark-haired, bearded man who stepped out of the bedroom. “You’ll wake them.”

Iko’s eyes widened in disbelief. The man was Rog Burnok, and he appeared to have just woken up. Iko had known that Theia had been with Rog for a few months, but he had not suspected that the brute had been sleeping in the same cottage as Cas. The thought of it made his skin crawl. Rog had always carried himself with unwavering but unwarranted confidence, and Iko detested his unthinking assertiveness. But the others admired it enough to treat Rog as their leader.

“Wake them?” questioned Elex.

Rog nodded toward Cas’s straw mattress in the room’s corner. Only then did Iko notice Theia sleeping there with her mouth gaping. Cas’s tangle of dark curls flowed from beneath the tightly wrapped cover they shared.

Rog indicated the door, and Iko and Elex stepped back outside.

Once they were out of earshot, Rog explained. “Mizur kept them up all night, and they’ve just gone down. It’ll be hours before they’re up.” He glared at Iko. “Unless someone wakes them beforehand.”

“How was I supposed to know?” Iko asked.

Rog folded his arms and didn’t answer.

“Have you got word about anyone else last night?” Elex asked. “I mean, other than the eight me and Kruick found?”

Rog shook his head. “Everyone else is accounted for. Iko here was the last I was unsure of.”

“Well, here I am,” Iko said.

“Good for Cas,” Rog said. “You can come back for her around noon. Or wait, if you want. Out here. Like I said, it’ll be a while.”

“I don’t mind waiting,” Iko said.

Rog nodded, and Iko expected him to turn back toward the house. Instead, he stood there silently as if he had something else to say.

Elex seemed to sense it, too. “What?”

“I’ve had several discussions this morning about Gelida.”

“Gelida?” Iko asked. The desolate area in the mountains was known for its caves but little else.

Rog nodded. “Everyone else thinks it would be a good idea.”

Iko’s eyes widened when he understood Rog’s meaning. “You mean *moving* to Gelida?”

Elex shrugged. “Probably safer from Mizur.”

Iko struck Elex’s shoulder. He couldn’t believe his friend approved of the idea.

Elex rubbed his shoulder. “What?”

“Why?” Iko asked Rog. “We’re as likely to be killed by an arcanotaur there as the dragon here. And how would we ever grow enough food? Get water?”

“An arcanotaur?” Rog asked, shaking his head. “Come on, Iko. Even if there are any there, they wouldn’t approach such a large group.”

Iko knew he was probably right. Arcanotaurs were carnivorous bipedal bovines that were ten feet tall—a primary reason most people in Jynsomn were scared to go to the mountains. But as far as Iko knew, no one had ever actually seen one this far west. But that was hardly the only danger in the mountains. He remembered Kruick’s face-painting wretchers. What if he’d been telling the truth? Then there were the problems of growing food, hunting, and acquiring water. He was shocked that Rog dismissed those challenges so readily. He was acting on impulse, and Iko worried the others would blindly follow the loudest voice, as usual.

Of course, Iko had other concerns about moving to the caves. If he had to live so close to the other survivors, he doubted he’d ever have enough peace and quiet to read, think, and pray. A day would not pass without his having to endure mockery, gossip, or drunkenness.

“What about the foreign wretchers who’ve been crawling around up there as of late?” Iko asked. “The wretchers Kruick saw?”

Rog tilted his head. “They were all dead,” he said. “Look, everyone else I talked to agrees it’s for the best. We’d figure it out. We have to. It’s obvious Mizur knows we are here now.”

Iko motioned toward the empty sky. “That’s not obvious at all. Don’t you think he’d be here right now if that were true?”

Rog scoffed. “You don’t know what Mizur is thinking.”

“But you do?” Iko asked.

Rog’s eyes hardened. “I’ll tell you what. You can stay here by yourself, just as you like. No one would miss you, and I’ll take good care of your little girl. How’s that sound?”

Iko grew hot with anger. Elex’s hand came to his shoulder.

Rog spat on the ground, flexed his calloused hands, and turned back toward the home. “I think we will be going, and I’m asking the Lotherins to join us,” he called out. “Maybe you’ll prefer their company.” He disappeared into the house.

“The Lotherins?” Iko repeated. He turned to Elex. “Why? Mizur hasn’t attacked them, has he?”

The Lotherins were the only other people anyone in Jynsorn was sure were still alive. They lived a half-day north, in the Lotherin Wood, and they were all heathens too. Iko didn’t think them any worse than those in Jynsorn, but adding more people to a small space was never a good idea in a dragon-ruled world. Rog’s decisions kept getting worse.

“It might not be so bad,” Elex said.

Iko cocked his head. “You want to leave everything we have here? Where we surely have it better than anyone else the dragons haven’t found? Clean water. Plenty of places to hide. The library!”

“Eight people, Iko. In one night,” Elex said.

“It’s shortsighted,” Iko said. “They’ll all be begging to come back in less than a week. I won’t be going, and neither will Cas.”

“Ha!” Elex said. “Theia would never allow that.”

“She might. It’ll be safer here if it’s just us,” Iko said. He was trying to convince himself as much as Elex.

Elex shook his head. “Not if Rog says it won’t be.”

Iko rolled his eyes. “Who cares what Rog says?”

“Theia, apparently.” Elex put his hand on Iko’s shoulder again and spoke kindly. “You can’t take a six-year-old girl from her mother, Iko. Not even your own daughter.”

Iko didn’t answer. He walked down the hill sulking and sat against the trunk of an oak so he could see when Cas came out of the house.

Elex sat beside him. “If it helps, I heard a while back the Lotherins had a couple of new young women among them. Kruick says they’re pretty.”

Iko raised his brow. “Where have they come from?”

“Lychonica, I think.”

Iko frowned. “Everyone from Lychonica is a—”

Elex raised a finger toward his friend, cutting him off. “Don’t say it.”

Iko’s mouth hung open as he struggled to come up with a kinder description for the average Lychonican than *heathen*. For the last several months, Elex had scolded him almost every time he’d used the word. He had insisted that speaking more kindly of the others when they weren’t around would help Iko get along with them when they were around. Iko wasn’t sure that would work, but he had promised to try.

Elex shook his head and said, “Do you call *me* such nasty names when I’m not around? I don’t understand much about your Silent One either, you know. And I can’t read.”

Iko looked surprised. “What? No, not at all. You’re different. You know that.”

“Well, maybe the pretty girls are *different*.”

“Maybe.”

“Look, I just meant to say that Gelida might not be as bad as you think,” Elex said. “Maybe it’ll be good for you. You’d get to see Cas more.”

Iko didn’t believe that. If Theia could figure out a way to keep Cas from seeing him more than she did, she would.

He dropped his head back against the tree and closed his eyes. Whatever the perks were of moving to Gelida, they probably wouldn’t outweigh the dangers and unpleasanties. Rog couldn’t have been that serious about the matter. Perhaps another couple of days without Mizur coming back would sober him and the others up. Eventually, they’d see the folly of their ways. They had to. And the survivors’ living arrangement would stay just the way it was—the way Iko liked it.

Chapter 3

“**Y**ou see how the leaves are starting to wither? This little bit of brown right here? And see how green is turning yellow? That means they’re ready.” Sleeves rolled up, Iko kneeled in the moist soil and worked a spade around the potato plant. He wrapped both hands around the stems. “Near the base is easier.” The earth muted the snapping roots as he pulled up. A few potatoes dangled from the plant as dirt cascaded off, and the smell of the moist earth surrounded them. “See?”

Six-year-old Casiena stood a few feet away, quietly watching the activity Iko had chosen for them to share. She was an exceptionally small girl, like her mother. But she shared Iko’s cerulean eyes and thin, delicate nose. And the dark tangled mass of hair upon her head was much the same as his, albeit a little curlier and longer. She raised her forearm to shield her eyes from the sun and offered Iko an expressionless nod.

“Now, you’ll want to dig around some,” Iko said. “Not all of them will come up.” The pile of potatoes next to him grew as he fished more out of the loose soil. When he finished digging, he asked, “Want to give it a try?”

Cas nodded. She wore a new cotton dress, woven and dyed a deep cobalt blue by Theia. She pulled it up above her knees, knelt, and imitated her father’s use of the spade.

“Alright, grab around the stems,” Iko said. “That’s it, all of them. Okay, now pull up.”

Cas pulled but wasn’t quite strong enough. She yanked harder.

“Grab them closer to the bottom.”

Fire came into the girl’s eyes, unwilling to be defeated by a plant. She stood and pulled with all her might. When the plant came free, she stumbled backward and landed on her rear end in the dirt.

Iko couldn’t help but laugh, and Cas laughed too. It was the first time he’d seen her smile since picking her up after Mizur’s attack. Only then did he notice that one of her front teeth was missing.

“I got it!” Cas said, holding up the plant. Potatoes dangled, and dirt rained upon her dress. “That was harder than I thought.”

“You’ll get the hang of it.”

Cas’s face fell. “How many are we pulling?” She beheld the ten-yard square crop in front of them.

Iko’s brow shot up. “You’d rather not?”

“Well, it’s just...” The gap-toothed smile returned with a bit of mischief. “I have a lemon. And some bread.”

Iko guffawed. “You just happen to have lemon and bread with you?” He stood and wiped his hands clean.

Cas nodded giddily. “Uh-huh!” She looked across the yard.

Iko had set up his garden in a small schoolyard close to his home. It was a decent location for crops. Between the single-story school buildings that surrounded it and the few tree branches stretching overhead, there was just the right balance of sunlight and cover to grow some food without being conspicuous. The potato plants carpeted most of

the yard, but grapevines crept up the far wall. The grapes weren't quite ready for harvest, particularly for making jam. But with a bit of extra honey, it would taste fine.

"Is there enough for me?" Iko asked.

Cas nodded emphatically.

"Well then, what are we waiting for?"

Iko was happily surprised by the grapes' sweetness, and they soon harvested enough to make a little jam. Iko peeled and deseeded the fruits, and Cas eagerly added the lemon and honey while he boiled them in a skillet. After it cooled and thickened, they sliced some of Cas's bread and spread the fresh jam on the pieces.

Cas took her first bite, and the sticky, deep purple spread covered her lips. She giggled. "Mm!"

"This is better than I thought it would be!" Iko said through a mouthful of jammed bread. He took another bite, then asked. "So, what do you think about going to the mountains?"

Cas shrugged her shoulders and glanced toward the ground. "I dunno. It's good, I guess."

"Do you want to go?"

Cas nodded listlessly.

Sensing an opportunity, Iko asked, "Would you rather stay here? With me?"

Cas's eyes widened as she choked out, "You're not coming?" She was suddenly on the verge of tears.

Iko scooted over to her. "Oh, no! Of course, I am. Of course! I'll go wherever you are. Alright?"

That was true, but her response stung. Iko silently cursed himself for believing she would actually be willing to be separated from Theia and the rest of them.

Cas nodded, holding back tears. “Mother says Mizur can’t get us in the mountains.”

“She’s right,” Iko said. He wrapped his arm around Cas and rubbed her shoulder.

Cas said, “Rog said we will be safe with the Lotherins there, too.”

The mention of Rog annoyed Iko, but he quickly brushed it aside. “I’m sure he’s right.”

Cas wiped her tears with the back of her hand. “He’s been teaching me to use a knife. So, I can help if we have to fight something off.”

Iko thought he was going to be sick. How much time was she spending with Rog? He tried hiding his reaction and pulled her closer. “I bet you won’t have to worry about it.”

Cas reclined for a nap shortly thereafter, as she often did when something was wrong. Iko had built a pallet for her in the corner of the schoolyard beneath a covered walkway. She was still sleeping when Theia showed up at dusk to collect her. Iko extinguished the fire so that Mizur would not see them.

Iko was fairly sure Theia was the shortest adult in Jynsomn. If one didn’t know her, her oversized brown eyes and soft features gave the impression of a kind and gentle soul. But she was as fierce as she was small. Getting on her bad side usually meant paying for it for weeks.

Theia was obviously annoyed when she noticed Cas’s dirty dress. “What happened? That dress is not a week old!”

Iko rolled his eyes. “She fell. I told you what we were doing.”

“Doesn’t look like you got much done,” Theia snapped, eyeing the yard full of potato plants.

Iko did not respond as he handed over Cas's bag. The exchange took him back to the heated quarrels they'd had in their early days—right after Theia had realized she was pregnant. Their relationship had started out as a rousing, impetuous affair. Iko had just arrived in Jynsomn, and his interest in the very forward young blonde had been regrettably unhallowed and prurient. They had gotten along fine as long as things hadn't been serious, but after she'd found herself with child, the fighting started immediately.

There was almost no matter of significance on which they had agreed. The child's name. Living arrangements. Whether or not they should call themselves husband and wife. The worst of it was that Theia's feigned admiration of The Silent One was revealed for what it was. She was adamant that her child would not be brought up in the ways of Iko's superstition—the primary reason she didn't like Cas spending much time with him now. In short, they'd fought about everything, and viciously.

Before Theia's morning sickness had faded, they'd gone their separate ways and agreed on her idea of a parenting arrangement. At the time, Iko had thought it was a relief that he would have to take care of the child so little. Now he rather regretted that he hadn't fought for more time with her. For a few months now, he'd been trying to work up the courage to ask Theia for two nights a week with Cas.

Iko remained courteous for Cas's sake. "Rog still set on going to the mountains?"

"He and everyone else. Still waiting to hear back from Lotherin. If they are coming, we will leave as soon as they do."

"Do you think it's a good idea?"

Theia put her hands on her waist and cocked her hips. “What would you prefer we do? Sit around until the dragon comes back? You think that’s what’s best for Casiena?”

“It is a big city with plenty of provisions.”

“Well. *You* can stay here. Stay with your books and all that. You’d have the whole place to yourself, just as you’d like.”

Cas stirred in the corner, and the quarrel quieted. The girl sat up and stretched. “Wow! It’s dark out here.”

“You’ve been asleep for an hour,” Iko said, voice suddenly light.

“An hour?” Cas’s eyes widened with childish amazement. “Hello, mother. We made some jam. Want some?”

Theia smiled. “Sure. But we can’t stay too much longer.”

The three finished off the jam and bread while Cas explained the incident with the potato plant to Theia. The girl’s cheer dissolved much of the venom between her two parents, and for that, Iko was thankful. By the time they were ready to depart, Theia’s tone was mostly civil.

“Rog will send word when we hear back from the Lotherins,” Theia said. “Expect it in another day or two.”

“I will.”

After they left, Iko gathered his things and trekked home. On the way, he planned his next day. If he was going to move to the Sepentrio Mountains, there was much to do, and he had little time to do it.

Chapter 4

Zerah Noburia was sure that this morning would be the beginning of the end of the dragons.

She leaned forward on her butt-numbing wooden stool, bringing her emerald eyes within inches of the convoluted network of glass tubes, bubbling flasks, and flickering flames. At the labyrinth's end, positioned above a small metal crucible, was a stopcock. She carefully rotated it toward vertical, but her brew flowed faster than she expected. The steaming, putrid liquid spewed and splattered out of the little container. She hurriedly closed the spigot, then she started again, even slower. Slowly, the dark liquid puddled within the little crucible. Maybe this was finally it—the dragon-killer poison she'd sought for years.

But the smell! Zerah coughed and gagged. The sour, vomitous odor was nearly unbearable. She lifted the crucible carefully but quickly, then moved toward the window. Hot from the liquid, the metal seared her palm. She gritted her teeth and placed the container on the sill. Shaking the pain from her hand, she used the other to push the window open. Sunlight and cold morning air rushed inside, wafting her long black hair. The rising steam from the concoction in the crucible swirled.

From her laboratory atop Dunbardin Castle's highest tower, Zerah looked out over Ivory City. It was a scene unlike any other in the world. Far below, upon freshly paved cobblestone, countless vendors peddled goods of all kinds to passersby. Children scurried incautiously amidst the crowded market, earning sneers and curses from its patrons. Farther south, where some of the land was still wild, men with saws and axes crawled like ants over derelict buildings and decades of overgrowth. Trees snapped and crashed under the rebirth of civilization.

It was all because of the dragon-killer poison—the little bit Ivory City had, anyway. It was a humble beginning, to be sure. But as soon as Zerah figured out what the poison was, they could start hunting dragons in earnest, and the world could be rebuilt.

Crack.

Zerah spun around. Black sludge oozed from shattered glassware. She looked toward her crucible. The liquid inside had swelled into a boiling glob of tar upon cooling. Whatever reaction had occurred, the smell became even more offensive. She gagged on the pungent, tarry odor and rushed to open the other windows.

“Not again,” she said through chokes. All of her hundreds of attempts to reproduce the dragon-killer poison had ended in failure, but this was the second time in a month that she'd ruined some of the precious glassware she'd found in the castle's basement. Worse yet, the material looked nothing like she'd hoped. She was further from success than she'd thought.

She grabbed a few of the hundreds of pages of her handwritten notes strewn about the room and used them to fan the odor toward the windows.

Someone knocked on the door.

“Just a minute!” Zerah said, embarrassed. Hopefully, it was no one important.

“It’s just me.” The voice was deep and familiar, though muddled behind the door’s dense wood.

“Come in, Makus.” Zerah relaxed.

The door opened, and Zerah’s bodyguard, Makus, filled the frame. He was an imposing, inhuman figure—a marikano of Lake Portumnus to the east. He was over seven feet tall, and he had oversized, luminescent purple eyes. Dense muscles rippled beneath his shimmering silver skin, and iridescent red and blue streaks ran along his sides. Tentacles as thick as fingers protruded from the back of his head, nearly having the appearance of human hair. Like most marikano, he wore only light, fitted pants that stopped at his calves, so that his gills and hulking form were apparent.

Makus’s flattened, human-like nose wrinkled. “What is that *smell*?”

“My work,” Zerah said, eyes watering.

Makus covered his mouth. “Can we speak outside?”

“Absolutely.”

“Close the door!” Makus said as Zerah crossed the threshold. “Please tell me that’s not it.”

Zerah couldn’t help but laugh at herself. She pulled the door shut and uncovered her mouth and nose. “Even a dead dragon’s not worth smelling that every day.”

Makus chuckled.

“I have no idea what caused it,” Zerah said, wiping her brow. She put her hands on her hips and spoke to herself. “I wonder if it was the bluewood bark.” After a moment of thought, she turned to Makus. “What was it you needed?”

Makus nodded farther down the hall, and Zerah understood. The stench was seeping through the door.

“Captain Essili has called for you.”

“Couldn’t find Val?” Zerah asked.

“You know he doesn’t like Val.”

“I’m not sure he likes me either.”

Makus waved off the suggestion. “That’s just the captain.”

“Alright,” Zerah said. “Where is he?”

“A block north of the market. Doerwine Felsmit’s Tavern.”

“In town? Really?” Zerah asked. The captain was usually busy around the castle until at least lunch. Something was out of the ordinary. “Any idea what’s going on?”

Makus shook his head. “None.”

“Well, let’s find out.”

As Zerah crossed the main market square with Makus close behind, the crowds parted for them along the way. As one of Ivory City’s two justices, Zerah had the power to proclaim right from wrong and condemn men to death at her discretion. The other justice, Val Campo, was perceived to have wielded his power as a bully for the last two years. When Zerah had come on six months earlier as a second justice, the townsfolk had expected her to behave the same. Only recently had the good people of Ivory City started to acknowledge that she was not like Justice Campo, but they were still cautious. They smiled at her nervously. None risked irritating a justice.

Zerah and Makus found Captain Essili propped against the wheel of a wagon on the side of the busy road. He was a grizzled, middle-aged man with short, salt-and-pepper hair and a sturdy, jutting jaw. One of the few hardened warriors in Ivory City, his expression seemed forever frozen in a jaded scowl.

“Took you long enough,” Essili said.

Zerah ignored the jab. “What seems to be the problem?”

Essili nodded toward the humble tavern on the other side of the road. “Dori Felsmit. Says she’s got some information that we should know about all the vermin crawling about.”

Zerah’s brow furrowed. Doerwine Felsmit, or Dori, was a profane drunk. People liked her well enough, but it was most likely because her tavern had the widest selection of strong drink in town. She was not someone who should have known anything about wretchers that the Guard didn’t already know.

“What kind of information?” Makus asked, voice dripping with doubt. As usual, he and Zerah were on the same page.

“Apparently, she has to tell Lord Adair,” Essili said. “Tried to get into the castle to see him, but a guard threw her out. I didn’t want to tell him because you know he’s crazy enough to come to the tavern to see her. I thought you were the next best thing.”

“Was that a compliment, Captain?” Zerah asked.

Essili rolled his eyes and started across the street. Zerah and Makus followed him up the tavern’s rickety steps. Inside, the tavern was empty except for Dori. She stood behind the bar, scrubbing it so hard Zerah expected to see smoke rising any second. The woman was pale as a ghost, and her

thin, light hair was untidy. She huffed, entirely focused on her vigorous scrubbing.

“Hello, Miss Felsmit,” Zerah said.

Dori froze. Her gaze remained on the bar for a moment before she slowly brought her bloodshot eyes to meet Zerah’s. There was an odd air about her—fear. Zerah could see the tightness of the woman’s throat and her short, ragged breaths. She was unnervingly terrified of something.

“I hear you have something you’d like to tell us.” Zerah did her best not to react to Dori’s strange way.

“I must tell Lord Adair,” Dori choked. “But okay, maybe you.”

Zerah flashed a warm smile. “Well?”

Dori limped around the edge of the bar and led the trio to a circular four-top table. They took their seats on stools so tall that no one’s feet reached the ground but Makus’s. Dori clutched a mug of ale in her two hands as if her life depended on it.

“Get on with it now,” Essili said.

Zerah lifted her hand calmly. “Don’t rush for me. I’ve got time this morning.”

Dori gulped the ale, then wiped her lips with her sleeve. “I was visited last night, Justice Noburia. Told that we need to leave. Now.”

“We?”

“All of us,” Dori said. “The wretchers your men are seeing in the valley these days, they are foreigners?”

“There are plenty of locals,” Makus said.

“But there are foreigners?” Dori insisted.

Zerah hesitated. Everyone knew there had been an increase in wretcher attacks recently, but it was not yet com-

mon knowledge that most of the attacks had been carried out by foreigners with white-painted faces who seemed to be coming over the Sepentrio Mountains to the north.

“Yes,” Zerah said. “There have been reports of hostile foreigners. Limited to the base of the Garans, really. Do you know something of them?”

Dori’s voice softened. “Just that they will keep coming.” She continued in an ominous, matter-of-fact tone. “And that we do not have the numbers to withstand their eventual assault.”

The hair stood on the back of Zerah’s neck. She did not necessarily believe Dori, but *Dori* believed Dori, and she was terrified for it.

Makus scoffed next to Zerah, breaking the tension. “Who told you this? Was it one of their ukori who visited you and volunteered this information?”

Dori snapped a cold glare at Makus. “It was a god!”

“A *god!*” Essili said mockingly.

The ridiculous claim dissolved the rest of Zerah’s unease, but she would not laugh at the woman. “Dori, I think you might need some rest. Maybe a break from the ale?”

“I wasn’t drinking! I swear it. He came to me—voice clear as yours.”

“And where is he now?” Makus asked.

“He... he said he’d come back after I did what he asked,” Dori said. “Said I needed to tell Lord Adair about the foreign wretchers.”

Essili looked around the empty room. “So, how long do we have to wait?”

“How am I supposed to know?”

“I see,” Zerah said. “Was there anything else he wanted you to tell us?”

Dori shook her head. “You don’t believe me, do you?”

“I will keep it in mind,” Zerah said, trying to be kind. “But we are keeping a close eye on the situation in the valley. I assure you there is nothing to worry about right now. Try to get some rest, won’t you? Maybe take a night or two off?”

Dori buried her face in her mug. “Makes no difference to me,” she grumbled before a gulp.

Chapter 5

The morning after Cas left, Iko dug up the rest of his potatoes in the schoolyard. Being that he was the only one who grew them, they were valuable currency for a couple of things he would need to prepare for the Sepentrio Mountains.

His boots were in desperate need of repair, which Mister Leonnan would happily do in exchange for a sack of potatoes. The Shuckwine family might have a woolen coat that would fit him, and they always needed potatoes to feed their five growing sons.

Mister Leonnan was closer, so Iko went there first. Leonnan lived by himself in a derelict millhouse with a sprawling oak that grew against its southern wall. The wheel outside creaked and turned under the steady flow of water.

Iko leaned against the tree's mottled bark. "Mister Leonnan?"

No response.

"Mister Leonnan?" Iko called a little louder.

A shadow stood on the other side of one of the giant gears inside the millhouse and hobbled into the light. Hunched with leathery, wrinkled skin, Leonnan had a curiously small face, and his bottom lip seemed perpetually pushed into his top. Wiry gray hair grew horizontally from his ears.

The elderly man often ensnared unsuspecting victims in long-winded, unsolicited opinions, but he was also an expert in working goatskin.

“Oh, Iko,” Leonnan said, neither happy nor disappointed to see him. The old man smelled of sweat and manure.

Iko offered a kind bow. “Looks like I’ll be heading into the mountains too.”

Leonnans face scrunched. “Why wouldn’t you be?”

The gruff response surprised Iko, and he waved off the question. “My boots have seen better days. Do you think you can fix them up for some potatoes?”

“Potatoes? But I’ve just gotten some potatoes from young Rygold.”

“Rygold?” Iko asked. The boy was thirteen or fourteen and as unprincipled as most his age.

“That’s right. Came by this morning.” Leonnan lifted his chin toward a crate full of potatoes near the wall. “Had a big bunch of them, about like your cart there.”

“Rygold is growing potatoes?”

Leonnans shrugged. “I can’t imagine how else he got them. You shouldn’t be surprised. His mother doesn’t have the time to properly care for him since the baby. If you ask me, she should have remedied that before she had it. Misses Trangu could have made her an elixir, you know. She didn’t have time for another, especially without proper help from Creal. I’m not even sure he’s really the father, you know...”

Leonnans rattled off a few more opinions about Rygold’s family as Iko did his best not to listen. When he finally finished, Iko said, “Mister Leonnan, *I* grow potatoes. You know that.”

Leonnan straightened as much as he could. “I was offered a fair bargain, and I took it. Don’t take it out on me if you’ve been beaten to the punch.”

“That little—”

“Cursing Rygold will do you no good. He’s a good boy. Treats me with respect.”

Iko seethed.

Leonnan sighed, and his demeanor softened. “You hungry? I’ve got some roasted quail.”

Iko shook his head. “I’m fasting today.”

“Fasting? My boy, you need your strength for the trek. Is that for your magical spirit in the sky? This is no time for that. You’re going to get yourself killed, you know. Can’t fight off wretchers and trolls if you’ve not been eating. Have some.”

“No, thank you, Mister Leonnan,” Iko said, unabashedly irritated.

Leonnan grimaced. “I’ve got to get back to work.” He returned to his hunch and turned around. “There’s much to do before we leave. If you cool down by the time we get to the caves, you can see me again about new boots.”

“I just want them repaired.”

“Won’t do,” Leonnan said, walking away. “Those are beyond repair.”

Iko scoffed. He picked up his cart and started toward the Shuckwines’. The large family had taken up residence in a formerly grand palace—in the interior rooms that still had roofs, anyway. Iko had thought it bold to live in a place so conspicuous, but the Shuckwines had been there more than three years now, and Mizur had never noticed them.

He found Luci Shuckwine and her two youngest boys in a peristyle near the front of the palace. She sat on the steps, leaning against one of the ornately carved marble pillars as the boys wrestled in the grass. Luci was a jovial brunette with a button nose and rosy cheeks. Iko realized she was pregnant again.

“Have you all made your preparations for the Sepentrios?” Iko asked as Luci noticed him.

“Oh, we’re ready for them, though I’m not sure you all are ready for us.” She indicated the sparring boys in the center.

“And I see congratulations are in order?” Iko motioned toward her swollen belly.

“Congratulations?” She directed a confused glance toward her belly, then her eyes cut through him.

Iko panicked. “Oh, I’m sorry! I thought—”

Luci burst into laughter. “Sorry, I couldn’t help myself! I can’t believe you’ve just noticed. I’ve got less than a month to go.”

Iko breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness.”

“Don’t be too thankful just yet,” Luci said, trying to be polite. She eyed his cart full of potatoes. “We don’t have many skins left with everyone needing warmth for the mountains and all, and we’ve already got potatoes.”

“Rygold?”

Luci tilted her head. “He’s such a nice boy.”

Iko couldn’t believe it. “What about grapes? I’ll have some grapes ready soon.”

“Well, check with us when they are ready. We’re holding on to what we have in case we really need something,” she paused. “I hope you understand.”

“Right. Yes.” Iko turned around.

“Bennick and Thom are out after a herd right now,” Luci called as Iko departed. “We should have more by the time we get to the mountains.”

Iko raised one hand and called to her without stopping. “Thank you!”

Twenty minutes later, Iko shuffled into the library as he and Elex had planned. The pair had cleared a little meeting area amid the thousands of dusty books. Elex was already there, seated in a chair with his face buried in an atlas. He couldn’t read, but he liked looking at the maps and knew his numbers well enough to understand the distances.

“Do you think there are any lonely women in Anuthura?” Elex asked without looking up.

Iko collapsed into the other chair and sighed in exhaustion. “I don’t think there is anyone left in Anuthura.”

Elex glanced up from the book. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Do you need any potatoes?”

Elex shook his head and returned his attention to the book. “I saw Rygold today. Seems he’s growing them now.”

“That little hellion!” Iko buried his narrow face into his palms and sighed.

Elex chuckled and swatted playfully at Iko’s knee with the atlas. “Hey, I’m just kidding! I would never take his potatoes.”

Iko’s anger with Rygold was just part of his frustration. Since he’d first arrived in Jynsorn, growing potatoes had been *his* job. It was the one way he fit with the other survivors. He’d never admit it to anyone, but it hurt that Leonnan and Luci Shuckwine hadn’t seen it that way. They hadn’t thought twice about trading for Rygold’s potatoes.

Iko ran his fingers through his tangled hair. “You’re likely the only one. I’ve got a whole cart of them outside.”

“What do you want for them?”

“Nothing you have. But I can’t carry them all into the mountains, so take what you’d like.”

“Ah. So, you’ve given in?” Elex’s brow rose.

Iko sighed and sank deeper into the chair. “I never had a choice. If I don’t go, I may never see Cas again. Or you, for that matter.”

“That’s fantastic!” Elex said. “I mean the part about your coming.”

Iko stood and disappeared into the books. When he found the *Natural Studies* section, he ran his fingers along the soft, grimy spines and read their faded titles.

Elex scampered after him. “What are you looking for?”

Iko could just make out the names. *Flowers of the Sepentrios*. Maybe another time for Cas. *Wildlife of the Anuthurian Coast*. Too far south.

The lack of response appeared to bother Elex. “What are these books about?”

“All kinds of things. Local natural studies.” Iko squinted. “If we must go to the mountains, we should be prepared.”

Wretchers of the Sepentrios. Iko plucked the volume from the shelf and kept scanning the spines.

“Shall we travel together?” Iko asked.

Leisure in the Great Sepentrio Range. He smirked. That would be nice.

“If you would have told me sooner.” Elex looked down. “Me and Kruick are going to help the older folks with their stuff. You can come with us if you’d like.”

The Deadly Sepentrio Mountains: A Catalogue of Dangers. Perfect. Iko slid the book out. He brushed his unruly hair out of his face and opened the cover. The table of contents listed various animals, plants, rock formations, and even a section on magma flows. It was alphabetized, too. This would certainly do.

“I’ll meet you there,” Iko said. He slapped the book shut, sending dust and mold spores into the air.

Elex choked on the tiny particles. “Well, good,” he said between gags and with watering eyes. “It wouldn’t be the same without you.”

Chapter 6

Iko had prayed every morning and evening for as long as he could remember. It was an obligation for adherents of Silence, and his father had taught him the ritual when he was a boy.

Those seminal moments had made an indelible impression on Iko. He remembered his father's stillness—those deep breaths on the quiet mornings that had ushered in an unnatural equanimity. That had been the secret to his father's strength and considerable wisdom, as far as Iko could tell, and he had been trying to reach the same heights since then. Alas, he doubted he had ever come close. And his father had claimed to be a mere novice. He'd said that the pre-dragon world had seen prophets and seers far more advanced in prayer than him.

Nevertheless, Iko dutifully fulfilled his obligation. Even if he'd never be a seer, it was a calming, grounding practice that kept him from wandering too far off course.

He usually prayed in the room adjoining the room he called home. There was a hole in the wall of the watchtower there, and just outside was the top of a willow tree. From the floor in the corner, Iko could see much of Lake Bellum between the willow's somber foliage and the wall. A few minutes after sunrise, birdsong was in full swing, waves

lapped upon the lake's stony shore, and the willow billowed gently into the room.

After absorbing the scene, Iko began the prayer ritual of Silence. He reached for his Silent Scroll—a leather-bound book containing prayer rituals and ancient wisdom of The Silent One's prophets. He opened to his favorite passage and read.

A soul is born in Silence, but innumerable sirens lure it into confounding clamor. There, the soul withers, its vision darkens, and it is left blind to things beyond the wickedness that consumes it.

He breathed in the words, then knelt and reached for the small glass jar at his side. The oil inside had been extracted from a hundred of the tiny flying lizards called dracomuen that resided in the mountain caves throughout all the Northernlands. As Iko uncorked the jar, its acrid, urine-like aroma stung his nose. That deadened his sense of smell entirely—the desired effect. It would be a half-hour before he could smell again. He recorked the jar and picked up the traditional sheepskin tacit cap. The cap fit snugly over his head and had circular flaps that dropped over his eyes and ears. He tied it in the back, and the flaps pressed firmly against his head so that he could no longer see. The ear flaps had wool within them, so he could no longer hear much either. Finally, he reached for his Silent cloak, also made of sheepskin. He wrapped it entirely around himself, sealing out the light breeze blowing through the room.

Now, senses deadened to the physical realm, his soul awakened, and he slipped into the nothingness from which

he had been born. Somewhere in the darkness, there was Silence, and he searched.

Then—

“Mister Phainor!” Someone screamed so loud that Iko heard it through his earmuffs. The voice shot through the south-facing window in Iko’s bedroom.

Annoyed, he lifted the flaps from his eyes and ears, stood, and crossed the room.

“Mister Iko Phainor!” the voice said again.

Iko leaned out the window and groaned when he saw who it was. “What is it, Rygold? Are you trying to call Mizur down to us?”

Rygold stood on the grass below. He was a strapping blonde who unnecessarily carried a sword with him everywhere he went.

“Sorry,” Rygold said. “I’ve been sent to tell you that most everyone is leaving this morning.”

“The Lotherins capitulated, have they?”

“Um... ” Rygold shrugged. “They’re following Rog to the caves near the Gelida Cliffs.”

“When?”

“Well...” Rygold fidgeted. “Most left a few hours ago to get there while it was still dark.”

Iko’s eyes narrowed at the boy.

“Sorry,” Rygold said. “I was supposed to tell you last night, but...”

“Too busy harvesting your potatoes?”

Rygold feigned a smile. “Hope you’re not mad about that. I wanted to try something easy first, and everyone needs potatoes. I need to start carrying my weight around for my family, right?”

Iko pressed his lips together.

“I didn’t do grapes,” Rygold said sheepishly.

“How nice of you.”

“We’re leaving in a bit. Mother didn’t want to disturb the baby’s sleep. You can come with us if you’d like.”

“I’ll be fine.” Iko offered a dismissive wave. “You go on.”

Rygold stayed put and stared.

“What else?”

“That your praying hat?” Rygold was amused.

“Yes. It’s called a tacit cap,” Iko said.

“Oh.” Rygold was on the edge of laughter—typical for heathens who had never seen prayer garb. “See you there!” he called, barely holding it in as he departed.

Iko opened his mouth to say something, but he caught himself and bit his tongue. He was surprised by how small Rygold’s laughter made him feel. He longed for the day that anyone other than Elex would ask a sincere question about the prayer ritual rather than laugh at it.

Things hadn’t always been this way for seekers of Silence. A thousand years ago, most of the Northernlands had been devoted to The Silent One. But over the centuries, the once proud tradition had become so entrenched that it became taken for granted—a thing inherited but not understood. It devolved into a therapeutic pastime—a self-serving drug for the masses. Inconveniences like twice-daily prayer, reading the First Prophets, and weekly fasting were all but forgotten. Detached from its roots, this diluted perversion of the faith proved too anemic to carry its remaining adherents through the horror of the dragons’ arrival. By the time Iko had been born, most people were hardly aware of Silence. Prayer ritu-

als, asceticism, and holy books were only amusing reminders of the naivety of the past. And so was Iko.

Iko spent the next few minutes stuffing his worn leather traveling pack with what would fit. He donned his trim-fitting navy tunic—a favorite that Theia and Cas had woven for him—and packed a few extra articles of clothing along with his prayer garb. He added a couple of pots, a knife, and a blanket of elk hide. Potatoes filled what space remained. He shouldered his bow and looped his half-full quiver onto his belt. He checked that all his books were still in the smaller of his two bags. Then he knelt next to the cedar chest he never opened and opened it.

The aroma of cedar might have washed over him had he been able to smell. Inside was a sword wrapped in sheepskin. Iko unwrapped the sword, taking hold of the cherrywood grip beneath a silver pommel and cross guard. He admired its scabbard, black with sweeping white designs. Wool lined the inside for quieter carrying. The blade glinted as he drew it. It was still pristine, as was the name etched into its shining metal: *Blessed Ember*. His father had taught him enough about using a sword that he could make use of it if they came across a troll in the mountains.

Iko sheathed the blade and stood to depart. He beheld his home of the last seven years. Even with so few possessions in his bags, the room seemed unnaturally empty now. Perhaps he would come back one day. Maybe Cas would not like living in caves.

Alas, she probably wouldn't mind.

It only took a couple of hours to get into the mountains. But after another hour of climbing, the trees became too sparse to continue in the daylight. The Sepentrio Moun-

tains had patches of woodlands, but for the most part, the landscape was desolate. If Iko continued and Mizur came by, there would be no hiding. So Iko found a little stretch of woodlands and glossed through the A's of *The Deadly Sependrio Mountains* until he got to the section on arcanotaurs.

He thumbed through the pages, taking in a few of the illustrations related to the beasts, then decided it would be best to read the rest of the lengthy section after he'd settled into his new home. If there were really arcanotaurs in the mountains, as had long been rumored, he'd make sure he understood everything about them he could.

He reached the base of the Gelida Cliffs a couple of hours after sunset. The landscape was bleak and lifeless, as it was in most of the rest of the mountains. Gnarled spires stretched toward the stars in the crisp, cloudless sky. The waning gibbous moon cast long shadows across the ashy gravel. Crags and fissures hid in the shadows, some deep enough to kill. Iko minded each step.

He found the other survivors after searching through several empty caves. Whatever the drawbacks of the mountains were, he had to admit that he would have never known anyone was in the cave from the outside. And the narrow, shadow-veiled entryway was far too small for Mizur to enter or even breathe fire.

The inside of the murky torchlit cave was another story. It was really a tunnel, perhaps twenty yards across and half as high, and unnaturally uniform. To the left, the passageway continued as far as the torchlight reached. To his right, he could just make out a fork. The air smelled like rotten eggs, akin to a dragon's breath. Iko had read about lava channels and assumed that's what this was.

Everyone from Jynsomn was there, and as many Lotherins. Despite their hushed voices, the mood was festive. The groups bustled harmoniously, enlivened by their newfound camaraderie. Iko recognized some of the Lotherins from his few dealings with them, but there were enough new faces to spark interest. A few of them were pretty girls, as Elex had promised.

To Iko's surprise, he found the scene welcoming. Here was a sincere joy in the others he'd not seen before, and it was attractive. He hoped the change would not be fleeting. Perhaps Elex had been right. Perhaps something good would come of living in the caves.

Iko scanned the crowded space for the reason he had come.

"Father!"

He spun around, and Cas's curls rammed into his gut at a sprint.

"Oof!"

Cas's arms wrapped around him. A girl with dark skin followed her. The girl giggled. She was Cas's age. There hadn't been any other girls Cas's age in Jynsomn.

"Father, this is Alisa," Cas said, releasing her hold on Iko's waist.

Iko nodded politely, "How do you do?"

"Hello," Alisa said. She turned to Cas and said, "I thought Rog was your father."

"Mother calls Rog my *stepfather*," Cas explained. "This is my father. He makes the jam I was telling you about. And dried those flowers." Cas spoke with pride.

Iko straightened.

Elex's cheer joined in. "See, Casiena! I told you he was coming tonight."

Cas's delicate hand wrapped around Iko's wrist, and she tugged. "Can we play the game with the batons? I want to show Alisa."

"Here?" Iko asked. "Now? I'm sure Mister Elex didn't even—"

"Of course I did!" Elex said. He lifted a leather bag. "She's been asking for hours."

Iko snickered. "Of all the things to carry to the mountains."

"We've got to have something to do for fun," Elex said.

The four set up the game as far from the crowd as possible while staying in the dim dancing torchlight. Split into two teams, each team took a turn trying to knock down the other's woodblocks by tossing batons. They played several rounds, with Elex and Alisa coming out on top all but once. Iko was usually competitive, but this evening, he didn't mind losing. Cas had enjoyed herself, and that's what mattered.

They stopped playing when the buzz on the other side of the cave softened.

Theia came to gather Cas. "C'mon, Casiena, it's time for us to sleep. No sense in keeping everyone up."

Iko noticed the rest of the group reclining in the cave. "Everyone is sleeping in here?"

"Just for now," Theia said. "We are going to do some more exploring in the morning, see where everyone can go for good."

Iko bit his bottom lip. "Hmm."

Theia lifted a finger to Iko's nose. "You didn't have to come. You don't always have to be the one—"

“What’s this matter?” Rog bellowed, striding toward the game.

Iko surrendered his palms. “I was just wondering if we are really all staying in here tonight.”

“Does it look like we’re going anywhere else? You don’t want to stay? Don’t stay!”

Iko was initially taken aback by Rog’s aggression. But then he smelled the moonshine emanating from the bigger man, and it made sense.

“I didn’t say I didn’t want to stay.” Iko tried to stop himself from being honest, but the words came out too fast. “Though, it *does* feel a little exposed in here.”

Rog scowled.

Iko failed to hold his tongue again. “Just because of the big open tunnels.” He held his hands far apart from each other and then dropped them to his side. He was mostly worried about ridge trolls, who were known to dwell in the caves at higher elevations. They were solitary creatures, and probably wouldn’t bother a crowd, but one couldn’t be too careful in the Sepentrios. There were reasons the survivors rarely ventured into the mountains.

Rog stepped so close that Iko smelled his stinking breath. “There are sixty of us. *We* will be fine. But why don’t *you* find somewhere else to be tonight? Somewhere not so big and open?”

As irritated as Iko was, he knew there was no point in doing anything but leaving. He strode toward his bags and belongings. “I’ll see you in the morning, Cas,” he said, slipping on his pack.

The little girl nodded quietly.

Iko gathered everything else and stormed out of the cave. Just a few steps into the moonlight, Elex was stumbling behind him.

“You should have let him have it!” Elex called.

“He’d crush me.”

“Not if you land a good first blow.”

Iko surveyed the landscape. He decided on a small space beneath an overhang and laid down his things.

Elex sat against the back of the overhang without being asked. “Maybe someone from Lotheirin will put him in his place one day.”

Iko removed his weapons and sat next to Elex. He brushed his hair back. “That would be nice, but I doubt it.”

The two stared out at the stars visible over silhouettes of distant ridges. A star streaked through the sky.

“Still. It wasn’t too bad of a first night out here,” Elex said.

Iko felt the corner of his mouth rise. “No. It wasn’t. It’s been a while since I had that much fun with her. And I think you’re right that I’ll see her more here.”

“I meant the women,” Elex said. “Did you see them?”

Iko snickered. “I did see them. They *are* rather pretty.”

“A couple are eligible,” Elex said. “Lisi and Raakal. I could introduce you.”

“Good luck, then, but I’m not interested.”

“Oh, come on! Don’t make me go it alone. There are two of them. Two of us. It’s fate! They might not be so bad if you just get to know them.”

Iko rolled his head toward Elex. “I’ll meet them eventually.”

“You’ll meet them tomorrow,” Elex said with a grin. “For me, if for nothing else?”

Iko sighed. “Alright, Elex. I’ll meet them tomorrow.”

Chapter 7

A scream pierced the mountain's nocturnal quietude. It was a panicked, primitive cry—not discernibly male or female. Iko was sitting up before he was fully awake, adrenaline surging. Elex shot up behind him. There were other noises, none distinguishable. Thuds. Mumbles.

The unmistakable *clang* of two swords clashing.

Iko stood and bent for his quiver and bow. “Get my sword,” he whispered to Elex.

Elex fumbled around in the black night. The blade rang out as he drew it.

They inched forward. Iko fastened his quiver to his belt and nocked an arrow. Through the cave's narrow entrance, sword fights echoed. Shouts. Another guttural scream.

Growls. The sounds of beasts.

Iko remembered Cas and ran.

A shadow hobbled out of the cave, holding its shoulder. Mister Leonnan straightened when he saw Iko and Elex, afraid. Then he recognized them. Between ragged gasps, he implored, “Run!”

“What has happened?” Iko asked.

“Wretchers.” Leonnan coughed as he hobbled by, terrified and bleeding.

Iko reached the entrance in time to collide with someone else trying to escape. It was one of the young women from the Lotherin Wood. She screamed until she realized he was human.

“Are you alright?” Elex asked.

“Go!” she said, seeing their weapons. Blood was streaked across her face, but she was not wounded. “There are too many.”

“How many?” Iko asked.

The Lotherin woman shook her head. “More than our swords!” She pulled away from Iko and ran into the night.

The claim sent Iko’s hair standing on end. He dashed into the cave, tearing his tunic as he rushed through the narrow, jagged space. Elex huffed as he tried to keep up.

Iko came into the cave. A single torch lay on the ground halfway across the tunnel, illuminating a space ten feet across. A body lay near the torch—a crumpled silhouette. Iko could not tell who it was—or *what* it was. Moans and sobs echoed in the surrounding pitch black. There was no more fighting here, though Iko heard it to the right, farther down the lava tunnel.

Movement on the opposite side of the light caught Iko’s attention, and his pulse quickened. A shadow tottered into the light, moving from left to right. The impish creature was the size of a child and resembled a bipedal rat with no tail. It had large, lifeless eyes and erect, ovate ears. Its skull was broad but tapered into a long, horse-like snout. From its hip hung a sword, and in its hand was a bow with an arrow nocked. It wore a dark tunic, leggings, and a leather belt. The creature was a wreg, the smaller species of wretcher.

Without further consideration, Iko raised his bow, aimed, and released an arrow with a *thwack*. The shot whistled into the wreg's neck. The creature gargled and collapsed, writhing and grabbing at the arrow. A pool of dark blood spread quickly across the rock beneath it, and the wreg grew still.

Screams and bellows echoed through the tunnel from the right. They were moving farther away.

The slumped-over body near the torch groaned and turned over, and Iko ran to it. It was Rygold. His sword lay a few feet away, dripping blood.

Iko knelt beside him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "What has happened, boy?"

Rygold's eyes moved too slowly toward Iko's. "They came, and..."

Strange squishes and gurgles told Iko that Rygold had a wound near his stomach. He did not look.

Elex had been surveying the shadows and came to stand behind Iko. His throat was tight as he spoke. "Everyone here is dead or close to it, but there are only a few. A dead ukori too."

Iko spun around. "Cas?"

Elex shook his head.

Iko turned back to Rygold. "Did you see my Casiena?"

Rygold lifted his head toward the forked passageway from where the sounds of a quarrel still came. "There." He choked. Rygold gripped Iko's hand and squeezed so tight it hurt. He stared desperately. "I..." He couldn't finish and gasped.

Iko could only behold the dying boy with compassion. "You will be alright, my boy," he said as gently as he could. "Fear not. There is only peace before you." He didn't know

if that was true for an unbeliever, but it seemed like a comforting thing to say.

Rygold's grip lessened. After a few seconds of an unblinking stare, Iko knew he was gone. He closed the boy's eyes, then bowed and remembered his father's prayer for the War's fallen soldiers: "Might this one's plenary offering warrant final peace in sweet Silence."

When he lifted his head, Elex was standing a few feet in front of him, staring at the fork in the tunnel. The shouting and fighting in the distance faded, and the faint echoes made it difficult to tell from which side they came.

Iko lifted the torch and listened.

"The left," Elex said. He turned to Iko. "Ought we carry the torch? They'll see us coming."

"We can't run through a pitch-black cave," Iko said. "Mind your footing." He started running, torch extended. They passed a couple more bodies along the way, but Iko did not look at them close enough to know who they were. He only assessed that they were not little girls. There were a few fallen wregs, too.

Iko skidded to a stop after a sharp turn. Specters clashed in an opening at the end of the tunnel, silhouetted by starlight. Only the slim form of Bennick Shuckwine was discernible, torch in one hand and sword in another. A young girl screamed. A monstrous form dragged her by her hair toward Iko, and he raised his torch. He recoiled when he saw an ukori in front of him.

The ukori's head resembled a lion's with ears stretched thin and sticking straight out. In its usual hunched stance, the imposing brute was over seven feet tall. Thick matted hair carpeted its broad shoulders and sturdy abdomen. The

ukori hissed, baring its long, pointed fangs. Its clawed hand gripped a heavy broadsword. It wore armor made of leather, unlike that of any wretcher Iko had ever seen.

Iko dropped his torch and raised his bow toward the hulking figure. His arrow found the center mass of his target, and the fiend wailed. The ukori's head came into the torchlight, and Iko's second arrow pierced the space between its shimmering, catlike eyes.

Iko's sword brushed past his face from behind and collided with another blade, and Iko leaped backward. Another ukori had charged him, and Elex had engaged it. Their long shadows danced on the walls.

With both hands on his sword's hilt, Elex defended himself clumsily, but well enough for Iko to regain his composure and put an arrow into their enemy. Two more arrows hissed from the men at the open end of the tunnel, striking the beast in the back. The ukori fell to his knees. Still panicked, Elex repeatedly hacked at the helpless creature's neck until it crumpled into a bloody heap at his feet.

Then silence.

Iko spun around, bow in hand. Were there no more?

The little girl was on her feet, but she was not Casiena. She was Cas's new friend, Alisa, running away and calling for her mother.

"Casiena?" Iko called.

Rog's voice broke through cries of grief. "Quiet."

Iko could not see him. "Where is she? Is she with you?"

"Quiet." Rog's voice was still calm but a little louder.

"Are they all gone?" someone called from the opening.

Rog growled, "Next person to speak, I will run through myself."

Iko emerged from the tunnel. The survivors were scattered about a starlit shelf amid sparse foliage. Many had gone all the way to the edge of the shelf, uncomfortably close to a drop of a couple of hundred feet. Some were injured. Others mourned those who were no longer with them. He dashed from group to group, looking for Cas.

“Where did the rest of them go?” someone else asked.

“I think they are gone,” Rog said, listening carefully to the dark tunnel. Disbelief colored his voice.

“Luci! They got Luci!” Bennick Shuckwine wailed.

Midway through the survivors, Elex intercepted Iko. The two had been searching through the reeling throng from opposite sides.

“Cas?” Iko asked.

Elex pressed his lips together. “Not here.”

Iko hurried toward Rog, strides long and anxious. He spat, “Rog, where is my daughter?”

Rog whipped around, streaming tears glistening in the torchlight. The corners of his mouth pulled down, and he shook his head. “Neither did her mother make it,” he said. “Cut down trying to save your little one.”

The night spun, and Iko suddenly felt faint. “Dead?” he choked.

“They took her.”

Iko straightened. A sliver of hope. “Which way?”

Rog’s demeanor remained unchanged. “There are at least fifty, Iko. No less than twenty ukori. Even if we all went, there is no hope.”

Elex’s hand found Iko’s shoulder, and it was too much. Iko struggled to hold back his tears.

Rog continued in earnest. “Maybe if there was more time.” He looked to the ground.

That was true. Wretchers had not confronted the humans without reason—the only explanation for what had just happened was that they had come in the hope of acquiring fresh human flesh, an increasingly rare delicacy for them. They wouldn’t waste food, water, and effort to keep their prisoners alive for very long. They would find a safe place to dine, cut the living captives into filets, and consume every bit of them—maybe even minutes from now.

But Iko had to try. He took his sword from Elex and dashed back into the tunnel. He recovered the torch and scanned the cave walls for wherever the wretchers might have gone. He found an opening near where he’d killed the first ukori and entered without thought. He was only vaguely aware that Elex was following him.

He searched in the darkness. He found silence and more ways the wretchers could have gone. Some of the adjoining tunnels seemed endless.

“Iko,” Elex said gently after several minutes.

“Was there another way back there?”

“Iko, we are going to get lost ourselves.”

They searched for an hour without another word. Nothing.

It was likely too late, and Iko knew it.

The truth hit him all at once. He nearly toppled over, but the cold cave wall stopped him. He was sick. Forsaking his desire to appear strong, he wept. Elex embraced him, and the rest of the night was a blur.

Chapter 8

Makus had been happy for the first twenty-nine years of his life—before his world expanded beyond Lake Portumnus and the surrounding woodlands. Even after the Portumnian marikano had learned of Ivory City and many of his friends departed for it, he stayed home for a time, unsure if he'd ever go. After all, he had been a member of the marikano's elite fighting force called the Night Warriors. He'd trained for five years before becoming one of the few candidates for the group who succeeded in their final assessment. He and the other Night Warriors had believed that they'd been chosen by the marikano gods, Alun and Ora, to defend their beloved aquatic home from several wretcher clans who routinely encroached upon it. Makus had never thought he'd find a more purposeful life elsewhere.

But over the first year after marikano left for Ivory City, stories returned of wonders beyond Makus's wildest imaginings. The food, drink, and people had come from all along the coast of the Sea of Nivero and brought with them an excess of new experiences and ideas. They had built terrestrial homes and were restoring an old castle. Most importantly, Ivory City's founder had discovered a secret to killing dragons and was recruiting soldiers to help turn the tide against them. That promise finally convinced Makus to leave Lake

Portumnus. For as much of an honor as it was to protect his home from wretchers, he knew it would have been more of an honor to help liberate his home and the rest of the world from the dragons.

Alas, Makus hadn't anticipated that the people of the broader world would enlighten and unsettle him the way they did. He had always been fond of new ideas, so he had embraced conversation with the humans from afar without hesitation. But for better or worse, doing so illuminated just how small his world had always been. The new ideas of his homeland had all been born of a particular, familiar worldview, but the new ideas of the humans were unfathomably alien, even at their foundation. Most of the foreign peoples scoffed at the notion of a divine will and mocked many gods who were not so different from Makus's. It had been obvious to them that tales of heavens and spirits were fabrications of ignorant peoples, and eventually, it became obvious to Makus too.

That had been a terrifying ethos to adopt, but there was no part of Makus that could have gone on believing in Alun and Ora after a few months in the city. The admission shook him to his core, for there was almost nothing he believed of importance that didn't trace its roots back to his long-held beliefs in his ancestors' gods. He suddenly saw his time as a Night Warrior as having been a naïve, unwarranted risk to his life. He realized that Lake Portumnus hadn't been protected by any divine force when the dragons came; it had only been protected by water. The wisdom of the wisest people he'd ever known crumbled before him, and the effect was something like being left out in cold darkness. He didn't

know where to turn. He didn't know what mattered most. He didn't know what his life meant.

Becoming Zerah's personal guard had helped some, and he hoped her discovery of the dragon-killer's identity would help more. But the longer Zerah's search had gone on without answers, the more Makus had struggled without a clear purpose. He longed for the sense of certainty and meaning that had defined his naive youth, but no matter where he searched, he could not find anything that came close to providing it.

Fortunately for Makus, Ivory City offered many interesting and enjoyable activities that helped keep him from going mad while he tried to figure out his new place in the world. This had been enough for a time, but after three years in the city, he had eaten every meal at every eatery in Ivory City, and he'd tasted every drink. He'd seen all the theatrical performances and dances at Ravenwood Theater. Even the occasional hanging was of no interest to him anymore. How many times could one watch a neck snap before the thrill of the spectacle faded? Apparently, not many. He'd experienced every pleasure the city had to offer, and now, he was nearly numb to them all.

He wasn't the only one in this predicament. That is why, as of late, he'd been joining expeditions into the valley during his free time to light fires and enjoy drinks and smoke. The groups always sought a new place to enjoy themselves—some cave or hilltop they had yet to discover. Novel thrills were their aim, and there were no more to be found within Ivory City's walls.

The sun had set a couple of hours earlier, which meant Makus was officially relieved of his responsibilities for the

next week. But before he left, he peeked into Zerah's chamber. As expected, it was empty. He climbed Dunbardin's highest tower and gently knocked on the door to Zerah's laboratory.

"Yes?" Zerah said from inside.

He entered and found her on her stool, bent and looking through the magnifying glass at the tiny black scale—her obsession. It was a piece of dried dragon-killer poison—the only piece she had since getting another would require wasting some of the few drops of fresh poison they had left. Zerah was writing as she stared. Makus wondered how many pages one could write about a thing so small.

A part of Makus understood Zerah's passion. The dragon Azoch had murdered her entire family in front of her—two young boys and a husband. She had never explicitly stated to Makus that revenge was her aim—in fact, she almost never discussed her loss—but she didn't have to. What else would have driven her to work so tirelessly to discover the poison's identity?

Everyone knew Lord Adair would not allow anyone to use the dragon-killer on Azoch until they got more of it. As long as the dragon feared Adair and stayed away, there was no point in using the last of the poison on her—especially since it would leave them defenseless against other dragons that might show up if her territory was unoccupied. Everyone wanted to figure out what the dragon-killer was, of course. Everyone knew that it could save the world one day. But Zerah's obsession with the riddle was not healthy, at least in Makus's opinion.

The room was lit by a half-dozen candles scattered throughout it. The stench from the last failed experiment still lingered, though it had faded some.

“Have we discovered the secret today?” Makus asked, already knowing the answer.

“I’ve not yet replaced all my glassware,” Zerah said, still looking at the scale. Her ink quill scratched against the pebbly parchment. After a moment of silence from Makus, she stopped writing and slowly raised her eyes from the paper. “I thought Reya had come on at sundown?”

Makus nodded. “In her quarters now. I wanted to let you know that we’re going to the North Fork tonight, staying for a few days.” He paused. “You should come spend a night with us.”

“You know I can’t. I’m...”

“Going to do what you do every night?”

“You know I don’t like those sorts of gatherings. The drink and smoke—they aren’t for me.”

“You never partook in those things before. And yet you used to smile. Before Adair gave you this... work.”

Zerah put down her quill and rotated on the stool toward Makus, who towered over her. “And I will again! But how much more will we smile when I’ve succeeded? When the dragons are falling from the sky by the dozen?”

“You mean when *Azoch* falls from the sky?”

Zerah reacted as if she’d been punched in the gut.

Makus offered a nod of resignation. “If you change your mind, you’re more than welcome any time.”

Zerah smiled. “Thank you, but don’t expect me.” She turned back toward the little black scale beneath the magnifying glass and picked up her quill. “Enjoy your time off.”



They met on a small peninsula where the Tyel River flowed into the Akando River. The fire was bigger than it should have been, and Makus had to retreat from it several times as its flames leaped toward the treetops. He didn't know many in this group very well aside from Kavil, who had invited him. But Kavil was somewhere in the forest with Astellis.

Elsewhere, a few townfolk smoked something on the edge of the fire's light. Others chattered about something political. Under a nearby tree, foolish men gambled in a game of dice. Makus sat alone against a stump, sipping ale and staring at the fire, uninterested in anything going on around him.

A form stumbled out of the shadow in Makus's periphery. It plodded clumsily toward him and sat without invitation. It was Doerwine Felsmit, and she seemed quite drunk.

Makus glanced toward her, irked by her invasion of his space. "I'm glad to see you took Justice Noburia's advice."

"Allabel is more than capable of watching my tavern alone," Dori slurred.

Makus stood to go somewhere else. Anywhere else.

"Hey! I need to talk to you," Dori said.

Makus sighed. "I think I heard enough from you in your tavern."

Dori shook her head, and her eyes widened. "No, you have not. I talked to him again."

"Who?"

"The god."

“Right. The god.” Makus tried to turn away.

“He said I needed to talk to you.”

“You’ve had too much to drink.”

Dori ignored the accusation. “You were right to leave behind the childishness of your homeland. Their small minds and foolishness. That’s what he said to tell you—that you were right.” She put her hand on her hip and nodded in drunken satisfaction.

The words struck Makus more forcefully than he’d admit to Dori.

Dori seemed to notice his silent reaction. “He wants to speak with you.”

Makus’s pulse quickened, and suddenly he felt fear creeping in from the darkness around the fire. Then he grew angry. Why was he entertaining this at all? It must have been the ale. “Then tell him to speak to me,” he said antagonistically.

“He told me you’re too far from him. That you’d have to invite him in,” Dori said.

“What does that mean? How does one invite a god in?” Makus asked, mockingly.

Dori shrugged. “Just ask him to come to you.” Her words had become quick and indifferent. “It’s quite a thrill when he comes, at least for me. Far beyond anything your ale has to offer.”

Makus’s eyes narrowed. He wondered if Dori should be locked up. She was probably the first genuinely insane person he had ever met. “I’ll keep it in mind,” Makus said. He slurped the last drops of ale from his mug.

Dori’s face dropped in disappointment. “Why does everyone keep saying that? I’m not mad.”

Makus chuckled and extended his empty mug toward her.
“Where’s the rest of the ale?”

Chapter 9

Theia's death had been cleaner than most of the rest, at least in appearance. She lay on her side, ghost-white with blood blossoming from the center of her chest and running onto the ground. Iko squatted beside her and swept her delicate blonde hair from her half-opened eyes. Her cold skin saddened him. He regretted what they had become to each other and that they would never make amends. How terrible it was that for all of Cas's life, her parents had been so adversarial. Iko would never be rid of the guilt.

The others had started back to Jynsomn in small groups before sunrise, uncaring for the dead. Iko had stayed to give Theia a proper blessing and burial. He owed her as much since she had died trying to save their daughter, and it was what Cas would have wanted.

Elex helped wrap her in her cloak and carry her out of the cave. They placed her beneath the overhang under which they had slept the previous night and piled stones to conceal her. With his Silent Scroll in hand, Iko carried out the traditional burial rite of Silence and read a passage about the afterlife from the holy book. Elex listened attentively.

"Are we going to pray for Cas?" Elex asked through tears when Iko finished.

Iko was not ready for that. “When we get back,” he said, holding the Silent Scroll tightly to his chest. “I want to gather all of her belongings first since we don’t have... her.”

Iko shuddered. Had it not all been a dream? Was he sure Cas was not with the group that had gone back to Jynsorn? Perhaps she had gotten away and gone back on her own. Maybe she had fallen in with Alisa and her family.

No. She was probably in the bellies of wretchers by now.

Elex returned to the cave to gather his belongings. Iko leaned against a rock and glanced at the bright blue morning sky. It was a clear day with just a few streaking clouds. There would be no hiding from Mizur if he passed, but Iko no longer cared.

“Iko!” Elex called from the cave. He was dragging something. “Come take a look at this.”

Elex had dragged a dead ukori into the sunlight. The stench of the creature was unbearable. Even alive, it had smelled like a decaying animal. Iko didn’t understand why Elex had done it until he beheld the ukori.

“I’ve never seen an ukori that looked like this,” Elex said, wrinkling his nose.

“How many ukori have you seen so close?” Iko asked.

“Enough,” Elex said.

Iko observed the ukori. It wore a leather cuirass over a knitted crimson top and still tightly gripped an expertly crafted broadsword. It even wore pants—local ukori usually didn’t wear pants. The white painted symbol on its forehead was the most peculiar thing—it was an inverted triangle with a jagged, alien character in each corner. And a metal medallion of the same shape and etched with the same foreign characters hung around its neck.

“Were the others all the same?” Iko asked. “I remember a breastplate on one.”

“I didn’t get a good look at them. It was too dark.”

Iko crouched next to the ukori and yanked the medallion off. He tossed it to Elex.

Elex inspected it. “Seems a bit sophisticated for a wretcher. And did you notice the wregs were fighting too? There are several dead in there with swords at their sides. Strange, isn’t it?”

Elex was right. Wregs and ukori usually lived together in a mutually beneficial relationship. The wregs did the manual labor, food gathering, and general maintenance of their cave homes. The ukori were the aggressive ones and generally protected their communities. Wregs were comparably skittish, especially when ukori weren’t around. But these wregs had seemed just as willing as their ukori counterparts to fight.

“These must be Kruick’s foreign wretchers,” Iko said, brow furrowed.

On a hunch, he flipped his leather bag to his front and pulled out *Wretchers of the Sepentrios*. It was a blue book with shimmering gold lettering. The book creaked as he opened it. He thumbed through the pages, releasing the smell of damp, old paper as he searched for something that looked like these wretchers. After repeatedly coming up empty, he turned to the back of the book. There was an index. But no entry for *crimson*. None for *paint*. None for *white paint*. But there was an entry for *war paint*.

War paint, see Praivun Alliance

Praivun Alliance, 147–153

Iko flipped to the pages. There was an image of the symbol that was painted upon the ukori's forehead at the top of the page. Iko started reading.

The Praivun Alliance resides in a network of naturally occurring underground tunnels (commonly referred to as 'burrows') in the upper Leinna Mountains in Arcantu. Set apart from other wretchers by their religious fervor, they are rarely found elsewhere since they consider their cavernous home a gift from their god, Praivus.

"They are members of the Praivun Alliance." Iko stared at the image, then showed it to Elex.

"Never heard of them."

"Neither have I. Says they come from the mountains in Arcantu."

"Arcantu?" Elex asked. "Why've they come so far?"

Iko slapped the book shut, suddenly uncaring about the identity of the wretchers. "Makes no difference to Cas," he said grimly. "Let's get out of these wretched mountains."

Chapter 10

Eighteen-year-old Gilly Dagmire plodded down the crumbling spiral staircase that would take him to Dunbardin Castle's lowest underground levels. He extended his candle in front of him and carefully stepped so that he would not go tumbling down the uneven stairs. The last thing he needed was to injure himself in such a remote location. The nearest fellow guardsman was at least a couple of stories overhead and would likely not hear any cries for help.

As a new recruit to Ivory City's Guard, Gilly had earned the worst assignment of them all—patrolling the most obscure nooks and crannies of Dunbardin Castle by himself during the night shift. Basements, seldom-walked hallways, and even an entirely vacated wing were on his itinerary twice a night, and none of them ever offered any sort of excitement. Despite this being only his third shift of official duty, Gilly had already grown tired of the lonely treks through the unlit corridors and musty abandoned rooms. He had to remind himself to remain proud to be wearing the ivory tunic of the Guard. He had earned it with hard work, and he was sure it would help turn the heads of a few girls.

At last, Gilly came to the bottom of the stairs and approached the doors to his last stop of the night, a shrine dedicated to The Silent One. He didn't know why he ever had

to worry about the room; allegedly, hardly anyone spent time in there anymore. Nevertheless, evidence of wax showed there had been at least a couple of candles burning the last two nights. A few steps into the room, Gilly sensed another peculiarity. A cold draft came from the shrine's far side. Upon it was an odor that reminded him of rust and mud. He had not noticed the smell the previous times he had patrolled there.

He kept his candle raised as he crept over the dusty flagstone floors. Though he could only see a few feet in front of him, he knew the room was circular and about sixty feet in diameter, with several concentric rows of old oak pews surrounding an altar at its center. The brick ceiling of the shrine hovered just a couple of feet over Gilly's head, seeming as if it would cave in on him any moment. It was quite uncomfortable, and it did not help that what little walking space there was between the pews was partially obstructed by ornately carved stone columns that supported the low ceiling.

Gilly squeezed between the pews and columns until he came to the space around the room's altar. It was a simple structure, a small block of smoothed granite three feet tall and three feet wide. Upon it were several half-burned candles and puddles of dried wax.

Typically, this would have been the end of the patrol for Gilly, but as he turned to leave the shrine, he heard something that he knew was not quite right. It came from the shadows on the opposite side of the room.

Tap, tap, tap.

The sound drummed on.

Gilly recognized that the tapping had been there all along and that he just had not noticed it. Using his candle to lead the way, he stepped around the little altar and walked toward the far wall.

“Is someone here?” Gilly called into the darkness.

No response.

He inched closer and squeezed between another column and a row of pews. He switched the candle to his left hand and placed his right upon the pommel of his sword. He called out again as he started to sweat, “I don’t mean to interrupt your prayers. But if you’re in here, could you please say something?”

Nothing.

Gilly tensed as he came to the last pew, just a few feet from the nearest wall. As he took another step, his boot splashed in shallow water. Perplexed, he lowered the candle toward the ground. A thin sheet of water trickled over the floor, collecting in a depression a few feet away. More surprising were the dirt and brick fragments strewn over the floor. He studied the scene, then stepped in the direction from which the water flowed.

He realized that the tapping was the sound of water dripping from the shadow-veiled wall before him. Gilly raised his candle as he neared the wall, and he gasped at what its light revealed.

A four-foot section of the shrine’s brick wall was gone. Something had smashed it in from the outside. A freshly dug tunnel ran into the earth. It was large enough for at least a couple of men to come through. A cool breeze from the tunnel wafted over Gilly, carrying upon it the damp, metallic smell he had already noticed. Groundwater dripped from the

top of the tunnel and formed the stream, which trickled over the shrine's floor. Gilly knew at once what had happened. The foreign, crimson-clad wretchers had burrowed into the castle!

Something growled in the darkness behind him.

Gilly whirled around and drew his blade. He raised the sword toward the growl and yelled, "Guards! Guards! We may have a problem here! Guards!"

Another growl came from his right, this one closer than the first. Keeping his sword raised, he stepped cautiously toward the door.

"If this is more hazing, I am not having it!" he cried, knowing that it wasn't the case. "I'll run you through!"

Gilly stepped toward the door with his sword pointed toward whatever was in the room. He would get out of the shrine, bar the door, then go for help. He could wake the castle quickly enough, and it was apparent that the wretchers had not gotten an army inside yet. Perhaps it was not too late.

Something else squawked to Gilly's left, and he started to panic. Was he surrounded? He redirected his sword toward the squawk and watched his arm tremble violently. He would be helpless if forced to defend himself with the blade; it felt so impossibly heavy. He had to get out of the shrine before it came to that.

Something struck him hard in the middle of his back, knocking him forward and sending the candle and sword from his hands. He landed on his knees before the little altar and watched the candle tumble between two nearby pews. Amazingly, the candle stayed aflame. As it came to rest, Gilly recognized with horror the shadowy forms of

three wregs crouched between pews before him. Their eyes flashed white as they reflected the candle's light. The wregs watched him intently for a moment. One of them screeched tauntingly.

Gilly felt light-headed. He lost his balance and fell onto his side. Then he saw another stream trickling across the floor, but this one was not water. This stream was dark and crimson. His hand came to his side, and he realized that a broadsword was sticking out of his stomach. It was only then that he felt the searing pain of being stabbed. He suddenly felt weak and queasy. Desperate, he used his arms to drag himself toward the door. Maybe he could still get out. Perhaps someone had heard his calls and would be along shortly to save him.

A heavy thing pushed down on Gilly's back, pinning him to the ground. He felt the burning pain of the sword being pulled from his body and wailed loudly. He strained to turn himself over and face his attacker. There, in the dim orange light, an ukori with an angular white symbol on his forehead stood over him with the bloody broadsword in hand. The brute unhurriedly wiped the blade clean on his tunic and sheathed it. He growled again. He grabbed Gilly by his tunic and, using just one arm, picked him up so that the two were face-to-face.

Gilly's feet dangled helplessly in the air. The world around him started fading, and oddly, so did his fear. He knew what was about to happen, but to his surprise, he was completely resigned to it. There was nothing left to do now. He looked into the ukori's spiteful eyes. Then, before the young guardsman could react, the lion-like creature opened its powerful jaws and pulled Gilly's head into them.

Chapter 11

The morning grew warm as Iko sat watching the waving willow that shared his home.

When he had returned after the wretcher attack, he had unpacked his things and tried to settle back into his usual rhythms, but with Cas gone, that had not been easy. Three days later, his things were again packed as they had been the day Rygold had summoned him. His sword was on his hip, his bags were overflowing, and nothing of importance remained in its place in his bedroom. He still had too few arrows, but he would make more along the way.

Elex's head appeared at the top of the stairs, and Iko breathed a sigh of relief. Elex was late, but since Iko hadn't wanted to leave without saying goodbye, he had waited for him.

Elex surveyed Iko's preparations to leave. "Are you going somewhere?"

Iko offered a nod and a grunt.

"Where to?"

"West."

"West? Moraburg?"

"Maybe. Maybe as far as Deiland."

"Deiland! That's half a world away." Elex stepped slowly to the top of the stairs, keeping his sorrowful gaze fixed on Iko.

“It is far.” Iko returned his attention to the willow, unable to face his only friend. “I was hoping you would come along.”

“Come along?” Elex asked, his voice suddenly laced with anger. “To what? To where? This place is all I have.”

“Cas was all that I had.”

Elex took a seat across the small room, back against the fragment of the brick wall in front of the willow’s drooping foliage. His legs were outstretched. “Remember when my sister died? What was it you told me about The Silent One? About grieving and loss? *It does no justice to flee from grief?*”

“It may be sacrilege to quote the Silent Scroll so poorly,” Iko said, words full of spite. He immediately regretted them. But despite Elex’s wounded expression, he did not apologize.

“You’re not the only one who lost someone,” Elex said. “Maybe you should talk to some of the others.”

“And what could they tell me?” snapped Iko. “How to bury my grief with profanity? How to put all my faith in someone as insolent as Rog? It seems I’m the only one who questioned the move to the mountains. They are misguided fools, Elex, all of them. They followed him blindly into peril, and Cas was killed for it. It’s all their fault.” Tears welled in his eyes.

“No, Iko. It’s the wretchers’ fault.”

Iko sighed heavily, finished with the exchange. “I take it you will not be joining me?”

Elex shook his head. “You’re my best friend, but I can’t wander aimlessly into an abyss with you. We don’t even know what’s left out there. There might be no one and nothing to find but trolls and dragon fire.”

“Then I’d be no worse off than I am here,” Iko said.

“You don’t really mean that,” Elex said. He sat quietly for a long moment. When Iko said nothing else, Elex stood. “Well,

if you really mean to leave, can I have that book of yours? The one about the wretchers?" He didn't seem interested in talking more about Iko's departure.

Iko embraced the change of subject. "Sure, but why? You can't read."

Elex cleared his throat. "Kruick can read some, and we wanted to know more about the Praivun Alliance."

Iko rolled his eyes. Kruick could barely read children's books. But desiring to leave Elex on good terms, he leaned over to his bag and opened it to retrieve the musty blue book.

Elex continued, "I told him about what you'd found, and he said we should learn what we can about them in case we have to deal with them again."

"Probably not a bad idea," Iko said. He handed the book over.

Elex opened it to nothing in particular. "It seems they prefer eating our girls and women. They took Cas, Luci, and Raakal."

"Who's that?"

"One of the Lotherin girls," Elex reminded Iko. "And they tried to take Alisa too, remember?"

"*Young* women," Iko grimly commented.

"Apparently, they grabbed poor Theia to take her away, but she fought for Cas and..." He shrugged.

Iko's eyes narrowed. "No males at all?"

Elex shook his head.

That was odd. Luci would have certainly been with at least a couple of her young boys—easy prey for wretchers. Yet they had left them alone?

"Let me see that," Iko said, indicating *Wretchers of the Sepentrios*.

Elex tossed it over, and Iko opened to the pages on the Praivun Alliance. “Rygold’s baby brother, what’s his name?”

“Juno,” Elex said. “And he’s three now. The new baby is a girl.”

“Yes. I meant Juno. They didn’t try to take him?” Iko scanned the pages.

“Nope. Strange, isn’t it? They killed some men who fought, of course, but they didn’t try to take any of the boys. Kruick swears they were going for the girls. And he was in there.”

A line in the book jumped off the page.

...captured and sacrificed females of other sentient species, including humans.

Iko found the beginning of the paragraph and started reading.

Stories abound of the sacrifice and spectacle of the annual “Praivun Moon” celebration, which takes place every harvest moon. At midnight of their most sacred occasion, the wretchers cast females of their own kind into the lava flow of Mount Kompeiti, sacrificing their remaining fertile years to appease Praivus. Ancient records indicate that, while away from their home warring, the Praivun Alliance’s (all male) army occasionally captured and sacrificed females of other sentient species, including humans, on the night of the Praivun Moon by burning them at a stake.

The words were a flash in the darkness—a painful hope. Iko stood. His throat was so tight from the excitement that he could barely reread the paragraph to Elex.

Elex understood at once. “You think that’s why they took girls?”

Iko’s eyes were wide. “The harvest moon is more than three weeks from now. She might be alive. Casiena might still be alive!” He was suddenly sick with the thought of what the last two days would have been like for her. He imagined her bound and fed rotten meat and insects. They would keep her alive if they meant to sacrifice her, but she must have been so scared. “We must go back.”

Elex raised his hands. “Don’t go running off just yet. Ben-nick will want to know. Even Rog will probably be interested in helping if Cas might still be out there. We can come up with a plan.”

Iko had no objection to the thought of Rog joining him if it meant getting Cas back.

Elex continued carefully. “And mind your hope, Iko. I want her to be alive too, but... well, mind your hope.”

Brushing the warning aside, Iko said, “It’s what I have now.”



Iko and Elex only meant to tell a couple of people what they had learned, but the news spread like wildfire through Jynsomin. They had proposed a small meeting in the library the same afternoon, but when the time for the meeting arrived, nearly all the survivors of Jynsomin and Lotherin

had crammed into Iko's meeting space among the books. The crowd mumbled somberly among themselves, in stark contrast to the celebratory mood of the cave a few nights earlier.

Even without raising his voice, Rog's speech silenced the crowd. "Let's hear it, Iko. Tell us more about what you've uncovered."

The crowd spread out, encircling the space between the chairs and desk for Iko and Rog. Elex and Bennick stood behind them.

Iko swallowed and stepped to the center of the space, suddenly nervous. He had not considered that he might have to explain the Praivun Alliance and their customs to *everyone*. "Right." He rubbed his hands together. "The wretchers that befell us at Gelida were not ordinary wretchers."

"We already know that!" a malcontent shouted from the back.

Iko raised his hands. "They are of the Praivun Alliance. From Arcantu."

"Arcantu?" another said. "Why would they come so far?"

"I—I don't know," Iko said. "But I think it's a certain thing." He raised *Wretchers of the Sepentrios*, already opened to the page with the picture of the inverted triangle. "This was painted on their foreheads. It's unique to the Praivun Alliance."

"But of the harvest moon," Rog urged, folding his arms. "Tell us of that."

"They sacrifice females every harvest moon," Iko said. "Usually their own, but when they were away for war in the past, they kidnapped human girls and young women."

“War?” Rog asked. “There hasn’t been a war in decades. There is no one left for wars.”

“That’s not the point,” Iko said. “They are away from home, so I think—”

“You think a lot of strange things,” Rog said. “You suggest that a few of us charge ahead into the mountains after a bunch of ukori because of what you *think*?” He spoke louder so that everyone could hear. “I was led to believe you had *proof* that they were alive.”

The malcontent in the back screamed, “Has no one *seen* that they have survived?”

“Well, no. But that doesn’t mean they’re dead,” Iko said. He stepped toward Rog and spoke so that his words stayed between the two of them. “Is it really not enough for you? Not enough that Casiena might still be alive? It is at least worth an expedition.”

Rog did not lower his voice. “It’s suicidal! And for what? Your hunch and a book written a hundred years ago?”

Iko was speechless.

“This isn’t what we were led to believe,” someone said. “He’s just gone mad because they took his daughter!”

Slowly, the crowd started shuffling out of the library.

Iko spun toward Bennick Shuckwine, who stood beside Elex. He was a slender man with a long, hooked nose. Surely, he could not deny a chance to save his wife and unborn child. “Bennick?” Iko said.

“I’m sorry,” Bennick said, grief-stricken. “My boys can’t be left orphans.”

“What about Luci?” Iko said.

“If you were surer, perhaps,” Bennick said, and then he followed Rog out of the library.

Only Iko and Elex remained in the meeting space.

“I can’t believe it,” Elex said, observing the suddenly empty library.

“I can.” Iko fell into his favorite chair, which groaned under his weight.

Elex leaned against the desk. “So, what’s next?”

Iko raised his head to find Elex haloed by the afternoon sunlight that shone through the library’s tall windows.

“I cannot ask you to follow me, Elex.”

Elex chuckled and sat on the desk. His eyes brightened. “You wanted me to follow you into the unknown for nothing. But this is for Cas, and now you want to call me off? Do you think we can do it or not?”

“We will not know until we go. But if there is a way, I will find it.”

“Then I will find it with you.”

“You’re a better friend than I deserve,” Iko said, lowering his chin. “I would be forever indebted to you.”

Elex waved off the sentiment. “So, when do you want to leave?”

“Sunset. We gain nothing by waiting.”

Elex’s eyes widened, but he did not protest.

“Be sure to bring that atlas you’re always looking at,” Iko said. “It might come in handy.”

Chapter 12

Zerah stood with Lord Bhal Adair in The Silent One's shrine beneath Dunbardin Castle, awaiting the return of the small team of guardsmen who'd entered the wretchers' underground tunnel. General Vhannus was with them, too. He was the old, orange-eyed marikano in charge of Ivory City's defenses. None had spoken much in the hour since the guardsmen had left the shrine.

Every candle in the shrine was lit, illuminating Gilly's bloodstains and the darker bloodstains of the wretchers who'd found their way into Dunbardin the night before. A pair of other guardsmen had heard his screams from above but hadn't arrived in time to do anything for the poor boy. They'd gathered a small team and made quick work of the few wretchers they'd found, then they'd alerted the entire castle to the infiltration. Everyone had prepared themselves for a fight—for a hundred ukori coming into Dunbardin from underground. But that never happened.

After a few hours of waiting, General Vhannus had grown confident that the rest of the wretchers weren't coming. He'd then ordered a dozen of the most experienced guardsmen into the tunnel to see where it led. Zerah, Vhannus, and Adair now silently waited.

Footsteps splashed in the shallow stream running through the tunnel, and the bare earth walls glowed orange as a torch drew near. Zerah reflexively touched the hilt of her sword, relaxing only when the guardsmen appeared. A young scout named Beiva led the way. He was covered in mud and drenched in sweat.

“Well?” Vhannus asked.

“It runs due south,” Beiva said, panting. “Comes up on the other side of the tree line, right under a huge boulder.”

“The tree line?” Zerah asked. “That’s a mile away.”

Beiva nodded and wiped the sweat from his brow. “It’s concealed well, too.”

Zerah looked at Bhal Adair, jaw clenched and eyes wide.

Adair was a handsome man, tall and strong with gray-blue eyes. He kept his full head of gray hair cut short and his full beard the same length. He nodded to Zerah as if to say he was as alarmed as she was.

“They’ve been at it a while, then,” Vhannus said. He peered over his thin wire-framed spectacles at Adair. “I guess we’ve settled the question as to whether or not they are hostile.”

“It would seem so,” Adair said.

Zerah asked Beiva. “No sign of them at the other end?”

Beiva shook his head. “We didn’t find anything. Not even all the earth they moved.”

“Careful, too,” Vhannus said. “They must be in the Garans,” he said, referring to the mountain range at the foot of which Ivory City resided. The mountains ran southward from there. He looked at Adair. “We’ve been lucky, Bhal. They didn’t mean to hit this shrine. Probably didn’t even realize it was down here. If they hadn’t, we may not have

known about them until they were squirming out of a hole in the middle of the market.”

“There could be more tunnels, too,” Zerah said, dreading the thought.

“Probably,” Adair said. “They don’t seem stupid enough to risk all of them coming through just one.”

Vhannus took a deep breath. “We need to act quickly. Root them out before they attack at full strength.”

Adair’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t think we could negotiate?”

“They’re vermin, Bhal,” Vhannus said. “And even if we forget that they’ve just tried to tunnel into our city, their weapons and armor tell me they didn’t come all this way just to talk.”

“You’re probably right,” Adair said. “But war should not be our first option. Let’s get a plan together to find them. I’ll come up with words for them, but be ready to coordinate an offensive.”

“I’ll be ready as soon as we know where they are,” Vhannus replied.

Zerah asked, “Where will you start your search? There are a lot of hiding places in the Garans.”

Vhannus shrugged. “Hard to say. We’ll send out as many scouting parties as we can without leaving the city defenseless. Cover as much ground as we can as quickly as we can.” He started up the stairs.

Adair turned toward the guardsmen who’d come through the tunnel. “Thank you all. Rest up for now, will you? You’ll need your strength.”

Beiva nodded and led the rest of them up the stairs behind the general.

Zerah turned to follow them, but Adair raised a hand to stay her exit. The two were soon alone in the shrine.

“I’m going to go with them,” Adair said.

“Bhal, that’s foolish.”

Adair folded his arms.

Zerah wasn’t surprised. Despite being old enough to be her father—or perhaps grandfather—Bhal Adair had more energy than most men half his age. More importantly, he was a man of action. It drove him mad if he wasn’t directly involved in something he thought really mattered. He’d hunted down criminals on his own on more than one occasion. He’d scaled the highest towers of Dunbardin to refurbish their roofs—a job that had claimed four lives. And just a few weeks ago, he’d broken up a fight between two drunks with knives. Many people admired his eagerness to be so involved in everything, but Zerah had long thought it was a weakness. He took risks because he didn’t trust anyone else to get the job done. To Zerah, the man leading civilization’s rebirth had some responsibility to make sure he didn’t get himself killed.

“I’m going to leave Dunbardin to you while I’m away,” Adair said.

Zerah gasped. “Me? Why me?” She’d thought it was always Justice Val Campo who’d led when Adair was unavailable. He’d taken over when Adair had left for Lake Portumnus a year earlier, and the time Adair had nearly died of fever. Wasn’t he the better option to lead if wretchers were threatening Ivory City? Zerah had barely been on the job for six months.

“Someone other than Val needs to know what to do in my absence,” Adair said. “I trust you. The people trust you, too.”

“They hardly know me.”

“Oh, they know you well enough by now.”

Zerah still didn't like the idea. She was already so busy—and on the verge of a breakthrough with the dragon-killer. What if Adair were gone for weeks? What if he never came back? How many more people would the dragons kill because she put aside her real work to flounder in playing lord?

“But, Bhal!” Zerah begged.

“You'll be fine, Zerah,” Adair said, and he started up the stairs. “Just don't let Val talk you into anything you'll regret.”

Chapter 13

Iko was eight years old again. His sturdy, broad-shouldered father stepped out of the dense pine forest and looked to the sky. It was a cloudy spring day with a storm surely brewing. Over his father's shoulders was a freshly killed sheep with an arrow sticking out of its heart and crimson blood staining its white wool. He listened carefully to the rustle of the trees behind him and the long marsh grass in front of him. The rapid, high-pitched chirps of swallows surrounded them. A frog croaked from the grass a few yards to the right.

"Come on, son," he called toward Iko.

Iko emerged from the forest and came to stand beside his father, and they peered at the muddy marshland together. Iko carried a sack full of freshly picked cotton bolls over his shoulder and his dad's bow on his back. His tangled hair fluttered in the wind. "I'll race you," he said with a wry grin.

His father chuckled and began slogging through the mud.

"You're no fun!" Iko said.

"I can think of few better ways to injure myself." His father struggled to traverse the shallow marsh with the heavy, dead animal. "If I break a leg, who will provide for us?"

"I could do it."

"I'm sure you could."

Forty yards through the marsh, and they were back on dry land. Another thirty through the dense forest, and they found their encampment along the barely discernible trail that had been the winter's main trade route. Another trail would soon be marked before this one became easily seen from above.

His father's blue eyes met Iko's of the same color, and his voice was warm and comforting. He spoke prophetically, as he often did in these dreams. "If you had known what was going to happen today, would you have insisted that we leave now?"

But as usual, Iko did not understand at first. "What is going to happen today, Father?"

"It will be the last of these kinds of days," his father said, now crouched over a pot of boiling water. He stirred the pot with a wooden spoon. "Don't you remember?"

Thunder rumbled in the distance.

Iko and his father were finishing their meal of mutton and potatoes as a light rain fell and trickled through the pine needles overhead.

"What shall we read this evening?" his father asked through a mouthful of potatoes.

"Did you get anything else when we were in Bortura?" Iko asked. "I'm getting tired of the same stories."

His father straightened, and his eyes widened. "How did you know? As a matter of fact, I did," he said. "Have you ever heard of King Synerus and the Troll Wars?"

Iko lit up. "*Troll Wars!* I didn't know there was such a thing!"

His father's thick brow furrowed. "You didn't? Well, it sounds like we have a winner."

Iko smiled as he tore a piece of mutton with his teeth.

The occasion was interrupted when a figure emerged from the mist at the edge of their encampment. A woman—a stern-faced warrior. Her hair was fiery red and fashioned into a braid draped over her shoulder. There was a long sword in a black scabbard on her back, and her chain mail looked heavy to Iko.

Iko's father placed his bowl on the ground and stood. "Hello, Farah," he greeted with a courteous nod.

Iko remembered Farah now. She was an unbelieving heathen, like the rest of them. At least, that's what his father had said.

"Jona," Farah said. There might have been distress in her next words. "They've taken the North Ridge."

The message gave Jona pause.

Iko remembered Farah had been asking his father to do something for nearly a year now.

"You already have my answer," Jona said, stern but not unkind.

Farah was undeterred. "You've got friends, even some family who will be in danger."

Jona shrugged. "I will have them leave with me."

Farah growled. "And go where? Across the plains? Into the mountains? Even if you get away, do you think the Mataran scourge will be stopped if we do not fight it? You will have to take a stand eventually. You or someone else." She cast a cold glance at Iko.

The storm had passed. The warm afternoon air was sticky and humid. Farah had joined Jona and Iko around a fire. Jona had relented and was entertaining Farah's proposition. He was asking a lot of questions. Then he turned to Iko and

asked, “Do you remember now, my boy? Do you wish we had left before she got here?”

Iko squinted. “But where would we have gone? Would not Turakis have seen us on the plains? Were the wretchers living somewhere other than the mountains?”

Farah observed the conversation indifferently.

Jona mused. “We could have run forever, my boy. Don’t you think? Could you and I have made it on our own forever?”

Iko started remembering. The Matarans worshiped dragons—and their faith would prove misplaced. “We wouldn’t need to run forever, Father. Don’t you know what’s going to happen to the Matarans?”

Suddenly, his father did not remember. “No one can predict the future, Iko.”

“He’s a precious boy,” Farah said, “but still a child. He thinks some foolish things.”

“No, Father!” Iko said. He knew he had to stop him. “Nothing good will come of fighting with her! With *them*. You know that. You told me that. The dragons wouldn’t even be here if not for their faithless ways.”

“You’ve got cousins in the North. Your mother’s family,” Jona said. He was not taking Iko’s warning seriously. “If we are not this world’s light, then who will be?”

Farah said, “We haven’t got time to waste. Gather your things.” She stood and observed the fire. “And put this out before it gets too dark. Turakis is lingering nearby.” She beheld Iko and asked Jona, “You’ve taught your boy to shoot, haven’t you? Does he have a bow of his own?”

“My boy will not be near the quarreling,” Jona said.

“I can protect you, Father!” Iko said. “They don’t care about you. I care about you.”

“No, Iko,” Jona said. “Iko!”

“*Iko!*”

Iko opened his eyes. His heart was pounding, and he was drenched in sweat despite it being cool out. It was Elex who had been calling his name, and he hovered over Iko. The sun would soon be over the eastern ridges, and much of the small wood they were in was still veiled in shadow. The strange mountain insects of the night still buzzed and chirped.

“Sorry, but you were so loud,” Elex said. “I worried the wretchers would hear us if we’re close.”

Iko sat up. “It’s fine. He tried to work a crick out of his neck. How had he wound up using a boulder as a pillow? “It’s time we get moving, anyway.”

By midmorning, they reached the cave in which the massacre had occurred. Elex gathered Rygold’s sword, then they hastened to escape the stench of the days-old death. It didn’t take long to find a trail of wretcher blood, which they followed through the darkness. It eventually led them through a crack in the side of the cave and into a dense pine forest. There, the wretchers’ trail was easier to find, even four days after they had been there. Where so many had moved over the forest floor, there was matted foliage, crushed sticks, and plenty of wreg scat.

The signs were even more apparent when they reached what had been an encampment in the forest. There, it seemed someone had cleared the underbrush, and carcasses of the wretchers’ meals lay strewn about—pieces of a couple of goats and something that might have been a rabbit. But no human remains.

“They’re eating animals,” Elex said, encouraged by the same observation.

“Good to see.” Iko surveyed the scene. “But they aren’t being very careful. It’s only a matter of time before Mizur flies over and sees them.”

Elex shrugged. “If they stay under the trees and in the caves, they’ll be alright.” He observed an ukori track in the bare dirt. It closely resembled a bear’s hind footprint. “Where do you think they’re going?”

“Gruedalwood is my only guess,” Iko said. The forest was a small stretch of flat, fertile land along a stream higher in the mountains. As high as it was, it was something of an oasis, and it was thought to be home to a few dozen wretchers.

“They may be heading that way,” Elex said.

But the wretchers had not continued toward Gruedalwood. Instead, they had turned south after another day’s journey. The path became more arduous for Iko and Elex, and their quarry became more difficult to track. The rockier ground and sparser vegetation left fewer signs to point the way. They spent hours scouring the ground for wreg scat.

Near sunset on the second day, Elex was losing faith. “We aren’t ever going to catch them at this rate,” he said. “We’ve just taken half a day to cover a mile.”

“They’re going *somewhere*,” Iko said. “When they get there, we will catch up to them.”

“What if they don’t stop?”

“They will stop,” Iko said. “They must stop. But picking up the pace will not hurt.” He continued searching for the trail.

The next day, they came to another encampment. From it, it appeared the wretchers had departed in four single-file

lines. All had departed on a generally southward trajectory, but it was clear they had stopped traveling together.

“They’re hiding their numbers,” Iko suggested. “But why only now? And why split up?”

“Which one should we follow?”

“I don’t know,” Iko said, his voice wavering for the first time on the hunt.

But the question was answered for them when they scrutinized the four trails. All were obvious for only a short distance before ending upon hard, rocky ground. Beyond, there was little foliage to disturb, and what there was appeared untouched. There wasn’t even any scat to follow.

“I wonder if they meant to lose us,” Elex said.

Iko’s head dropped. “Whether or not they meant to, they did.”



Hope exhausted, they came to the edge of a cliff, high above a vast verdant valley through which a river wound. They had reached the other side of the mountains and the fertile land called Anuthura. There, in the dim glow of dusk, the sense of something out of place permeated the cold mountain air. Were the trees below so much lusher than those in Ekara? Perhaps it was the birds. There were so many of them. They weaved in and out of the foliage with a rare lightness.

Elex offered the answer. “There are fires,” he said, coming to stand beside Iko.

He was right. There was one fire beside the river. It was miles away, but in the darkening valley, the dancing flames

were unmistakable. There was another flicker farther south, and yet another at the foot of the mountains which bounded the valley. But the most perplexing thing was the light on the horizon, which was not just a fire. It was a soft orange glow emanating from what must have been many fires just out of sight. From so far away, Iko could only guess that the glow was hundreds—maybe thousands—of feet across.

The two men exchanged confused glances, and neither offered any guess as to what they were seeing. There were few better ways to attract a dragon than by lighting a fire in the dark. They raised their eyes to the purple evening sky and watched in nervous anticipation. But they found nothing but the first stars of the night. They watched until the sky was black and the rest of the stars appeared. The fires kept burning. But there were no roars, no screams.

No dragon.

“It must be the wretchers,” Iko said. His hope rose like a withering plant that had been given a little water. “But why would they be so stupid?”

“They might be stupid,” Elex said. “Or they know something we don’t.”

“Their dragon’s sleep schedule? Or do you think...”

Elex intuited the question. “Every land has a dragon.” He gazed into the night. “Right? Maybe it’s the valley. The dragon probably can’t see them from the sky unless he’s right over them. Or in these mountains.”

“They wouldn’t chance that. And it’s not just one or two fires,” Iko said. “Do you know where we are?”

“I think it’s the Tyel Valley. Northern reaches of Anuthura.”

Iko pondered. What was there of interest to the Praivun Alliance in Anuthura? He indicated the horizon's glow. "That must be where they are heading."

"Must be a lot of them."

Iko nodded. "Is it Azoch who rules south of the Sepentrios?"

"As far east as the Faluni River," Elex said. "At least, it was Azoch when I was a child."

Iko observed the surrounding mountains, now completely cloaked in shadow. It would be dangerous to make the descent into the valley in the pitch black, and perhaps not worth the risk. If the Praivuns were camping for the night, he and Elex would lose no ground by sleeping.

"We will stay here tonight," Iko said. "But in the morning, we will make haste, my friend."

Elex was quickly asleep, but Iko was restless. He tried to pray, but as had been the case since Cas had been taken, he found no peace. His worry for her consumed him—kept his heart and mind tethered to the mortal world. Even as he prayed, he knew he would not find Silence this evening.

He rose and sat for a while watching the fires. He did not want them to go out; he did not want the wretchers to continue at night when he could not follow. They didn't, and Iko eventually acknowledged that he would do Cas no good if he was too tired to rescue her, and he reclined.

He fell asleep after another hour as he tried to find hope in the wisdom of the Silent Scroll.

Unrighteous strength is fed by a compulsory devouring of things that will die. Do not fear it, you who draw strength from Eternal Silence.

Part Two: Third Quarter Moon

The One Who Speaks as Interpreted by the Silent
Seer Velia Amenini

The Silent One exiled me after I destroyed the mortals' world. He stripped me of much of my power and vision and sent me into an unfathomable void. But if he meant to punish me, he failed. There are too many souls dissatisfied with his design for comfort and pleasure. They hunger for something more, and they search for satiety. He must not know that their search brings them into my void, where I can see them and influence them. These hapless mortals embrace what I offer without question, allowing me to keep their world as I like it.

But it is always a risk to reveal myself, even to them. My missteps fifty years ago nearly spoiled my plans for the dragons. I've done well so far, but I am not finished. I have discovered Ivory City's secret, the dragon-killer. Alas, my options to remedy it are limited. I require the use of another embodied soul to extinguish the mortals' hope. After much deliberation, I've chosen that soul, and his hour is at hand.

Chapter 14

Every night in the Tyel Valley was the same, and Makus grew tired of it. The company had become stale, the ale was weak, and he'd spent much of his time dodging Dori so he didn't have to listen to her babbling on about her god anymore. Kavil had hardly been around either, opting to spend most of his time with Astellis away from the others. That is why Makus had decided to leave a couple of nights earlier than he'd originally planned.

Makus packed his things and reclined to sleep, ready to leave in the morning before any of the others got up. He was drifting off when a commotion rustled the bushes, and Kavil came charging toward the fire.

"There's something out there!" Kavil said.

Makus sensed his friend's genuine fear and sprang to his feet. "Where? And what kind of something?"

"It's gotta be ukori," Kavil said. "I saw them come over a hill. Two, I think. Big! From the north."

It wasn't usual for wretchers to be in the middle of the valley, but it had happened before. "Where is Astellis?" Makus asked. "Have they taken her?"

As if in response, the woman emerged from the bushes. She dashed toward Kavil and threw all of her weight into his chest. "Left me alone for them, did you?" She struck him

again in the sternum. “Coward. I knew you was making all them feelings up.”

Makus paid no mind to the quarreling lovers. He was the only experienced warrior present and the only one armed. He could deal with two ukori if he got a jump on them. “Show me where they are.”



“Was that a woman?” Elex asked, peering through the moonlit forest.

“It was. And someone else ran before her,” Iko said, looking and listening. He thought he’d heard more voices. “Come on.”

The two had nearly stopped to sleep for the night when they’d seen a fire nearby. They’d prepared for a fight with ukori and crept as quietly as they could through the old forest and toward the orange glow fifty yards in front of them. As the fire came into view, Iko saw several figures standing in a tight bunch near it. To his surprise, they were people, and all of them peered northward—toward Iko and Elex. Their eyes were wide, and they grasped each other, trembling and afraid.

“So much for there being no one in Anuthura,” Elex said. “What are they looking for?”

Iko sensed a presence to his left and turned to see a massive body hurtling toward him. It was too large to be a human, and its eyes glowed bright purple in the darkness. Iko drew his sword instinctively. He slashed, but the form ducked under it. The attacker hit the blade’s broad side with

the palm of its hand, knocking the sword away. Elex drew his sword too, but the mass of muscle before them was too fast. It grabbed Elex's wrist, pried the sword free in a flash, and shoved the human onto the ground. Iko unshouldered his bow and tried to ready an arrow, but it was knocked away before he could. He reached for another.

"Have we done something to offend you?" the purple-eyed shadow asked in a pleasant tone, not even breathing hard. He stayed Iko's hand.

"Might I ask you the same thing?" Iko asked.

"I was not the one who drew my blade," the creature said. He stepped into the fire's glow.

Iko had never seen anything like him. He was unbelievably muscular and the height of an ukori. His strange humanoid face and the tentacles that protruded from his head were entirely alien.

Iko placed the creature when he noticed gills on his abdomen. "You're a water breather?" he asked. He'd read about them before. Most lived in the shallow waters around islands of distant seas to the west. Before the dragons came, seafarers had regarded them as so dangerous that they'd left much of those waters unexplored. The water breathers were said to have attacked ships that entered their territories by swimming up beneath them and cutting holes in their bottoms. Entire crews had been doomed without ever seeing their attackers. But the few small communities living in and around the Sea of Nivero had never exhibited such hostile tendencies.

"Yes, a water breather," the creature said. "A marikano."

“Do you make it a habit of sneaking up on folks in the woods, marikano?” Elex asked, picking himself up off the ground. He was angrier than usual and still shaken.

“I am Makus,” the creature said. “And we thought you might be ukori.”

The crowd near the fire inched toward the foliage.

“What about it, Makus?” a woman called. “Did you get them?”

“Ukori, wasn’t it?” another said.

“They are human,” Makus answered, “and they mean us no harm.” He turned toward Iko. “Right?”

“Not unless you mean us harm,” Iko said.

Elex picked up his sword. Iko did the same and followed Makus into the clearing.

“They definitely aren’t from around here,” a young man smoking a pipe said when they emerged. With each word, smoke billowed from his mouth.

“How can you tell?” another asked with slurred speech.

“Their clothes,” the young man said.

Despair struck Iko. These were not wretchers, and that meant Cas was not here. He and Elex had merely wandered into a party of Anuthurian heathens. Judging by their voices and dumb stares, half of them weren’t in their proper state of mind. The air smelled of acrid, earthy smoke and ale.

“We aren’t looking for any trouble,” Elex said. He had returned to his usual cordial self. “We’re hunting wretchers that came over the mountains.”

“The Sepentrios?” Makus asked. “You’re from Ekara? Borland?”

“Ekara,” Iko said.

“Jynsogn,” Elex clarified.

“I don’t trust these two,” the man emanating smoke said. “Why would anyone chase wretchers over mountains? Especially the Sepentrios.”

“They have my daughter,” Iko said. “We tracked a group of forty or so until we lost them entering the valley.”

The claim hushed the mumbling miscreants.

“So many?” Makus asked, surprised. “They were the crimson-clad wretchers?”

“You’re familiar with them?” Iko asked.

“Only that we’ve been seeing them with increasing frequency,” Makus said. “And that they are quite aggressive. They’ve been blamed for missing livestock and a couple of missing persons.”

“They are of the Praivun Alliance of Arcantu,” Elex said. “Iko here found a book about them. They attacked us and kidnapped several of our women.”

That piqued Makus’s interest. “You know what they’re up to? Why they are here?”

Both of the Ekarians shook their heads.

Makus said, “But you’ve fought against them?”

“We had an encounter, yes,” Iko said. “We quarreled with them near our home.”

Makus mulled over the information. “Our leadership would like to speak to you about this, I’m sure. Stay with us for the night? I could take you to them in the morning.”

The drunken gaggle grumbled at the invitation.

“We’re in a bit of a rush,” Elex explained.

“There is plenty to eat in Ivory City,” Makus said. “A good meal would serve the rest of your journey well, would it not?”

Iko eyed the fire. There was no way he would risk sleeping anywhere near it, no matter how safe the fools thought they were.

Makus intuited the concern and glanced toward the fire. “You have nothing to worry about, my friend,” he said matter-of-factly. “Azoch will not come to us as long as we are in the Tyel Valley.”

“What?” Elex asked. “Why would you think that?”

Iko turned to Makus, sharing Elex’s disbelief.

Makus shrugged as if the answer was obvious. “Because she is afraid of us.”

Chapter 15

They emerged from the forest as the sun rose over the mountains to the east, bathing Ivory City in a warm, golden glow. It was something out of a dream—a picture Iko held in his mind for the way things used to be.

Countless cows, goats, and horses grazed upon the tamed land surrounding the city. Two young foals danced playfully in a nearby pasture while farmhands unloaded hay bales in another. To the east, a man sauntered carelessly through pale waves of a wheat field, which seemed nearly ready for harvest in the late summer morning. A light breeze carried the aroma of horse manure to Iko, and he hardly minded it. Anywhere else in the world, the scene before him would have been impossible.

Ivory City was framed neatly by the foothills of the Garan Mountains, which stretched out behind it. Most of the city was hidden, however, behind a high wall that stretched a half-mile east to west and nearly as far north to south. Upon a waist-high earthen embankment, rows of gray timbers were stacked ten feet tall. Thousands of shards of sharpened saplings protruded horizontally from the wall, daring would-be invaders to scale it.

What Iko could see despite the barrier was inspiring. Rising from the city's western edge was a large hill, cov-

ered by trees except at its summit, where an ancient castle sprawled. The structure was a myriad of halls, towers, and turrets. Its stonework was the color of straw and streaked with bright green ivy. Atop its highest pinnacles fluttered tattered purple flags. Battlements and buttresses concealed much of the castle's grounds, but rising above some of the walls were the tops of sycamore trees, which must have grown from its courtyards.

"Is that where he lives?" Elex asked, staring at the castle in awe. "The dragon-killer?"

Makus nodded. "Bhal Adair rarely leaves it."

Bhal Adair—the man who had killed the dragon Turakis, whom Iko had once feared in Moraburg. Iko had doubted the tale until the fruit of the feat was before him.

"How did Azoch know it was Bhal Adair who killed Turakis?" Iko asked.

"Azoch was with Turakis. They were mates," Makus said, stepping into the field. The dry grass crunched beneath his feet. "She barely escaped his poison arrows herself."

"And what was the poison?" Iko asked, still considering the tale.

Elex guffawed. "Did you listen to *anything* he said on the way here?"

Iko shrugged. In truth, he'd been thinking of Cas and had missed much of the marikano's words as they'd marched southward this morning.

Makus chuckled. "Yes, a poison. It came to him by chance."

"Chance?" Iko asked. "How does one come across a dragon poison without knowing what it is?"

Makus answered, “An Easternman on the edge of a dragon-burned field. Adair watched him sneak up on Turakis. Thought he was crazy. The man must not have realized Azoch was there too, and he fell to her fire. After the dragons left, Adair went to him. He was burned beyond hope. But he held the poison in his hand and choked out the words *dragon-killer* before he died. Lord Adair is... bold. He couldn't help but try to put it to use. And it worked.”

“Unbelievable,” Iko said.

“So, why didn't Adair stay there? In Moraburg?” Elex asked. “Why not stay where he killed the dragon? Seems like it would be less of a risk.” He and Iko followed the marikano into the field.

Makus answered, “No land is without a dragon, my friend. When Turakis died, the dragon they named Gaiji arrived a few weeks later and claimed his territory. Adair's got so little of the poison—a single small vial—that he didn't want to risk a perpetual fight against new dragons. Until he's got more, he thought it best to stay beneath the one dragon who fears him—the one from whom he is free without expending his precious elixir.”

“That makes sense,” Iko said.

Elex beheld the castle again. “It's worked for him so far.”

As Iko followed Makus farther into the field, movement closer to the river caught his attention. At first, he thought there were children working the soil there, but after watching a little longer, he realized the forms were not children—or even human. There were wregs in the field.

“Makus!” Iko said, reaching for his bow.

Makus stopped, spun around, and followed Iko's eyes to the wregs. He gently placed his hand on the bow to stop Iko from nocking an arrow. "It's alright, my friend," Makus said.

"But they're wretchers," Iko said.

"Those are locals," Makus said. "A benign faction from the Eastern Garans. They are not a threat. Bhal Adair has been quite determined to make them our allies."

"Wretchers!" Iko asked. "As allies? Why on earth would you want to do that?"

Makus nodded. "That was my initial reaction, too. I spent much of my life before Ivory City killing them. But they aren't so bad when they aren't trying to eat you. Lord Adair has been in dialogue with the Valley's wretchers for nearly a year now."

"You can *talk* to them?" Elex asked.

Iko had the same question. To everyone in Ekara, the wretchers' tongue had always been an enigmatic cacophony of grunts, growls, and howls. Iko had never considered it might be decipherable.

"My people have always had translators," Makus said.

Elex looked worried. "Do the wretchers, uh, live in the city?"

Makus grinned. "No. They are as wary of us as we are of them. The wregs stick to the fields, and their ukori generally stay in the mountains unless they mean to trade."

Iko watched the wregs work the soil as the trio approached Ivory City's northern gatehouse. Accepting the wretchers' presence as safe felt as strange as walking in the sunlight without fearing a dragon, and he had a tough time shaking his unease.

On the other side of the gatehouse, a row of pristine A-frame cottages lined each side of a cobblestone roadway that stretched at least a hundred yards. Nearby, a group of children played chase in the street around a man loading oversized golden squash into a hand-drawn cart. People tended chickens. They talked and laughed, and many walked southward toward the open area at the end of the road.

Iko had never seen so many people in one place. He was in awe. But to his surprise, he also felt uneasy. Part of him wanted to turn around and run back into the forest. The clean, crowded city felt unsettlingly foreign—and perhaps threatening. He stayed close to Makus as they passed the houses and entered a crowded marketplace at the end of the road. The smile on Elex's face told Iko his friend was much more enthralled with the city than he was.

Iko breathed a sigh of relief when they approached an empty dirt path beneath the trees at the bottom of the hill upon which Ivory City's castle stood. A pair of guards in ivory tunics and chain mail stood to intercept the trio, but when they recognized Makus, they returned to their place against a tree without a word. Makus led the way up the winding path, and the sounds of the overcrowded marketplace faded. They approached the castle's central hall and entered through a door on its side.

The first thing that struck Iko when they entered the castle was the smell of cinnamon. The second thing was the cleanliness of the marble floors. Purple flags, embroidered with an image of a dragon's horn crossed with a sword, adorned the walls every few feet, and plush runners of the same color covered the floors of the adjoining halls. Sunlight flooded in through tall lancet windows.

One of the nearby pair of guards was a golden-eyed marikano. She was a half-foot taller than Makus but thinner and a few years younger. She wore chain mail and an ivory tunic like the human guards. A long spear with a black obsidian tip stretched across her back.

“Makus!” she said, starting toward him.

“This is Nabi,” he said. “One of our wretcher interpreters.”

“Have you just come back?” Nabi said as she reached the trio. She spoke with an awkward cadence of one speaking a foreign language, but the distress in her words was obvious.

Makus nodded. “Just this morning.”

“Has anyone told you about the crimson wretchers?” Nabi asked.

“What about them?”

Nabi explained. “A handful of them infiltrated the castle and killed young Gilly.”

“What?” Makus asked, voice suddenly urgent. “Where’s Justice Noburia?”

“In the east tower,” Nabi said. “She’s acting Lord now.”

Makus raised his brow, then started toward a nearby spiral staircase. “Tell me more along the way.”



Iko tapped his foot impatiently. “This is a waste of time. Cas is only being taken farther away.”

“Can’t be too much longer,” Elex said.

The marikano had taken them up three sets of stairs while discussing a recent incursion into the castle by the Praivun

Alliance. When they'd reached their destination—a room at the top of one of the castle's towers—Makus had gone inside and directed Iko and Elex to stay with Nabi. Fifteen minutes later, Iko sighed and started pacing.

“Are you in a rush?” Nabi asked.

“As a matter of fact, I am,” Iko said. “The wretchers who attacked you have my daughter.”

“And what do you mean to do?” Nabi asked. “Save her by yourselves?”

Iko stopped. “That's right.”

Nabi shook her head. “You'd do nothing but get yourself killed.”

Iko turned toward the featureless wall and mumbled curses under his breath.

“I can still hear you,” Nabi said.

“He's had a rough couple of weeks,” Elex said, stepping between the two. “We'll wait a little longer.”

Makus appeared in the doorway. “The justice will see you now,” he said, and he stepped out of the way as he opened the door for Iko and Elex.

Inside, the room was a mess. Pages of handwritten notes lay scattered all over tables, desks, and the floor. Some were torn, and the writing on others had been scratched out. On one page was a half-eaten sandwich. An alchemy set covered most of the central desk, and flasks and bottles of several shapes and sizes resided beneath it. Some lay on their sides, and a few were broken. Iko couldn't quite place the smell—vomit? Cinnamon-scented vomit, perhaps.

Iko didn't notice the woman standing near the window until she turned toward him. Her striking emerald eyes found him, and she greeted him with a nod. Long dark hair

lay swept over one of her shoulders. Her perfectly fitted tunic was pristine ivory, and her pants and boots were without blemish. She stood proudly, appearing as a queen out of one of Iko's father's stories, and his heart skipped a beat. Without saying a word, she was strength.

And she was so *clean*. Iko had never seen a human being so clean. Her olive skin seemed to glow. But then why did it smell like vomit in this room? And why was it such a mess?

Makus raised a hand to introduce the woman. "This is Justice Noburia, acting Lord of Ivory City."

"I am Zerah," the justice said.

Standing with his back to his friend, Iko could hear Elex's stupid, smitten grin as he introduced himself. "Elex Conwell. This castle is wonderful. How long have you been at it? It must not have looked like this when you came. And how'd you get the whole place to smell like dessert?"

Elex's enthusiasm amused Zerah. "If you mean everything outside of this room, it's the candles," she said, nodding toward one. "And Lord Adair's been working Dunbardin for almost four years now. I've not been with him quite that long." She turned to Iko. "You must be Iko?"

Iko nodded.

"I am very sorry to hear about your little girl."

Her warm sincerity jolted Iko. "Thank you," he said.

Zerah continued, "But I understand you believe her to be alive? Held captive? Because of a book you've found about these crimson-clad wretchers?"

"The Praivun Alliance," Elex said.

"It's just a few pages," Iko clarified. "But they've sacrificed women before when they've been away from their home in

Arcantu. They took a handful of women from us other than my daughter.”

“I’ve never heard of wretchers doing such a thing,” Zerah said. “What else did your book say about them?”

Iko shrugged. “I didn’t read it all, but from what I could tell, it was nothing else pertinent. Social structures. Biology.”

“I was wondering if I could borrow it,” Zerah said. “Make some notes?”

Iko was struck by the fact that Zerah was literate. It had been years since he’d met someone else who could read and write. Nevertheless, he shook his head. “I’m sorry, but we’re going back after their trail as soon as possible. I might need to refer to it again.”

“Go after them? Alone?” Zerah asked. “You realize how many there are, don’t you? A couple of hundred at least. We are going to find them and kill them all, in case you weren’t aware. We’ll free any of their prisoners, your daughter included.”

Iko straightened. “You’re going after them?”

Zerah nodded. “We’re working on a plan now.”

“When? Before the harvest moon?”

“What is that? Two weeks away?” Zerah thought out loud.

“Closer to three,” Elex said.

“Oh, I can’t imagine it’ll take that long,” Zerah said. “I’d be amazed if we haven’t found them and killed them all within a few days.”

“Then I’m coming with you,” Iko said.

Makus interjected. “I’m sorry, but that’s out of the question. Proper integration into the Guard requires months of training. And that’s hardly adequate. You’d only interfere.”

Zerah added, “I agree that it would be unwise to interfere in the Guard’s operations. Let them do their work. It’s in your daughter’s best interest.”

Iko wasn’t going to miss an opportunity to fight for Cas alongside an army. “I won’t interfere. I can shoot.”

Zerah shook her head. “I just don’t think—”

“Do you have children, Justice?” Iko asked.

The question silenced Zerah. A gust of wind swirled through the room, whipping papers into the air.

Iko pulled *Wretchers of the Sepentrios* from his bag and raised it. “You can borrow this and make your notes if I’m sticking around.”

Zerah’s eyes narrowed. “Can you use the blade you carry?”

Makus shook his head. “Zerah, I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“We need bowmen, don’t we?” Zerah retorted. “It seems like it could be a mutually beneficial agreement.”

“I can,” Iko said.

“And you?” Zerah asked Elex.

Iko responded, “There’s no need for—”

“I can use it,” Elex said, swallowing. “Killed an ukori just a few nights ago.”

Zerah raised her brow. “Very well. You’ll start your training tomorrow morning. Get in what you can before the fight.”

Makus groaned.

Iko nodded, happy to have the Anuthurians’ agreement, but he was uneasy that he’d just committed to joining the efforts of hundreds of men and women he didn’t know. But if that’s what it took to get Cas back, then that’s what he’d do.

“Alright,” Iko said. “What do we do?”

“First,” Zerah said, “you need to lend me that book.”

Chapter 16

Makus's home away from the castle was a humble semispherical hut—the traditional terrestrial dwelling of the marikano—tucked away in the northeastern corner of the city with several other such huts. It was nearly twenty feet wide and half as tall, made of hardened clay packed over a bowed wooden frame. A fire crackled in the center of the floor, and its smoke swirled slowly toward the vented ceiling. The hut smelled of baked fish and dill. Rain drummed on its roof with increasing intensity. The world outside its small, circular window was dark except for the repeated lightning flashes.

An hour after sunset, the rain had not relented. Makus sat hunched on the edge of his bed, holding a bowl of food that he had not thought about for the last half-hour. Nothing was quite right, and Makus was uneasy. His time off had been a boring blur, Zerah's newfound power was already getting to her head, and Ivory City was suddenly on the brink of war with an overzealous wretcher cult. How had things taken such a turn so quickly?

He needed to get his mind off things, but he had no way of doing that. The weather had forced him to abandon plans to call on Kavil again. He lamented having the evening off. Even working was better than sitting around with nothing

to do. He needed something—*anything*—to take him out of this place for a while. He had no more ale nor anything to smoke. And what good would those have done anyway? They hardly affected him anymore. How he longed for the days when smoking and drinking were novel thrills.

He suddenly remembered Doerwine's claims from the previous night. She said talking to her god was a thrill beyond ale. But that was nonsense. Makus was fairly certain there weren't any gods, much less any who *talked* to you.

But what if he was wrong? What if she had been telling the truth, and a god wanted to talk to Makus? She had claimed that Makus would have to invite the god to speak to him.

Without further consideration, Makus blurted out, "I am here if you wish to speak to me."

In the moments after he said it, Makus expected absolutely nothing to happen. In fact, he felt silly for considering that there was any possibility that he should have taken Dori seriously. He did not wait for a response.

Even as the warmth started at the tips of his fingers and toes.

It spread slowly up his limbs—a warm liquid comfort that soothed. Makus dropped the bowl of food but did not care. The pleasure was beyond anything he had ever experienced. His heart beat faster. The warmth approached his lower abdomen from his legs and pectorals from his arms. His mind fell into a thoughtless wash of ecstasy. The warmth neared his heart from all sides.

It came together, and Makus felt fully alive. He sensed he had been like a corpse for thirty-four years.

A voice surrounded him. "Makus." It was unnaturally deep and as liquid and comforting as the warmth coursing

through his veins. "I am pleased that you called for me." There was a higher, feminine voice too, layered upon the lower. It was less discernible but just as sweet.

The euphoria waned enough for Makus to ask, "Who are you?" He was not afraid. How could he be when this felt so *good*?

"I am The One Who Speaks," the voice said.

"The One Who Speaks?" Makus repeated. He sank deeper into pleasure and almost forgot that he was talking to someone.

"I need you," Speaks said.

The voice's demeanor was gentle and maternal. Makus felt as if he were talking to his mother when he was a child, and he suddenly remembered the comfort and naïve sense of security of those days.

"Me?" Makus asked. "Why?"

"Your world is not as it should be," Speaks said. "I need your help to set it right."

"Set it right?" Makus vaguely remembered Dori's warning about the wretchers. "Is it the wretchers that we must deal with? Must I warn Adair, as Dori tried to do?"

"She misunderstood me," Speaks said. "Do not concern yourself with her ramblings. Will you help me? Will you serve your world?"

Makus was lying on his bed, though he did not remember how he had gotten there. The dill from his dinner, had it always smelled so heavenly? And this cotton blanket, had it always been so extraordinarily soft? How had anyone woven an article so fine?

"Come back to me, Makus," Speaks said.

“I am here,” Makus replied. He was only half paying attention. “Yes. I will help. What must I do?”

Speaks said, “You work with a shadow—a woman too far from me to see clearly. She is influential, and if we can set her right, it will help our cause.”

“Zerah?” Makus asked.

“Yes,” Speaks said. “Something consumes her. What is it? What has enslaved her?”

Makus grinned. Why was this god so blind? “Do you mean killing Azoch? Azoch killed her loved ones.”

“That explains much,” Speaks said. “But it seems there is something *real*. A small thing in that tower in which she spends so much time.”

“Do you mean the scale?” Makus said. “It’s a piece of dragon-killer.”

“Ah,” Speaks said. “Now, I understand. She thinks it will deliver you all. She is confused, Makus. We must do away with her obsession so that she can see clearly.”

“Do away with the scale of dragon-killer?”

“It is an obstacle.”

“She would just get more,” Makus said. “We have more. Just a small vial, though.”

“Do not concern yourself with that. We must remove the burden. Can you do that?”

“I think I can.”

“Your world will thank you,” Speaks said. “When you have done it, I will return to you.”

“Must you go?” Makus didn’t want the euphoria to end.

“I must. Rid the poor woman of her obsession, then call for me. I will come no sooner.”

Then The One Who Speaks was gone. Makus's comfort vanished, and he fell into his usual mortal misery. His back ached, and he was hungry from forgetting to eat his food, which was now all over the bare dirt floor. The rain had stopped, and so had the thunder. Slowly, the realization of what had just happened swelled within him.

His entire worldview splintered—or perhaps shattered.

At least one of those gods of fairy tales was real. And Makus was to play an instrumental role in his plans.

Nothing could have been more terrifying.

Chapter 17

After staying the night at a local inn, Iko and Elex reported to Dunbardin Castle an hour after sunrise for integration into the Guard. Nabi met them and escorted them to the Guard's training ground. It was a square arena forty yards across, and a thin layer of sand covered its floor. Rows of stone benches rose in tiers inside its high walls and encircled it. Overhead, Dunbardin's tall towers stretched skyward, bestrewn with talon marks and gouges from past dragon attacks.

They entered to the smell of sweat and two men with broadswords fighting at its center. The clanging of their swords ricocheted off the walls. The men kicked sand into the air as they danced around each other.

One other man stood on the grounds. He was a broad-shouldered, middle-aged man with a protuberant jaw. He studied the fighting men in the center with his arms across his chest. The man greeted Nabi with a nod and glanced past her toward Iko and Elex. "What's this?" he asked.

"I tried to tell you yesterday," Nabi said. "Couldn't find you. Justice Noburia wants them ready for the offensive."

The man's face scrunched. "*What?* We are mere days away!"

“It was part of some sort of deal,” Nabi explained. She shrugged. She turned her golden eyes toward Iko and Elex. “This is Captain Essili.”

They made eye contact with the captain. His displeasure remained apparent.

“What makes you two so special?” Essili asked.

Iko was taken aback. He had assumed that Zerah had gotten everyone on board with her plan. “I’m Iko. This is Elex. We’ve just come from Ekara. The wretchers are holding several of our own, including my daughter.”

“Wretchers don’t hold people any longer than it takes to roast them on a spit,” Essili said.

“These are different,” Iko said, minding his tone. “They are holding them for sacrifice at the next full moon.”

The claim gave Essili pause. He looked to Nabi. “That true?”

Nabi shrugged again. “I’ve not spoken to any of these wretchers, nor read any of their texts. Justice Noburia believed this pair, for what it’s worth.”

The captain sighed. “You can fight?”

Iko nodded. “Well enough.” He hoped that with a little practice, all that his father had taught him about using a sword would come back to him.

Elex indicated Iko. “He’s an excellent shot. I’m not entirely hopeless with a sword.”

A sardonic grin came to Essili’s face. “Well, that makes me feel better.”

The fight in the middle of the arena ended as one man swept a leg out from under the other. The falling man lost his breath when his back hit the ground. The other apologized for injuring his partner and bent to help him up.

The captain observed the end of the quarrel. “Well, if I’ve got no choice, let’s see what you can do.” He eyed the swords they carried. “Blades sharp?”

Iko said, “As they should be.”

Essili looked closer at Iko’s sheath. “Where did you get that?”

“It was my father’s.”

Essili held out his hand, surprisingly interested. “May I?”

Cautiously, Iko drew the blade and handed it over.

Essili took it in both hands and read the weapon’s name aloud. “*Blessed Ember?*” His brow furrowed. “You are a Phainor?”

Iko was stunned. He nodded. “Iko Phainor.”

“You’re Jona’s boy?”

“I am.”

Essili cried out, “Ha! You look just like him. I should have known.”

Iko tilted his head. “You knew my father?”

“I fought the Order of Matara with him,” Essili said. “I was but a boy then. A brave man, your father was. A bit prickly, and a bit superstitious, but a rock for us all. Kept calm no matter what was going on.”

“*Superstitious?*” Iko asked, defensive and annoyed at the same time. He felt like he was back in Jynsomn talking to Rygold.

Essili didn’t notice. “Right.” His eyes gleamed as he reminisced, and the volume of his voice was nearly unbearable. “He spent half his days praying, as if it would help us. But it was his *sword* that helped us. The man could fight.”

Iko beheld Essili and tried to make sense of him. Here was one of the very people who’d dragged his father into a

fight into which he had no business—one of the very people who hadn't cared at all about his father's life. Why was he smiling? Why was he so clueless as to what he'd done to Iko? Venom came to the tip of his tongue, but Elex gently patted his arm, and Cas came to mind. As much as it pained him to stay silent, it was in his daughter's best interest that he did.

“Very well. Very well,” Essili said, cheerful as he could be. He put his hands on his hips and took a breath. “Well, let's see what you've got, Phainor.”

Chapter 18

“**Y**ou’re willing to die for a horse?” Zerah asked.

“Not die, no. But I am willing to kill.”

The man to whom Zerah was speaking was thirty years older and forty pounds lighter than the man who stood next to him—the man he wished to duel. The older man was scrawny and missing most of his hair.

The older man continued, “He’s the only male offspring of my stud. We had an agreement.”

“There was no such agreement,” the younger man said. “It’s not my fault his stud sired a single male.” This man was not particularly muscular, but he may as well have been a marikano Night Warrior compared to his challenger.

“It was a verbal agreement!” the older man said with a shrill shout.

The humble maple throne upon which Zerah sat swallowed her as if to remind her that she did not belong on it. Makus stood at her side again, and she was happy about that. His substitute, Reya, was a fine bodyguard, but Makus *knew* Zerah. He was brilliant, too. Her counterpart, the skeletal justice named Val Campo, stood like a statue at the bottom of the throne’s dais, facing the men.

Zerah leaned forward and massaged her right temple. It was her job to determine whether to allow the requested

duel. The men had already brought the question of the horse's ownership to her and Justice Campo, and they had declined to provide a decision. One of the men was obviously lying, but he did it so well that it was impossible to identify him. Picking sides might have been a troublesome precedent, so they had dismissed the dispute, hoping the two could settle it themselves. Now the men were back, and each was willing to duel until the other yielded or died.

This particular case seemed to meet all the criteria for a just duel to Zerah, but it was so *stupid*. A horse? Really? The old man was willing to be cut open for a horse? Was it not obvious to everyone else that it was his inflated ego for which he would risk his life? It had nothing to do with the horse. And the younger man was perfectly content to accept the older man's challenge since he knew he would easily win.

She tried one last time. "To be frank, Mister Smollan, I don't see you coming out on the winning end of this duel. Mister Isal is half your age and seems to be in good health. Your proposal *does* meet all the lawful requirements for a duel, but I beg you to reconsider."

"You don't think *I'm* in good health!" Mister Smollan said. "And what do you know about the good health of *men*? I'll take my duel date, thank you. And I'll kill him for the brute that he is!"

Mister Isal held his hands behind his back and rolled his eyes.

Zerah sighed. "If you insist, Mister Smollan. We will provide you with a date within two days, barring active warfare."

Mister Smollan tilted his head down and stepped toward the exit. "I'll be looking forward to it." He departed.

“Mister Isal?” Zerah asked as the younger man turned to follow.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Please try not to kill him.”

Isal responded, “I’m not sure he’ll stop until he’s dead.” He stepped toward the exit.

Zerah massaged her temple again. He was probably right.

A plush purple carpet ran from the throne to the room’s entrance between a dozen bronze fire-bowls. The fires always burned, even with the daylight streaming through the tall windows. Lord Adair insisted it was necessary decorum for audiences. It took a moment for Zerah to notice that Nabi and Iko Phainor were standing at the other end of the carpet. The pair approached.

“Is that sort of thing normal here?” Iko asked Nabi, loud enough for everyone else to hear.

“They are following our law,” Nabi said. “Better to bring it before a justice than take it upon themselves to spill blood in the streets.”

“Is it?” Iko asked, apparently troubled by the display.

Zerah smirked, finding Iko’s disregard for the decorum and order of the throne room refreshing. Part of her envied it. “Done with the captain already?”

“This one says you owe him something,” Nabi said, nodding toward Iko.

“I didn’t say that,” Iko said defensively. “She agreed to return it to me.”

Nabi said, “Same thing.”

“Ah, yes. The book. It’s in my laboratory,” Zerah said.

Makus leaned forward. “Would you like me to retrieve it?”

“No. I could use a good jaunt up the tower,” Zerah said. “If I have to sit on this throne any longer, I’ll go mad.”



Iko followed Zerah and Makus up the tower, considering the conversation he’d heard in the hall along the way. How savage were those two men willing to kill each other over a horse! He wondered how many more of Ivory City’s residents were so ugly and brutish.

He followed Zerah into the laboratory while Makus stayed in the hallway. Zerah crossed the room and began shifting papers and equipment, searching for the book.

Iko noticed the many containers of what he assumed were ingredients placed around the room. They were organized in no particular way. From what Makus had said, he understood that this was where Zerah had been trying to replicate the dragon-killer poison of Bhal Adair. There were several jars of liquids—perhaps blood, honey, and... well, there was no telling what the bile-green soup was. There were bones of several animals, strange crushed powders, and some still-bloody chunks of flesh, crawling with flies.

And beneath a magnifying glass on a small table was a small black something. Tiny, translucent red channels snaked across it, appearing as rivers might from a mountaintop. Iko didn’t know what this ingredient was, but he immediately recognized that he had seen something similar recently.

“Sorry,” Zerah called, still searching on the other side of the room. “I just read it this morning, so it hasn’t gone too far.”

“Take your time.” Iko reached into his bag and pulled out his book, *The Deadly Sepentrio Mountains*, then flipped to the A’s.

Zerah commented on her reading as she searched. “Did you know the Praivun Alliance is led by a prophet they call the Emperor? Or at least they think he’s a prophet. They believe he speaks directly to Praivus.”

Iko scoffed. “They’re fools and savages.” He started flipping through the pages. “So, this is where you and Adair are trying to figure out his poison?”

Zerah moved a stack of papers and came up empty again. “Just me, really. Lord Adair gave the task to me years ago. He got tired of all the failure, I think. Plus, he’s usually too busy to do more than check in.”

Iko looked up from his book, suddenly struck by the weight of what Zerah was doing alone. “Why has he only asked you to work on it?”

“I wouldn’t say he did,” Zerah said. “Others have tried, but I didn’t find their methods were adequate.”

“You dismissed them?”

“Not exactly,” Zerah said. “But this is important work—the most important undertaking since the dragons came. We must have standards.” She abruptly started searching for Iko’s book again.

Iko could tell there was more to the story that Zerah didn’t want to discuss. Not wanting to press, he returned his attention to *The Deadly Sepentrio Mountains*. He flipped through the pages until he found what he was looking for.

It was a colored illustration of several pieces of jewelry, all made of a material that looked exactly like the object under the viewing glass. The image was under the book's entry for *arcanotaur*. Iko read the text accompanying the image.

Though arcanotaurs are rarely found as far west as the Sepentrio Mountains, recent archeological expeditions have discovered that members of the ancient Myniso Tribe, native to the Sepentrios, crafted jewelry by pouring arcanotaurs' blood into casts. Researchers now know that the arduous journey to Arcantu and the killing of an arcanotaur were rites of passage for young men to be accepted into adulthood in the tribe. Thus, it is thought that this "blood-jewelry" was used to indicate status among Mynison men.

Iko didn't know much about arcanotaurs other than they'd kept most people in Jynsomn from venturing into the mountains without ever actually being seen. He remembered people claiming to have seen one when he was a boy, but he thought that, for the most part, they lived far to the east, in the caves near the Arcantuan Sea. He wondered how Zerah had acquired the blood of one.

"Ah!" Zerah said. She snapped up from a bent position and held *Wretchers of the Sepentrios* into the air proudly. She spat a strand of hair out of her mouth. "I knew it was here."

Iko slapped the book shut and smiled, amused by Zerah's excitement for an accomplishment so small. "I was getting worried."

“Not necessary,” Zerah said. She marched across the room and extended the book to him. “You’ve got another?” she asked, seeing the book in his hand.

“Oh, yes,” Iko said. “This one’s got nothing to do with wretchers, though. Just odd facts about the Sepentrios.”

“I see.”

Iko accepted the book with a courteous nod, then opened his leather bag to place both books inside.

“And another?” Zerah asked, having seen inside his bag. “What’s that one? You’re practically a walking library.”

“Oh,” Iko said. “That’s my father’s Silent Scroll.”

Zerah raised her brow. “You worship Silence, Mister Phainor?”

“Um... Yes. I do.” He was tempted to explain that, technically, silence was not the object of his worship—that it was just the beginning. And that, despite The Silent One’s name, the god wasn’t really all that silent. But he held his tongue, suspecting she wouldn’t care much about the nuances of it all.

Zerah nodded. “I’ve read some about the old religion. You do it all? The prayer and the lizard urine and all that?”

“Lizard urine?”

“The stuff you sniff.”

Iko laughed. “Dracomuen skin excretions. It kills your sense of smell for a bit—taste too. They excrete it so that predators can’t track them.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Zerah said. “My mistake.”

“It’s fine.” Iko grinned. “And yes, I do the prayer. Twice every day.”

Zerah thought for a moment. “If you don’t mind my asking, why use the excretions and the blinders and everything?”

I never quite understood the point of it. Why don't you just talk to your god?"

Iko stood tall. He couldn't remember the last time anyone other than Elex had been interested in The Silent One. "Because deadening the physical senses clears the way for the most important sense."

Zerah's brow knotted. "What sense is that?"

"The spiritual sense."

"Fascinating."

Hope creeping forth, Iko couldn't help but ask, "Are there any adherents of Silence in the city?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Zerah said. "We do have several old temples that people sometimes visit. They'll pray and light a candle. But nothing like what you do. Nothing like religion."

Iko had suspected that, but was nonetheless disappointed. "I see."

"Well, I must be going," Zerah said. "Thank you for letting me read the book. Perhaps I can learn more about your prayer after this business with the wretchers is done. We'll have your daughter back by then, and I can meet her too."

"Oh," Iko said, surprised by her casual confidence that he'd get Cas back. "We would like that."

Chapter 19

Elex's eyes widened as Iko recounted the encounter with Zerah. "You'll have to marry her!" he said through a mouthful of buttery mashed potatoes.

They were in a busy dining hall across the road from their inn. It was dinner time, and the establishment was so full of men, women, and marikano that one could hardly move about without incurring a half-dozen impatient glares. The building smelled of garlic and, oddly, urine.

Iko rolled his eyes. "That's not the point, Elex."

"What else matters?" Elex said. He swallowed his potatoes and pounded his fist on the leaning wooden table. "Did you ever think you'd have an opportunity like this? You like to read, and she likes to read. You believe in The Silent One, and she wants to *learn* about The Silent One. It's fate! And did you see her eyes? You'll never see any other eyes like that. I don't see what the problem is."

"First of all, I've got bigger things to worry about right now," Iko said. "Second of all, weak admiration for Silence is not the same as devotion. Third of all... no."

"It wouldn't hurt to try." Elex scooped more food into his mouth.

"Fourth of all, she's a queen or whatever."

“I see you’ve thought more about it than you let on,” Elex said. “And she’s a *justice*. You’ll need to get that right if you want to impress her.”

Iko slapped his spoon into his potatoes and scoffed through a smile. “*Impress her?* Have you heard nothing I’ve said? Whatever her position, it’s far too lofty for me to entertain thoughts of wooing her.”

Elex pointed his spoon at Iko in accusation. “But the thoughts of wooing *have* come to mind.”

Iko’s smile spread across his face. “Oh, shut up.”

“I knew it.”

“I’ll probably never even talk to her again,” Iko said. “We’ll be too busy learning to fight with the captain.”

“And after you get Cas back?” Elex asked, glancing around the tavern. “You’re telling me you’d rather go back to Jynsomn and Rog than stay here?”

Iko drew in a deep breath but didn’t answer. The question of whether he would settle in Ivory City or leave after he saved Cas had been gnawing at him more than he cared to admit. On one hand, the city was, in many ways, what he’d always dreamed a city would be. There were the resources, safe, sturdy homes, and an excess of delicious food. And as far as Cas was concerned, he’d already seen more children in Ivory City than she had seen in her entire life. She could have friends and a community of people who weren’t hanging on Rog’s every word. And what worthy pursuits might she find here? Would civilization’s rebirth in Ivory City mean a return of arts and academia?

On the other hand, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he would never quite fit in in Ivory City—that there was an invisible wall between him and everyone else, as there had

been in Jynsomn. It saddened him to feel so isolated among so many people, but he couldn't help it.

Recent reading had led him to believe that if there were still pockets of adherents of The Silent One, they lived far to the west. Now that Cas wasn't tethered to Jynsomn, might it be better to take her that way in hopes of finding such a community? People like him? If Zerah were to bring the dragons' reign to an end, he would be free to find a place he could fit in and raise Cas the way he wanted to.

Iko surveyed the semi-drunken throng around them. "You find swarms of heathens appealing?" he asked half-jokingly.

"If they're pretty enough," Elex said. "And don't forget that I'm a heathen."

Iko chuckled and used his index finger and thumb to indicate smallness. "Just a little bit heathen."

Elex laughed. "There's so much more here. More for me, you, more for Cas, too. Don't you think?"

Iko attempted to satisfy Elex without committing to anything. "We'll see."

Elex raised his fist in victory. "That's the spirit."

Iko rolled his eyes. As he started eating in earnest, his mind drifted back to the offensive they'd agreed to take part in. He'd felt certain that inserting himself into the fight against the Praivun Alliance was what he wanted when he'd demanded to be allowed to join the attack. But from the moment Zerah had agreed to it, the idea of facing a couple of hundred wretches as part of an army had bothered him.

Iko asked Elex, "Do you think they know what they're doing?"

"Who? Essili and the Guard?"

Iko nodded. “They can’t have done this before, right? I’ve had the thought that it might be better for us to go after Cas before they attack. What if they are simply kicking a hornet’s nest? What if they get overrun? What if we get ourselves killed because they have no idea what they’re doing?”

“You really think we’re better off alone?”

Iko shrugged. “Maybe.”

Elex put down his spoon and folded his hands on top of his belly. “I think they’re Cas’s best shot.”

Chapter 20

Late in the night, few candles remained burning in the broad, airy corridor. Makus leaned against the cold stone of the hallway, watching for any movement that may spoil his plans—a movement of the doors or at the other end of the corridor. A guard would pass through a few times a night. But there were only quiescent paintings and busts upon pedestals. He inched closer to the door he meant to enter and slowly pushed it open.

Creak.

Makus froze and surveyed the stillness. Still no one. Without opening the door any farther, he slipped inside and gently closed it. He ascended the spiral staircase.

Climbing, the better part of him doubted he would *actually* do anything to Zerah's scale. How could he? She had done nothing wrong, after all, and only good would ever come of her continued work with it. The whole world would benefit from her discovery of a dragon-killing elixir.

Yet he continued up the stairs.

On the periphery of his awareness, the memory of the warmth that accompanied The One Who Speaks lingered. What satisfaction that had been! It had touched him so deeply—primitively even. He had been made for such pleasure, and he meant to experience it again.

He came to the top of the stairs, and the hallway before him was a murky abyss. A human would not have been able to navigate the shadow at all, but his large, glowing marikano eyes allowed him to see well in low light, and he stepped lightly over the dusty stone floor of the remote keep. It was a short hallway with a single door on each side and a large window at its end. The tips of his long, cold fingers came to the door of Zerah's laboratory, and he gently pushed it open.

Inside, the window was still cracked open, and the note-filled leaves strewn over the room's tables shivered in the night's breeze. The stench from the failed experiment had finally dissipated, and the usual dull mustiness had returned to the room. A few steps and Makus was standing before the little desk, hovering over Zerah's precious scale.

His doubt faded. He remembered what Speaks had pointed out about the harmless little mystery: It had *enslaved* Zerah. What else might she have done by now had she not been so preoccupied? Who else might she have helped? There was still so much work to do in Ivory City, and Zerah had squandered her talent on what? This... unsolvable riddle? That must have been what Speaks could see—inattention toward her calling.

Adair had more of the poison. If Zerah needed more, she could get it.

Not to mention that a *god* had ordered the scale's destruction. Who was he to decline the order of a god?

Makus snatched up the little black object, spun around, and left the room in a flurry. He threw it through the window at the end of the hallway, where it would disappear among the trees.

“Alright,” Makus said, leaning forward on the windowsill. “It is done. What else do you require?”

The warmth spread more slowly this time. Or did it just seem so? But the effect was the same. From his outermost extremities, extreme relaxation crawled toward his center—toward his soul.

Then there was euphoria.

“I am in your debt,” Speaks said.

“Why did I do it?” Makus asked.

“Long has this burden tormented her,” Speaks said. “She must be free of it if your world is to be as it should be.”

Makus understood what Speaks meant, but he didn’t respond. He was lying on the ground for some reason. Had the stones not been so unyielding, the whole castle might have collapsed.

“Will you help me again? There is more to do,” Speaks said. “It vexes me that I am so impotent when confined in this emptiness. But that will be remedied as more approach me.”

“You need more to accept you? Shall I tell them to call for you?” Makus asked.

“No. The others are not ready for me like you were. You mustn’t say anything about me to them.”

“Of course.”

“You serve them well,” Speaks said. “They will thank you one day. Now we must turn our attention to your people’s other leader. The man who rules the castle.”

“Lord Adair?” Makus said. “What about him? He’s not here now.”

“He is nearing,” Speaks said. “He is often far from me, like the woman, but I see him sometimes. More often than her.”

“Only sometimes?”

“I can see embodied souls who are properly oriented, like you. You are a flame illuminating darkness. Others are shadows obscuring everything around them.”

“I see. And what do you want with Lord Adair?”

“He will not stay long when he returns,” Speaks said. “Of that I am certain. I must know if he takes his poison when he goes again.”

“Why?” Makus asked. “He isn’t obsessed like Zerah.”

“That is true. But there are many things you can’t understand in your current state. Rest assured, you will eventually see that it is for the best.”

Makus was troubled by that response for a fraction of a second, then he let himself fall into the warmth. “Alright. We will all know if he removes it from Dunbardin.”

“You are a treasure to your people. Your world will be what it ought to be if you persevere.”

Makus relished the praise. He had found the meaning of his life at last! And it could not have been more profound.

Speaks continued. “Call for me when you are certain of his intentions.”

“Must I wait?” Makus asked. He did not want the warmth to leave. He did not want to return to the darkness.

“You must be patient. Can you do that?”

“I can.”

The world dulled. The tower was empty, and Makus suffered on the cold, hard floor.

Chapter 21

Makus reminded himself of the good reason Speaks had asked him to get rid of Zerah's dragon-killer—that he had freed her. It was the only way to keep the guilt from crushing him the following morning when she discovered it was gone. Fortunately, she was so wrapped up in her search for it that she didn't question him and make him lie to her. Instead, she crawled around on the floor for ten minutes, then began retracing her steps of the day before.

“Perhaps it was a bird,” Makus suggested half-heartedly. “The window was left open.”

Zerah waved off the suggestion. “What would a bird want with it? It's basically a rock.”

She said she remembered that the scale had been there the previous morning, and no one unusual had been in the room... except for Iko Phainor. She was sure that she would have noticed if he had taken it, but she felt the need to talk to him. Perhaps he had noticed something she had not. The captain had taken Iko and the rest of his trainees into the fields to practice their archery. It would take longer than she'd like to get out there.

So Zerah postponed all of her morning meetings.

“Are you sure that's wise?” Makus asked.

“Not a single matter on the agenda is urgent.”

Despite Makus’s legs being significantly longer than Zerah’s, her pace proved uncomfortable for him. She silently wound down stairwells, bolted across courtyards, and shoved her way through the busy morning market on her way to North Gate. She was as flustered as Makus had ever seen her. He wondered if she had forgotten that there was more dragon-killer in Adair’s quarters.

As Makus followed Zerah through the field, he watched the trainees under the captain’s instruction in the distance. They were conducting an exercise that the Guard had adapted from the marikano Night Warriors. The exercise tested one’s ability to shoot under pressure. Each man had four targets placed before him at successively farther distances. The targets were all scarecrows, fashioned after ukori and wregs. On the captain’s mark, they would begin shooting at the nearest target. When they hit it, they would move on to the next, and then the next. Once they hit the farthest target, they would start shooting their way back, following the same rules in reverse. Speed and accuracy were the purposes, and the first to make his or her way back to the first target was the victor. The catch was that a miss meant that you had to start over.

The captain’s voice boomed over the rustling golden grass. “Ready position. And. Go!”

Watching the men shoot was a distraction for Makus at first—a way to avoid considering how he had hurt his dear friend. Then the form on the left end of the line caught his attention—it was Iko Phainor. With rare smoothness, his hand removed an arrow from the quiver upon his hip, strung it, and sent it into his target. The next shot was identical.

His bow-stroke was a single motion and noticeably graceful compared to the jerky, amateurish archery of Elex. It was even advanced compared to the other two men, who had been in the Guard for a couple of years and were only re-training because of injury. It took exactly eight shots for Iko to complete the exercise. He did not miss once. That wasn't unheard of, but considering Iko had been scrounging for a living in Ekara until recently, it was an impressive feat.

Zerah noticed it too. "And you doubted he'd be of use to us."

Essili clapped his hands together and shouted, "That's some fine shooting, little Jona. You might make up for your uselessness with your sword that way."

Makus stopped close enough to the archers to hear Elex say to Iko, "I think he likes you."

Essili noticed Zerah. "We came out here to get away from you." He might not have been joking.

"We hauled all of that sand into your *pit* because you begged for it," Zerah said, "and you don't even want to use it?"

Essili laughed. "Too pleasant outside to be in there today."

By this time, the men had turned toward Zerah and Makus, remaining at the spots from which they'd shot and leaning on their bows.

"May I have a word with Mister Phainor?" Zerah asked.

Iko seemed nervous. Elex grinned and nudged him forward.

"Fine with me," Essili said. "He's making the rest of them look bad."

Iko approached, cheeks flushed from exertion. His shaggy dark hair was dripping sweat. The other men went to collect arrows from the field.

“If you don’t mind,” Zerah said, motioning for Iko to follow her and Makus farther into the grass. They went far enough so that no one could hear. “Mister Phainor, I’m missing something,” Zerah said after they stopped. “It was in my lab yesterday morning, and other than me and Makus, you’re the only one who was in there.”

Iko defensively responded, “I didn’t take anything.”

“I’m not accusing you,” Zerah said. “But I was trying to piece together a timeline and thought you might have noticed it. It was on a small table against the wall to the left of the entrance—a small black object beneath the magnifying glass.”

“You mean the arcanotaur blood?” Iko asked.

Zerah’s brow wrinkled. “What? No. It wasn’t blood. It’s something like a rock.”

Iko nodded. “The little dark flake with the red channels running through it?”

“Yes.”

Iko nodded as if his conclusion was obvious. “The hardened blood of an arcanotaur.”

Zerah stammered, “I... I don’t know anything about arcanotaurs.”

“I don’t either,” Iko said. “But I know that’s what that was.”

Makus’s heart skipped a beat. Could it have been so simple? Arcanotaurs were rare in these parts—few people in Ivory City had ever seen one, much less any of the creatures’ blood. They were native to caves far to the east, but as Makus understood it, the beasts had been drifting inland since the

dragons had cleared humans out of their temples and cities. The large, empty structures were said to be ideal spaces for the arcanotaurs to make their homes.

In the couple of years Makus had known Zerah, she had never once given the impression that she was not entirely in control of herself. Her head had always controlled her heart, perhaps to a fault. But at that moment, when Iko may have so effortlessly accomplished the goal for which she had lived for years, a façade cracked. For the first time, Makus saw a fury in her eyes that he had long suspected. It was a cold, determined ferocity—born of the desire to repay Azoch for what she had done to Zerah’s family, long sequestered in an effort to remain sane.

Iko obviously didn’t understand the shift in demeanor. “I’ve got pictures in one of my books. Would you like to see?”

“You’re sure that’s what it is?” Zerah asked.

Iko shrugged, still oblivious to the importance of his revelation. “Fairly sure.”

“Then, yes. Take me to your pictures.”

They returned to Ivory City with a pace exceeding their jaunt out of the Castle. Along the way, Makus reveled in what had surely been the plan of The One Who Speaks. It was now clear that without Speaks’ instruction, Zerah may never have spoken to Iko again. Had Makus not removed Zerah’s obsession, she may have continued toiling over it for an eternity. But now, she had discovered its secret. Now, it was only a matter of time before Zerah Noburia brought the dragon-killer poison to the rest of the world.

And Makus had been chosen by a god to play a part in it all. Who would have ever guessed? Somewhere in the back

of his mind, he wondered why Speaks had chosen him, but he would worry about that later. For now, it would do to be proud of his part in a divine plan that would free the world's peoples from their tyrannical rulers of the sky.

Chapter 22

Zerah scoured archives, and the hours flew by. There was no one else in the dim, dusty basement. The room was silent aside from the fluttering of countless pages—records of arrests, accusations, and riddles. She worked in the waning glow of her second candle. She raised it to look at another record, and hot wax dripped on the back of her hand. She winced. The paper was not what she was looking for, and she carefully returned it to its place.

She was searching for a record of a particular claim—a claim that a monster had made off with... what? What had the beast stolen? Where had it been? When the story had reached her, it had been hearsay. She had not been a justice then. Val Campo had been, but he could barely remember anything about it except that it had happened. And that the monster fit the description of an arcanotaur.

Zerah cursed. How had Ivory City amassed so many records in so few years? She didn't need sleep, did she?

Out of view, the door at the top of the stairs slammed shut. Footsteps descended in the shadow. A pang of guilt struck Zerah. She had been down here too long. So long that someone was coming to get her now. It must have been important too. Makus was upstairs watching the door, and he wouldn't have let anyone in if it hadn't been important.

The shadow at the bottom of the stairs spoke. "You canceled nearly everything scheduled for today."

Zerah's hair stood on end. It was Lord Adair, already back from his search for the Praivun Alliance. She had not expected that.

"Not everything," Zerah said. "Val and I reviewed the Bradoton Parcel proposal for the wretchers this afternoon."

"And left it unresolved. I know," Adair said. He stepped into the candlelight.

Zerah's pulse quickened, but she rebuked her angst. What did it matter now if he scolded her? Who cared if she had not carried out the arbitrary responsibilities he had thrown upon her without consideration? She was about to save the world.

And kill that murderous monster, Azoch.

Zerah stood proudly. "Perhaps you will appreciate that I have solved the riddle of your dragon-killer."

Adair nodded. "Val told me."

"Arcanotaur blood," Zerah said. "So simple. How could we have been so perplexed for so long?" She turned toward her pile of papers. "There was a sighting a couple of years back, I think. I just need to find out where and—"

"Zerah," Adair said calmly. "You need to put this aside."

"But I've just solved it. We can kill dragons now."

"And what good will that do us if we are dead?" Adair stepped closer. "I need you right now, Zerah. Ivory City needs you to lead. Can we count on you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"We found them. The wretchers. They are held up in the dam at Ambrial."

“That’s good news, isn’t it?” She didn’t understand his despair.

“There are five to six hundred inside, and more arrive each day.”

Zerah tilted her head, and her voice thinned. “So many?” The whole Guard was a few more than three hundred strong. She recalled the warning of Dori, the drunk, and shivered. “Did you dialogue with them?”

Adair shook his head. “They didn’t take well to our translator. Tossed his headless body from the top of the dam moments after they accepted him inside. Vhannus was right about them, and if they mean to eradicate us, they’ve got the swords to do it.”

“Oh, Bhal!” Zerah gasped. “We have to call for the Portumnans. The marikano may help us.”

“General Vhannus has already departed. I doubt he will sleep until he’s arrived at Lake Portumnus. But I will not lie; I wonder if the marikano have much of an appetite to risk their lives for an enemy they’ve never met.”

“If the vermin came for us without reason, they might well come for them too.”

“A point I’m sure Vhannus will make,” Adair answered. “But wretchers are not much of a threat to an underwater city.”

“Do we have a plan if they do not come?” Zerah asked.

“We must attack as soon as we can. If we wait, they’ll be too strong for us to hope to fight them off.” Adair paused. “But for what it’s worth, Vhannus thinks if he can convince the Portumnans, we have a real chance.”

That made Zerah feel better. General Vhannus was not prone to hyperbole or false hope. “But if he can’t?”

Adair grimaced. "Pray that he can."

Chapter 23

After Iko solved Zerah's riddle, he had a hard time believing that Zerah was not somehow mistaken. It was simply too good to be true. What if Adair had been mistaken about what had killed Turakis? What if Zerah's scale wasn't even what Adair had used? But it was also hard to believe that, if arcanotaur blood was really all it would take to kill dragons, the world would look very different very soon.

The thought pierced Iko's lifelong sense of impending doom. The world suddenly seemed brighter, and his drive to save Cas intensified. If a world without dragons was coming, the possibilities for her would be endless. She could see the world rebuilt. She could have her own family. Her life could be long and full of joy beyond Iko's wildest imaginings. But he had to free her from the Praivun Alliance first—he had to give her that chance.

Thus, he was eager for his third morning of training with the captain. But when he and Elex arrived, it was obvious something was out of the ordinary.

“Not today, gentlemen,” the captain said. He handed them a pair of neatly folded tunics, bound with twine. They were ashy gray and soft, perhaps never worn. “I tried to get some that would fit you. If they don't, I'm sorry.”

“What's this?” Iko asked. “What's happened?”

“Some scouts found our friends in the mountains, and we’re moving sooner rather than later,” the captain said. “Tomorrow morning, most likely. The rest of the Guard are already on their way to a rendezvous point. You two will travel with me, and I’ll get you into a unit when we arrive.”

Like a spark to kindling, the words reignited Iko’s hope of saving Cas. He was ready to go *now*. He was terrified, too.

Elex was as pale as a ghost. “But we’ve hardly learned a thing.”

“You’re the ones who wanted to be a part of this,” Essili said, leaning against the wall with his arms folded. “Won’t bother me if you don’t come.” He looked at Iko. “We could use your bow, though.”

“I didn’t mean that,” Elex said. “I’m not backing out.”

“Did they see the prisoners?” Iko asked. “My girl?”

Essili softened before he answered. “There were human captives seen. All young women. Whether any of them was your daughter, I do not know.”

That was enough for Iko. “And our units? We will not be fighting with you?”

Essili shrugged. “I thought you’d be with the rest of the bowmen, behind the infantry. We’re assaulting their position head-on, from what I understand. You’ll provide useful cover and will be less likely to be killed.”

Iko shook his head. “That will not do. I will be in the front.”

Essili laughed heartily. “Have you forgotten that I’ve seen you try to use a sword? You’ll stand no chance at the front. I appreciate your zeal, though. Very much like your father’s.”

“You don’t understand,” Iko said. “I can’t save my daughter from behind you. What if they retreat? Or decide to

sacrifice their prisoners before they are defeated? No. I will be in front.”

Iko would not be denied. And Essili recognized it.

“Alright,” the captain said. “You stay with me then. I’ll be up there. That alright?”

Iko nodded. “And Elex?”

“As long as he stays out of my way,” Essili said.

Chapter 24

Dunbardin Castle buzzed for the rest of the day with a dizzying agenda of preparation. What would happen if the assault on the Praivun Alliance failed? Who would succeed so and so if they died? Or so and so? Was there hope that Ivory City could protect itself against any number of wretchers with so few guardsmen left behind? What of evacuation routes? Food? Could the general public outrun the Praivun Alliance if it came to running?

By the end of all the meetings on these questions and more, Zerah's mind was mush. She groaned, knowing there was one more meeting left—one to discuss the plan of attack on the wretchers' position. She did not think herself one to shirk responsibility, but considering she would not be part of the fighting, she resented Adair for asking her to attend a session that would surely take hours. It was almost sunset, and from what she knew, General Vhannus had drawn up the plans. What point was there in questioning *his* battle plans?

Aside from the window overlooking the city, the small meeting room's grimy, grayish walls were devoid of any sort of decoration. For some reason, Lord Adair seemed to consider such gloom necessary for their most secretive meetings. A half-dozen of the leadership huddled over a small wooden table, upon which was a map of the Vale of

Ambrial. For hours, they discussed what would happen if the Portumnan marikano provided no support, or if the support was less than expected. They theorized the wretchers' response to the assault and whether or not it would be prudent to pursue a retreating foe.

Zerah's mind wandered. She needed to get back into the archives and see where that arcanotaur had been. It had probably been in the mountains somewhere. Arcanotaurs lived in caves, didn't they? They didn't like being around people, right? If they needed the creature's blood, she assumed she'd have to kill it. What sort of weapon was required to kill an arcanotaur? Would arrows suffice? And there was the matter of capturing and storing the blood. It would probably be better to have many small containers rather than one big one. If it were all in one container and something happened—

"Zerah?" Adair asked, obviously irritated.

Her eyes widened as she realized he'd been asking her something. Unfortunately, she'd heard nothing of the conversation over the last few minutes. "Hm?" she asked.

"The idea of keeping a hidden contingent? To our north, in the event of having to defend our walls?"

"Of course," Zerah said. She struggled to respond. "Was the question whether or not I thought it was a good idea?"

Adair frowned and sighed in exasperation. "Why don't we take a few minutes and then finish this up?"

It took another hour to work through the rest of the details, and Zerah did well to keep her mind where it should have been. But she wasted no time in descending back to Dunbardin's archives once the meeting was over. She knew Makus was tired too, but it was his job to stay with her, and

he didn't seem to mind staying up a little longer so she could get more work done.

After a couple of hours of fruitless searching, she grew tired and discouraged. She felt weak, even hopeless, but then remembered that somewhere in the piles of paper was an artifact from her past life. It was a small, leather-bound journal that had belonged to her husband, Orin. She had not seen it in months, and she had not opened it in years. She had not had the heart to throw it away nor the stomach to keep it in her room. But now it called to her—as if she needed to see it to continue her search. It was in the corner of the archives, tucked away with the miscellaneous documents and unreadable books that had been in Dunbardin Castle when Adair had annexed it. She found it exactly where she remembered putting it and returned to the small wooden table. Her fingers glided over the smooth, soft leather. It was cold to the touch.

Upon opening the journal, Zerah smelled charred wood and paper. She smelled her husband, too. Her heart pounded, excited and afraid to remember him so vividly. But here was his writing, as if he had written it today. She thumbed through the pages until she found what she was looking for.

Orin would have never claimed to have been an artist, but he would not have denied his enjoyment of trying to be one. The sketch Zerah beheld was simple. There was little detail and no shading or shadow, only smudged lines. But there was no question that the lines came together in the shapes of Zerah and her two sons. She was standing in a windblown dress, holding the younger in her arms while the older looked up to her. Zerah smiled. The older child's but-

ton nose was unmistakable, even with so few pencil strokes. Orin might have been an artist had he lived in another time.

She'd thought of him when she'd seen Iko Phainor's Silent Scroll. Most of the little she knew about Silence had been thanks to Orin. He'd been quite interested in history and old religion, and she was sure he would have loved to speak to Iko about his beliefs. More than that, Iko's devotion to his daughter had reminded Zerah of the family that she and Orin had once had—something that, only now, she admitted she may want to have one day again. That simple acknowledgment saddled her with guilt, but perhaps it wouldn't matter. She'd poured all of herself into the quest to uncover the dragon-killer over the last few years, but now that she could see the end of that road, she wondered if she'd strayed too far off the path she'd once been on. She wondered if she'd ever be able to find her way back to who she'd once been.

The door opened, and footsteps started down the stairs into the archives. Zerah imagined that before today, she would have hurriedly shut the journal and pretended to be doing something else. But this evening, she didn't care, and she continued to admire the picture.

Makus appeared at the bottom of the stairs. He was holding a pair of cups, a bottle, and a small wrapped something.

Zerah looked up from the book. "What's this?"

"I visited the pantry," Makus said. "I thought a celebration was in order."

"A celebration? For what?"

Makus approached the small, candlelit table and carefully set the items on it. "What do you mean, *for what?* It would only be more appropriate if Iko Phainor were here to partake in these." He was smiling. He noticed the picture but did not

stare. “How long have we been trying to figure out what the dragon-killer is?”

“Don’t you think it might be prudent to wait to celebrate?” Zerah asked.

“We celebrate while we can. Have a drink with me.”

There was a sweet aroma in the air now. Cake, perhaps?

Makus placed the two cups on the table and opened the bottle. “Mead,” he said as he filled their cups. There wasn’t much of it around Dunbardin, but Makus knew Zerah preferred mead to ale. He unwrapped two slices of a plum loaf, removed one for himself, and slid the other on the cloth across to Zerah.

She smiled and took it. It was still warm and melted in her mouth. The honey drizzled over it was almost unbearably sweet. Almost. The pieces of plum were still juicy.

“You left my side for the pantry?” Zerah said, grinning and grabbing for more bread.

“I thought you wouldn’t mind.”

Zerah raised her brow. “You were right. I didn’t think they would be making desserts today.”

“They thought it would be good for morale,” Makus said as he enjoyed his own.

Zerah washed down her bread with the mead, disappointed by the strange taste that comes from drinking something sweet after eating something sweet.

Makus inquired, “You will not be down here all night, I hope?”

“I don’t plan on it, but you know how that goes.”

Makus smiled widely. “With you? Yes. I know how that goes. Just don’t forget we are at war now.”

Zerah held another piece of the plum bread but did not eat it. “I suppose it is obvious that my mind has been elsewhere.”

“It is understandable,” Makus said, seemingly trying to comfort her. He downed his entire cup of mead in one gulp. “But if you want my opinion, you should refocus your energies. You may never get a chance to use the dragon-killer if we cannot repel the Praivun Alliance.”

Zerah offered an emphatic nod. “Thank you for being honest.”

“You’re welcome.” Makus wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

Zerah stared at Orin’s sketch. “May I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“Why do you think the dragons kill us? What’s made them hate us so much?”

“I wish I knew.” Makus leaned back and put his hands around the back of his head. “You humans all seem confident that they *hate* us. I am not sure that’s the case.”

“Oh?”

Makus nodded. “I’ve fought many enemies. Among them, there was a type consumed with a particular brutal, primal energy that always reminded me of dragons. They were always my most dangerous foes.”

“Who were they?”

“Anyone without escape. Those who knew they were doomed if they didn’t kill me,” Makus said. “I’ve long thought that the dragons think their survival hinges upon our elimination.”

Zerah tilted her head. “Why would they think that?”

Makus shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Zerah tried to come up with an answer to her question that made sense, but could not.

“May I ask you something?” Makus eyed the picture in front of Zerah without moving his head.

“You may.”

“What were their names? I’ve never heard you speak them.”

“Their names?” Zerah choked quietly. She reached for her mead. After a moment of darkness, she found herself staring at the purple morsels dotting her plum loaf. “My husband was Orin. My boys were Kyran and Isa.”

“How old?” Makus asked.

“Kyran was four. Isa three,” she answered matter-of-factly. She touched the softened paper of the journal. “Here they were a year younger.”

“Ah,” Makus said, lightening. “Marikano children are quite a handful at that age. Especially when there are two of them.”

To her surprise, Zerah laughed. “Yes. They were a handful. They used to fight without end. Playfully, for the most part.”

“Did they now?”

She lit up. “I never expected such violent offspring.”

Makus laughed.

Zerah continued, suddenly at ease. It felt good to enjoy speaking about her family. “It bothered me for a while, but Orin insisted that it was good for growing boys. He even joined them sometimes. He’d pretend to be a troll, and they were knights. They’d use sticks for swords. They hit him too hard more than once.”

Makus smiled. “That might have changed his mind.”

“It didn’t deter him in the least,” Zerah said. “He was patient with them. Always calm. He would correct the boys sternly, but as quietly as he could.”

“I can see why the two of you were husband and wife.” Makus finished his bread and brushed his crumbs onto the floor.

Zerah swallowed the last of her drink and murmured to herself, “Husband and wife. That is what we were.” After a long moment of silence, she said, “I won’t be able to bear it if I squander this opportunity.”

“To kill dragons?”

Zerah glared. “To kill Azoch.”



After another hour, Makus was alone in his room. “I am here,” he called out.

The warmth came more slowly. And was it dulled? Why?

“What have you learned?” Speaks said.

Makus was more nervous this time than the last. A feeling that he was doing something wrong crept into the corners of his awareness. But then he remembered his new purpose: helping the world fulfill its destiny. He let himself fall into Speaks’s warmth. It might have been shallower than before, but it was still so *right*.

“Adair will not take his dragon-killer with him,” he said. “They have no fear of Azoch as long as they have the colors raised.”

“Thank you, Makus,” Speaks said. “That is all. I will come when I need you again.”

Speaks vanished.

“Wait!” Makus said, hardly settled into the pleasure.

But it was too late.

Chapter 25

For most of his life, Elex had cared too much about what people thought of him. Others' opinions had dictated his every move. He was too eager to agree. He would not speak up if he had a novel thought. And there wasn't any circumstance imaginable in which he'd tell someone *no*. He just wanted people to like him—to the point that it made him miserable.

He hadn't realized the problem growing up. Then Iko arrived in Jynsomn, astonishingly unconcerned about what everyone else thought of his unpopular opinions or funny-looking prayer garb. Iko didn't hide that he didn't think much of Rog. He denounced the town gossips without reservation. He even declined an advance from Rein Whills, the prettiest girl in Jynsomn, claiming that she was *not up to his standards*. Then he got with Theia. What a scandal that had been. The gossip persisted for months.

Elex had been drawn to Iko, seeing in the bold newcomer things he did not find within himself. All it had taken was a few sincere questions about gods and the heavens for Iko to accept him just as he was. Being around him so much, Elex began to think and speak for himself, albeit just to those closest to him. But it was a start, and quite liberating. His lifelong anxiety diminished. Then Elex's sister died—a

strange, bloody cough took her in a few short days. Most around Jynsomn spoke kind words and offered food and help with the burial. Iko's strange ways had offered something more—a sincere hope of the afterlife, where Elex and his sister might one day be reunited.

Now, as Elex marched through an unfamiliar wood on his way to a battle against hundreds of wretchers, he reminded himself of these things. He thought of Cas. He was scared, but this was a worthwhile endeavor—perhaps the most worthwhile endeavor he had ever undertaken.

The sun had barely risen, and the insects beneath the trees swarmed. Elex was second-to-last in a line of six—the training crew plus Nabi leading the way. They were to march all day until reaching the rendezvous point near the Vale of Ambrial. Nabi led at an unbearable pace, and Elex dreaded the rest of the march almost as much as the battle. Also unsettling was that they would soon be leaving behind the safety of the Tyel Valley. Captain Essili claimed that Azoch would stay away if they raised the bright purple flag of Ivory City. Apparently, she thought it meant they had Adair's dragon-killer poison. But they couldn't fly the flag without risking being spotted by nearby wretchers. So, they would have to hide from the sky and the caves for the rest of their journey.

Elex tried to think of happier things.

“Hey, Iko,” he said.

Iko was walking in front of Elex and looked over his shoulder. “Hm?”

“There are so many girls in Ivory City, and I was thinking that there might be more than one I like. You think I could marry a pair?”

“Two!” Iko laughed. “You’d never survive.”

“Why not?”

Iko said, “You’re meant to give yourself to one woman. If you give yourself to two women, they will tear you in half.”

Elex chuckled. “Never thought of it that way.”

“He’s wise, like his father,” Essili said from in front of Iko. “What else did he teach you, little Jona? What of his war songs? I could use a good war song right now.”

Elex tensed at the question. Captain Essili seemed oblivious to what Iko really thought of him—and what Iko thought about his father’s involvement in the war against the Order of Matara. Worse yet, Iko was fasting today. Elex prepared himself to interject.

“War songs?” Iko asked flatly. “I have no idea what you mean.”

Essili craned his neck around. “Really? He sang them all the time.”

Iko shrugged and continued marching.

Elex thought that was the end of it. But after a few more steps, Essili broke into a soft song. His voice wasn’t the most pleasant Elex had ever heard, but it was practiced and precise.

*Your fear, my boys, I know it too.
It came for me, now here for you.
Stand tall, hold firm. We’ll see it through.
And make way for the good and true.*

Elex was so focused on the captain, he almost didn’t realize the song had brought Iko to a stop. He barely avoided running into the back of his friend.

“That’s not a war song,” Iko said.

Essili stopped too and turned around.

“It’s not *boys*, either. It’s *boy*,” Iko said. “Your fear, my *boy*. He wrote it for me when I was afraid of Turakis.”

By now, the rest of the crew had stopped. Elex suspected they all heard the frustration in Iko’s voice.

Essili certainly noticed it, and he obviously didn’t understand it. “Oh. Well, he must have repurposed it.” He shrugged.

“I doubt it,” Iko said coldly. “You must be misremembering. Please don’t sing it again.”

“Alright,” Essili said.

“Come now,” Nabi said, resuming her unbearable pace. “We have much ground to cover today.”



The soldiers hid throughout a small wood at the bottom of a broad cliff a mile south of the Vale of Ambrial. Many hid beneath blinds crafted of broken sticks, dirt, and dried leaves. Others were in caves. A few reclined beneath a waist-high canopy of broad, waxy leaves in a nearby clearing. None remained in the open for very long. They didn’t want the wretchers to see them.

But enough of the men and marikano peeked out from their hiding spots as Captain Essili’s squad arrived so that Iko could guess their total numbers. Two hundred? Maybe two hundred and fifty. Not nearly enough for their purpose. Their heavy, dirt-blackened faces told Iko that they knew it too.

“How many more are coming?” Iko asked.

Essili glanced behind him as he walked. “Worried, little Jona?”

Iko said nothing, but his concern remained. He wondered again if he had a better chance of sneaking into the wretchers’ fortress alone than taking part in a direct assault that would surely fail.

“Your father never concerned himself with such things,” Essili said. “Fewer swords just meant we needed a better plan than the enemy.”

“Do we have a better plan?” Iko asked.

Demeanor still light, Essili asked, “Don’t trust us?”

Iko said nothing.

“You’re not like your father, are you?” Essili said.



A voice called out, “Tatus!”

Iko’s eyes fluttered open. Beneath the canopy of waxy leaves, he could see a sliver of the sky. The mountain forest glowed pink in the early morning, and the night’s insects still chirped. It was cold. How had he slept in such cold? The ground was an unyielding block of iced earth. Strangely, the air smelled of citrus.

“*Tatus!*”

Iko looked toward the voice through the foliage. He could only see a pair of marikano legs, but he knew it was Nabi calling for someone named Tatus. He threw his cover aside and crawled toward her. It was strange for her to be so loud. No one else made a sound.

By the time Iko emerged from the foliage, Tatus had arrived. He was a young marikano with turquoise eyes. Each of the two marikano stared silently into the wall of pine trees on the other side of the encampment.

Iko saw nothing of interest as he stood up. “What’s all the ruckus about?” He brushed himself off. “And is there anything to eat?”

Nabi glared at him, then looked back toward the trees. “Perhaps we are surprised that you are still here, Mister Iko. See now who comes. It may raise your spirits.”

Murmurs and mumbles grew louder throughout the encampment. More soldiers emerged from concealment to watch the trees. Their spirits brightened, and they called to others who remained hidden.

“What’s going on?” Iko asked.

“Watch,” Nabi said.

Iko watched the trees. Movement materialized from the shadow—a sort of pattern coming toward the encampment. Forms came together and spread out, and then came together and spread out again. He continued to watch, only to be disoriented as the shadows disappeared. Then he saw them again. They had not gone anywhere; they were simply moving in a different pattern. Taller forms continued straight toward the encampment, and those behind seemed to weave in and out of the trees in two alternating groups. After several seconds, the shadows returned to their first pattern of movement.

Iko asked, “What?”

Several marikano emerged from the pine trees, answering Iko’s unfinished question. These were no ordinary marikano. There were nine of them, and all were magnificently mus-

cular. Three of the nine were females, much taller than the males. Obsidian-tipped spears were on all of their backs, and each had a long and curved sword and several knives of varying lengths on a mesh belt. They all wore black form-fitting pants and had their cranial tentacles pulled back with ties made of small wooden beads. The female marikano also wore fitted tops of the same dark material. Of particular interest were the earrings every one of them wore in their left ears. They were small wooden rings with a shimmering sapphire in the center.

“Who are *they*?” Iko asked.

Nabi beamed. “These are the Night Warriors.”

“The Night Warriors?”

The marikano approached abreast of each other, then in a maneuver that most closely resembled the movement of a flock of birds, they broke into three small wedge-formations, each with one of the tall females at the point. The movement was arrestingly elegant and suggested that the soldiers operated with one mind. Their steps were synchronized and smooth, and they barely made any sound. They paid no mind to the many men and marikano staring at them as they marched westward.

Nabi could barely contain herself. “They are looking for General Vhannus. Do you realize what this means?”

Tatus was smiling too. He chattered something.

“*Of course* we will win now,” she said.

Iko raised an eyebrow. Perhaps the young marikano had forgotten just how many wretchers were in the Vale of Ambrial. “They are decent fighters?”

Nabi continued to gawk. “Yes. *Decent* is a way to say it.” She tossed a satsuma she’d been holding to Iko. It had a bite

taken out of it, straight through the peel. “Here. This will help that empty belly of yours.”



Iko found Captain Essili on the other side of the encampment, along with a chubby, orange-eyed marikano. The pair reclined on opposite sides of the entrance to a cave. Twenty or so Night Warriors were scattered throughout the surrounding foliage, ready to pounce. They eyed Iko as he approached Essili, but they didn't move.

“Have you finalized the plan?” Iko asked.

Essili casually cut a slice of apple with his long knife. “You are quite the worrier, aren't you?”

The old marikano frowned and waved Iko off. “Go on now, lad. We'll be making assignments shortly.”

“It's fine. He's with me,” Captain Essili said. Apple juice dripped down his grizzled chin as he chewed.

The marikano squinted and inspected Iko. “Personally taking on new recruits? I've never even seen him.”

“His father fought with me against the Order of Matara.”

The marikano grunted indifferently.

“You want to know what we're doing?” Essili asked. He pointed the knife at the marikano. “This is General Vhannus. He's the brains.”

Iko offered the general a hesitant nod.

“Eager to kill wretchers, are you?” Vhannus asked.

“They have my daughter.”

Vhannus was surprised. "I'm sorry." He was sincere but steady. "If you want assurance of victory, I cannot provide it."

"I want to know what chance we have," Iko said. "If we're rushing toward certain death, I'll go find my own way."

"Your own way?" Vhannus chuckled. "My boy, you'd be charged with desertion."

"He's not signed a contract," Essili said. "Hasn't even been through a camp."

Vhannus straightened. "Yet he wears our uniform?"

"I wouldn't be here if it weren't for this father," Essili said.

Iko tilted his head. He didn't know exactly what Essili meant, but it was news to him.

"I doubt Adair would approve," Vhannus said.

"It was Zerah's idea," Essili said. He cut another slice of apple.

General Vhannus laughed. "Of course it was."

Essili clarified, "Mostly, anyway. I gave them the uniforms."

Vhannus peered at Iko over his thin, wire-framed spectacles. "You've come from?"

"Ekara."

"Bold." Vhannus placed his hands atop his round belly and drew in a deep breath. "We will draw the vermin out and ambush them."

"How?" Iko asked.

Vhannus spoke assuredly. "There is cover there. A small village at the base of the dam. That is where we begin. Their archers will get to work. We will retreat. They will think they have us on the run, and they will chase us to finish us off. Because that is what vermin do. When the bulk of their force

is exposed, the Portumnans will ambush them.” He indicated the Night Warriors.

Iko beheld the soldiers. “A force of twenty will turn the tide?”

“The Night Warriors will function as the tip of the spear,” Vhannus said. “But there are also a couple of hundred Portumnan regulars on the way. They should arrive throughout the day.”

Iko brightened. “What’s that? Five hundred swords and spears? Against six hundred?”

“Probably closer to seven by now,” Essili said.

“Yes, but more than half of their force is wregs,” Vhannus said. “It will be a fair fight, my boy. You’ll have your chance to save your daughter.”

Chapter 26

“I ’m going to have Justice Campo hold the throne while I’m away,” Bhal Adair said.

Makus could tell the words were a punch to Zerah’s gut. That didn’t surprise him, though she’d confided in him that she didn’t want the job to begin with. But he suspected it wasn’t as much about not getting the job as it was about who had been chosen over her.

Val Campo stood with his hands behind his back next to Adair’s throne, flanked by Reya. The blue-eyed marikano had been assigned to him since his usual guard would be at Ambrial. His gaunt form was straighter and taller than usual, and his frail, pointed nose tipped slightly into the air. His sunken eyes peered down at Zerah, who stood at the bottom of the dais.

The man was smug and insolent. Makus didn’t blame Zerah for her feelings.

“I take it that won’t be a problem?” Campo said in a slimy tenor croak.

Zerah shrugged. “Why would it be?” She forced a smile.

Apparently sensing the tension, Adair interjected. “I thought it best, given your progress on the dragon-killer. It’ll free you up to continue your work.”

That was sincere, but Makus knew the real reason. She had gotten carried away with her work on the dragon-killer and neglected her duties when given her first opportunity. He imagined she was trying to tell herself that it was okay—that the job was miserable anyway. But he knew her well enough to see her simmering as she watched Campo relish the moment with unwarranted pride.

“It is prudent,” Zerah said. “Hopefully, I’ll have located an arcanotaur by the time you return.”

“We can only hope,” Adair said.

Makus stepped forth from the shadows, expecting Zerah to leave.

“One other thing before I go,” Adair said. “An investigation has started into a breach that occurred late last night. Marshal Falgo is handling it.”

“A breach?” Zerah asked.

Adair nodded. “Miss Doerwine Felsmit. I found her near my personal quarters before I retired.”

The mention of Dori piqued Makus’s interest. He alone in the room understood that if Dori was doing something so bold, it was likely part of the plan of The One Who Speaks.

“Isn’t that the tavern owner?” Campo asked. His beady eyes got smaller.

“It is. I don’t know how she got past the guardsmen,” Adair said. “She was drunk, from what I could tell, and rambling on about our certain demise. She said she needed to warn me about the wretchers.”

Zerah tilted her head. “Yes. The captain and I have heard that from her. Utter nonsense.”

“I agree,” Adair said. “Given her state, I banished her from the city for a month rather than throw her in a cell. She

wasn't particularly concerning, but I was troubled by the fact that someone in her state got inside so easily. As I said, Falgo is handling it, but you need to be aware. Changes will likely come to our rotations and security measures."

"So, we've got no action to take while you're away?" Campo asked.

"None as far as I can see," Adair said. "I believe Dunbardin Castle is perfectly secure moving forward."



A few hours later, Makus sat hunched with his elbows on his knees in the hall over the archives Zerah was scouring. The mention of Dori by Adair had brought his mind back to The One Who Speaks, and he had yearned for the god's presence ever since. His mind raced uncontrollably. He had pulled himself out of his wallowing a handful of times, only to find himself back in it without understanding how he got there.

He remembered the comforting warmth, and he wanted it again. But Speaks had not given him any instructions about getting it back this time, so there was nothing he could do to get it.

Why had the god abandoned him as it did? Was The One Who Speaks a cruel deity?

Makus shook the thoughts from his mind. Speaks had not *abandoned* him. The world was still not ready, and Makus would have more work to do. His inability to control his yearning was his fault alone. He just needed to be patient. Speaks would be back.

A collision with the door at the bottom of the stairs brought Makus back to the world around him. Feet pattered rapidly up the dark, damp stairwell. Zerah appeared, holding a half-page document in her hand. Her hair was disheveled, and her breath was shallow and rapid. Candlelight glinted in her wide, green eyes. She was excited about something.

When she beheld Makus, her face fell. "Are you alright?"

Makus sat up straight on the creaking wooden bench against the wall. "Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Your eyes," Zerah said. She stepped closer. "They're... dimmer."

Makus waved a hand in dismissal. "Just natural variations." He nodded toward the paper. "Have you found something?"

Some of Zerah's excitement returned. She extended the document to Makus. "Godskeep." She took a deep breath. "There may be an arcanotaur at Godskeep."

Makus smiled, genuinely happy for his friend. "That is good news."

Zerah snatched the page from Makus's hand. "Come on, let's go talk to Val. We'll make arrangements for an expedition as soon as this business with the Praivun Alliance is finished."

"I admire your confidence in the Guard," Makus said. He stood to follow the justice.

"Why wouldn't I be confident?" Zerah raced out the door. "General Vhannus is leading the attack. I can't imagine the wretchers outfoxing him."

Chapter 27

Iko was only vaguely aware he was dreaming.

He was ten years old again, helping his father check river traps for fish. Farah appeared on the water's edge, wearing a green cloak that matched the trees behind her. She was missing two fingers on one hand, and her bright red hair had been cut so that it hovered above her shoulders.

"Our spy tells us they will attack Evisdale," Farah said.

Jona looked up from his place in the shin-deep water. "That seems like an unlikely target."

"They don't have the swords for anything more," Farah said. "This could be our chance to end them, Jona."

Iko didn't want his father to leave again. He'd started getting used to the fact that the fight with the Order of Matara was almost over, and he hated going to stay with Aunt Cyri and his three bratty cousins. Worse was the paralyzing fear he felt every time his father left—the fear that he'd never see him again. He couldn't sleep when he had to stay with Aunt Cyri. He would sit alone under the stars, away from the others, worrying that he'd be left there forever.

Jona agreed to go with Farah once more. He spoke to Iko while cleaning *Blessed Ember*. "The fighting will be over soon," he promised. "We can go wherever you'd like after that."

Iko wasn't sure if that was true, but he knew his father wished it was, and that mattered. He nodded solemnly, and Jona embraced him and kissed him on the head.

The following days were among the least unpleasant Iko had spent with his cousins. It was late spring, and the weather was warm and clear. The cousins coaxed him to the river for days full of swimming and games in the safe places where the trees hung over the narrow body of water. They were careful to keep Aunt Cyri's cinnamon candies dry, and all of them worked up immense appetites for some of the best meals Iko had ever had. He especially enjoyed the venison. He'd been so worn out by the end of each day that he'd slept nearly as well as the rest of them. It took almost a week before he started worrying about his father again.

Then Farah came back alone.

Iko was the first to see her through the trees. "Where is my father?" he asked.

Farah froze at the question. Iko was standing before her. A light rain fell.

The sight of Farah's stone face falling was one Iko would never forget. It told him everything he needed to know. She pulled *Blessed Ember* from beneath her cloak. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she presented it to Iko without a word.

Iko was crying. Somehow, he found himself in Farah's embrace. She stank like a wet dog, and he hated it.

"Your father turned the fight in our favor," Farah said.

That didn't make any difference to Iko. He pushed her away and beheld her. He'd imagined this moment before, but it had never been quite like this. He had not imagined the smell and the rain. He had not imagined the horrible finality of Farah's declaration.

“He gave us everything that he had,” Farah said.

“You didn’t deserve him.”

“But boy.” Farah’s cold, militant demeanor returned. “Would you prefer us overrun by the Order of Matara?”

“That wouldn’t have made a difference to me. Your fight was not ours. Why should he have died for you?”

“We needed good soldiers.”

“I need my father!”

They were on the rocky shores of the grey sea, staring out over rough waters on a dreary morning. This was where the heathens had put Jona Phainor to rest without any proper funeral ritual. Iko had never done the ritual before, but he was doing the best he could without a body.

Farah said without thought, “If you’re sure of an afterlife, why do you mourn?”

Iko did not answer.

“If you’d rather not stay with your aunt, we will find someone to take you,” Farah said. “Someone good, who will care for you right.”

Iko slipped away in the night while Farah slept. He had to get away from them all before they poisoned his mind and soul. He hated them for taking his father away. He hated Farah for pretending to care. She didn’t care about anything except winning her fight. His father had not mattered to her, and Iko didn’t matter either.

So Iko wandered across the world alone, clutching his father’s Silent Scroll to his chest. And everywhere he wandered, his father’s song hung in the air—reminding him that the heathens’ selfishness had robbed him of the only person who’d ever loved him.

*Your fear, my boy, I know it too.
It came for me, now here for you.
Stand tall, hold firm. We'll see it through.
And make way for the good and true.*

Chapter 28

“**W**here is she?” Iko asked as the day’s first light spilled onto the scene before him.

The Vale of Ambrial was a desolate sea of black, volcanic sand—an unnatural, featureless hollow among the whetted peaks of the Southern Garan Mountain Range. A quarter of a mile away, a massive stone-built dam stood between two cliffsides. Its top appeared as a bridge between dense mountain forests on its east and west. The dam had doubled as a fortress centuries ago, and it looked the part. Several towers stretched skyward behind the parapet wall on top—wretcher archers would be well-positioned. The faint rush of water cascading from the middle of the dam was the only thing Iko could hear. The water fed a small river that crawled southward, bisecting the vale. On the western side of the river, near the foot of the dam, was a small, derelict village of gnarled cabins. The village would be the Guard’s protection from the Praivun arrows.

Essili motioned toward the dam. “They stored arms and prisoners in the top of the dam when it was an outpost. That is where they are holding the women.”

Iko grimaced. That meant that to get to Cas, he’d have to enter the dam from ground level and climb to its top through scores of wretchers.

“They’ll see us before long,” someone said, “now that the sun’s up!”

“We’re about to move,” Essili said calmly.

Guardsmen still arrived. They’d split up into groups of ten or twelve and traveled the mile to the Vale of Ambrial by different routes. They gathered in a narrow ravine that opened onto the black sand plain’s southern edge. The Portumnan marikano were close behind, but they would not be part of the initial charge, so Iko didn’t see many of them.

Standing behind Iko, Elex loudly blew out a deep breath. “Said your prayers this morning, Iko?”

“More than usual. I kept you in mind.”

His nervous friend nodded in gratitude. “What’s the Silent Scroll have to say to us this morning?”

Iko didn’t hesitate to recite the passage he’d read before prayer. “*The wicked clutch their folly firm to their breast so that they may not see it and despair.*”

Elex frowned. “What does that have to do with fighting a battle?”

“Aim for their folly.”

Elex still looked confused.

Iko grinned. “The girls of Ivory City will love a war hero, Elex.”

“That’s probably true, isn’t it?”

Murmurs broke out behind them, and a man dressed entirely in black emerged from the crowd. A half-dozen purple-clad guardsmen flanked him. Iko did not need anyone to tell him that this was Bhal Adair. He carried himself proudly, offering a steely, confident gaze to every soldier he could. Each responded by straightening a little, perhaps becoming a little braver. His sword’s handle was gilded and

bejeweled, and his leather cuirass was embroidered with an ivory-colored image of a dragon's horn crossed with a sword. It was the same design that was on the Guard's purple flags.

Iko wondered if he was making the same mistake as his father—trusting the wrong people with his life. But he pushed the thoughts from his mind. Cas was in that dam. He was going to get her back.

“Now we go,” Essili said. “Stay on me. Listen to me,” he said to Iko. “I’ll see to it you live long enough to get to your girl.”

Iko nodded.

“I’ll be right behind you,” Elex said.

Adair moved to the edge of the ravine. “Guard on me!” he boomed.

The guardsmen fidgeted and bustled. They struck each other's chests for encouragement and whispered to each other.

“Colors!” Captain Essili ordered.

Bright purple banners rose above the heads of the army and flowed in the wind that swept through the ravine. Their holders bound them to the backs of designated carriers—about every tenth soldier.

Lord Adair turned toward the dam and jogged onto the open plain, and the army was close behind. The soldiers poured from the ravine, spread wide, and thundered northward. The clattering of their swords, spears, and shields echoed off the nearby western wall of the vale. If the wretches were not yet aware of the approaching army, they would be soon.

When they were about one hundred yards from the village, figures scampered behind the parapet wall atop the

forty-foot dam. Fifty yards later, the first wretcher arrows met the charge. Those with shields raised them. Men and marikano cried out as arrows struck them, and some tumbled to the ground. The hail of arrows grew thicker. More soldiers fell and wailed, and those unscathed ran faster toward the protection of the village.

In any other circumstance, the sight of the little log cabins of the village would have given Iko reason to despair. They were sad structures making their last stand against their inevitable dissolution. Their doorways twisted, their roofs sagged, and some had caved in entirely. But as the arrows fell upon the Guard's heads, the little rotting buildings had become life itself.

The army reached the safety of the southernmost edge of the village. The cabins groaned, creaked, and cracked as the soldiers threw their bodies into them, but they remained standing and stopped most of the wretcher arrows. Iko flattened his body against one cabin's grimy logs. His deepest breaths could not assuage the strange combination of anxiety and exhaustion. He turned back toward the black sand plain and watched the last of the men and marikano arrive. Many bodies were slumped over in the sand to the south.

Iko's throat tightened into a painful lump. He didn't see Elex anywhere.

When everyone was behind cover, the arrows from above relented.

Adair's voice echoed through the village. "Alright. Nice and easy!"

Iko found himself amidst sudden, startling movement. As one, half of the soldiers lurched toward cabins a little clos-

er to the dam. The wreg archers unleashed another volley of arrows. One marikano stumbled and caught an arrow through his neck. His rose-colored eyes dimmed, and his body crumpled.

“Now’s us,” Essili said.

Iko beheld the dead marikano, then remembered Cas.

“Go!” Essili dashed out, and Iko joined the advance.

Arrows showered the soldiers after a few steps, and screams filled the vale. Iko felt his hair tussled by one that came too close, but he reached his cabin without being struck.

“Archers hold and cover! And again, we go!”

Iko stepped out from behind cover, found a target atop the dam, and sent an arrow into the wreg. It tumbled over the parapet wall and landed in a heap below. The first wave advanced again. More arrows rose through the morning to meet the wretchers. The rest of the guardsmen emerged from behind the cabins and charged into the hail of arrows. Iko joined the sprint to the next set of cabins.

Another advance would bring them to the northernmost edge of the village. From there, twenty yards of sand would separate him from the dam. Directly before the advancing guardsmen, two towers protruded from the front of the western edge of the structure, and each extended two stories above the top of it. Each tower had a single narrow doorway on the ground level that provided access to the upper levels of the fortified dam. Either of these doors would do for Iko, but at the moment, wregs poured out of both of them. They came to stand behind a wall of shields.

“Wregs!” shouted the captain. “They are trying to thin us out. Watch your legs when they come.”

Iko joined the other archers in shooting at the wregs congregating at the bottoms of the towers. Alas, their shield wall was well-formed. Few arrows found their marks as the wregs advanced toward the village.

Blades rang out all over the battlefield as the wregs' shield-wall met the guardsmen and dispersed. The vale came alive with the sights and sounds of hand-to-hand combat. Iko, Essili, and the other guardsmen behind their cabin found themselves surrounded by a dozen of the inimical enemy. The little vermin repeatedly scampered close to stab and slice at the humans' legs before springing to a distance. Two of the other guardsmen fell during the encounter. The scene was one of many like it throughout the village.

Iko stepped toward one of the wregs and drew his sword. He sidestepped its weapon and kicked it onto its back. A swift cut with *Blessed Ember* separated the wreg's shield-wielding hand from its arm. The wreg cried out, and Iko silenced it with steel through its neck. Dark purplish blood splattered over the sand.

A soldier cried out, "The ukori are coming!"

Essili dispatched the last wreg behind their cabin and grabbed Iko by the shoulder. "Get to the back."

Iko shook his head. "She's right there!"

"You'll do her no good if you're dead," the captain said. "You can help us with your bow! Get to the back and help hold them long enough for Vhannus to get here."

Iko relented and dashed across the village. The captain shouted orders to the rest of the Guard while Iko ran southward. Arrows fell all around as Iko raced across the battlefield. The soldiers' expressions were grim as they abandoned the wounded to prepare for the ukori's coming onslaught.

Iko heard swords, axes, and spears crash against each other along the front line. Ukori screeched and bellowed, and men cried out in victory and in death. Iko leaped onto the nearest cabin and climbed to its roof. The structure buckled but held. He readied an arrow and scanned the battlefield for a target.

The scene was disheartening. The horde of ukori barreled through the Guard violently and effortlessly. They slashed and stabbed. They kicked, punched, and threw men out of their way. The wregs were reinvigorated as their larger counterparts overran the enemy, and they swarmed like angry bees.

Iko had only shot two arrows when the Guard's forces on the village's eastern side started their retreat. Shortly, the guardsmen near the middle of the village retreated southward, too. To the west, the Guard held a little longer where most of the marikano guardsmen had gathered. The big water breathers were able to go toe-to-toe with the ukori, but they soon pulled back, too.

The ukori continued their merciless push with startling efficiency. The Guard's retreat had been planned, but from the looks of it, they would not have been able to withstand the ukori if they had wanted to. If General Vhannus did not arrive soon, everyone would die.

Iko glanced southward, and his stomach knotted. The sandy flat plain was empty. Vhannus and his Portumnian warriors were nowhere to be seen. He feared the wretchers had outmaneuvered the general—that they had known about the second force and had sent their own to eliminate it. And without the Portumnans, there was no hope. The Praivun Alliance would achieve its victory.

Iko would have to find his own way into the fortress.

By chance, he glimpsed a marikano dashing from the village's southern edge. A glint of golden eyes was enough for him to know that it was Nabi. She was running toward the shallow river that ran from the dam alongside the village. The river was still covered in the early morning shadow. In a flash, she disappeared beneath the peaceful waters. Then, a set of glowing orange eyes popped out of the water a little farther to the north—right behind the army of wretchers who had clobbered the Guard.

The river erupted. Out leaped hundreds of marikano of Lake Portumnus. General Vhannus cried out as he led the way out of the water with sword raised. He was quickly overtaken by eight trios of Night Warriors, who were faster than the rest. The elite marikano moved much as they had through the forest near the encampment, with their groups of three weaving in and out of each other with grace and precision. In unison, they raised their spears and, even as they moved in their serpentine patterns, threw them into the backs of the wretchers who had not yet noticed them. In an instant, the Praivuns' forces were down by twenty-four ukori.

By the time the rest of the wretchers realized what had happened, the Night Warriors were upon them. The formidable marikano continued to work efficiently in their trios. They confounded and overwhelmed the wretchers. Even as they fought with their swords, they effortlessly hurled knives into the hearts and heads of ukori with whom they were not engaged. In those moments, they seemed invincible to Iko. That is, until he saw one of them struck with an arrow sent from the top of the dam. At once, the fallen Night Warrior's

two partners ceased their fighting and dragged him back toward the river.

The fall of the Night Warrior did little to help the wretchers since the rest of the Portumnans arrived while his comrades pulled him to safety. The Praivuns still held an advantage in numbers, but their response to the ambush was so disorganized and chaotic that it didn't matter. As they frantically tried to repel the Portumnan fighters to their east, the now emboldened Guard to their south began their counterattack. Iko leaped from his perch and joined in, quickly cutting down two flummoxed ukori. The wretchers fell by the dozen, and those who survived retreated toward the dam.

As the Guard and marikano overran the vermin, the scene in the village began to settle. But General Vhannus called out to let everyone know that their work was not finished. "To the towers! To the towers!" he cried. "We have them now!"

Chapter 29

The Praivun Alliance retreated but was not ready to admit defeat.

Iko joined Captain Essili outside the entrance to the eastern tower. They both peered inside, where a staircase spiraled up the hollow tower for six stories. It looked as if most of the wretchers had escaped into the dam, but a dozen wreg archers were positioned on upper flights of the staircase. They screeched and taunted their enemy below. When the miscreants noticed Iko and Essili leaning into the tower, they unleashed a volley of arrows toward them. The men spun back through the door to safety.

A young red-haired soldier was the closest to the captain. “What’s it look like, Cap?” he asked.

“Like we can take it,” the captain said.

Swords rattled, and cheers broke out following the captain’s assessment.

Essili continued as the din quieted. “You’ll have to be patient. Their will isn’t broken just yet. We’ll need shields.”

Most of the rest of the Guard gathered in a forty-foot-wide space between the two towers. As far as Iko could tell, the wregs were too short to shoot at the ground directly below them without climbing atop the parapet wall. A couple of them tried to do so, but were quickly shot down by watchful

guardsmen. Thus, the men and marikano on the ground were protected from the few enemy archers still crawling around atop the dam.

General Vhannus took charge of the Night Warriors and brought them into the western tower, leaving Essili and his men to take the eastern tower.

Over the next couple of minutes, the captain directed the soldiers with shields to try to take out the wregs in the eastern tower. They formed an impenetrable shield wall, behind which the archers entered the tower's lowest level. Once inside, the archers took turns leaning out of the cover of the shields to shoot at the wregs overhead. It was a slow process, but it was effective and safe. None of the soldiers was struck during the maneuver, and slowly but surely, the disorganized gaggle of wregs overhead dwindled.

The soldiers waiting outside could not contain themselves, and they shouted and rattled their weapons as each enemy fell. They were exuberant as they watched the last of the Night Warriors enter the western tower. The end was near. Judging by the restless clatter, none wanted to be left out of this rout.

That was why it was quite noticeable when the excited murmurs and shouts of the guardsmen suddenly dissipated. A moment of absolute silence was enough for Iko to turn around and investigate. He first saw Essili, who, like every other man and marikano he could see, was staring toward the southern sky over the Vale of Ambrial. All their mouths were gaping.

Iko hardly had time to guess what they were all looking at when the soldiers burst into a panicked mob. They cried out in fear and shoved past each other in search of cover.

Many fled into the two towers with little regard for the wreg archers overhead, while others retreated incautiously into the village. Many marikano dove into the nearby river.

There was only one thing that could evoke such fear. Iko knew what was happening. But he was nonetheless shocked to see a massive, winged form gliding silently toward the dam. Azoch had come for them.

The dragon's white scales glinted in the morning light. She glided over the vale's floor, kicking up sand as her limbs grazed the ground. She was lean for a dragon, sixty or seventy feet long, and not at all like the old Mizur, whom Iko had feared in Jynsomin. The muscles beneath her lustrous, serpentine form rippled with every movement. She snapped her powerful jaws, revealing her innumerable dagger-like teeth. Two gnarled horns jutted from the back of her skull and extended several feet over her neck. The hollow gaze of her black eyes sent chills up Iko's spine.

"Colors! Colors!" Adair ordered, panicked.

Soldiers raised the flags higher, but the dragon was not deterred by Adair's colors this morning.

When Azoch reached the village, she ascended toward the top of the dam's westernmost tower. The muscles along her back bulged as she flared her broad, leathery wings to slow her immense body. She reached for the tower, in which Vhannus and the Night Warriors remained, and pulled herself onto its corner. Her razor-sharp talons secured her to the structure's brittle stonework, and she raised her head so that it was even with the pale green spire at its top.

The dragon inspected the structure, then whipped her head into it, causing it to buckle and splinter. Seemingly angry that the obstinate structure remained intact, she

reared her head back again. The second blow shattered the nearest corner of the spire, sending debris crashing to the ground. Azoch peered through the new opening and, after a moment of consideration, opened her mouth to spew a thick, colorless liquid into it. A rapid clicking began in the beast's mouth, and Iko braced himself for what he knew was coming.

Azoch's stream of venom ignited, and the resulting explosion was deafening. The vale shook as the western tower burst into a blinding inferno. Flames burst out of every crack and hole to scorch all that was nearby.

Azoch ceased her firing, but the blaze raged on. No voices called out from within the tower. The dragon had reduced the old General Vhannus and all the magnificent Night Warriors to lifeless ash in the blink of an eye.

Most of the Guard stood, pale as ghosts, paralyzed in dreadful awe of the terrible beast. But some fools were still breaking away to flee into the village and its little rotted cabins.

"Not into the village!" Essili begged the fleeing soldiers. "Not into the village! There is no hope for you there!"

His pleas fell on deaf ears. Those who had run from the dam did not turn back.

Had Azoch's fire been infinite, she may well have leaped to the eastern tower and fired it, too. But as it was, there were precious few minutes before the dragon was ready to breathe fire again. Like all dragons, her fire venom was limited. After a burn as considerable as the one she had just conducted, she had most likely depleted her reserve of the incendiary fuel for the time being. Iko knew her body would replenish

it soon enough, but in the meantime, the soldiers had time to reach the dam's interior.

The captain must have understood this, too. He raised his sword toward the top of the tower. "Up! Up! Up!" he cried. "We've got to get inside before she's got her flame back!"

The wretchers in the eastern tower had not fled from Azoch, and their arrows continued to fall upon the Guard. They must have known what Iko knew—that the men and marikano were vulnerable to dragon fire as long as they were in the tower. If the Praivuns could keep the would-be invaders at bay long enough, the dragon would win the fight for them.

Essili scowled at the archers who had huddled beneath cover. "Pick up your bows and clear these stairs!" he said.

Iko dropped his shield, nocked an arrow, and sent it into a wreg overhead. He grabbed another arrow and looked for a target, but seeing a wreg aim at him, he spun out of the tower's doorway.

Having exhausted her flame but not her hatred, Azoch turned her attention to those who sought refuge within the dilapidated village. She unwound herself from the burning tower and glided southward, landing in their midst. The nearest cabin was helpless against her wrath, and a single swipe of her forelimb fractured it into a hundred pieces. Two sorry souls remained standing where the cabin had been. They tried to flee, but they were not nearly fast enough.

Azoch snapped forth like a viper, snatching one man in her jaws before he could take a step. He flailed about futilely as the dragon tilted her head back and swallowed him whole. She took the other man into her hand and bashed him into the ground until his body was limp. Then she dropped him

in the sand, bloodied and lifeless. Ever unsatiated, Azoch turned her attention to a nearby group of soldiers who were fleeing southward. She lunged toward them. Their terrified screams filled the vale.

Iko turned away from the scene, and he noticed Essili was captivated by it. He grabbed the captain's sleeve. "No point in watching that, Captain Essili. The ukori have come back, and our men are retreating." He motioned to the staircase.

Overhead, the soldiers had already reached as high as three stories, just one story from the dam's entrance, but their progress was stymied. A handful of ukori had come onto the stairs, and they stalked like wolves. They had yet to swing their swords, but their presence on the narrow stairway was enough to stop the soldiers from trying to go any farther. The men closest to them shouted for the soldiers behind them to back up while keeping their shields raised.

Iko observed the entrance to the fortified dam behind the ukori, and he knew Cas was just beyond it. He charged into the mass of soldiers on the stairs, shoving his way forward.

Azoch roared. Iko heard her destroy another cabin. The sounds of her fury escaped no one's notice.

Captain Essili yelled, "Press on! Forward, boys! Forward! We have to get inside!"

But he was not nearly loud enough to be heard over the chaos.

Chapter 30

The retreating guardsmen trembled, and Iko burst through them. *Blessed Ember* glinted as it caught the light of the fire. Iko brought the sword into the neck of one of the stalking ukori with all his might. It happened too fast for the others to do anything about it, and Iko engaged another befuddled ukori while the first's limp corpse fell to the ground.

The men and marikano behind Iko lurched forth. He'd shown them the ukori were not invincible.

The dam shuddered. Azoch had landed on it. It shook again, and Iko knew the dragon was trying to break the dam.

The Guard pushed toward the top of the stairs. A cloud of arrows rose from the archers below, and the ukori fell away. In a daze, Iko hacked through the enemy until he reached the entrance to the hallway inside the top of the dam that stretched from one side to the other.

Golden beams of morning sunlight flowed through windows on the right and a thin smog from the burning tower. Light also flowed in from a doorway immediately to Iko's left, where a short stairwell led outside—to the top of the dam. To his dismay, wretchers were pouring into the hallway from rooms on the left. Some turned and fled from the

invaders. Others turned toward Iko. He readied his bloody sword as they approached.

The fortress groaned and cracked as the dragon's assault continued. Sheets of water started coming out of the rooms behind the wretchers. It was not much, but it was enough for Iko to know the dam was compromised.

Then Iko heard screams—human screams. Women. Girls. A flash of pale human skin caught his eye behind the wretchers running toward him.

Iko ducked an ukori's broadsword and brought *Blessed Ember* into the foe's belly.

"Help!" a woman called out.

Through the crowd of wretchers in front of him, Iko saw the prisoners—women and girls being carried over the shoulders of ukori toward the other side of the dam. He cut down a wreg in front of him, anxious to get closer. But the wretchers kept coming.

A bright blue dress appeared in the hallway, carried as the others were. The girl's head hung so that her dark curls covered much of the ukori's back.

"Casiena!" Iko yelled. He was propelled forward by an inhuman determination, only to find himself dodging another wreg's sword. He quickly dispatched his foe.

Cas's head snapped up. Her eyes found Iko's. "Father!" she called in a frail voice.

There was no other sound to Iko, even in the chaos.

"Cas! I'm coming."

The young girl tried to say something else. Instead, she sobbed. Her face was dirty and gaunt, and her curls were matted. She reached her bound hands toward her father and cried louder.

The dam shook again. Azoch had moved. She was on the eastern tower now, striking its top.

Cas disappeared behind more wretchers.

“No!” Cas cried. “Father, help! Help!”

“I’m coming, Cas!”

Water suddenly gushed into the hallway between Iko and Cas, knocking some of the wretchers to the ground. The dam was breaking.

Cas disappeared from view.

“The walls are failing!” someone said behind Iko. It was Captain Essili.

The last of the ukori charging the Guard took a spear to the chest.

The water rose to Iko’s shins.

Azoch struck the top of the tower again and roared.

Essili implored, “C’mon. We’ve got to get out of here! This way.”

He indicated a stairwell behind Iko through which soldiers were fleeing. Iko could only guess that it would take him to the top of the dam, behind its two towers and very near the forest in which he could hide from the dragon.

“I can’t leave her!” Iko said.

“Survive to save her another day,” Essili said. He nodded toward the gushing water and the countless wretchers fleeing on the other side of it. “There’s no hope for either of you that way.”

Iko hated that the captain was right. He turned to follow the rest of the Guard.

A familiar cry stopped Iko’s exit. He bolted back toward the tower. From the entryway, he saw a chubby form dragging a partially charred and faltering marikano up the spi-

raling stairs a story below. It was Elex helping Nabi, who looked gravely injured.

The tower's roof shattered as Azoch finally drove through it. Splinters, dust, and rubble rained down.

Iko dashed toward his friend.

"Iko!" Essili yelled.

Elex called out, "Help us, Iko! Help us!"

Iko put Nabi's heavy arm around his neck. She was barely conscious. It took all of his strength and Elex's to move the marikano with any speed. The steady flow of water rushing down the stairs made things still more difficult.

Azoch's head appeared in the bright blue sky overhead. She opened her mouth and ejected her stinking venom into the tower. Iko and Elex were a few feet from the door when the dragon's igniter sounded.

Click, click, click...

They leaped out of the tower. Flames singed their backs as Azoch's venom ignited. They hurried through the stairwell through which the others had escaped. As they climbed, heavy footsteps overhead told them Azoch was moving toward the middle of the dam, closer to the gap she had already created. That would provide Iko and Elex with a chance to get Nabi to the trees without being noticed. The dragon began pounding on the structure again, screaming angrily.

A dry, cold breeze blew across the group from the expansive glassy lake on their right as they emerged atop the dam. They felt the heat of the burning towers on their left. A few yards ahead lay mountain wilderness and steep slopes. Captain Essili waited just outside the stairwell's exit, and he instinctively grabbed Nabi, freeing Iko from the burden.

Iko looked back toward the dam while others fled toward the trees. He was aghast at how close he was to the great white dragon, who continued hammering the top of the dam with her horned head. A large piece of the fortified structure broke away, sending a heavy water flow and debris into the vale. Azoch relented, seemingly satisfied with her victory. Then, her cold, heartless gaze fell upon Iko. She bellowed.

A voice boomed from the trees behind Iko. "Azoch!"

Iko knew the voice but could not place it.

"Azoch, I have come for your head!"

The dragon looked toward the voice, dropped to her forelimbs, and roared mightily. She opened her mouth, and her ribs contracted as if she intended to release her fire venom, but it had not been long enough since the dragon's last burn. What little venom she had regained sputtered and fell harmlessly a few feet in front of her.

Iko turned around. There at the edge of the trees, a small group of guardsmen stood with bows in hand. Their cloaks had been shed to reveal their white and purple tunics, and all of them wore gold and silver armor, which glistened in the early morning sunlight. Bhal Adair stood at their center, staring unflinchingly at his foe. The lord raised his bow, and the rest of his group followed suit. He never appeared to question the power he held over the beast—he carried himself as if he knew Azoch would flee from him.

But this morning, she did not.

Azoch leaped into the air, glided over Iko, and landed in front of Adair. He panicked and hastily released his arrow. His men shot too. The arrows struck the dragon, and while a few penetrated her thick, scaly armor, none had any effect on her. In an instant, her jaws closed over the paralyzed Bhal

Adair. She shook him until she broke him. Then she dropped him carelessly onto the ground. He struck rock below with a sickening, helpless *thud*.

The men surrounding the lord scattered, and all the others who had stopped to watch Adair tame the beast fled into the mountain wilderness. The dragon roared and gave chase.

Iko dove into the freezing lake water and swam.

Chapter 31

A stumbling blue-eyed marikano almost knocked Elex over. Azoch shrieked somewhere behind him. Dying men shouted, and the air smelled of bile and fire. There was a dense forest to his right, but Elex chose the rocky crevasse to his left, into which half the fleeing soldiers hid. Its rock walls were black and slick with dew, dotted with brilliant chartreuse moss. As he ran, the crevasse deepened and grew wide enough for ten men standing shoulder-to-shoulder, but no one was standing now.

Trees crashed behind him as the dragon closed in on the army.

The crevasse forked, and half the soldiers went each way. It forked again, and the soldiers split again.

Elex saw Captain Essili ahead, still hauling Nabi, who was helping herself along more than should have been expected. They disappeared into the rock wall.

A cave!

A few men dashed after Essili. Elex followed suit.

It was not so dark in the cave that one could not see at all. Enough daylight filtered in so that the men were ghostly blurs. Elex's hand came against the rock, and he breathed in the damp air. Everyone gasped for breath as quietly as

they could. The dragon would pass them soon, and their lives depended on their silence.

There was a grunt and a gush. Something spattered on the floor. A man groaned and collapsed.

Hanging from Essili's shoulder, Nabi's sagging head snapped up. Her glowing golden eyes pierced the darkness before them. "Our enemy hides alongside us!"

Elex saw the man crumpled on the ground. A pool of blood expanded beneath him.

Something moved in the shadows deeper inside the cave. Feet pattered. An arrow sliced past Elex and out of the cave's entrance.

The cave shook. Azoch purred. She was close. She searched and sniffed the ground.

Elex's eyes adjusted to the darkness, and he saw them. Wregs. Four of them? Five? Not ten feet away. They did not move. They knew the cost of a sound, too. One of them had a bow and readied another arrow.

The dragon neared.

Elex was upon the wregs before they realized it. His blade slid through the wreg archer's chest. The wreg dropped the bow and grasped helplessly at the sword's hilt. A miserable yelp caught the other wregs' attention. Elex withdrew his sword and raised it. The other wregs hissed as Elex kicked the bow away from his enemies.

Azoch bellowed outside the cave, drawing the attention of the wregs. The dragon had not noticed them yet. Everyone stayed silent.

Elex slowly stepped back toward his allies, keeping his sword raised the whole way. None of the other wregs had a bow, so they were safer now.

Captain Essili gently placed Nabi on the ground.

“These three are the only ones I see,” Nabi whispered, wincing as she leaned against the rock.

Essili drew his sword. The other men followed his lead as quietly as they could. There were seven of them. They would win this fight.

The dragon snorted outside. Her tree trunk legs passed in front of the cave. The footsteps faded, and all in the cave carefully raised their swords.

Elex stepped back, and the rest of the men approached the wregs. The little wretchers came together, facing the men. They had no retreat. They had no hope. Elex thought it odd that they stayed so quiet. They were dead whether or not they made a sound.

Essili hacked first, then the rest. Before any of the men delivered their third blow, it was over. The wregs' weapons fell, and there were no other sounds.

It was quiet outside, except for the wind howling through the rocks.

“Where have the rest of us gone?” Elex asked.

“Wherever they could,” Essili said, out of breath. He approached the entrance of the cave and leaned out. “She’s gone, I think.”

“Dragons are cunning, Captain,” Nabi said. She struggled to her feet. Her left pant leg was torn at the thigh, and she had a cut on her leg, but otherwise was uninjured. That surprised Elex, given how helpless she had been when they’d ascended the tower. He surmised she’d taken a blow to the head.

“I say we stay put for a while,” said one of the men in the cave. “Might be a trap from her.”

“Maybe,” the captain mumbled. “But there are plenty of others to chase.”

“This makes no sense,” Nabi said. “We raised our colors. Have we not deterred her in the past with our colors?”

“We have,” the captain said. The light from outside illuminated exactly half of his face. “I... I don’t know what happened.”

“And Lord Adair,” one of the men said.

Essili grimaced.

“She didn’t care at all. I don’t understand. I thought she was scared of us. Of *him!*”

“What of my wife, Captain?” another said. “Is Azoch on to Ivory City? We need to get back there, don’t you think?”

“They have dragon-killer at Dunbardin,” Essili said. “They’ll be alright.”

“Didn’t stop her from eatin’ Adair,” another man said.

Essili shook his head. “He didn’t have it with him.”

“What! Why?”

Another man answered impatiently. “He wouldn’t leave the women and children without the poison, Isan.”

“But the colors have always been enough,” Nabi said. She was still in disbelief.

“She knew he was bluffing,” Isan said. “She knew he didn’t have it.”

Essili scoffed indignantly. “How would she have known that?”

Elex suddenly remembered Iko, and the conversation faded from his awareness. He came to the cave entrance, leaned out, and looked toward the dam. He heard nothing, and he saw nothing but wet rock and moss. He had seen Iko behind

Azoch when she had charged. He was probably alright, but Elex needed to make sure. He stepped into the crevasse.

“Hey!” Essili said. “Where are you going?”

“To find Iko,” Elex said. “He’s still back there.”

“Why don’t you stay, huh?” the captain said. “Give it a few minutes. He can take care of himself.”

Before Elex could protest, a cough from the darkness startled the men in the cave. It was one of the wregs, not quite dead.

“Finish the beast off!” Isan said.

Two men rushed toward the wreg.

“Wait!” Nabi said. She limped past the men and kicked the weapon from the helpless wreg’s hand. She came to her knees in front of the foe, and her glowing golden eyes illuminated the wreg’s face. He peered at her and coughed again, then he said something.

“What are you doing?” Essili said.

“Do you not want to know why they want to kill us?” Nabi said.

Elex remembered Nabi could speak to wretchers.

The marikano spoke in the wretcher tongue—that cacophony of grunts and syllables with too few vowels.

The wreg had not expected that but responded with gurgles and groans of its own.

“He calls us interlopers,” Nabi said.

“Inter—what?” Elex said.

“Invaders,” Essili said. He asked Nabi, “That’s what this is all about, is it? Why do they think we are interlopers?”

Nabi asked the question, and the wreg screeched in response.

Nabi translated. "He says the land we occupy has been set aside by the Lord Praivus for the devoted. He says..." Nabi let the wreg speak a little more. "We defile it with our presence, and we must be driven out."

"Tyel Valley? What gives them that idea?" Essili asked sardonically.

"Praivus told them," Nabi said.

Essili laughed. "Tell him Praivus is mistaken."

The struggling wreg and Nabi conversed.

"He says we stand against a god," Nabi said. "If we do not leave now, we will be destroyed. Once the devoted consummate their covenant, Azoch will serve Praivus, and the devoted will enjoy her protection."

"Protection by a dragon?" Essili asked, amused. "What sort of consummation does that require?"

Nabi asked.

The wreg cackled.

"He says they will consummate before the... I don't know this word... perhaps he means *equinox*? They will offer Praivus' gift to Azoch."

On a hunch, Elex stepped forward. "He means the Praivun Moon? The next full moon?"

Nabi asked for clarification. "Yes. The full moon."

"They are going to feed the girls to the dragon?" Elex asked.

Nabi tilted her head, unsure what to make of the question. She asked the wreg anyway.

The wreg eyed Elex and said something.

"He wants to know how you know that," Nabi said. "He wants to know if Praivus has spoken to you."

Elex ignored the nonsensical suggestion. “That’s when they usually offer the girls to Praivus by throwing them in lava or burning them. I suppose they’ll be giving them to a dragon this time.”

Nabi continued to translate. “He repeats that we are doomed. Too many of his compatriots survived this morning. We are... the damned. We are doomed to death and enslavement in the afterlife until our light is extinguished forever. Praivus has spoken this. It was Praivus who told them where this paradise would be. It was Praivus who told them about us, the interlopers. Did we notice that the dragon chose to chase us, the interlopers? The dragon did not pursue the devoted. Fleeing from the sacred valley will save us much pain.”

“I think I’ve heard enough,” Essili said.

Nabi agreed coldly. “I do think he has outlived his usefulness.”

Essili promptly drove his sword through the bottom of the wreg’s neck and twisted it.

“Isan?” the captain asked, withdrawing his blade coolly.

“Yes?”

“You and Beiva will follow the wretchers,” Essili said. “Track them from a distance and be careful. When they’ve settled somewhere, make haste back to Ivory City to let us know where they are.”

“Yes, sir.”

“The rest of us will split into pairs and return to Ivory City by different paths. We’ll have to tell the justices what has happened here and that a sizable contingent of the wretcher army remains at large.”

“I’m not going back until I find Iko,” Elex said.

Essili wiped the wreg's blood from the sword with the bottom of his shirt. He slid the blade into its sheath and stepped toward the daylight. "You will be with me," he said. "We will find Iko, then we go."

Elex nodded.

The captain looked at the men in the cave one at a time, and each affirmed his orders with a nod. "Alright," he said. "Let's get to it."

Chapter 32

Iko kicked hard and broke through the water's surface. He drew in a deep breath and prepared to go under again, but when he heard Azoch roar from farther away than he'd feared, he treaded water instead.

He sloshed in a circle, surveying the lake's shoreline. To the west, he saw the rocky outcrops and forest into which the surviving guardsmen had fled. To the east were the dense woodlands into which the wretchers had disappeared with Cas. He might have swum across the lake to follow them had the current not started pulling him toward the gap Azoch had created in the dam. It threatened to carry him over the edge to his death if he tried to cross it, so he swam in the opposite direction.

He reached the shoreline and collapsed face-first, shivering and breathing in the rich, stinking mud. The fight, flight up the stairs, and swim had left him weak, and he embraced the momentary respite. But it would not last. He couldn't hesitate if he wanted to take advantage of what may have been his best chance yet to save Cas.

He was still hopelessly outnumbered, but the wretchers were, in all likelihood, going to be reeling from the crushing loss of their fortress and soldiers for the foreseeable future. They'd be disorganized and scattered, and Iko doubted their

top priority would be keeping their prisoners secure. He was confident he could track them without being seen in the mountains. If he were careful and patient, he'd have an opportunity to sneak her away without coming to blows with any—or many—of the wretchers.

Iko rolled over, sat up, and reached for his leather canteen. The lake water was cold and clean, and he needed to have enough to drink for the trek ahead. He dipped the canteen into the lake, and bubbles gurgled to the surface as it filled.

Azoch roared again, farther away this time. Still, Iko turned toward it out of instinct. But instead of the dragon, he saw Elex and Essili approaching him from the outcrops. Iko stood and fastened his canteen to his belt.

“Thank goodness,” Elex said, hurrying forth. “I was really worried.”

“I’m fine,” Iko said. “Just wet and cold.”

“Better than dead,” Essili said. “Come on. Best get back into the trees before the dragon takes flight.”

Iko indicated the other shoreline and said, “I think this is where our ways part, Captain.”

Essili followed Iko’s eyes to where the wretchers had disappeared into the trees, only then seeming to understand what he’d meant. “You don’t need to do that, Iko. We can still help you.”

Iko gritted his teeth and pointed across the water. “She’s right there! I’ll make the most of what’s happened here. Take advantage of the time the wretchers will need to regroup.”

“It’s too great a risk to go alone,” Essili said.

Iko looked toward the vale and the bloody bodies that littered it. “A greater risk than trying that again with you?”

Essili grew stern, and he stood tall. “We had the advantage until the dragon showed up, if you remember. We will gain it again.”

“Without the Night Warriors?” Iko asked. “Without Vhannus or Lord Adair? What if the dragon comes again?”

“We’ll have the dragon-killer next time,” Essili said.

Iko’s eyes narrowed. He was in disbelief when he realized what he’d just heard. “He didn’t have it with him?”

Essili shook his head. “No.”

Iko stepped toward the captain. “We engaged in open warfare beneath a dragon’s sky, and you didn’t bring the one thing we have to protect us from a dragon?”

“Azoch has never approached our colors,” Essili said. “Ever. I don’t know why they didn’t work this morning. Something’s changed.”

Iko had doubted Essili and the Anuthurians before, but now, he felt betrayed. They’d knowingly left him defenseless beneath a dragon’s sky without telling him, and he’d nearly paid the price for it.

Essili looked to the mud and brought his hand to his forehead. “Look, you don’t need to go off and get yourself killed. And your bow could mean much to us in the next fight. Come back with us.”

“Why in the world would I trust you again?” Iko asked.

“Your father trusted me,” Essili said.

Iko gritted his teeth. “That hardly helps your case.”

“Why?” Essili asked. “It must mean something.”

“Because dragging him into your fight got him killed,” Iko snarled. “Just like you almost got me killed.”

“*Dragging him?*” Confusion flashed across Essili’s face. “No one *dragged* Jona Phainor anywhere.”

Iko raised a finger in accusation. “You took advantage of him—used him for his skill with a blade. You didn’t care about him. About his family.”

“That’s not true,” Essili shook his head. “That’s just not true. Iko, your father was our heart. Don’t you know that? Steady and certain. Warm and reassuring to the weakest of us. Better if it had been me than him who fell, and I’m not the only one who felt that way.” Essili thought before continuing. “And might I add that he willed us to victory more than once, just as you did when you charged up those stairs and pushed the ukori back. I know what’s in your blood, Iko. I saw it in him, and now, I’ve seen it in you. Come back with us. Help us, and let us help you.”

Iko’s throat tightened, and he came to the edge of tears when he heard his father admired in such a way. But it was coming from the mouth of one of the very heathens who had gotten him killed, and Iko didn’t know how to make sense of it.

Iko suddenly wanted nothing more than to flee from Essili’s questions and claims—to retreat into something more familiar. More importantly, he wanted to go to Cas. He shook his head and said, “I didn’t charge up that tower for you.” He looked toward Elex. “Let’s go.” Then he turned and started walking along the shoreline.

But after a few steps, he realized he was walking alone. He turned around to find Elex still standing next to Essili. His friend’s cheeks were pink, and his eyes were full of what may have been mistaken for anger by anyone else. But Iko knew that look on Elex—fear. Elex had always been afraid of disagreement, even with Iko.

“Iko,” Elex said. “I think we should go back to Ivory City with the captain.”

Iko stepped back toward the pair of men. “This is our chance to get Cas back.”

“I’m not sure our chances are really better that way,” Elex said. “And I won’t until I hear Ivory City’s plans after what’s happened this morning. Don’t you think we owe it to Cas to hear them out?”

“They’ve shown me enough,” Iko said. “We can’t give the Praivun Alliance more time to reorganize.”

“And what about all the people in Ivory City?” Elex asked. “We could help them. We should, shouldn’t we? Especially after today. They could certainly use *you*.”

Iko scoffed. “I doubt a few of my arrows will make any difference.” He raised his chin. “Are you saying you won’t come with me?”

Elex shook his head. “No. I’m begging you not to make me.”

Part of Iko was angry—in disbelief that Elex would challenge him at such a critical moment. But he also knew his friend was probably right. Why did that bother him so much? Why was it so difficult to admit the Anuthurians could probably come up with a better plan than his going after Cas alone? That helping them fight the wretchers was a noble thing to do?

“The dragon-killer could make all the difference, don’t you think?” Elex said. “Captain thinks we might even use it to kill Azoch before we attack again. That would give us a fighting chance to save Cas *and* Ivory City.”

Iko asked Essili, “You are confident we’ll be able to use the poison?”

“It’ll be up to the justices,” Essili said. “But I can’t imagine them denying it with Ivory City’s very existence on the line. So, yes. I believe we will have it.”

Iko finally relented. “Fine. I’ll hear your plan,” he said. “For Elex’s sake and none other.” He looked to Elex. “If it does not satisfy me, will you come back with me?”

Elex relaxed and nodded. “Of course.”

“Then let us make haste,” Iko said, walking toward the outcrops without making eye contact with the captain. “My daughter’s life depends on it.”

Chapter 33

It was a quiet morning at Dunbardin Castle. Angst held most of the people's tongues. Everyone knew the fight at Ambrial must have been over, and now they had to wait until at least nightfall before any sort of report came to them. Had they decimated the Praivun Alliance? Had they forced them to retreat into the mountains for good? Or was the wretched army marching toward Ivory City this very moment, bent on its destruction? These questions remained on almost everyone's mind.

Given the circumstances, there was little on the official agenda today. Zerah passed the time by reading in the main courtyard, her favorite place in Dunbardin. Usually, the colorful floral arrangements, their sweet fragrance, and the old mottled sycamores made it easier to escape from the stresses of castle life. Still, this morning, even with the cheerful serenade of wrens and robins who called the courtyard home, Zerah's thoughts remained on Ambrial. It was not because she was particularly worried about the Guard's chances, but because she was anxious to begin her search for an arcanotaur. The sooner the Praivun Alliance was defeated, the sooner she could get her hands on more dragon-killer poison, and the sooner Azoch would be dead.

A sudden tremor took Zerah's mind away from the page in front of her. The birds stopped singing. There was another tremor, and the birds rose from the courtyard's trees in unison.

Makus stood from his respite against a sycamore, sensing something out of the ordinary.

A deep roar reverberated through Ivory City. There was a dragon nearby.

Shouts echoed through the castle. Zerah was on her feet. There was an explosion. The voices blended together and swelled into a panicked chorus. Zerah sprinted across the courtyard with Makus at her side. Overhead, the dragon appeared and swooped low, dropping a line of her venom and igniting the end of it to send half the courtyard up in flames.

Zerah reached the doorway as Azoch circled for another pass. Bhal Adair's poison was in his chamber, and she or Campo had to authorize its use. She bolted up the stairwell.

Excitement overtook Zerah, and she grew eager. Azoch had made a miscalculation, and she would pay for it with her life. This was the opportunity Zerah had been waiting for. A single thought consumed her—*kill the dragon*.

There was more shouting, and Dunbardin Castle shook. The dragon had landed.

"Underground!" someone shouted behind Zerah. "Get underground where she can't reach you!"

"Have we got any arrows up here? A bow?" Zerah asked, already out of breath from the sprint up the stairs.

"Lord Adair always keeps a bow and full quiver near his wardrobe," Makus answered.

There was no one but the usual guards in the hallway at the top of the stairs. They were hurrying from window to window as if they were trying to figure out what was going on. Makus and Zerah entered Adair's room.

In the middle of the back wall, alone upon a little table, was a small but ornately decorated wooden box. Golden trim along the box's top shimmered. Its sides were engraved with line after line of elegant foreign writing, and on its top was an intricately detailed engraving of a landscape full of foreign trees and animals. It was a beautiful display of craftsmanship, but burn marks and deep gashes marred it.

"Get the arrows!" Zerah commanded Makus as she came to the box.

The dragon was in the courtyard.

Campo entered with Reya. "Quickly, Zerah. Quickly!"

Zerah unlatched the box, and when she looked inside, she gasped.

Makus arrived with the arrows. Not understanding Zerah's paralysis, he placed them at her breast. "Here!"

Zerah paid them no mind.

"On with it now!" Campo said.

Zerah spun around, eyes full of fear.

"What's wrong?" Campo asked. "What are you waiting for?"

"It's gone," Zerah said. "The poison is gone!"

Part Three: New Moon

The One Who Speaks as Interpreted by the Silent
Seer Velia Amenini

I chose my servants wisely. The wretchers reacted to my imitation of Praivus as I'd hoped. They failed to destroy Ivory City, but in the end, I found another way, and I can still make use of their zealotry and power. That woman, Dori, proved useful too, despite revealing more about me to the other mortals than I had asked. She trembled before my dragon, as she should have, but in the end, she delivered the necessary message to Azoch regarding the poison.

My most potent servant is Makus. His part has yet to come to fruition, but it is critical for the restoration of my order. He is further from me than I would prefer, but he is coming closer. With continued attention, he will soon be entirely within my grasp, and I will end the threat of Ivory City once and for all.

Chapter 34

Thunder rolled across the plain south of Ivory City, greeting Iko, Elex, and Essili as they emerged from the forest. None said a word, but each froze and stood in awe of the scene across the field. Less than a mile away, Ivory City smoldered in the night. The scent of burned wood washed over the men, carried on the gales of the impending storm. A lightning flash revealed a skyline nothing like what the men had left a couple of days earlier. Pieces of the wall were gone, and what should have been the neat geometry of houses and eateries was now an amorphous pile of rubble. When the lightning flashed again, Iko saw the castle's silhouette. At least a couple of its towers were gone.

“Was it the Praivun Alliance?” Elex finally asked.

“Wretchers didn't knock down Dunbardin's towers,” Iko said.

Essili hung his head and groaned. “How can this be?”

Iko had simmered over Essili's invocation of his father since Ambrial and hadn't spoken to him at all during the journey back to Ivory City. But the sight of Essili's silent shock as he beheld what remained of the city was heart-wrenching.

Essili started silently across the plain, and Elex and Iko followed. They crossed into the city where part of the defen-

sive wall was missing, no sign of it anywhere in sight. As if it had been lifted into the sky and carried elsewhere. Inside, the city looked as one would have expected after a prolonged siege by a dragon. Nothing remained standing save for a few old stone buildings, and most of them had holes in them or entire walls missing. Fire still burned upon many of the heaps of debris, though the flames waned. Rain from the coming storm would probably quench them.

It was strange that there were no bodies—at least none that were discernible. This briefly gave Iko hope that most of Ivory City’s residents had miraculously escaped, but then he realized they had probably been hiding in their houses, huddled together as if it would save them. Where else would they have gone when Azoch had attacked? They were probably burned and buried under the rubble. He thought of Cas. How many boys and girls her age were among the dead?

A tear rolled down Iko’s cheek. “What hope did they have, Captain? Do you think any escaped?”

Essili looked over his shoulder, eyes also glistening with tears. He pressed his lips together and shook his head as if to say he wasn’t sure.

The sickening sense of imminent doom arose in Iko again. He hadn’t felt it since the rush of hope that had come with uncovering the dragon-killer’s secret. But now that sense of hope had burned away, and Iko remembered how he’d felt in Jynsomm after Mizur had killed a quarter of its residents.

“We should go to Dunbardin,” Essili said. “There are safe-rooms there. Underground saferooms with tunnels to the mountains. Everyone might be gone by now, but it’ll be a start.”

Iko assumed this didn't help Cas's chances. But most of the surviving soldiers from Ambrial wouldn't have been here when Azoch came. Maybe there were still adequate numbers to conduct another assault. But what of the dragon-killer? Had the justices wasted it? Lost it? Had it not worked? He would have to wait to find out. He silently followed Captain Bane Essili through what remained of Ivory City.

Chapter 35

Zerah lay in the corner of a room big enough for a couple of hundred people, deep beneath Dunbardin Castle. It was a pity there were fewer than forty inside. Currently, it was completely dark except for the candelabra upon the chalky flagstone floor on the other side of the room near the entrance. There, two guardsmen in the room kept watch, whispering so that everyone else could sleep.

Sleep. There was no hope of it for Zerah. Tired as her body was, there was no slowing her mind. Over and over, she recalled the locations of the thinnest scales on a dragon. Beneath the wings. The underside of the jaw. Bhal Adair had gotten an arrow beneath Turakis' left arm. Just an inch or two of penetration into his flesh had been enough. The dragon had succumbed to the poison within a minute or two.

If she killed an arcanotaur, she would have plenty of dragon-killer. Swords and spears laced with the poison would be easier to get through Azoch's scales than arrows, but how would she get close enough to Azoch to use them? The Order of Matara was said to have lit fires late at night to attract dragons and attempt to communicate with them; perhaps that was the best way. She could hide in a tree line and wait for a dragon to come and investigate a fire she'd built.

Another option would be to go to Azoch's nesting site in the east. Zerah had never been there but understood it to be atop a peak near what had once been Faluni Outpost. But that would mean crossing the Multus Plains and plenty of wretcher-infested woodlands. The fire would be preferable.

A clatter near the door drew Zerah's attention. One of the guardsmen shot up and drew his sword. His head nearly struck the low brick ceiling. The second guardsman stood too, albeit less gracefully. His armor rattled as he worked his sword free.

The first guardsman relaxed, observing the entryway. "Thank our maker," he said, raising his free hand to his heart. "I thought you was an ukori, Captain Essili."

The name brought Zerah into a seated position.

There was a subdued exchange she couldn't quite hear, and a couple of other figures entered behind the familiar silhouette of Essili.

"What has happened here, lad?" the captain asked.

"Just what it looks like, sir," the guardsman said. "Azoch was at it all day."

"And what of the poison?" Essili asked. "Did we miss our shots?"

Zerah stood and tiptoed over a couple of sleeping townsfolk between her and the doorway.

"I... I don't know, sir," the guardsman said. "Haven't heard. It would seem that way, wouldn't it?"

"It would," Zerah said, drawing the attention of the five men. She recognized that the two men with the captain were the Ekarians, Iko and Elex. When she reached the group, she indicated the candelabra. "May I?" she asked the guardsmen.

“Of course.”

“Find Justice Campo,” she said to the second guardsman as she bent and retrieved one of the lit candles.

“I think he’s asleep, Justice,” the man said.

“Then wake him. Tell him Captain Essili has arrived.”

The man disappeared into the darkness.

She led Essili, Iko, and Elex across the room to a long wooden table with benches for seats. There, she lit another candle in the middle of the table.

Essili could barely contain his question as he took his seat opposite Zerah. “What *happened?*” he asked, his effort to whisper betrayed by his angst.

Zerah leaned forward, both elbows on the table and forehead resting in her hands. “She came this morning,” she said without picking up her head, “and the poison was gone.”

“Gone?” Essili asked.

“Gone.” Zerah wrapped her unusually untidy hair over her shoulder. Smudges of soot and bloody scratches covered her face, and her eyes were swollen from crying. “The rest of the day was straight out of the pages of history, when the dragons first came. We ran and hid. Some people came here, and we sent many of them into the mountains through the escape tunnel. Then Azoch found the other end of it, and...” She flipped her hands up as if in surrender. “We’ve been here since.”

There was a long moment of silence before Essili asked, “And you know what happened at Ambrial? What happened to Lord Adair?”

Zerah nodded somberly. “Nabi arrived a couple of hours ago and told us.”

“Nabi is here?” Essili asked.

“Sleeping now, I’m sure.”

“Who else?”

“At last count, there were one hundred and sixty guardsmen here,” Zerah said. “We’ve positioned them throughout the safest spots of the castle to keep watch. Seems you were among the last who survived to make it back.”

Essili perked up. “That’s far more than I thought would make it back alive. I have to assume there are a few still to come from the Garans. Some will have traveled with caution.”

“That’s good news,” Zerah said.

Essili scanned the room and rubbed his chin. “It’s quite a coincidence.” His eyes were full of suspicion. “Azoch shows up for our fight, then destroys the city right after the dragon-killer goes missing?”

“Missing,” Zerah said, “or Lord Adair took it with him and didn’t tell anyone. Either way, I agree that the timing is rather unfortunate.”

Essili dismissed the suggestion with a quick head shake. “I don’t believe he had it on him. I saw what happened to him. And some of his arrows found their mark.”

Zerah shrugged. “We’ve got a couple of other theories, but we’ve not had the luxury of an investigation. Doesn’t make much difference now, anyway.”

“Understandable. How many made it out?”

“We don’t know. We may have sent a couple hundred out of here before Azoch stopped us.”

Elex gasped audibly, and Zerah understood why. Of the two thousand residents of Ivory City, they knew of the well-being of just a couple hundred, plus the guardsmen who’d come back from Ambrial. There were probably plenty

more who had survived, but the lack of certainty was unsettling. She tried to offer a little hope. “I’m sure there were plenty who made it to the mountains the usual way. And the marikano could have used the canals to escape into the river.”

Val Campo’s gangly form crept out of the shadow. “I do hope you’ve not started without me,” he said seriously. He was still drowsy from his slumber, and his eyes were half-closed.

“Nothing you don’t already know,” Zerah said as Campo took his seat beside her.

“What do we do now?” Essili asked, glancing at the two justices.

Campo held up his hand as if to slow Essili down. “Do we know where the remaining Praivun Alliance have gone? And how many are left?”

“A couple of hundred, maybe. It’s hard to say,” Essili said. “A lot was going on when they withdrew. And we don’t know where they are, but I’ve got a pair of my best men tracking them, so we should have an idea soon. If we have a couple of swords to spare, I’d like to post some sentries along the tree line so they know we are here when they come and see what’s happened.”

“We’ll see to it when the sun rises,” Campo said. “In the meantime, we need to dig in. Prepare ourselves for an attack from the wretchers.”

“Dig in?” Essili asked. “We have more than enough to make another run at them, especially since most of their remaining numbers are probably wregs. The loss of ukori during the Night Warrior charge may have left the vermin mortally wounded—unable to repel an equal number of men

and marikano. And they mean to feed our women to the dragon under the full moon, so it would be best for us to take the initiative.”

“You want to attack again?” Campo asked. “After what happened at Ambrial? I can’t allow that, Captain. Azoch won’t allow it.”

“There are ways to fight beneath a dragon’s sky,” Essili said. “And if we do, I have little doubt we will overrun them.”

“Too risky,” Campo said. “This isn’t like fighting a few dozen Matarans during your youth. You can’t start a fight in the open without the dragon noticing. I thought you’d learned that at Ambrial.”

Essili didn’t respond.

“It would be different if we could acquire some dragon-killer,” Zerah said. “We could send an expedition to Godskeep, and—”

“Godskeep?” Campo scoffed. “We could have an army of wretchers on our doorstep at any moment, and you want me to send any of the remaining soldiers I have to *Godskeep*?”

Zerah started, “But if we have the dragon-killer—”

“I won’t spare swords for your guesswork and personal vendetta,” Campo snapped.

The comment left Zerah’s mouth gaping. She hated that Campo had all the power. She hated the fact that she’d authored the rules that had given him all the power.

“Our goal right now is to survive,” Campo said. “We can evade Azoch down here and in the caves. We will arrange our defenses against the Praivuns accordingly.” He crossed his arms, and his head snapped back and forth between Essili and Zerah in a manner that reminded her of a lizard. After a moment, he acknowledged Iko and Elex for the first time.

“And who are these two? What place do they have at this table?”

A harsh glare came across Iko’s face. He prompted Elex off the bench with a pat on the shoulder. “C’mon. Let’s get some sleep.” And the two walked away from the table without saying another word.

Chapter 36

The northernmost turret of Dunbardin Castle had always been Makus's favorite place to watch the sunrise. The view of the mountains to the east was unobstructed. This morning, the sky was a watery pink, streaked with orange and purple clouds. The storms that had blown through overnight had brought cooler, drier air. When the sun came, it bathed Tyel Valley in its warm, gentle light, and the river shimmered. Mornings like this one had always stilled Makus, making him feel comfortingly insignificant.

But this morning did not. The sunrise had barely registered with him. His mind was elsewhere—on The One Who Speaks.

Makus was convinced that Dori Felsmit had taken Adair's dragon-killer, and that Speaks had told her to do it. She had been caught right outside the Lord's room just a few nights earlier, after all, and as far as Makus knew, there had been no other unusual visitors to that part of the castle. He suspected that the god's grand plan had required the poison to be destroyed, just as it had required Zerah's scale to be destroyed, for reasons beyond the understanding of mortals. But Speaks' plan had almost certainly been upended when Azoch had razed Ivory City. There was no proselytizing to the people if they were all dead. So why had Speaks not

responded to Makus since the dragon had attacked? Why had the god not let him in on what would need to be done to rectify the situation? Was Makus no longer worthy? Was he not needed? Had he failed Speaks in some way he was too blind to see?

These questions and many others swam unceasingly in Makus's head. There was no controlling them. They gnawed at his soul. He began to perspire, and his pulse quickened. The thoughts came faster, and the questions multiplied. Eventually, they reached a crescendo, and Makus may or may not have cried aloud: *Where is The One Who Speaks!*

That all-consuming question was propelled to the forefront of Makus's mind by an insatiable thirst for contact with Speaks. Makus was hollow—dying—as long as the god evaded him. The energy drained from his extremities, paralyzing him and keeping aflame his desire for the soothing energy that accompanied the god. His desire was to be in union with Speaks, and everything else mattered less with each passing moment.

Then, without a discernible cause, the desire faded to a manageable level.

Makus beheld the ruined city below, having forgotten about it for a short while. There was no more fire nor smoke, just wet, blackened wood and crushed stone. It reminded him that those who had survived the previous day were in a delicate position, and he was to play a critical role in their future. He rose and started down the nearest stairs. He needed to get back to Zerah and see what news there was of the rest of the survivors of Ambrial.

Chapter 37

After a few hours of broken sleep, Iko gave up trying. A few people were stirring, so he knew it must have been morning, anyway. He rolled onto his side and reached over Elex, who was still asleep and snoring loudly, to grab the atlas he had carried with him since Jynsomin. He stuffed it into his own bag, then headed toward the exit of the saferoom.

“Where are you going?” a guardsman asked as Iko neared the stairs.

“To get some air,” Iko said.

The guardsmen shrugged and nodded him onward.

At the top of the stairs, Iko came to the airy central hall of Dunbardin Castle. There was a hole in the eastern wall of the hall now, allowing morning light in. Iko found the nearest corner and sat on the cold floor. His first thought was to pray, but that had become harder each day since he’d arrived in Anuthura, as his heart and mind had grown more consumed with angst. And right now, as he thought through a new plan to get Cas back, there was no hope of stilling his soul. He decided he’d try prayer later and pulled out Elex’s atlas.

The surprisingly high number of soldiers who had survived the battle and were back in Ivory City had lifted Iko’s

spirits almost as much as they'd seemed to lift Essili's. If they attacked again, they'd have roughly the same number of swords as what the wretchers had left, but wregs carried most of the wretchers' swords. Iko liked those chances—a lot. He was glad that Elex had talked him into returning to Ivory City. Essili's soldiers could still help him get Cas back.

But Campo's decision to cower in the caves was no recipe for victory. It meant the wretchers would decide when and how they wanted to fight. It meant they'd reorganize, and perhaps even grow their numbers. As his father had once told him, an enemy left free to attack as they saw fit always had a better chance of success.

No. The Guard would dictate the terms of their final confrontation with the Praivun Alliance. It seemed Val Campo was the only one who didn't realize how critical it was. Zerah had known that it was for the best. Essili knew it. And now, Iko would make it happen.

The previous night, he'd heard enough to know that Zerah had located an arcanotaur at a place called Godskeep. Campo may have been unwilling to spare any Anuthurians to acquire the dragon-killer, but fortunately for Iko, he didn't answer to Campo. He could go to Godskeep without facing any repercussions and acquire the arcanotaur blood so that Campo would have no choice but to authorize another attack.

He'd never heard of Godskeep, of course, but he knew there were several maps of Anuthura in the atlas Elex had been carrying. He found one titled *Western Anuthura* and found the city almost due south, right along the coast of the Sea of Nivero. It was more than twice as far as Ambrial, but there weren't any mountains he'd have to traverse. Iko

figured that he and Elex could make the journey in three days or so. That meant that, assuming the arcanotaur was where Zerah thought it was, he could have dragon-killer back to Ivory City with more than a week to spare before the harvest moon. Surely, that would give the Anuthurians adequate time to launch another assault on the Praivun Alliance.

Satisfied with his plan, he put Elex's book in his bag, pulled out *The Deadly Sepentrio Mountains: A Catalogue of Dangers*, and returned to the section about the arcanotaur. If he was going to kill one, it was best to be prepared. He found a section titled *A Formidable Adversary* and started reading.

Despite the obvious danger arcanotaurs pose to humans, Mynison men were required to face the beasts alone to prove themselves worthy of adulthood. Armed with only a sword and spear, each man was required to enter the den of one of the fearsome carnivores on his sixteenth birthday. If he were victorious, he was bestowed the status of a man. If he fled, he was banished from the tribe under penalty of death. Population estimates of Mynisons and analysis of the bones and weapons found in ancient arcanotaur dens indicate that roughly half of the young men who entered the dens perished.

Iko swallowed. *Half* of them died? That wasn't exactly encouraging, considering they had certainly known more about arcanotaurs than he could hope to learn in a few days. He scanned the book for more relevant information on the creatures but came up empty. There was a section on its general anatomy, which appeared as expected. A section on

their dens, which may have been interesting but not very useful. And a section on their smaller, distant relatives in the Southernlands. But there was nothing about hunting or killing one. Iko would have a bow; perhaps that would give him an advantage that the poor spear-wielding Myniso Tribe didn't have. And he'd have Elex. A second sword would be worth something. Still, his optimism waned. He'd thought hunting a wild animal would be easy.

Someone approached from the other side of the hall. Glowing purple eyes made it easy to identify Makus, who had just entered from a staircase that spiraled down a tower.

"You didn't sleep long," Makus said as he passed.

Iko wondered how Makus had any clue how long he'd been asleep. "There's a lot on my mind."

Makus nodded politely and kept walking.

Then Iko recognized Makus's earring—a simple wooden ring with a sapphire in its center. It was the same as the Night Warriors' at Ambrial. He remembered how Makus had disarmed him and Elex in the woods by the Anuthuri-an fire—the impossible speed and precision. The minimal effort it seemed to require. Iko had never seen anything like it before, then he'd seen something just like it in the Vale of Ambrial when the Night Warriors had come out of the water. Makus was a Night Warrior.

Iko doubted that killing an arcanotaur would be a problem if he had a Night Warrior with him. And he followed Zerah everywhere, didn't he? She seemed formidable and was obviously interested in acquiring the arcanotaur blood. If he could convince her to join him, they'd probably both come along.

"Makus?" Iko asked.

Makus stopped and looked at Iko expectantly.

“Can you tell me where Justice Noburia is?”

“Why?”

“I’m going to go to Godskeep,” Iko said. “I think we all stand a better chance if Ivory City decides the terms of the forthcoming confrontation with the wretchers. So, I’d like to get some dragon-killer to clear the way for an attack.”

“Bold.” Makus raised his chin. “That would be welcomed by most of us. But it might be best to leave Zerah out of it.”

“Why’s that?”

Makus hesitated before answering. “These times are trying. Better not to clutter her mind right now. If you succeed, then by all means, go to her. I’m sure she’d be happy to receive the poison from you.”

“Please,” Iko said. “I just want to make the most of our chances. I want to know what she’s learned about Godskeep. And I’m sure she’s done some reading on arcanotaurs by now that could help me. I don’t know the first thing about them.”

Makus folded his arms and eyed Iko closely.

“It’s the least you could do for me,” Iko said. “I did identify what your poison was, after all.”

Makus sighed in resignation. “Very well. Follow me.”

The two entered a tower on the opposite side of the room from the one Makus had just come down. As they climbed, Iko considered Makus’s reluctance to bring the matter to Zerah. He had also assumed that Makus would share her desire to slay the arcanotaur, but apparently, he did not. Iko couldn’t quite make sense of it until he remembered Justice Campo’s comment the previous night about Zerah having a personal vendetta. It was easy enough to guess why that would be the case.

“Who did Azoch kill?” Iko asked.

Makus continued up the stairs without turning around. “Azoch killed a lot of people. We haven’t even started identifying them all.”

“Sorry, I meant Justice Noburia’s loved one,” Iko said.

Makus peered over his shoulder. “Why? Who said anything about that?”

“It was something Justice Campo said last night.”

Makus scoffed as he continued climbing. “The fool. As if that’s what she needs on her mind right now. Zerah had two young boys and a husband taken from her by Azoch. Justice Campo thinks it clouds her judgment, but I wouldn’t worry much about his opinion.”

Iko froze. “Her entire family?” His stomach churned at the thought of it, and he pitied Zerah. He knew some of the pain she must have felt, but at least Cas still had a chance. He still had hope. She’d lost everything, and he wondered how he hadn’t suspected it until just now.

Makus turned around when he realized Iko had stopped. “Let’s say nothing more of it.”

Iko didn’t like the way Makus’s words felt like a warning. “Of course,” he said.



Not long after Iko started explaining his plan to defy Campo, Zerah held up a hand to stop him, called Makus over, and whispered something to him. He left the dreary meeting room, only to return with Captain Essili a couple of minutes later.

“That’s quite an ambitious plan,” Zerah said when Iko finished making his case.

Iko shrugged, eyeing the captain and wondering why she’d sent for him. “It’s the only way,” he said. “Is there any better plan for our causes than killing Azoch and confronting the Praivuns on our terms?”

Zerah shook her head. “None as far as I can tell. And it would have the guardsmen demanding to go after the wretchers again.”

“Yes. Exactly!” Iko said.

Zerah looked to Essili. “Captain? Would you mind telling Iko and Makus what you’ve been doing since last night?”

“You sure about that?” Essili asked.

“It’s not that big of a secret, is it?” Zerah asked.

“It’s a little bit of a secret.” Essili looked at Iko. “Don’t discuss this outside of this room. Okay?”

“Sure.”

Essili hesitated before saying, “I’m already coordinating a possible mission to Godskeep.”

“I thought Campo wouldn’t allow it,” Iko said.

“That’s one of the things he’s working on,” Zerah said.

Essili rubbed his hands together. “One could call my efforts a clandestine political operation. I’m gathering support. If everyone but Campo agrees on the best course of action, he’ll have no choice but to bless our mission. In the meantime, a few of my men who are familiar with Godskeep are planning the operation. Quietly.”

“So, if he blesses it, you’ll go?” Iko asked.

“It’s likely,” Essili said. “But we may not risk an expedition if I think we can hold the wretchers off from here. I have a team working on those strategies, too.”

“When will you know if you’re going?” Iko asked.

“A few days. Four. Five, maybe.”

Iko’s jaw dropped. “Five days! That’s far too long. The Praivuns are weak now. You need to be ready to strike as soon as you know their location. You can’t give them that much more time to reorganize.”

Zerah smirked. “I’m glad someone agrees with me.” She cut a glance at Essili.

Essili lifted a finger toward her. “We’ve been over this, Zerah. I don’t need you two teaming up on me. It’s not ideal, but we need to get this right. We get one chance at going all the way to Godskeep. More time allows my guardsmen to rest up, gather resources, and develop a solid plan.”

Iko ran his fingers through his hair and took a deep breath. “I can’t wait for you, I’m sorry. I’m leaving this morning. If the arcanotaur is where Zerah says, I’ll get the poison, and I’ll kill Azoch myself.”

“Don’t be foolish,” Essili said. “Who knows how many wretchers there are between here and the coast. And that’s to say nothing of hunting arcanotaurs and dragons.”

“I don’t have a choice,” Iko said. “You just admitted that taking care of Azoch sooner rather than later would be better for you, didn’t you?”

Essili sighed. “I did, but—”

“It would be better for my daughter, too,” Iko said. “So, I go now, with my bow as my plan. If I fail, you lose nothing. You can proceed with your operation as if nothing ever happened. But if I succeed, you can attack sooner, and that benefits us all.”

Zerah leaned forward. “I’ve read something of arcanotaurs since our discovery. They used to kill half the people who

crossed paths with them. I'm not sure it's wise to go alone, Iko."

"I know it's dangerous," Iko said. "Elex will be with me, I'm sure, and I'd love to have more support. To be honest, I came up here to ask you to join us."

Zerah's lips pressed together as if containing a smile.

Makus stood tall. "That is not what we discussed."

"I don't think that's such a good idea," Essili said.

"You said you preferred leaving sooner," Iko said to Zerah. "Here is your chance. You've devoted your life to that poison, haven't you?"

Zerah nodded. "I have."

"Zerah," Essili warned.

"Then come with me." Iko stepped toward her. "Help me save my daughter. Avenge your husband and sons."

Makus erupted. "That is not your place!" His hands turned into fists.

Zerah clenched her jaw and raised her chin.

Makus stepped toward Iko. "I'm sorry, Zerah. I should not have brought him. I will remove this—"

"Wait," Zerah said, staying the Night Warrior.

There was a long silence. Iko could hear Makus's deep, angry breaths. He could hear his own heart pounding.

"You want to leave now?" Zerah asked.

"As soon as we can."

Zerah nodded. "I'll go."

"Zerah, you can't," Makus said.

"I will," she said. "I won't ask you to join me, Makus. Bane can explain how you tried to stop me."

Essili groaned.

Makus shook his head. "I will not abandon you to this duplicitous oaf."

"Well, I won't deter you from coming either," Zerah admitted. She looked at Iko. "If you get a shot at Azoch, can you swear to me that you will not miss?"

"I will not miss," Iko said.

"Good," Zerah said. "Give me an hour."

Chapter 38

An hour after the decision to go after the arcanotaur, Zerah and Makus met Iko and Elex outside the main hall. They carried a bundle of arrows and two unexceptional dark green tunics for the Ekarians. Zerah explained that she didn't want them wearing guardsmen tunics on an unsanctioned errand. The tops were well-fitted but thin enough that they wouldn't restrict any movement. They would be comfortable in a fight, and they were ideal for concealment beneath Azoch's sky. Iko also carried most of the rest of what he'd taken with him from Jynsomm.

"Do you think Essili will tell anyone?" Iko asked.

Zerah shrugged. "Not until he must."

Elex rubbed his eyes and yawned, still groggy from a solid night's sleep. He asked Zerah, "So, you really agree that this is the best idea?"

"Best?" Zerah smirked. "Maybe not. But I think we should do it."

Elex scratched his head. "I guess that's good enough for me."

Zerah had also changed her clothing to avoid any outward display of her position in Ivory City. She wore a fitted maroon tie-front tunic, a pair of leather boots, and a tattered brown cloak that looked as though it might have

disintegrated at any moment. She had fashioned her long black hair into a braid that ran straight down her back. To Iko's surprise, she was armed to the teeth. The sword on her hip was a royal sword with an ivory hilt, placed within a black-and-gold scabbard of the Guard. A similarly fashioned knife hung from the front of her belt. On her back was a quiver full of guardsman arrows, identifiable by the bright purple and gold fletching. She carried her slight black re-curve bow across her chest.

Iko thought it odd that Makus had not changed at all. As usual, he wore his dark, fitted pants and nothing else aside from his weapons. A sword on his hip was in a sheath similar to Zerah's, albeit less ornate, and there was an obsidian-tipped marikano spear on his back.

For the first several miles, their journey traced the path Essili had taken on the way to the Vale of Ambrial, but at the point at which the captain had drifted away from the Tyel River, they remained beside it. Makus led the way and explained that they would stay alongside the river until it joined with the Akando River, which ran due south, roughly parallel to the Garan Mountains. It would take them to the Sea of Nivero. Godskeep was along the coast, a few miles east of where the river fell into the sea. The path would keep them beneath lush foliage or upon rugged terrain all the way to the coast, minimizing the chance of being seen from the sky.

By dusk, they reached Lake Nita, positioned among rocky foothills that overlooked the unfathomably featureless Mulus Plains to the east. There, never-ending waves of flat grasslands extended to the darkening horizon. The lake's southern edge came to a cliff over which its waters poured.

In contrast with the plain to the east, the land between the river and the Garan Mountains to the south was fertile and covered with trees.

Storm clouds rolled overhead as the sun set, and the world around became dark. Thunder rolled, and rain started falling as they attempted to settle in for the night. Makus observed the hills surrounding them with his glowing purple eyes. "There is an overhang up there." He pointed west. "It should keep you dry."

"Too late for that!" Elex said as he hurriedly collected his things.

The humans scrambled up the hill with their cloaks over their heads while Makus followed behind, not minding the rain at all. They made it to the overhang before the brunt of the storm pushed through. Hail fell from the sky. Lightning repeatedly illuminated the otherwise invisible landscape before them.

Between thunderclaps, Makus gasped.

"Oh!" Zerah echoed.

Iko followed their gazes southward. Several miles away, the blackness that covered the forests along the Akando had been intruded upon by a pillar of fire. It lasted only a few seconds. A moment later, the entire hill shook as the rumble born of the flame reached Lake Nita. Pebbles and small rocks broke free of the hill and tumbled down all around them.

"It's Azoch!" Makus said. "She's taken care of something along the river."

"Is she coming toward us?" Zerah asked.

"No, no. She is heading back to the east," Makus answered.

The following morning, they left the rocky hills of Lake Nita before dawn, eager to escape into the cover of the

trees along the Akando. After a difficult descent from the foothills, they made good time, covering a few miles every hour.

Eventually, they reached the place Makus called Bluewood Forest. There, the world took on an eerie cerulean glow as the sun's light shone through the translucent blue leaves of the trees that grew there. The trees' whitish trunks were broad and smooth, growing perfectly straight for twenty or so feet before branching into a web-like network of smaller branches that twisted around everything they contacted as if they were vines. They twisted up and around other trees and wrapped back down to the ground. Some of the contorted blue-leaved branches extended hundreds of feet from the trunks that bore them. The trees' aboveground roots were similarly sprawling, like those of oak trees. Mosses and lichens covered them.

Iko craned his neck as he took in the wondrous scene. "That is incredible," he said.

"It's like this all the way to the coast," Zerah said. "And I've never seen the bluewood trees elsewhere."

By mid-morning, they reached the still-smoldering aftermath of Azoch's attack the night before. All that was left within a circle fifty yards wide was charred wood and blackened bodies. At the center of the burned clearing, where Azoch's flame had struck the earth directly, there was only soot. The stinging aroma of roasted flesh and burned metal filled the air.

"There were a lot of them," Iko said as they walked through the clearing. He counted at least eight bodies, and he saw what he thought were several more.

“These were wregs,” Makus said. He’d crouched down to inspect one of the bodies.

“I don’t understand how she saw them,” Zerah said as she pulled her cloak over her nose and mouth. “With the rain and being nighttime, you’d think they would have been alright.”

Makus had moved toward the trees. “I don’t think they were the first to come through here,” he said, studying the ground. “The Akando is shallow in these parts. I suspect this is one of the places the vermin have been crossing.”

“So much for the dragon offering them divine protection,” Elex quipped.

“I believe they must complete the sacrifice for that,” Iko said, moving toward the riverbank.

“I suppose it’s reassuring that our enemies aren’t on the same side,” Zerah said.

Iko came to the shore and observed what may have been hundreds of footprints coming out of the water. “These don’t seem very old, do they? Perhaps we shouldn’t linger.”

Makus approached and observed the footprints. “You’re right.” He scanned the surrounding blue forest. The vermin that left these must be close.”

“Then let’s move,” Zerah said. “Might as well cross here. We will have to eventually.”

They kept a close eye on their surroundings as they moved across the river and back into the cover of the forest.

Chapter 39

After the others were asleep, Makus lay awake, staring through a hole in the foliage into the clear, starry sky overhead. In his physical exhaustion, he'd grown numb—drained of all desire but for The One Who Speaks. He yearned for an hour. Then another. Then clouds rolled overhead and covered up the stars, and he groaned audibly.

“Where have you gone?” he whispered. “Where?”

“Makus...” The voice was barely perceptible over the rattle of leaves. It brought with it a trace of the usual pleasure.

Makus sat up and did a quick survey to make sure everyone else was asleep. “Are you there?” He looked with wide eyes toward the darkened forest from where the voice seemed to come.

“Makus, come here.”

It was definitely Speaks.

The warmth spread over Makus's body, but the wind carried it away almost as quickly. “I am coming.” He quietly rose. “Wait for me.” He stumbled over roots but moved swiftly into the darkness and did not stop until he heard Speaks again.

“You mustn't wake the others,” Speaks warned. “It's important that we speak. Much has happened since we spoke last.”

“Why was it so long?” Makus asked, breathing in the soothing embrace when he could. It was not like before; it came and went in waves. He needed more. He needed it to stay.

“You know there is much to do, don’t you?” Speaks said.

Makus dropped to his knees. “We are trying to help,” he said, still grasping after the fleeting pleasure. “We will save your people if we can get the arcanotaur blood.”

“Yes, I know. That is why I have come to you.”

The pleasure stabilized, though still dull, and Makus relaxed a little.

“I have seen what you and the woman have been doing,” Speaks said. “You lead two shadows southward in hopes of killing dragons, do you not? You are risking much.”

“We are not afraid,” Makus said with subdued pride. “We know what must be done.”

“I do not think that you do. You may think you are doing some good right now, but in my truth, you risk spoiling your people’s destiny.”

Makus tilted his head. “You mean... We must not acquire the dragon-killer?”

“You must not.”

“I don’t understand how that’s for the best.” Makus’s suspicion grew at Speaks’s apparent and disturbing dislike of dragon-killer. “Did you have Dori rid Adair of his poison?”

“You mustn’t concern yourself with such things,” Speaks said. “Your purpose is to make sure the woman does not get the blood she desires. Do you remember what it did to her before? I know it is difficult to understand, but you will. In due time.”

“But did you?” Makus asked. “And did you tell Azoch it was gone?”

There was a sharp increase in the pleasure. Makus was taken back to the first time Speaks had come, and he lost himself within it.

“Do you think I wish harm on you?” Speaks asked.

“No.”

“I do not speak to dragons. I cannot,” Speaks said. “It is not in my nature. Dragons are mere matter, and I am mere spirit. I can’t do anything to a body without a soul, like yours, through which to operate. Do you see? That is why I need your help.”

“I see.”

“My ways are high above yours, Makus. You must trust me. Can you do that?”

Ecstasy! Makus was exactly where he needed to be, doing exactly what he needed to be doing. “I trust you.”

“Good,” Speaks said. “Now, rise. Do not let the woman’s quest succeed. And beware of what comes from the north. I still need you.”

“What comes from the north?”

But The One Who Speaks was gone. Makus was cold and suddenly physically exhausted. He felt as if a hammer were striking between his eyes from the inside.

“The north,” Makus wheezed. He turned in the direction, allowing his marikano eyes to peer into the darkness, and then he heard it. A screech. A wreg. They were about fifty yards to the north, and he could just see their shadows between trees. A dozen or so wretchers, carefully surveying the ground and moving in his direction. He saw at least four ukori among them.

Makus rose and bolted toward the others.

“Get up!” He shook Zerah awake and moved for his weapons. “We have been tracked.”

Zerah shot up without a word and began gathering her things.

Makus moved toward the Ekarians. “Wake up.” He shook them awake, too. “We must go now.”

Chapter 40

They moved southward as quickly and quietly as they could, taking care to cover their tracks. When Makus was satisfied the wretchers had fallen far enough behind, they settled in for the night among some bluewood roots about fifty yards from the river. Makus watched the darkness for a couple more hours, and afterward, the humans took shifts as lookouts so he could sleep. Much to Iko's relief, the wretchers never came.

With their eyes behind them, they continued along the Akando until noon the next day, when they turned south-eastward. Within a few hours, they reached the sheer granite cliffs of the Anuthurian coast. Immense white-capped waves burst into fine, salty mists as they crashed against the protuberant gray rocks jutting out of the water one hundred feet below. A fierce, warm wind blew inland, carrying with it the smells of seawater and algae. Iko gripped the smooth wood of a bluewood limb and chanced a dizzying glance over the cliff. Hundreds of birds sang along narrow rock ledges below, and a thin white-sand beach glistened at the cliff's bottom.

Such was the view all along the cliffs, which they followed eastward until they reached the edge of the forest. Before them, then, were the southernmost reaches of the Multus

Plains, which also extended to the seaside cliffs and were almost as empty and featureless as they had been farther north. But a mile away, at the end of a peninsula and perched high above the thundering waters of the Sea of Nivero, was a dome of cerulean leaves a mile wide. Protruding in several places from the top of the tangled bluewood branches were white stone towers, appearing as pyramids stretched thin to reach hundreds of feet into the sky. Suspension bridges joined them at several levels. A white wall encircled the city, partially covered by the blue foliage. These were the ruins of the city called Godskeep, which a bluewood forest had overtaken.

They crossed the plain at dusk. There was enough light to make it without trouble, but not so much that they would be obvious to a dragon above or wretchers in the tree line. Across the plain, they came to the remains of a road and followed it into Godskeep.

Within the city walls, broad cobblestone streets crossed each other at perfect right angles, delineating identically sized blocks packed with houses, towers, and shops. Tall grasses grew from the accumulated detritus along the sides of the roads, and leaves scraped along the exposed stone. There was a soaring white tower on every block. Each had a perfect square footprint about forty feet across and narrowed gradually as it rose through the trees. Bluewood branches enveloped most of their upper stories, twisting through windows and doors and curling around the bridges that crisscrossed the streets at every level.

They walked a couple of blocks until they heard footsteps echo through the ruins. Someone or something was running toward them. Makus reflexively raised his spear, and Zerah

and Iko each nocked an arrow. Elex drew his sword. The orange glow of the setting sun broke through the rustling leaves, casting a long shadow over the road. Soon, a small, curly-haired girl, no more than five years old and wearing a pink dress, came running into view. She was screaming.

As quickly as the little girl had appeared, a man appeared behind her and scooped her up. The girl screamed even more, but the man was smiling.

“Put her down!” Elex commanded with sword raised.

But everyone else noticed that, despite her seemingly horrified screams, the little girl was smiling too. The smile disappeared when the girl saw how many weapons were directed toward her.

“Daddy!” the girl cried. She buried her face in the man’s arms.

The father looked stunned, but when the weapons dropped, he breathed a sigh of relief. “It’s alright, Emi.” He looked at the strangers. Sorry for the noise,” he said. “We get carried away sometimes.”

“It’s fine,” Zerah said. She said to the girl, “Sorry to have scared you. We thought you were a wreg.”

Emi turned so that one eye observed the strangers. “But wregs are ugly.”

“They are, aren’t they?” Zerah asked. She was gentle. “That’s how we could tell you weren’t one.”

Emi smiled, and Iko’s heart skipped a beat. She resembled Cas from a year or two earlier.

“We mean you no harm,” Makus said. “We will be on our way.”

The man asked, “Might you be willing to trade? I am in dire need of a good knife.” He was eyeing the knife on Zerah’s belt. “I’ve got nothing but a dull cleaver left to my name.”

“What are you offering?” Zerah asked.

The man’s name was Ossi, and he led the way to the rest of their family in one of Godskeep’s old gashed-open houses. A bluewood branch curled over the roofless corner of the home in which Ossi’s fair-skinned wife bounced a cranky infant on her knee. A small boy slept nearby on a pile of leaves beneath an elaborately patterned blanket. Iko couldn’t help but smile at the way the boy’s mouth hung wide open.

As Makus and Zerah picked out a few choice apples in exchange for the knife—a rather lopsided trade—Iko admired the quaint family. Emi wasted no time in offering the guests a cup of tea. Elex accepted the offer, and the little girl hurriedly poured some freshly brewed tea into a freshly carved cup. She accepted her mother’s gentle reminders about hospitality at every step along the way. Afterward, she and Elex made easy small talk. There was a warmth to the scene that reminded Iko of what he and his father used to have. It was evident that the family was just passing through Godskeep, but the little broken house felt like a home.

He pondered this as they left behind the family to find their shelter for the night. Trailing behind the others, he was lost in his thoughts long enough to draw Elex’s attention.

His friend dropped behind with him and asked, “What’s on your mind?”

Iko snapped back to the present. “Oh. That family. It seems like a nice thing to have.”

Elex smiled wryly. “Well, you might be on your way with Zerah if you’d listen to me.”

“It’s not happening, Elex. Sure, she’s smart and kind and—”

“Pretty?” Elex rolled his eyes. “So... Perfect?”

“Not at all. She’s still mourning her dead family. And did I tell you about the men fighting over the horse?”

“Yes, yes.”

Iko continued explaining what he’d thought about Ossi’s family. “Anyway, I was thinking that might have been what my family would have been like had my mother not died. I might have had brothers and sisters. Built-in friends, you know?”

“Am I inadequate?” Elex asked.

Iko laughed. “Not at all.”

Makus and Zerah stepped into one of the city’s towers to inspect it, and Elex and Iko stayed outside.

“I didn’t expect you to have such kind words for them,” Elex said. “What, with them being of the Order of Matara and all.”

“*What?*” Iko asked, shocked.

“You didn’t hear Emi? She told me Matara’s will for practically every pebble and blade of grass.” Elex obviously thought Iko had known. “Why did you think they were heading east?”

Iko guffawed, beside himself. The Order of Matara—his father’s mortal enemy. They adhered to a strange pantheistic creed and thought Matara had willed the dragons into existence. At least some of them thought that if they wiped out all non-Matarans, the dragons would relent. Those were the Matarans his father had died fighting.

Elex said, “I was ready to have to get between you and them.”

Iko's brow furrowed. "What does that mean? I never got mad at anyone."

Elex looked like he realized he'd said something he shouldn't have. "Oh, it's nothing."

"Too late for that. What did you mean?"

Elex rubbed his hands together. "It's just..." He seemed to consider his next words carefully. "I've been thinking... and..."

"Spit it out, Elex."

"I think sometimes you're a little quick to see people as your enemies."

"I'm not following."

"I mean that if you would have known that Ossi and Emi were in the Order of Matara, that's all they would have been to you."

"That's not true."

Elex raised his brow questioningly.

The look gave Iko pause. "Fine. Maybe it would have bothered me. But the Order killed my father. It would have been understandable."

Elex shook his head. "It's not just Matarans, Iko."

"What are you talking about?"

Elex relented. "It's been bothering me since Ambrial. Since I saw how you treated Essili when he wanted nothing but to help you. I used to think you had problems with the people back home because they were difficult to get along with—and they were. But it hasn't been that different in Anuthura, despite everyone here being perfectly good to you."

"That isn't true."

“Yes, it is. Do you remember how you didn’t even want to give Ivory City a chance when we first got there? You only stayed because of the promise of an army. And have you forgotten what you said about all the strangers in the tavern? What about your reluctance to accept the obvious truth that Zerah is perfect for you?” Elex’s brow rose.

Iko closed his eyes and shook his head in exasperation. “Elex.”

Elex raised his hands as if in surrender, then he kept going. “Fine. As I said, I noticed it most with the captain. After the battle, you treated him like he was Rog, even though he was just trying to help you.”

“He almost got us killed by a dragon.”

“He’s not the one who told Adair not to bring his dragon-killer with him. You know that.”

“He hid the truth from us!” Iko said.

“Here’s the thing. Even if you’re right to be angry about that, that’s not all there is to him,” Elex said. “Sometimes you’re so focused on what people might have done wrong that you miss the rest of them. Often their best parts. It’s what keeps you alone. And that’s a real shame because most people could use a friend like I have. A friend like Cas’s father.”

Iko tried to think through Elex’s accusation—to refute it. He was hurt that his best friend would accuse him of such a thing at a time like this. He was angry that Elex had used his father’s murderers to make his argument.

But what bothered him more than anything was that Elex’s accusation rang true. But there was something his friend was missing, something that would make sense of it all. Iko couldn’t figure it out right now. He didn’t want to figure it

out. He suddenly felt the urge to flee the conversation and forget he'd ever had it.

Zerah and Makus burst out of the tower's entrance.

"What's wrong?" Iko asked.

"Grab your pack!" Makus ordered. "We've not lost our friends from last night. The wretchers are here."

Iko quickly shouldered his pack and began to follow the pair southward.

"Hey!" Elex said. "What about Emi's family?"

It stopped them all cold. Elex was right. The family stood no chance against ukori.

Zerah led the way down a street that would take them toward the family.

Chapter 41

Through the hazy azure air of dusk at Godskeep, Iko could see the gatehouse that was the city's northern entrance. Before it stood four hulking ukori, their features veiled in shadow. He crouched with the others against the wall of the nearest tower's breezeway, covered by the grass that grew along the street's side. Between the ukori and the tower, several smaller dark shapes bobbed in and out of the shadows of the city's ruins. At least a half-dozen wregs were spread wide and combing through the buildings. A pair of them was closing in on Ossi's house.

"Do we have a plan?" Zerah asked.

"We'll have to go around and approach from the south," Makus said.

A wreg's cackle echoed through the tower next to which they were crouched. Iko chanced a glance through the window. Two wregs were inside, distracted by a snake that was trying to slither away. One of them snatched the serpent by the tail, then each one bit into it. The snake constricted to try to escape, but the wregs pulled it apart with their mouths.

Zerah darted across the street to hide behind a pile of rubble. The others followed.

"We have to cross the main road to get to our friends," Makus said.

That was a problem. The main road was the one that ran from the gatehouse, and the one upon which the ukori stood.

“There is a good bit of cover farther south,” Zerah said, looking in that direction. Bluewood branches and grass covered much of the road near a plaza to the south.

“That’ll have to do,” Elex said. “We need to hurry.”

Several deep thuds sounded from inside the tower. Iko leaned out to find that one of the wregs was trying to tame its writhing half of the snake by slamming it into the ground. The silhouette of an ukori appeared in the tower’s doorway. His deep voice reverberated through the stone structure as he scolded the wregs for their impudent behavior. He picked up the snake and tossed it through the window. It wriggled as it tumbled across the street and stopped a few inches from Iko. It twisted itself into a ball, and its mouth repeatedly opened as if it were preparing to bite an attacker. Eventually, it stilled.

“Go, now!” Makus said.

They raced southward for a block, then westward until they came to the edge of the plaza. Branches and rubble covered each side of the road they meant to cross, but for a span of about three feet, the street was utterly exposed. To the north, the ukori who had scolded the wregs rejoined the others in the road.

Zerah sprinted across the road. Makus followed her, then Elex. Iko hesitated. It was too dark to tell when the ukori were looking toward him.

“Move, Iko!” Makus insisted.

Iko dashed across the road, only breathing after he had reached the other side. The ukori remained silent.

Zerah brought them westward so that they could approach Ossi's family from the south. A peek over a broken wall revealed that the family had tried to hide themselves with flattened branches on the floor. Emi's dark curls flowed from beneath one of the branches. The young boy's foot protruded from beneath another. Iko knew it wouldn't fool the wretches.

"Ossi. Emi!" Iko whispered.

The wife's face appeared from beneath the foliage.

"Come!" Makus said.

Ossi's face appeared next, and he turned to survey the approaching wregs. He whispered to the two older children to crawl toward the broken wall. Makus grabbed them and pulled them over as they reached him. The mother sent Ossi over next, leaving her and the infant alone in the shelter.

Iko noticed that the mother was nursing the baby, likely to keep him quiet. She couldn't get over the wall like that. Makus extended his hands over the wall, prompting her to separate the baby from her breast. The infant let out a shrill cry. Makus snatched him and covered his mouth, muting the scream. The mother covered herself and leaped over to join the rest. Everyone threw themselves against the wall and waited.

The arrhythmic pattering of several wregs' feet drew near. A chorus of wheezing and the ugly whispers of the wretches' tongue filled the house.

Zerah motioned for everyone to follow her, and they ran southward along the road. Emi, who was running near the back of the group, tripped and tumbled to the ground. Iko was the only one who noticed the fall as the others followed Zerah around a corner, and he went back to help. As he

brought Emi to her feet, a wreg appeared in the street behind them.

Iko jerked the girl into a small alcove in the wall of an old house. The space was just big enough for both of them, but there was no way out of it.

The wreg knew it was on to something. Its feet shuffled from one potential hiding spot to the next. It grunted each time it found nothing. Emi wrapped her arms tightly around Iko's waist. She trembled. Iko placed his right hand on *Blessed Ember*. He was hesitant to draw the blade too soon. The sound of it might have given them away.

The wreg neared. Iko inched the sword out of its sheath. His weapon's hilt became slick with sweat. He gently pushed Emi to the left to position himself to attack.

An arrow hissed through the air, and the wreg gargled. Another hiss preceded the unmistakable sound of an arrow piercing flesh and bone. The wreg collapsed at Iko's feet with an arrow in its neck and an arrow in its skull. Iko stepped onto the road to find Zerah had returned with her bow in hand.

Zerah waved them toward her. "Hurry!"

Iko released Emi and pulled the arrows out of the wreg.

The rest of the group was waiting at the base of the nearest tower. The mother embraced Emi when she arrived.

"We mustn't linger," Makus said when Iko joined them.

No one said another word as they all ran into the darkness. They eventually came to another gatehouse on Godskeep's eastern edge. Ossi and his family offered profuse thanks, then escaped across the Multus Plains while Zerah and Iko watched for wretches from the top of the gatehouse with bows in hand. Then they suffered a second consecutive night

of broken sleep as they took shifts watching for their pursuers. But like the night before, the wretchers never came.

Chapter 42

When the group reached the temple of interest the next morning, dark purple clouds stretched across a burning orange horizon. According to Zerah, the temple had been Godskeep's civic center of sorts—having housed public forums, entertainment, and festivals. More importantly, records in Dunbardin indicated an arcanotaur might have taken up residence inside a couple of years earlier.

The temple's rounded architecture was a welcome reprieve from the rest of the city's sterile angular constructs. It consisted of three elliptical wings built of the same white bricks as the rest of the city, but atop each wing was a grand golden dome, unlike anything Iko had seen elsewhere. Birds passed in and out of holes in them freely. The temple stood upon the southernmost tip of the peninsula so that the edges of the wings protruded over the sides of the cliffs on each side. Semicircular archways supported the breezeways at the base of the front of the temple, and colonnades of tall cylindrical pillars lined the cobblestone path to its main entrance.

Iko may not have known much about arcanotaurs, but he knew enough to recognize the unique sign of the beast as they walked between columns and toward the temple. A slate, mud-like substance had been shaped into a

twelve-foot-tall tunnel appearing to ooze from the temple's entrance and part of the way down its steps. The sides of the tunnel were bowed and did not quite come together at the top. Ridges every few yards gave the impression that they were looking at the inside of a giant serpent and its ribs. Iko placed his hand on the wall of the tunnel as they reached it. The mud was as hard as a rock. A foul odor akin to cow manure emanated from it.

Zerah wrinkled her nose and observed the protuberant tunnel. "What is it made of?"

"I don't know," Makus said. "But it isn't very welcoming."

Iko stepped toward the tunnel and urged the others to follow. "Let's not waste any time."

"Perhaps it shouldn't be all of us," Zerah said.

"What? Why?" Iko asked. "Remember what you said about how many people were killed by these things?"

"I doubt they had wretches pursuing them," Zerah said. "I think we need to leave a lookout so that we don't get cornered. And those ancient hunters were alone and not allowed to flee. I think the pair of us should go. We have bows, after all. We can keep our distance. We can at least assess and come back if we need to."

Iko didn't like the idea, but Zerah was right that the wretches complicated matters. Getting trapped by them would likely be the death of them, and the end of hope for Cas.

"She's probably right," Makus said.

"I don't mind waiting," Elex said.

"I suppose if that's what you all want," Iko said, still hesitant.

The pasture-like smell of the tunnels was still more offensive when Iko and Zerah entered. They walked slowly up the steps and into the tunnel, following it until they reached an atrium of the arcanotaur's mud walls not far from the entrance. From there, eight more tunnels ran deeper into the temple in all different directions.

The domed, golden roof of the temple loomed forty feet overhead. Vultures gathered around the holes in the ceiling to assess the invaders below. The floor was covered in the blackish mud, too, and upon it lay countless decaying corpses and dusty bones. Bits and pieces of birds, dogs, and wild hogs were there.

As shocking as the number of dead creatures in the boneyard was, more so were the enormous blood-red mushrooms that grew all around. The caps of the mushrooms were as wide as three feet, and thousands of tiny yellow spots covered each of them. Hanging beneath each mushroom's cap were a dozen or so brown bulbs, roughly the same size and shape as pears. From the bottom of each mushroom's stalk sprawled several inch-thick tentacle-like appendages, each nearly ten feet long and tipped with a pair of green luminescent finger-sized nodules.

"That's not something you see every day," Zerah commented as she observed the mushrooms. She pursed her lips and observed the many tunnels. "I suppose we should start with the closest one." She began hopping over corpses and mushroom tentacles toward the nearest entrance.

Iko followed, but he was not as careful. Halfway to the entrance, he stepped on one of the mushrooms' thick brown tentacles and nearly lost his balance. He steadied himself, but his weight remained on the tentacle long enough for him

to feel it react to him. It throbbed violently beneath his foot. He leaped away, startled. The stalk and cap of the mushroom quivered, and the pendulous pear-like bulbs rattled once.

As if in response, the mushrooms nearest the one he had stepped on quivered and rattled too, and those a little farther away after that. Within a few seconds, mushrooms were rattling down each of the adjoining tunnels in a steady rhythm, with each rattle being farther away than the last. Zerah and Iko remained frozen as they listened to the sounds fade into the distance.

Rattle, rattle, rattle, rattle...

Zerah turned toward Iko with her eyes wide. "What did you do?" she whispered.

Iko shrugged helplessly. "I stepped on one of them."

"Let's avoid doing that again, hm?" Zerah nodded toward the nearest tunnel.

They crept forward and into the tunnel, dodging the mushrooms and corpses along the way. The tunnel forked, and in either direction the tunnels branched several more times.

"It's a maze in here," Zerah said.

"Let's move to the east and then southward," Iko said. "Slowly, so that we see it before it sees us."

They combed tunnel after tunnel in the eastern half of the temple, carefully and with bows ready. But a half-hour after they began searching, they had still found nothing and were retracing their steps. They found only more tunnels, fungi, and dead things. There was no trace of an arcanotaur or anything else alive aside from vultures whose screeches echoed through the tunnels as they picked at bodies.

Iko sighed when they stepped into a long hall near the western side of the temple. “We’ve been here already.”

“Have we seen all of it, then?” Zerah was growing anxious.

Iko shrugged. “I thought these things never left their dens. Maybe it’s moved on.”

“I don’t think so.” Zerah surveyed the scene. “Some of these things are partially eaten and haven’t been dead too long.” Her attention shifted toward one of the mushrooms again. She squatted down and inspected the glowing green nodules on the end of one of its tentacles.

“What do you think we should do?” Iko asked.

“I don’t know,” Zerah said. Her face glowed green as she stared at the nodules. “Perhaps stay in one spot for a while? See if it comes by?”

Zerah poked the nodules and smiled as they reacted. The pair curled back toward the mushroom’s stalk momentarily. Then it quickly returned to a resting position. The mushroom did not rattle.

“I’m not so sure that’s a good idea,” Iko said.

Zerah smiled. “That’s really something, though. Isn’t it?”

Iko stepped closer to a nearby mushroom that grew from a decaying wild dog. The stalk was actually protruding from the ground like so many others. The corpse was simply very close to it and tightly wrapped within one of the mushroom’s tentacles. Iko recalled the throbbing of the tentacle he had stepped on and the way the nodules had curled when Zerah had touched them. Sensing there was something odd about the mushrooms, Iko pulled out *The Deadly Sepentrio Mountains: A Catalogue of Dangers*. He flipped to the pages on the arcanotaur and scanned until he found an explanation beneath the section on their dens.

Arcanotaurs are remarkable in their development of symbiotic relationships with a variety of other organisms. In almost all cases, these relationships provide food for the arcanotaur without it having to venture from its den. The most common symbiotes are the giant florid mud hornets, which burrow into the arcanotaurs' manure-crusts homes to use as shelter and sustenance. The hornets sting wandering animals to death in defense of their homes, but remarkably, will not attack the arcanotaurs. In a very few dens in the Northernlands, another symbiote—the so-called “rattling mushroom traps”—grow from the manure, a rich source of nutrients. But being that the growth of these fungi is limited only by their nutritional uptake, they have developed a spectacular means of feeding. A network of tentacles, baited with bioluminescent tips, crushes unsuspecting victims, providing supplemental nutrition for the fungus and easy meals for the arcanotaur.

Iko looked up just in time to see Zerah touch the green nodule again. “Zerah, don’t!”

Zerah hardly reacted as the tentacle curled around her wrist. It slithered up her arm. When she tried to pull back, the tentacle tightened. The mushroom rattled.

Rattle, rattle, rattle, rattle...

The rattling drummed on at equally timed intervals that traveled down all the surrounding tunnels. The sound spread out like a ripple in water. But this time, it did not only occur once. As the rattling faded into the distance,

the mushroom that had ensnared Zerah set off the array of rattling mushrooms again.

Rattle, rattle, rattle, rattle...

Iko ran toward Zerah, and she drew her sword, but by then, all the mushroom's tentacles had reacted to her. She landed a blow on the one, but then another ensnared her sword-wielding arm. Another snaked around her legs.

Rattle, rattle, rattle, rattle...

Iko stepped forward, and Zerah called out, "Be careful! We are both dead if you get caught too!" A tentacle twisted around her mouth, silencing her.

Zerah disappeared beneath a tangle of the tightening tentacles. She struggled mightily and managed to rip the mushroom's stalk out of the ground as she stumbled toward Iko. But the serpent-like constriction did not stop. Iko drew his sword and did what he could to save her, but Zerah fell to the ground.

Rattle, rattle, rattle, rattle...

Dust shook free of the walls. Heavy footsteps approached. The arcanotaur was coming.

Zerah gasped for breath. Iko sheathed his sword, pulled out his knife, and sawed at the tentacles around her head and neck. She wheezed desperately when he finally freed her mouth.

"I can't brea—!" she choked. Her eyes and veins bulged as she struggled to inhale.

The arcanotaur came closer. Iko worked his knife between Zerah and the tentacles, gashing her several times while trying to cut her free. The fungus became slippery with her blood. He freed her midsection, and she gasped for breath. He turned his knife toward her legs.

But the arcanotaur was too close.

Fear filled Zerah's bloodshot eyes. "Get out of here!" she said desperately.

Iko ignored the order. He unshouldered his bow and nocked an arrow as the creature approached the end of the tunnel.

The behemoth entered, lumbering on its hind legs with a rope-like tail whipping behind it. Even hunched over, it was nine feet tall. Its horned head appeared like that of an ox with the sharp teeth and long jaws of a wolf. The creature's hind legs also resembled those of an ox, only with more substantial hooves to support it as it walked upright. Its torso was stout and unsettlingly humanoid, and a thick mat of dark brown fur covered its entire body. Its long, muscular forearms were akin to those of ukori, but they were longer with sharper claws that grew from its digits. The arcanotaur's large black eyes peered at Iko. The beast bellowed.

Iko released his arrow, striking the center of the arcanotaur's chest. But the creature was undeterred. It grunted, came onto all fours, and charged. He shot a second arrow in panic, and it missed completely. He stepped back and reached for a third arrow. The beast was almost upon him. The arrow struck the arcanotaur's shoulder, only making it angrier.

Zerah's sword-wielding hand tore free and swung fiercely at the arcanotaur's ankles as it passed. It tumbled down the tunnel and slid to a stop a few feet in front of Iko.

"Go!" Zerah said.

The fall slowed the arcanotaur but not enough to stop it. It remained focused on Iko as it rose. He released his fourth

arrow, again hitting his target. But the arrow did not affect the creature, so he turned and ran.

Iko stumbled through the nearest tunnel, hearing the arcanotaur close behind. He searched desperately for an outlet or any sort of advantage.

He came to another small atrium that served as a nexus for four different tunnels. He leaped into the farthest one and pressed himself against its concave wall, careful to stay out of sight of the atrium. He tried to quiet his ragged gasps for breath.

The arcanotaur thundered into the atrium, and Iko was relieved to hear it walk toward one of the other tunnels. After a few seconds, he left his cover, convinced the monster was gone. Then he ran back toward Zerah.

Chapter 43

Makus had hoped the arcanotaur was gone or dead, but judging by the sounds echoing through the beast's tunnels, neither was the case. What was he to do now? How was he supposed to stop Zerah from collecting the thing's blood? She would collect it in the vials she had carried with her to Godsheep, and once she had it on her person, there would be almost nothing he could do. He grew tense—hot. How would he carry out the will of The One Who Speaks?

"It's a little too quiet in there," Elex said, peering into the tunnel. There was concern in his voice.

Makus realized he was right. There had been roars, growls, and thuds, but now it had been silent for at least a couple of minutes. "Maybe they've finished it," he said, torn as to whether he wanted that to be true.

An angry roar ricocheted off the mud walls. It was not the sound of a dying animal. Then it was quiet again.

"I think we need to go in," Elex said.

Makus sighed. Elex was too anxious, but he might have been right. He turned back toward the rest of the city and surveyed the bluewood-covered roads carefully. There was still no sign of the wretchers. He started into the temple and indicated that he wanted Elex to follow. The human drew his sword and fell in behind him.

They navigated the tunnels—a labyrinthian boneyard that smelled like a pasture full of dead fish. The giant mushrooms were quite strange. Makus led slowly—partly out of caution, but mostly because he was trying to figure out just what to do. He feared what might happen if he failed Speaks.

Zerah probably wouldn't leave the poison in her pack, but if she did, it would be easy enough to take care of while she slept. It was also possible that she'd keep it somewhere he could access when they returned to Ivory City. No. That was too risky. After Dori's theft of Adair's poison, they'd go to great lengths to protect what little they had. He'd have to dispose of the blood before they got back.

The ground quaked. Something large approached. Makus unshouldered his long spear as the arcanotaur appeared at the end of the tunnel. It dropped to all fours and charged.

"Come on!" Makus said to Elex.

The pair bolted down a tunnel to their right.

After a short distance, the tunnel came to an abrupt end upon a balcony that hung over the cliff's edge and overlooked the sea. Fierce coastal gales greeted them, and they slid to a halt to avoid falling into the massive waves, which thundered one hundred feet below. The balcony's old balustrade was mostly gone, so there was nothing to stop them in the event of a misstep. Makus quickly surveyed their surroundings. The balcony was a dead end.

The arcanotaur was fast approaching.

Makus pointed Elex to one side of the tunnel's exit. "He will turn one way or the other. Whichever one of us has his back to him will have a clean shot."

Elex nodded, looking pale as a ghost. Then he moved toward the wall on the side of the tunnel.

“We must be quick!” Makus said as he took up his position on the side opposite Elex.

In the seconds before the arcanotaur appeared, Makus realized that something was wrong with Elex. He was stuck and struggling to get free of something. It took Makus a moment to make sense of what was twisting around the human’s torso, then his legs. It was one of the mushrooms. It had come alive and was wrapping itself around Elex.

Rattle, rattle, rattle, rattle...

The human tried to cut the tentacles with his sword, but was ineffective. Realizing the peril, Makus stepped forward to help.

But a whisper carried on the wind stopped him in his tracks. “*Makus.*”

Elex tried to cut the tentacles off.

The warmth came to Makus, following the voice upon the gales, but like last time, it faded quickly. But it came again, and it was stronger. And upon the wind that carried it was a thing Makus had not yet experienced—a soundless suggestion that Makus was to go no farther. Like a rushing river, it pulled him away from Elex.

Makus resisted the call. He took another step toward Elex, and he was rebuked with waning pleasure. He beheld Elex, and he was suddenly panicked. Speaks wanted Makus to leave him. He couldn’t do that. It would kill him.

He took another labored step forward, and the pleasure diminished to a trickle. Makus suffered, and the winds beckoned him to turn back. It *hurt*. The pain of denying Speaks was too much to bear. Tears came to Makus’s eyes.

“Makus!” Elex was terrified. Heavy footfalls were approaching.

Returning to the warmth for a moment couldn't hurt, could it? Makus was meant for it, after all. He could come back to Elex afterward; he just needed a bit more of Speaks to keep him going. Makus stepped back, and with a deep breath, he drank in the pleasure upon the wind. It was so *right*. But he needed just a little more. He embraced all he could with every fiber of his being.

And at last, consumed by the pleasure, Makus understood. If he were alone when the arcanotaur came, no one would ever know if he had gotten rid of it. Without Elex, he could throw the arcanotaur into the sea. Zerah would never get its blood, and no one would know what he had done.

He took another step back, inhaling the soothing wind, and the increasing warmth assured him that he was doing the right thing. He didn't *want* to leave Elex. He pitied him, truly, but Speaks had a plan. And The One Who Speaks was going to change the world, wasn't he?

Elex yelled, "What are you doing!"

"What I must."

"What!" Elex saw Makus retreat farther, and his expression contorted into that shocked and horrified expression one has when he fears he is about to die. He struggled violently against the mushroom. "Makus! Makus, help me!"

The tentacles tightened, and Makus retreated until he was entirely out of sight from the tunnel. He couldn't see Elex anymore.

Makus closed his eyes. Euphoria!

The arcanotaur came to the entryway.

"Help me!" Elex choked one last time. The tentacles were strangling him.

Makus could barely hear him now.

There was a roar and a thud. Another thud. Elex didn't speak again.

Speaks' pleasure drained from Makus, and he was sober. He stepped out to find the arcanotaur had impaled Elex with its horns. He couldn't see much of the human beneath the tentacles except his arms, which flailed weakly as if to defend against the arcanotaur. But it was too late for Elex, and blood flowed freely over the tentacles that covered his abdomen.

The arcanotaur reared back to impale Elex again. Makus took advantage of the fact that its back was to him and drove his spear through the soft belly beneath its ribcage and deep into its chest. The creature twisted, snapping the spear in half, and swiped at Makus, knocking him back onto the balcony. Then the beast faltered. It tried to lunge forward but listed and collapsed to the ground, limp.

Makus rose, feeling as though the blow from the arcanotaur may have cracked a rib or two. Leaving the spear in place to minimize the blood that would stain the balcony, Makus grabbed the limp monster by its bloody horns and began tugging it toward the drop-off. It moved only inches at a time. Makus's chest heaved from exertion, and his muscles burned. But he pushed harder and faster. He would not stop. He would do what Speaks needed him to do. When he finally got it to the edge, he got behind it and pushed until the arcanotaur's body slipped off the edge and plummeted into the turbulent waters far below.



Where Zerah had been, the mushroom's tentacles lay diced to pieces. She had gotten away. Iko called, "Zerah?" There was no response, and he didn't yell again. She was alive and well enough to walk. She was probably heading toward the arcanotaur.

So Iko searched too. For ten minutes, he found only dead things and mushroom traps—which he carefully avoided. Then he saw daylight—a seaside balcony. At the end of the arcanotaur's tunnel, he could see the bottom half of a marikano leg, as if Makus was kneeling on the ground just out of sight.

He came upon Makus, and the marikano looked up to him, holding Elex in his arms.

Sorrow and tears filled Makus's glowing eyes. "I am sorry," he said.

Elex was white as snow. The blood had drained from his face and out of a couple of punctures in his belly. His head lolled backward as Makus held him, and the rest of him was limp. Tentacles lay cut apart around him.

Iko did not believe what he was looking at—it couldn't be real.

"We came after you, but we separated," Makus said. "I heard him cry out, but I was too late. The arcanotaur found him tangled in one of these detestable things!" He indicated the mushroom.

Iko knelt next to Elex and placed his bow gently on the ground. He took his friend's hand. "Elex?" he said softly. "Hey, Elex?" He placed his hand upon Elex's cheek. Its shocking cold conveyed the truth to Iko, and he gasped loudly. "No. No!"

Iko took his friend from Makus. Still seated on the ground, he scooted against the wall and wrapped his arms around Elex's chest, and he cried.

Iko's best friend—his only friend—had given his life for Casiena. He had marched unflinchingly across mountains and into battle with hardly a complaint because he loved her more than anyone except Iko and Theia. But could he have guessed what sudden, unceremonious death had awaited him? Might it have changed his mind if he had known? It would have changed Iko's mind. He would have denied Elex's offer to help pursue the Praivun Alliance across the Sependrio Mountains. More than anyone else, Elex had deserved the long, happy life that might have been possible with the discovery of dragon-killer. He might have found the love of a woman he had longed for, and he might have had children of his own one day.

Zerah stepped onto the balcony, bloody and bruised. Seeing Iko holding Elex, she covered her mouth in shock. "Oh, Iko! I'm so sorry." As if she were suddenly aware of danger, her head jerked back toward the tunnel from which she had come. "Was it the . . .?"

Makus nodded.

"Where is it?" she asked.

"It fell," Makus said, indicating the edge of the balcony. "It was upon Elex when I came, and after I pierced its heart, it stumbled right off the cliff. I am sorry."

Zerah was holding something close to her chest. She pulled it away and opened her hand, then said to Iko, "You must know his death was not in vain." In her palm were three arrowheads—broken from their shafts. They were the arrows Iko had put into the monster, and they were now

covered in its blood. “He pulled these from himself as he went after you,” she said to Iko. “The shafts couldn’t be saved, but I’d think these might serve our purpose.”

Part of Iko wanted to lash out. Elex’s death hadn’t been needed to gain anything. He wondered why Elex had been in the den at all. But in this miserable moment, the question fell away. For now, there was nothing to do except mourn.

Chapter 44

Makus didn't stay on the balcony for Elex's impromptu funeral. Instead, he returned to the front of the temple and kept an eye out for the wretchers so that Iko could carry out the ceremony without concern. At least, that's what he told Iko and Zerah. In truth, he needed to get away—to escape the unspeakable tragedy he had facilitated. The longer he had stayed at Elex's side with the others, the closer he came to throwing himself off the cliff to meet the arcanotaur.

He stumbled through the tunnels, each step more laborious than the last. He had not stopped crying. He had killed before, but never like *that*. It had been wretchers and lawless villains, not someone who had trusted him, someone who had expected him to help when he was in trouble. Though he'd been oddly numb to it at the time, he could not get Elex's expression out of his head—the look in his eyes when he'd realized Makus was abandoning him to death. Makus had never seen such a horrible expression, and he hoped he never saw it again.

“Makus.” The voice of The One Who Speaks stopped Makus in his tracks. He spun, finding the voice had come from a dead-end tunnel. He stepped lightly over the mushrooms, and Speaks's presence trickled in as he got closer.

“Makus, I know you are troubled,” Speaks said.

The comfort stabilized, and Makus’s angst slipped away. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. *This* was what he needed. This was the peace he sought. But it wasn’t enough. He needed more.

“I know you have done what I asked.”

“Was that the only way?” Makus asked, grasping after the pleasure. “He did not deserve to die.”

“Oh, Makus,” Speaks said. “That is not the way to see these things.”

“Then what is the way?”

“You have done well for me. But I have only told you what you can handle. Do you think you can handle more? Are you prepared for more of my truth?”

Makus feared answering in the affirmative. Speaks had specifically asked that Zerah not acquire more dragon-killer, and yet she had succeeded in acquiring it, however small the amount. Did Speaks know that? If so, what would Makus have to do about it?

The warmth increased sharply. From the center of Makus’s skull came a rush of rapturous bliss. It shot down his spine to his extremities, and he gasped. “I am prepared,” he whispered. He was on his knees, leaning against the tunnel’s mud wall.

“These things—these unfortunate things—will become more frequent.”

“Why?”

“Because the citizens of your world are not prepared for me,” Speaks said. “They live by lies, Makus—lies so deep, they spoil every ounce of their bestial blood. These distortions are a disease, passed on by birth and a corrupted com-

mon cause. Your people have grown from them. Fed from them. They are like trees wilting in tainted soil. Some of them must be uprooted and cast aside so that your world can become what it ought to be. Do you understand, Makus?”

“Lies? What lies are these?” Makus asked.

“You will not understand that. The lies permeate you, too, although to a lesser extent than the others. But know that much of what you consider truth is flipped upside down. Your intent to use that thing’s blood to rid me of my most potent instruments, for instance, is a grave mistake.”

“Your instruments?” Makus asked. “The dragons are your instruments? I thought you could not speak to them?”

“I cannot speak to them. But I use them.”

Makus remembered that Speaks had denied telling Azoch that Adair didn’t have his poison. Only now did he realize that didn’t mean Speaks hadn’t had anything to do with Azoch’s attacks on Ambrial and Ivory City. “Did you have Dori tell Azoch what she had done with Adair’s dragon-killer?” he asked.

The pleasure coursed through Makus again, more powerful than ever, and his concern faded away.

Speaks never answered that question. Instead, he said, “What you need to know is that the dragons serve a purpose. Yes. Haughty have you mortals of Ivory City become, and you must be returned to your proper place. But I do not wish for you to be destroyed. No. Do not think that. But you defy my order—my perfect plan and order—when you try to usurp your overlords in the sky. You must understand, Makus, that to submit to my plan is to be rendered happy. Do you doubt that, Makus? Do you doubt that I want your happiness?”

“I do not,” Makus said, embracing the impossible pleasure of The One Who Speaks.

“Good,” Speaks said. “Now, I will ask one more thing of you. And beyond that thing, I see much light. Even for you, things will become clear. Can you do one more thing, Makus?”

“Yes.”

“Return with your friends by way of Colimina.”

“Colimina?” That seemed a little out of the way. It was much farther west than they’d otherwise return to Ivory City.

“You must trust me. Return by way of Colimina, and you will find there what you seek. Will you bring them there?”

“Yes. I will bring them there.” Makus was relieved that Speaks said nothing of Zerah’s arrowheads.

Suddenly—more suddenly than ever before—Makus fell back to the suffering world. He felt as though he’d just fallen from a ten-story tower. Speaks had vanished in an instant.

Zerah’s voice rang out. “What are you doing?”

Out of breath and disoriented, Makus turned around. He was still on his knees and must have been quite a peculiar sight to his friend. He was suddenly self-conscious—vulnerable. He lied the best he could. “It was just a lot to take in,” he said in a voice that was not quite sad enough. “I shouldn’t have left him.”

“You know you can’t think like that,” Zerah said. “He acted on his own accord, as we all have.”

Makus said nothing.

“Have you looked outside?” Zerah asked. “Are we still alone?”

“Yes,” Makus lied.

She studied him closely. “Makus, what is wrong with your eyes?”

“Nothing. I’m fine.”

“They’ve hardly got any light to them,” Zerah said. “Are you sure?”

“It might be shock,” Makus said, regaining his composure. That was completely untrue, and Zerah probably suspected it. But she wasn’t *that* familiar with marikano physiology, was she? “Where is Iko?” he asked.

“I gave him a moment alone with Elex.”

“And then we are leaving?”

“Yes,” Zerah said. “I think we stick to the plan. The Empyrian Pass is probably the best place to draw Azoch out, don’t you think? Far enough west that there shouldn’t be any of the Praivuns around, and it’s open enough that a fire would probably be noticed from above.”

Makus bristled at the mention of her plan to kill Azoch, but he didn’t think she noticed. “Might as well take Miqa Canyon to the Pass,” he said. “Cut through Colimina.”

“Why such a treacherous path?” Zerah asked. “It’s easier going if we head north along the Akando. Like we came.”

“Like you said, it’s farther west. Probably farther from the wretchers.”

“I suppose that’s true,” said Zerah. “Alright. Miqa Canyon it is.”

Chapter 45

Essili and Nabi peered into the bright blue sky. Azoch had been by at least a couple of times each day since attacking Ivory City, and they didn't want her to catch them off guard. Since the second day, when a group of six had been burned without a moment's warning, everyone venturing into the city for supplies had been particularly cautious, and no one else had died.

The pair carried two sacks of moldy bread from the market. Seeing the dragon was not overhead, they left behind the shattered city, dashed up a grassy hill, and entered the slightly less shattered Dunbardin Castle from a door in its side. From there, they navigated a maze of narrow, musty passageways and staircases until they came to the room in which many of the survivors remained. The bread was for them—the weakest of those left alive. The rest were still coming together in caves on the other side of the tunnel under the protection of the remaining Guard. Azoch had not found them yet.

Essili hated the dim, stinking room as soon as he stepped into it. These people needed sunlight and fresh air as much as they needed bread. It could not have been good for their health or morale.

They were greeted by a guardsman at the door. “Captain,” the guardsman said with a nod. “A pair has just arrived with a report you ordered at Ambrial.”

Essili handed his bag to Nabi as if dismissing her, but she stayed at his side. “Where?” he asked. The timing was good. Today was the day he’d decide between sending men to Godskeep or keeping everyone in Ivory City for defense. He’d thought less of the idea of sending anyone to the coast since Zerah had taken a party that way already, but if he could spare anyone, it would probably still be a good idea. Knowing the wretchers’ location would help with that decision.

The man led him across the room to find Isan and Beiva, still wearing the blood-soaked uniforms they had worn in the Vale of Ambrial. They were finishing a meal, ravenously picking at crumbs on their plates with their fingers. When they saw Essili, they stood.

“Have you got some good news for me, boys?” the captain asked.

“Not sure that’s what it is, sir, but it’s news,” Isan said. “The wretchers have settled in at Colimina.”

“Colimina?” Essili asked. Of the many old cities, structures, and cave systems he had theorized the Praivun Alliance might go, he had thought the ancient holy site least likely. It was too far west, and the road to get there was quite hazardous. To get hundreds of wretchers there without a few falling to their death seemed unlikely.

“That’s not all, sir,” Beiva said. He hesitated.

“Spit it out, son.”

“When we left them, their numbers seemed to have grown by at least a couple of hundred.”

The news was a gut punch. “You sure?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Wregs?”

Beiva shook his head. “Mostly ukori,” he said grimly.

Essili hung his head. That many more ukori was not something the remaining guardsmen could overcome in an attack, even without Azoch overhead. They simply didn’t have the numbers, particularly for an assault on a location like Colimina. And there were too many injured and immobile beneath the castle to try to flee. As much as he hated to admit it, they would have to stick to Campo’s plan. The mission to Godskeep was off. For now, the Guard needed to focus on protecting those who remained in hiding.

Essili was almost certain that the fight would be hopeless, too.

Chapter 46

For the first day of their journey toward the Empyrian Pass, Iko dragged behind the other two, uninterested in talking. He thought over and over about the events that had taken him and Elex to Godskoop. He thought of a thousand things that might have spared Elex's life had they happened differently. He tried to think of something else—anything else—but the thoughts persisted, and grief consumed him. The second day was much the same. He did not speak until Zerah asked him how close he needed to be to the dragon to get a clean shot.

“Twenty or thirty yards,” Iko said flatly.

“Can we do that?” Zerah asked Makus.

“Easily,” Makus said.

Iko again retreated into silence. He did not even ask why they were venturing westward into the mountains, though he wanted to know why. They went farther west than Ambrial before turning toward the north. Zerah tried to engage him again a few times that evening, but he still spoke little. By sunset, she gave up.

On the morning of the third day of their journey, a steady, gentle rain fell, and the sky was endlessly gloomy and gray. Hour after hour, the rain drummed on until Iko's clothes

were soaked. He was cold, and it got colder as they climbed higher.

They eventually found themselves at the bottom of a vast canyon that stretched as far north as the eye could see. It was a dreary and barren place, referred to by Makus as Miqa Canyon. They followed a narrow ledge along the canyon's western wall, which gradually ascended. They climbed higher and higher, and before Iko knew it, they were hundreds of feet in the air, tiptoeing along a ledge a couple of feet wide. When the sun dipped below the tops of the surrounding mountains a few hours later, the bottom of the canyon disappeared into a murky abyss. An unnatural evening fog billowed up from the shadows and overtook the weary travelers. It frustrated Iko's balance and sense of direction. Then the winds came, forceful and persistent. The gusts grew more ferocious by the mile, testing the strength of all in the party as they trudged through the canyon. Iko pressed himself close to the slick rock wall, a misstep away from death. For a time, he thought Makus would stop, given the deteriorating conditions, but the marikano persisted undeterred.

They inched along the canyon without incident until voices, like those of mothers soothing their infants, called out from the twilight fog before them. The voices chanted a patient and ethereal melody, slow and steady. They swelled from time to time, corresponding with strengthening winds, only to slip away as quickly as they had come. The eerie otherworldly songs sent a chill down Iko's spine.

Iko finally spoke. "What makes that sound?"

Zerah turned toward him and slowed, welcoming him to come closer. “This is Colimina. It’s the wind blowing through the rocks.”

“It’s uncanny,” Iko said.

“Your cult annexed Colimina a couple of centuries ago,” Makus said.

He used the word *cult* academically, but Iko still didn’t like it.

Makus continued. “But before that, it was a holy site of some long-forgotten people. They are said to have carved the rocks to hear the gods.”

“Why have we come so far out?” Iko asked.

“We thought this way would be clear of wretchers,” Zerah said. “They are coming from the north and east. Once we’re out of the canyon, it’s a half-day’s journey to the Empyrian Pass, and that’s agreeable terrain.”

A few steps later, Makus stopped in front of a suspension bridge that stretched into the canyon and disappeared into the fog. The thick ropes of the bridge groaned as it swayed in the canyon’s wind, and its aged wooden planks were rotting and rickety. Iko could not tell what was on the other side of it.

“We will have to cross,” Makus said.

“When was the last time you were here?” Zerah asked, observing the derelict bridge.

“Years,” Makus said. He seemed to share her concern about the bridge’s integrity. He stepped onto the bridge. It creaked loudly, but it held. “Why don’t you two wait here? I’ll find a safe path.”

Zerah exhaled an anxious breath, hands on hips. “Alright.”

Makus grinned. "It will be fine." He stepped onto the bridge and disappeared into the fog.

"Where does the bridge go?" Iko asked.

"To the outer spires," Zerah answered. "There are several on each side of the chasm that stretch to the Citadel in its middle."

Iko sat against the wall and pulled his knees to his chest. Zerah remained standing, watching for Makus's return. The rain dissipated to a fine mist, but the wind did not relent.

After several minutes of silence, Zerah asked, "How are you?"

"Fine."

Zerah hesitated. "Iko, I know that's not true."

Iko shrugged. "Alright, I'm miserable. What do you want me to say?"

"I know I didn't know Elex long, but I mourn his death too."

"You, of all people, should." Iko looked away.

Zerah tilted her head, seeming to have heard the accusation in his voice. "You blame me for his death?"

Iko did not immediately answer, but that was what he had meant. Zerah had been the one who split them up in the arcanotaur's nest, after all. But when he remembered Elex rebuking him for his treatment of Essili, he hung his head, feeling as though he'd failed his fallen friend by treating Zerah similarly. He had crossed a line by implying Elex's death was her fault.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that," Iko said. He looked to Zerah. When she did not react, he continued. "I appreciate your concern. I'm just not sure talking about it will help anything."

Zerah stepped forward and squatted down in front of Iko, and their eyes met. Her gaze was sincere and sympathetic—and disarmingly beautiful. He'd never been this close to her. He studied her piercing emerald eyes and a cut on her bottom lip. Then he watched the corners of her mouth pull down.

"It feels like he's still here, in a way, doesn't it?" Zerah asked.

Iko nodded. "Like he's just out of sight."

"That will fade away with time."

"I don't want it to," Iko choked out, holding back tears. He took a deep breath to steady himself and explained. "After I left my home and Cas was taken, I felt like the world around me was falling away, threatening to pull me into an abyss with it. But as long as Elex stood by me, I was on solid ground, no matter what was happening around me. Now that he's gone, it's as if the ground beneath my feet is crumbling too."

"You can't give up, Iko," Zerah said.

"I'm not giving up. I can't. But I feel lost. Like I can't see the way out of the darkness. I truly thought I would save Cas. That I would help save your people and bring the dragon-killer to the world. But now I've awakened from a dream and realized that I will probably be dead very soon, and my Casiena along with me. Like Elex. It doesn't matter what I do."

Zerah raised her brow. "Have you forgotten what I carry in my pocket? Or that we may well have an army with us when we go to your daughter?"

"I haven't forgotten," Iko said. "But to this point, what has gone as it should have? My plans? Ivory City's plans?"

They've failed over and over. How many times can we fail before it's too late for us all?"

"It's not too late," Zerah said. "It's been challenging, that's true. But it hasn't been all bad. There are causes for hope."

"Like what?"

"We have *dragon-killer*," Zerah said. "We've chased the wretchers from their fortress. We have time to develop a solid plan and get your still-breathing daughter back. And when we do, think of her future, Iko. She will live to see the dragons fall. She will see the world return to what it used to be."

Iko closed his eyes, and images of Cas in Ivory City came to mind. He imagined her walking with friends in the fields to its north. He imagined her at the theater, enjoying a show, and in a proper classroom. Zerah was right that it was something to hope for—it was still something he had to fight for.

"Until you draw your last breath, Cas has a chance to see those days," Zerah said. "There will be time to mourn Elex, and mourn him you must, but for now, keep in mind the reason he risked his life."

Iko embraced Zerah's words, allowing them to lift his spirits. She was right that Elex had died for Cas, and he could not let that death be in vain. He opened his eyes and reached out to her. She stood and extended a hand, helping him to his feet.

Makus hurried forth from the fog.

Zerah saw him and asked, "Have you found a way across?"

Makus did not speak until he was upon them. He looked at Zerah, eyes wide, and whispered, "They are here. *All of them.*"

Chapter 47

On a clear evening, the spires at Colimina would have appeared like a forest of stone tree trunks packed tightly between the two sides of Miqa Canyon. On the canyon floor, they were so dense that one could barely squeeze between them. The spires varied greatly in width and height, and there were roughly a dozen that reached as high as the Citadel at Colimina, a few hundred feet from the bottom. Of those spires that more or less did, most of their tops had been razed to create perfectly flat landings that served as junctions for a web-like network of bridges.

At the center of each of these landings was a small, single-room shrine, carved from the tops of the razed spires. Thus, the uniformly cubic shrines were one with the rocks, with doorways that opened toward the adjacent bridges. At the center of each room was a monument or sculpture of some sort—different in each shrine—and above it a square skylight in the roof.

Of course, Makus could hardly see any of this now. The fog was too thick. That is why he led Zerah and Iko closer—across the bridges and to one of the landings' little temples—so they could see what he had seen.

In the middle of the canyon and at the approximate center of the spires, temples, and bridges, and upon a single gar-

gantuan spire, the Citadel at Colimina was only partly visible. Like the shrines, most of the Citadel had been carved out of the geological rarity that had preceded it, though Makus knew there had been additions in later ages. The structure consisted of three roughly conical pyramids arranged equidistantly around a fourth, much larger pyramid at their center. But the top of the central pyramid had been lopped off to form a courtyard forty or fifty yards in diameter. The courtyard was higher than the eastern side of the canyon and the surrounding mountaintops. Makus knew that from atop it, one could see over the Garans, the Akando Basin, and all the way to the Multus Plains. It was a breathtaking view on a clear day.

Alas, it was not a clear day. It was a wet evening suffocated by fog. Still, the Citadel's silhouette was clear enough for Makus's purposes. "Watch carefully," he said to the others.

They all peered toward the Citadel, which was a couple of bridges away. Their eyes took a moment to adjust, but the hive of activity was apparent once they did. The smaller outer pyramids consisted of seven stories, successively smaller and stacked upon each other to form their conical appearance. Around the circumference of each was a walkway dotted with doors and windows, and upon every walkway, shadows busied themselves without much noise. From top to bottom, there was movement.

"You're sure it's them?" Zerah asked, breathless and frightened.

As if in response, the fog parted and a pair of ukori came into view upon the walkways of the Citadel's nearest pyramid. They wore crimson, and the white war paint of the Praivun Alliance was evident.

“There are so many,” Iko said. “More than at Ambrial.”

Makus felt Zerah’s angst increasing by the second. He wasn’t far behind.

But for a different reason.

Had The One Who Speaks known what they would find at Colimina? That must have been the case. But why? Why would Speaks wish for them to wander toward the insurmountable force of wretchers? Did Speaks wish harm on them? Did Speaks wish harm on *Makus*? What might he have done to earn such a punishment? How had he fallen short of The One Who Speaks?

Makus struggled to mask his angst. He needed to talk to Speaks. He needed to *feel* Speaks. Then things might be alright.

Iko interrupted Makus’s angst with a desperate question. “Forgive me. But is there a way? Is there any way we could get inside and save my Casiena?”

The question took Makus back to the present for a moment. Here was the type of challenge that was second nature to him. He observed the Citadel and considered the proposition. “Their numbers have grown beyond what we anticipated. It seems there are more ukori than our remaining soldiers could handle. But I do not think a great force would be required, given the right circumstances. Before your kind annexed Colimina, the keep atop the central spire was converted into a prison. It’s still intact, and I imagine that’s where the women are. Do you assume the wretchers will all gather in one place for their ceremony?”

Iko nodded. “It’s a communal celebration, from what I’ve read. And considering they mean to call Azoch, I think they

will be atop the central spire. Unless there is another space large enough for all of them.”

Makus shook his head, then he continued. “If they do all gather at the top level, the interior of the structure would be left vacant. If you can get inside the central pyramid without being noticed, you could get all the way to the keep by way of the hallways beneath the courtyard. The vermin would never see you. It may require some luck, but it could work.”

“We might have to take that chance,” Iko said.

Makus concurred. “I see no other option. A direct assault will likely fail, given their apparent numbers and the landscape here. For what it’s worth, more daring missions have succeeded.”

Iko studied the Citadel. “I don’t like the idea of waiting until the last minute at all. But it’s hard to deny it will be our best opportunity.”

“And it would give us time to gather some others,” Zerah said.

“More swords are certainly better,” Makus said. “Though I think your best bet is getting inside without having to fight.”

Iko turned to Zerah. “Azoch should probably still be dealt with beforehand. And it will give us time to do that too.”

That caught Makus’s attention. He had not forgotten that Speaks didn’t want them to kill dragons. “Do we need to take that risk now?” he asked. His voice cracked—perhaps his first mistake. It betrayed his attempt to appear unbothered.

Zerah pulled out the arrowheads in their wrap. “We still have these,” she said. “If we don’t kill her now, I assume she would be upon us for your rescue operation. The wretches will try to get her attention if they mean to offer the girls to

her.” She folded the cloth and returned it to a pocket on her tunic.

“We might not have time,” Makus said.

“We will if we don’t wait,” Iko said.

Understandably, Zerah didn’t seem to comprehend Makus’ angst. “Makus, what’s wrong?”

A cackle ricocheted off the wall of the canyon at their backs.

Iko moved toward the door opposite the Citadel and looked outside. “They’re coming!” He squinted as if he were studying something far away. “Ukori. We must go!”

Makus was hot. He felt like a wild animal ensnared in a hunter’s trap. His heart pounded violently in his chest, perhaps visibly to the others, as he finally understood the plan of The One Who Speaks.

The god had known what Zerah had in her pocket, and sending her to Colimina—into the strength of the Praivun Alliance—was the surest way to eliminate the threat she posed. She had become an obstacle, like Elex, and Speaks would see to her removal. But what was Makus to do about it? He could not betray The One Who Speaks. The god was so good. So perfect and pleasurable. There must have been something Makus did not understand.

“Makus, your eyes are...” Zerah said, troubled.

“Zerah,” Makus said, voice quivering, “give me the arrowheads.” Perhaps if she didn’t have them, The One Who Speaks would relent.

“What? Why?”

“We can’t stay any longer,” Iko said. “We must go now!” He spun toward the other two and ran into the tension between them as if it were a stone wall.

“You are not safe with them,” Makus said. “They have to be destroyed. And you are in the way.”

Zerah recoiled, bewildered. “In the way? What are you talking about? Why do they have to be destroyed?”

“It is the will of The One Who Speaks—a god who will soon come to us all,” Makus said. He knew it must have sounded crazy to her—one so far from his truth. “I know you do not understand, but you will. Everyone will. I cannot explain. I’m not even supposed to be telling you this. But if I do not, I know you will not listen.”

“Makus, have you lost your mind?” Zerah asked, obviously unsettled by the shocking claims. “I’m not giving you anything!”

“You can’t win,” Makus said sadly, believing his words. “It’s for your own good, Zerah. You have no hope for survival if you resist.” He stepped forward and reached for the pocket near her waist.

Put off by the invasive grasp, Zerah stepped back and twisted the pocket away. Makus reached again, prompting Zerah to swat his hand. And then, with a desire for The One Who Speaks planted firmly at the center of his being, Makus saw only one path to pleasing his god, and he snapped.



It all happened so fast. Acutely aware of the approaching wregs and ukori, Iko watched in horror as Makus’s hand shot up to Zerah’s throat and lifted her into the air. She reached for the marikano’s hand, and he reached for the arrowheads in her pocket. Instinctively, Iko leaped forward, spearing

Makus at the waist. Zerah fell free as Iko pinned Makus against the wall momentarily.

Makus easily threw Iko off. A kick to the gut sent the human flying across the shrine and nearly out the other doorway. Iko stumbled to his feet, and Makus charged him, drawing his sword. Iko ducked beneath a devastating blow, which cut a chunk of stone from the wall.

Iko found himself next to Zerah and reached for her. Makus observed them, chest heaving. His eyes' glow was barely perceptible. He seemed an entirely different person—one possessed by a darkness Iko had never known.

The marikano's appearance was more frightening than that of the ukori who approached upon the bridge behind him.

Makus recognized the danger by the expressions on Iko and Zerah's faces, and he turned around in time to avoid being run through by an ukori's broadsword. In an instant, he was engaged with a pair of ukori, and more of them fast approached upon the fog-covered suspension bridge.

Iko saw an opportunity to get away. "Come on!" he said, pulling Zerah to her feet.

The two sprinted onto the bridge that would take them closer to the Citadel. But they were stopped cold when several wregs appeared on the landing in front of them. The chaos had not gone unnoticed. Without thinking, Iko unshouldered his bow.

Zerah stopped him with a hand over his. "Look!" she said, pointing downward. About fifteen feet below, another bridge rocked in the misty gales.

Makus emerged from the shrine and ran toward them. "We must destroy it, Zerah! You are doomed if we do not!"

Zerah pulled herself over the rope handrail and let herself fall through the fog. Iko was close behind. As he fell, the bridge below seemed impossibly narrow, and he feared falling into the surrounding abyss. He was partly surprised when he collided with the fragile decking. It buckled and cracked beneath the force of his impact, and as he came to his feet, a board snapped in half, causing him to falter. Zerah pulled him to his feet as Makus appeared overhead. They ran.

Makus followed over the handrail, appearing as a purple-eyed specter hurtling toward the bridge. The impact of his heavy body was catastrophic. He shattered the wooden planks, nearly falling straight through them, but he caught himself at the last instant. The ropes on the left side of the bridge popped and unwound, and the bridge groaned and listed. Iko and Zerah stumbled, catching the slackening handrails. The bridge shook, and they grabbed for the decking.

A succession of loud snaps on the right side preceded the bridge giving way entirely. Its two halves separated where Makus had broken through, and they swung like pendulums toward the spires to which they were anchored.

Iko's shoulder took the brunt of the impact, and his head slammed against the unyielding rock. The breath left his lungs, but he held on. Dazed, he dangled helplessly while he recovered his breath. Ten feet overhead, Zerah untangled herself from the web of ropes to which she had clung during the fall. She grunted in pain. Farther below, Makus heaved himself upward.

"Go!" Iko implored.

Zerah climbed, and Iko followed. She reached the top, pulled herself over, and turned and lay on her belly, extending a hand toward Iko to help him up.

An unseen force yanked her out of sight.

Zerah screamed. Iko climbed faster. He pulled himself onto the platform. Zerah was over the shoulder of an ukori, who was running toward a bridge that led directly to the Citadel. Her eyes met Iko's, and she could only scream, "No!"

Iko's bow was in his hands, and he nocked an arrow. A quartet of wregs who accompanied the ukori charged. Iko dropped two with arrows into their hearts, but the others were too close. He drew *Blessed Ember* and deflected the stab of one, then sliced through the chest of the other. The last wreg missed again, and Iko ran him through. He started toward the bridge.

But the ukori and Zerah had already disappeared into the Citadel.

Makus spoke from the broken bridge at Iko's back. "It's no use, Iko."

Iko spun around, sheathing his sword and taking his bow off the ground.

"I was trying to stop this," Makus said, distraught and out of breath. His shoulders sagged, and he was a pitiful creature. He'd lost his sword. "She should have listened to me. She got in the way... The One Who Speaks has a plan, and it will be carried out, whether or not we cooperate."

The reference to the supposed god pierced Iko. But he shouldn't have been surprised. He had known since boyhood that dark spirits infected the spiritually infantile. "This god's

objective seems rather wicked, don't you think? Saving the lives of dragons?"

"These ways are above our own," Makus said. He continued with strange, subdued happiness—the ignorant bliss of an insular zealot. "But for some unknown reason, The One Who Speaks gifted *me* an experience of the truth—of that peace for which we are all destined. It is wonderful, Iko—beyond any joy you can imagine. But we must obey, or it will be lost. If we obstruct the plan, we will be dealt with as necessary. I do not like it, but it is a fact. Yet we have the power to stop it from happening again. We need only cooperate. What's happened to Zerah... to your Elex, it doesn't have to happen to anyone else."

At the mention of Elex's name, Iko became a statue. "Elex got in the way of your demon?"

The label angered Makus. "You fool! Your childish adherence to those nonsensical contrivances of Silence will be the death of you!"

"You killed him?"

"I allowed what was necessary."

Iko raised his bow and released an arrow aimed at Makus's heart. But the Night Warrior reacted with impossible speed. The palm of his hand hit the arrow perpendicular to its path, and it fell away harmlessly. Another arrow nocked, Iko aimed again, but Makus bounded toward one of the two other bridges that stretched from the spire. The arrow missed, and Makus vanished into the fog.

Chapter 48

More wretchers were coming from the Citadel, and Iko knew he needed to move. He crossed to an intact bridge on the north side of the platform and ventured into the fog. The wheezing and grunts of the wretchers continued behind him. At the next landing, he went east, then east again at the next until he came to the other side of the canyon. He carefully followed the narrow cliffside path about a quarter of a mile northward before ducking into a small cave and collapsing against its back wall.

He would go no farther tonight, not in the dark along the narrow ledges of Miqa Canyon without a guide. He doubted he'd get any sleep either. How could he? He was alone without any plausible plan to save Cas, and there would be no quieting of his heart or mind.

He wished he'd never gone to Godskeep. Captain Essili had warned that it was perilous to embark on the quest without proper resources or planning, but Iko hadn't listened. He had no one to blame but himself. It was his fault Zerah was gone. It was his fault Elex was dead. If news of the dragon-killer never reached the rest of the world, that would be his fault too. Worst of all, it was his fault that Cas's chances of survival were now lower than they'd ever been.

For even if Ivory City had sent a team to Godskeep, they'd find no arcanotaur when they got there—no dragon-killer.

Iko remembered the conversation with Essili regarding Godskeep. He imagined it over and over, wondering how things might have been different if he had not dismissed the captain's warnings so readily. He might have been marching to Godskeep now with a plan and a handful of guardsmen, while Makus remained in Ivory City. He wished Elex had been part of that conversation. He might have been able to talk some sense into Iko—to tell him to stop being so petty and bitter and trust the captain this once.

It made no difference now. Iko had no choice but to return to Ivory City and beg Essili for help—if he was even still there. It would take a miracle, but Iko's only other option was to charge into the Citadel alone, and that would almost certainly be futile.

Overwhelmed and exhausted, Iko needed to restore himself for whatever trials lay ahead. There was only one thing he could think of that might help him do that. He checked outside to confirm there were still no wretchers nearby, then returned to the cave, knelt on the cold rock floor, and opened his pack. He uncorked the dracomuen oil, placed his tacit cap upon his head, and donned his cloak.

In the darkness of the cave, he prayed for strength and a solution to save the wretchers' captives. He prayed that Essili would be willing to help and was capable of a miracle. He prayed that Cas was not afraid tonight.

Eventually, Iko fell silent. He drifted into a primordial emptiness. As he approached the edge of consciousness, unsure if he was awake or dreaming, he thought he felt something call him to go further—something he'd never felt

before. Then the world fell away, he lost all sense of time, and he didn't move for the rest of the night.



Early the next morning, through the garb in which he had unintentionally spent the night, Iko was awakened by muffled voices—human voices. He threw off his earmuffs, blinders, and cloak, and hurried to the front of the cave, stopping short to watch the last of a group of men pass by. He crept toward the edge of the cave and leaned out to watch them. A broad-shouldered man, taller than the rest and with a full, black beard, led their way. He was obviously in charge, and Iko's mouth fell open when he recognized him.

It was Rog Burnok, and all around him were unbelievers of Ekara.

Iko stepped out of the cave. "Rog!" he called.

All the men spun around. A couple of them drew swords. Rog pushed through the group, parting them like water. And when he beheld Iko, he grew still.

Part Four: First Quarter Moon

The One Who Speaks as Interpreted by the Silent
Seer Velia Amenini

I knew there were shadows in Makus's midst, but I barely perceived the slave of The Silent One who stood beside him. All indications were that there were no more of those besides the ones I left at the world's edge five decades ago. I hate that I can barely see them—that they can't hear me from my exile. Curse these abominable mortals for forsaking my gifts with their contemptible disciplines! It is an offense to my truth that they rebuke what I offer.

I must be vigilant. It was such a slave who almost thwarted my designs fifty years ago by revealing me to the others. And as I know, the clearer I am to them, the more likely they will retreat from me. I cannot allow that to happen again. The slave will falter—all vermin come close enough to feel me, eventually. And when he does, I will act. In the meantime, my designs are not lost. Most of the pieces are set, albeit with a narrower margin for error than before. I will restore my order, barring any missteps.

Chapter 49

“**T**hey came again?” Iko asked. He faced Rog near the entrance to the cave.

Rog stood with his arms crossed and nodded. “Took two more of the Lotherin women. There were fewer than a dozen, but we weren’t all together, so that didn’t matter. I didn’t even know until the next day.”

The two stood inside the cave while the others chatted just outside. Only Kruick and Bennick Shuckwine paid any mind to their conversation from the entrance. The rest of the eight men were Lotherins, and while Iko had seen them all before, he didn’t know any of them. Iko had told Rog everything that had happened since he’d left Ekara, except for the bit about Makus and the demon. As expected, Rog had his doubts. The dragon-killer seemed like a bit of a stretch, but he listened intently, then followed with his own tale about how Jynsomm had been attacked by the foreign wretchers ten days ago.

Rog continued, “The Lotherins insisted we follow them since it was their women taken. They thought that if there was any chance you were right, it was worth the risk. And I... I thought it was the right thing to do.”

The right thing to do? Had Rog not thought going after Casiena was the right thing to do when Iko and Elex had left Jynsomm?

Iko steadied himself. At least Rog had finally come to his senses.

“But then we got here, and we found them in that fortress,” Rog said. “I can see no hope, Iko—I simply can’t. How many hundreds are in there?”

“Several, I think.”

Rog grimaced and shook his head. “It is hopeless then,” he said. “We saw some women being dragged into the structure on top of the fortress. There’s no way we can get to them without an army.”

The claim piqued Iko’s interest. Makus had predicted the women would be held in the keep. “One of Ivory City’s soldiers thought it possible to get them out if they were being held in the keep,” he said.

“I can’t see how. You trust him?”

Iko shrugged. “Not really, but I got the impression he knew what he was talking about. At least when it came to warfare.”

“Where is this soldier? Would he come with us?” Rog asked.

“Unfortunately, he...” Iko searched for the right way to put it. “He’s gone.”

Rog nodded understandingly, but Iko knew he did not understand at all.

“But there is another who might know what to do,” Iko said, thinking of Essili. “He may even be willing to join us for the justice’s sake. Maybe even convince some others to come.”

Rog shrugged. “Well, it sounds absurd, but I didn’t come all this way not to give it our best shot. I’ll hear him out. And I know the Lotherins will want to try.”

“Me too,” Bennick said from the cave’s entrance.

Iko had nearly forgotten that his pregnant wife, Luci, had been taken. She must have been nearly full-term by now.

“Very well,” Iko said. “If we leave now, we will have a couple of days to rest and plan before we come back.”

Iko bent to pick up his bag. When he rose, he found Rog looking at him intently—uncomfortably.

“I’m sorry about Elex,” Rog said.

Iko nodded. “Thank you.”

A tear streamed down Rog’s cheek, but he maintained his composure and spoke firmly. “And I am sorry about Casiena. I am ashamed that I didn’t come with you before. I’ve hardly been able to sleep since she was taken. She deserved better, as would her poor mother.”

Iko stopped. Had Rog really said that? He offered a weak smile, and Rog nodded in return.

Iko drew a deep breath. “We still have time,” he said. “And we will have our chance.”

Chapter 50

Zerah wondered how she had missed the trouble with Makus. Why had she not inquired further as to his increasing gloom or dimming eyes? Thinking back over the past couple of weeks, it was obvious he had not been quite right. It was true that there had been a lot going on, but she wondered if she would have noticed had it not been for Iko's discovery of the dragon-killer. Then again, who knew how long Makus had been involved with his alleged god? It could have been happening for months or years.

Zerah wondered at the fact that Makus, of all people, had somehow come to believe that a god wanted him to spare dragons from poison arrows. She wondered if there were others who believed in Makus's god. What else did they believe? What threat did they pose to what remained of Ivory City? She was anxious to get to the bottom of it to protect the survivors. But more than that, she was anxious to get to the bottom of it so she could help Makus. Alas, she wouldn't be able to do anything unless she could get out of this Citadel before she was sacrificed. At the moment, that seemed impossible.

Zerah suspected there were other women in the Citadel that the wretchers meant to sacrifice to Azoch, but she was alone in her cell for now. It was a small room, similar in

appearance to the rest of the Citadel and the little shrines surrounding it—hewn out of the rock of the spires. The only pieces of her room that weren't bare, black rock were the iron bars of the door. A small window let in a bit of morning light, but otherwise, the room was appropriately dark and depressing.

An ukori appeared on the other side of the iron bars of the room's door and growled something before thrusting it open. Zerah reflexively retreated toward the corner as the big brute approached. Two wregs entered behind the ukori, nervously eyeing each other and Zerah. One of the two was particularly ugly—he had a severe underbite from which several sharp, brown teeth jutted into his top lip. All the beasts smelled like dogs that had just rolled in something dead.

The ukori picked Zerah up by her shirt and set her on her feet. They had already taken her weapons, and now he tore her cloak off and tossed it toward the wregs. They tossed it into the hallway. Then, starting at her shoulders, the stinking ukori used its massive, clawed hands to pat down Zerah from head to toe. He proceeded crudely and with no concern for decency. She felt like a horse being inspected for sale. He tore off her belt and her boots.

As he patted her down for a second time, she breathed a sigh of relief. He had missed the dragon-killer arrowheads she had hidden in the fabric of the flap over the pocket they had been in. She had known that she needed to have them somewhere less conspicuous than inside the pocket if she hoped to have them when faced with Azoch, so she used them to cut a little pocket inside the pocket's flap. They all fit, snugly pressed against each other. The ukori had taken

care to make sure nothing was inside the pocket, but he had not seemed to suspect anything within the flap that covered it.

Apparently satisfied with his inspection, the ukori called the wregs over. They tied Zerah's hands behind her back and escorted her up several levels and across a bridge that brought them into the largest, central pyramid. From there, they ascended a flight of stairs to its flattened top. The courtyard there was about fifty yards in diameter. At its center was a rectangular, one-story keep—an apparent later addition to the Citadel since it had been built of wood and sandstone blocks. Three groups of stone beasts kept watch over the keep, midway between it and the courtyard's edge. Each group consisted of about thirty figures, and they were one with the rock spire, like the rest of the Citadel. They were lions, arcanotaurs, sea serpents, and more. They were all a couple of feet taller than an ukori, despite having been decapitated. Zerah could only guess why someone had taken the time to do that.

The interior of the keep consisted of a long hallway with several iron-barred doors on each side. Of the four cells Zerah could see, at least three held handfuls of girls and women. This was where the Praivun Alliance was holding their sacrifices.

The ukori grabbed Zerah's arms and held tight while the wregs removed her binds, then he shoved her inside the cell nearest the entrance. It was about twice the size of the room she'd stayed in the night before, and nearly as gloomy. There were a couple more windows, guarded with horizontal iron bars. Every face in the cell turned toward her as she was tossed inside. They were maybe twenty, holding in common

their drooping, resigned faces. They were dirty, and none had any possessions. Like her, the wretches had taken their shoes. Zerah did not want to guess what the many offensive smells were, but she deduced they were coming from the buckets in each of the back corners. None said a word.

As Zerah scanned the room for the best place to sit, a pregnant woman caught her eye. The woman had dark hair and a round, cherubic face. Her eyes were a little livelier than the others, and when they met Zerah's, the woman offered a faint smile. A young girl sat beside her in a dirty blue dress, face hidden by a tangle of dark curly hair. The girl rested her head on the pregnant woman's shoulder, and upon catching the smile, she turned to see what had caused it.

With a shock, Zerah recognized the girl's blue eyes as Iko's—along with her thin nose and unruly hair. She stepped cautiously through the women sitting on the floor toward the girl. "Are you Casiena?"

The pregnant woman's eyes widened with surprise.

"Yes," the girl said. Her gaze remained fixed on Zerah as she sat against the wall next to the two. "How do you know that?"

"I've been with your father."

Casiena shook the pregnant woman's arm. "See, Miss Luci? I told you he was here."

The pregnant woman smiled wider. "Oh, I thought she'd been seeing things. A lot was going on when the soldiers came."

"He's most certainly here," Zerah said, happy to bring hope to Cas. Never mind that Makus might have killed him by now. "And he's caused quite a fuss making his way to you."

Casiena beamed. “I knew it! See, Miss Luci? They’re still coming to get us!”

Zerah couldn’t believe it. To see Iko’s daughter alive and well was an unexpected but welcome joy. Furthermore, even though Cas’s complete faith in her father to cross the Se-pentrios and rescue her from hundreds of wretchers was a little naïve, it was contagious. Hope was not yet lost. Iko wasn’t the only one who knew where the Praivun Alliance was hiding—Captain Essili should have known by now, too.

The pregnant woman said, “I won’t lie, that makes me feel better. I wasn’t sure our men would be able to track us all the way here. And that they’ve joined with an army!” After a pause, she introduced herself. “I’m Luci.”

“Zerah.” Zerah realized Luci had assumed that more men than Iko and Elex had come from Ekara and that they had joined with the Guard to rescue the captive women. She wouldn’t spoil the theory just yet. “Looks like they won’t get here a moment too soon,” Zerah said, indicating Luci’s swollen belly. “I hope this isn’t your first.”

“Thank goodness not,” Luci said. “Number six, and I think each was easier than the last. I think I can handle it if I must, and I’ve been explaining to Cas here how she can help me if it comes to it.”

“That’s a big responsibility,” Zerah said to Cas. “I’ve had a pair of children myself. I can help if you like.”

“Well,” Cas said nonchalantly, “you can watch, I guess.”

Zerah grinned at the little girl’s tenacious declination. “Oh. Alright.”

“I think she *wants* me to have it in here.” Luci laughed. “But I’ll do everything I can to hold it in until help arrives.”

Chapter 51

“**M**akus did *what*?” Essili asked.

Iko and the captain stood alone upon the soiled purple carpet of the main hall of Dunbardin Castle, a day and a half after Iko had left Colimina. He’d been happy to discover that they’d decided against a mission to Godskeep when they’d learned how many wretchers were at Colimina.

Essili had despaired at the news of Zerah’s abduction, but he was entirely beside himself when Iko had tried to explain what Makus had done.

“There was no sense to it,” Iko said. “He must have been possessed. I’m not sure it matters at this point, but I thought you should know in case any of your soldiers should come upon him.”

Essili stood with his hands on his hips, baffled. “A god? Makus believes a god wants him to protect Azoch?”

Iko nodded. “A demon, most certainly.”

“He must have gotten hold of something,” Essili said, nodding. He seemed content to settle on the explanation. “Perhaps a few days in isolation will cure him.”

Iko knew that wasn’t it, but he was happy that Essili was so confused by what had happened. He’d gone to the captain in part because he’d assumed he was safe. He didn’t know if

anyone else was under the influence of Makus's demon, but Essili seemed the least likely to be.

"However you wish to deal with him, it will make little difference to those in captivity," Iko said. "Do you think he was right about the keep? Can we do it? He thought we wouldn't need many, but they'd have to be people you could trust. People who wouldn't have fallen into whatever Makus got into."

"I know who I can trust," Essili said. He bit his bottom lip. "I think it could be done. Maybe. He meant to breach the Citadel during their ceremony?"

"That's right."

"And we think the Praivun Alliance means to draw in Azoch during their ceremony?"

"Yes."

Essili raised his eyebrows. "It does sound an awful lot like suicide."

"It does," Iko said. "But the Citadel should offer us protection if she comes. And unless you think she'll actually ally herself with the wretchers, she should be busy with the hundreds of them atop the structure while we make our escape."

Essili nodded. "It's tempting, truly, especially for Zerah's sake. But I don't think I can leave right now. We're still trying to figure out what we're going to do when the wretchers show up."

Iko sighed. He knew a potential defense against the Praivuns was likely futile, but what else could the survivors of Ivory City do? Essili had already explained the difficulty. Azoch had remained watchful over the city since her attack, and considering how many elderly and injured remained

beneath the castle and in the caves, an evacuation wasn't possible until the dragon lost interest in the area. For the time being, they were stuck where they were. Iko doubted anyone was more important than Essili for making the most of their chances of repelling a potential wretcher attack.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, an idea struck Iko. "What if we can make sure the wretchers never come?"

Essili tilted his head. "How would we do that?"

"Is there any way off of the Citadel other than the rope bridges from the sides of the canyon?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Then is there any reason we couldn't extract the captives, then cut the bridges so that the wretchers can't escape?"

Essili's brow rose, and a light came to his eyes. "Ah! That's rather devilish of you. I can't believe I haven't thought of that." He considered the plan and continued stroking his grizzled chin. "Your peace is not your purpose."

"What?"

"That's what your father used to say to us before battles." Essili crossed his arms. "He liked to remind us that our purpose was not to be safe or comfortable. It was to put ourselves between danger and those who couldn't fight for themselves."

Iko nodded. "That sounds just like him."

"He did that for me. He did it for others," Essili said. "I never saw a man more reckless with his life than your father when someone else was in trouble." He raised his brow. "Though your pursuit of your daughter bears a resemblance."

Iko straightened with pride.

Essili nodded. "I will come with you, but I will force no one else to come. I will ask for volunteers among those I can trust. And I will ask for Campo's permission. If he blesses it, we will likely have more who are willing to join us."

"I can't imagine he will bless it," Iko said.

"If he doesn't, he's a bigger fool than I thought," Essili said. "If we have a chance to trap the vermin at Colimina, we must take it."



Before meeting with Justice Campo, Iko gathered Rog from the shelter beneath the castle. Captain Essili thought it best that the leader of the Guard's likely allies should be part of any planning that would occur during the audience.

They found Campo upon Bhal Adair's throne. He had issued a decree that no one could walk freely in Ivory City without his permission, and he had made sure that Dunbardin Castle was empty except for himself, a few guardsmen, and the cooks preparing his meals. Of course, he did not light the fires in the throne room—that was far too risky. Otherwise, the room looked much as it had before Azoch had come.

Justice Campo bit the last morsels of meat off a bone as Iko entered with Rog and Essili. Seeing he had an audience, he carefully placed the food down, picked up a neatly folded napkin, and wiped his face clean. It did not escape Iko's notice that he was wearing one of the flowing black robes of Lord Adair.

“Ah, Zerah’s friend has returned,” Campo said with hollow kindness. “And where is she?”

Iko didn’t like that Campo had directed the question toward him. He didn’t want to be the one to break the bad news.

“She’s been taken by the Praivun Alliance,” Essili said.

Campo’s eyes widened. “Oh!” A flash of sincerity dissolved quickly. “How unfortunate. But I suppose it could have been avoided had she listened to me.”

Essili ignored the comment and continued, indicating Rog. “This man is Rog. He is one of Iko’s countrymen, from Ekara. They’ve sent a small group in hopes of extracting several of their women and girls who are also being held captive at Colimina, and he’s come to us for assistance. I think we could succeed at freeing the prisoners, including Justice Noburia, with the right plan of attack. More importantly, I think we can trap the Praivuns there by destroying the bridges as we leave. We can stop them from ever coming here if we succeed.”

Campo folded his long, frail hands and smiled, then laughed without making a sound. “My dear captain,” he finally said through a thin, duplicitous smile. “Surely, you understand by now that we can do no such thing. We need every sword we can get to protect our people from an attack from the vermin.”

Iko couldn’t help but blurt out, “The wretchers are all at Colimina! And they will be there until after their Praivun Moon. There is no risk to Ivory City from them until then.”

“You wouldn’t know a thing about it,” Campo said. “You have no idea where they are or where they will be! Conjecture and false hope. That’s all that is.”

“I’ve seen them with my own eyes,” Iko said. He indicated Rog. “As has he. You’re wasting your swords by keeping them huddled in caves. Send some of them with us. We can end the threat of the Praivun Alliance *now*—rebuild Ivory City and bring dragon-killer to the world without delay.”

Campo dropped the false friendliness. “Hold your tongue! I was not addressing you in the first place.”

Iko was speechless.

Rog scoffed and turned to Essili. “You allow this *insect* to lord over you?”

Essili grinned.

“And the same to you, Rog the Ekarian!” Campo snapped. “You should not have even been allowed in my hall. I will not have foreigners coming into my city and undermining it. You will destroy all that we’ve built!”

Rog frowned and shook his head. “It appears Azoch has left little for me to destroy.”

Essili spoke as if he’d had enough. “You’ll be off that throne as soon as there’s a vote, and you know it. No one left alive would prefer you over Zerah.”

“Well, it seems Zerah’s not going to be an option,” Campo said coldly.

“Sure, she’ll be an option,” Essili said with a shrug. “We’re going to go get her.”

“You will not! I forbid it,” Campo said. “The rule states—”

“I don’t care what the rule says,” Essili said. “I resign my position as Captain of the Guard.”

Iko stepped back in surprise.

“You can’t do that! It’s desertion!” Campo’s face turned red with panic. “I’ll have you arrested!”

“Marshal Falgo will do an admirable job of protecting you from the attack that is never going to happen,” Essili said. “And you can arrest me when I come back.” He turned to the other two men. “Come on. Let’s go gather our swords.”

The three left the throne room through the echoes of Justice Val Campo’s irate threats and accusations, but none looked at him again.

Chapter 52

What kept Zerah going over the next few days was the dragon-killer in her pocket. Part of her hoped the Guard would arrive before the Praivun Moon and set them free—that she would be able to find another arcanotaur, gather its blood, and make hundreds of dragon-killing arrows for a proper hunt. But in the darkness of her heart was a primal desire to be the first sacrifice marched out to face Azoch. What a surprise she would hold for the monster then! Zerah’s face would be the last Azoch saw before coming to her long-overdue end.

As far as Zerah could tell, none of the other girls and women had any idea about the wretchers’ intentions. They were quietly perplexed by the bread and cooked flesh the Praivuns offered to keep them alive. The wretchers had brought in plenty of fresh water, and they had even changed out the buckets in the corner of the cell with some frequency. None understood why the wretchers hadn’t roasted them on a spit.

When the wretchers came in one afternoon to shackle all their ankles to the windows and floor drains, it confused them even more. The sudden change couldn’t have meant anything good. The women murmured theories and fears, and Zerah considered explaining what she knew of the

wretchers' plan, but she saw no benefit in giving her fellow prisoners a thing to fear over which they had no control. Besides, she wasn't sure the wretchers would succeed in summoning a dragon for a sacrifice of human flesh. To her knowledge, no dragon had ever cooperated with any people for anything.

Cas also made Zerah's imprisonment more bearable than she imagined it would have otherwise been. The girl's faith in her father to rescue her was imperturbable, and so she was more joyful and more pleasant to be around than anyone else in the cell. Zerah was glad that the Praivuns had shackled her in her usual spot beside Cas and Luci.

"My father never gives up," Cas said proudly on the evening of the Praivun Moon. "My mother used to complain about it a lot." Her brow knotted, and she put her finger to her chin. "I don't know why."

Zerah let out a nervous laugh. It was near sunset, and tonight was the night. Her hope was being infringed upon by fear. What if the Guard wasn't coming? What if Azoch simply burned her to a crisp before she could get close enough to use her poison? For Cas's sake, she tried to push the thoughts to the corners of her mind. "I've only known him a few weeks, but I've got that impression of him too."

The two had spoken a great deal over the past days of life in Jynsorn. Cas excitedly recounted her lessons in farming from Iko, and that Elex had taught her how to make cakes and candies. She retold her favorite fairy tales, explained her favorite games, and even had plenty to say about everything she'd learned about The Silent One from her father. In contrast with Iko, Casiena was quite chatty and a seemingly open book. But when Cas mentioned her mother's com-

plaint, Zerah realized that Cas had not said a word about the woman until just then. It was strange that Iko had never said a word about her either.

Honestly curious about what sort of woman Iko had chosen to be with, Zerah asked, “Tell me about your mother. I’m sure she’ll be happy to have you back.”

The life drained from Cas’s face, and she suddenly seemed near the edge of despair. “She’s dead,” she said flatly. “These wretchers killed her when they took me. She tried to stop them.” She pressed her lips together and willed herself back to strength. It was a feat well beyond her years, and quite tragic.

Regret coursed through Zerah. “Oh! I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“It’s okay.”

“You’ve been so strong, Casiena,” Zerah said. “I never suspected it.”

Cas nodded. “My father taught me—” A momentary lapse of strength broke through. She gathered herself again. “I miss her, and I still cry sometimes. But father said that when bad things happen, it can be like a flood that sweeps us away. We can be lost if we aren’t careful—if we don’t grab on to something good. I’ve been trying to remember that, Miss Zerah.”

Tenderly, Zerah asked, “And what’s good that you’re holding on to?”

Tears came to Cas’s eyes. “This dress,” she choked, indicating her ragged blue attire. “Mother made it for me just last month, and I really like it.” She started crying.

Zerah wrapped her arm around Cas and pulled her close.

“And my father,” Cas said, face buried in Zerah’s chest. Her warm tears soaked through the thin fabric of Zerah’s tunic. “He will come for me. I know it.”

“I’m sure he will,” Zerah said, not sure if she believed it. “You know, I lost someone too. Well, three someones, actually.”

Cas pulled her head up, and her doleful eyes met Zerah’s. “Really? Who?”

“My family,” Zerah said in a thin voice. “I had two sons and a husband, and they were my world. I know what it’s like to lose someone so close.”

“You are strong,” Cas said. “What did you hold on to?”

Zerah raised her brow, finding herself surprisingly befuddled by the question. She finally forced an answer that didn’t feel quite right. “Where I come from, I had an opportunity to help a lot of people live better lives—lives free of the dragons.”

“That sounds really good.” Cas sat up and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. “Maybe father and I will live there after we get out of here.”

“We’d love to have you,” Zerah said.

They were both suddenly aware of long, deep breaths being drawn to their right. It was Luci, who had been napping. She was awake and, apparently, in the midst of a strong contraction. Afterward, she looked to Zerah and said, “I was going to suggest to my Bennick that we come to your city after all this. I hope you have room for us all.” She breathed through another contraction, then said, “We’d better get ready, Casiena. I knew it would happen. Must be the full moon. This baby is coming tonight!”

Chapter 53

As the sunlight faded from the Miqa Canyon, the fiery orange Praivun Moon ascended over the mountaintops, and the gentle songs of Colimina were awash in its warm glow.

The party that made it back to Colimina was eighteen strong. Essili had recruited some of his most trusted soldiers, including Nabi, Isan, and Beiva. Iko did not know any of the rest besides Reya, who had abandoned Campo to save Zerah. She was soft spoken but had calmly explained to Iko along the way that Ivory City was a lost cause as long as Campo stayed on the throne. She thought Zerah might have been the only one left that could keep Ivory City together after all that had happened.

They gathered in the cave in which Iko and Rog had met. Being that Nabi was familiar with the Citadel, she crouched in the group's center beside Captain Essili as they went over their plans. They had chanced lighting a torch in the cave so that Nabi could draw pictures in the dirt.

"The three outer pyramids are crossed by several hallways at every level," Nabi said. She used a dagger to make a circle representing a cross-section of one of the smaller pyramids and drew several lines to represent its hallways. They were all perpendicular to each other and stretched across the

pyramid. “But the only way to ascend from one level to the next of these three is the stairs on their outer walkways.” She indicated a single stairway with an X.

Essili asked Rog, “You Ekarians claim the prisoners are being held in the central keep, right? Atop the larger pyramid?”

Rog nodded. “We saw several of them marched inside.”

“Then we will have to ascend to the top of one of these smaller pyramids to get there,” Nabi said. “The closest, I assume. Its sixth level leads to a bridge that will take us into the main structure.” Nabi drew a larger circle next to the first circle. She connected the two with a line. “There are two ways into its keep.” She drew a rectangle in the center of the larger circle to represent the prisoners’ keep. She pointed at the picture as she explained. “One is from underneath—if you navigate the interior of the main structure, you can come into it from below. The other way is to ascend one of the staircases near the edges of the courtyard, cross to the keep, and enter from the outside.”

Iko added, “And we suspect nearly all the wretches will be in the courtyard. It’s the only place large enough for all of them.”

Essili raised his brow and folded his arms. Iko’s theory was the main reason he thought they had a chance with so few. “You’d better hope you’re right. We won’t get very far if the outer pyramids are full of ukori.”

Rog asked Iko, “You figured that out from your books?”

Iko nodded.

Rog accepted the explanation with a nod of his own.

“So, we go out the same way we go in,” Essili said. “If the courtyard is crawling with vermin, it won’t be an option.

We hope to get in from underneath and get out before they realize we are there.”

The group stood silently around the torchlit diagram in the dirt, studying it. Iko assumed they'd suddenly grown sober to the operation's thin margin for error and the severe consequences of failure.

Essili broke the silent tension with a loud clap of his hands. “Alright, it's a plan. We must be ready when the time to move comes.”

Chapter 54

A few hours into the labor, Luci was utterly exhausted. Beads of sweat dripped from her forehead and chest, and her eyelids drooped. The wretchers had fed the women well, all things considered, but Luci had not eaten nearly enough for a woman eating for two. She must have been impossibly weak, and Zerah pitied her. Even five prior births had not prepared her for these circumstances. Cas did well to give her sips of water when she asked for it, which helped for a time, but a few minutes later, Luci was inevitably suffering on the edge of exhausted delirium again.

Luci did her best to be quiet during the labor, but one could only be so quiet when pushing a baby out of her body. The rest of the women watched silently, wincing every time she groaned or cried out. None of them knew what to expect if the wretchers realized one of their prisoners was having a baby. Zerah assumed that if it was a girl, they'd toss her to Azoch with the rest of them. If it were a boy, perhaps they'd eat it. She kept her theories to herself.

Casiena's primary job was to convince the other women in the cell to give up pieces of their clothing so there would be something to help clean up the blood. Even chained to the wall, she dutifully fulfilled her obligation. She gathered pieces from the women she could reach and coordinated the

passing of the rags from the rest of the women. All were willing to tear a bit here or there to help out.

Zerah focused on encouragement and providing counterpressure during contractions. The birth nearly let her forget all about the Praivun Moon. But then, orange light flooded the cell. The wretchers were lighting fires outside. Zerah was suddenly aware of a constant, abrasive drone of wretcher voices. They were gathering in the courtyard and chanting something.

Luci interrupted Zerah's concern, dropping to the floor, propping herself onto her elbows, and saying, "It's almost here!" She closed her eyes and grimaced, then took several deep breaths. She nodded vigorously. "Ah! It's time!" She suddenly came to life.

Zerah looked to Cas, who was supposed to help guide the baby out. The girl hadn't seemed squeamish at first, but when she made her way around to Luci's lower half and lifted her dress so that she could see what was going on, her eyes widened. "Maybe you should do this part, Miss Zerah."

Unsurprised, Zerah nudged Cas to the side and replaced her. "I can see the baby's hair," she said. "It's pretty dark, but a full head.

Luci surprised Zerah with a smile. "Like the rest of them."

Cas nudged Zerah's shoulder and offered a rag. "For your hair?"

"Thanks," Zerah said. She used it to tie her hair back. "You're almost there, Luci, and doing great."

A sudden clamor rose near the room's entrance, and the iron-barred door opened. An ukori walked in as the wreg with the underbite wrestled to get the key out of the door's lock. Luci had turned so that she would be birthing away

from the door, but she was the closest prisoner to the ukori. He looked down at her, then made eye contact with Zerah, who was between Luci's legs. His head tilted, but he realized what was happening. He considered the scene briefly, then looked past the two women and growled something to the wreg, who finally got the key out of the door.

Luci had a strong contraction and cried out, and the crown of the baby's head grew.

At the behest of the ukori, the wreg walked over to a pair of young women near the window and used a second key on his key ring to unlock the pair's chains. The women screamed as the ukori grabbed each of them by the wrist. They fought fiercely but futilely, and the ukori dragged them out of the cell as if they were rag dolls. The rest of the women recoiled against the walls as if it would keep them from suffering the same fate. When the ukori was gone, the wreg took a moment to survey his captives, then left.

"Oh, goodness," Luci said.

Casiena came closer to Zerah, frightened.

Luci strained through another contraction. As her screams faded, the cries of the two women in the courtyard grew louder.

The baby's face appeared, and Zerah's heart skipped a beat. "Oh," she said.

"What?" Luci asked, out of breath. Sweat dripped from her hair.

"The cord is around the baby's neck."

Luci's eyes widened.

Zerah reached toward the baby's neck. "I think I can get it." She tried to work her fingers beneath the slippery, pulsating cord, but it was too tight. She tried again.

There was a sudden eruption of voices outside. It was a thundering chorus of ugly wretcher voices, joined in a rhythmic, primitive song. Then the keep began vibrating—the wretchers must have been dancing. The entire structure shook in time with the song.

“I can’t get it,” Zerah said, refocusing her attention on the baby. “Push. We need to get it out now.”

“I can’t!” Luci cried.

“You must, Luci. Push. It’s wrapped too tightly.”

Luci groaned in disbelief and started to cry.



Iko had tried for the last half hour to find Silence, but his success had been fleeting. Fear assaulted him, and he fought against imaginings of Cas’s suffering and death by dragon fire. He fought against imaginings of his death and Zerah’s. He fought against speculation about what would come of the Anuthurians if Makus’s demon—and the Praivun Alliance—won this fight.

Yet eventually, the darkness around him came into focus, giving him clarity of purpose. It wasn’t quite what he’d found in the cave the night before Rog had arrived, though it was enough to bring him some peace.

But when he heard the Praivun Moon celebration begin through his prayer garb, the fear returned, and he wished it had not yet come.

Essili patted his shoulder to raise him from his prayer in the back of the cave. “Now you will get your chance,” he said as Iko removed his garb. “Have you prayed well?”

Iko accepted Essili's hand and rose to his feet. He shook his head. "I've not been able to still myself at all."

"You're not alone," Essili said.

The wretcher chant echoing through the canyon reached a crescendo. In unison, the men and marikano at the entrance to the cave glanced toward the Citadel.

Essili offered Iko a biscuit. "I haven't seen you eat a thing all day. Your father broke his fasts before battle, you know."

Iko took the biscuit. "It is permitted. I've just hardly thought about anything but Cas."

"You'll need your strength. Let's get on with it," Essili said.

The party left the cave and jogged anxiously toward the bridges of Colimina. There were no words, only shallow breaths and rattling weaponry. Essili led the way, and Nabi and Reya flanked him. The guardsmen and Ekarians followed their lead.

It was a clear night, and the full moon was nearing its apex among the glinting stars. The fire had left the moon's surface, and its now white light flooded the canyon. The bestial war song of the Praivun Alliance drowned out the motherly chanting winds of Colimina. Atop the pyramid, the hundreds of wregs and ukori jumped into the air in unison as they sang, and upon their landing as one, the whole canyon shook. They jumped together again, and they sang together, and raised their wretched hands together, and shook fists. Steadily, they were working themselves into a mad frenzy.

Iko saw two poles pulled up by ropes in the middle of the courtyard, and upon each was tied a young woman. The women were screaming, but Iko could not hear them.

Somehow, they crossed the bridges without being seen and entered the southwestern pyramid. Iko's throat tight-

ened when he considered there were nearly a thousand wretchers over his head, and he was running right into them.

But Casiena was there too.

The pyramid's interior was much the same as the temples on the outer spires—carved out of the black rock of the canyon. Thankfully, there were no vermin inside. The pyramid's torchlit hallways were narrow and intersected each other at perfect right angles. There were three iron-barred doors between each intersection.

Nabi took the lead and brought them to the outer walkways near the foot of a stairway that would bring them to the next level. Some in the party murmured and pointed toward the courtyard. That's when Iko saw an ukori standing at the edge of the large pyramid overhead and watching them. The ukori turned toward the celebration and disappeared. A few seconds later, a squad of ukori broke away from the continuing song and dance and ran toward the bridge to the southwestern pyramid.

The rescue party had lost the element of surprise. And even though there was no chance of success without it, they continued their climb.



The wretchers returned and grabbed another woman while Zerah tried desperately to unwrap the umbilical cord from around the baby's neck. But it was still too tight. The baby's face turned blue.

"Push, Luci. Push!" Zerah said.

Luci pushed, but the baby barely moved.

“Give me a pair of rags, Cas,” Zerah said. “Longer is better.”

Cas retrieved one of the remaining strips of cloth and tore it in two, and then handed the pieces over.

With some difficulty, Zerah slipped the rags around the cord and tied them tightly.

“What are you doing?” Luci asked, distressed.

The chant outside was deafening, and the dancing thundered.

Zerah screamed over the noise. “I can cut it!” She reached into her tunic pocket and pulled out an arrowhead. The thought crossed her mind that it was covered in dragon-killer—but in all her research on poisons, she’d never heard of arcanotaur blood being toxic to humans. Besides, the baby might die if she didn’t try.

The arrowhead was nearly too small and slick with blood to grip. She used another of Cas’s rags to get a firm grip and saw the umbilical cord. The sharp arrowhead did the trick, and the cord was severed.

“Alright, push!” Zerah said.

Luci cried out, and the baby’s shoulders almost came out. It was enough for Zerah to unwrap the remaining umbilical cord from the neck. She breathed a sigh of relief.

“One more,” Zerah implored fiercely. “Come on, Luci! Come on! That’s it!”

Luci pushed twice more, and a baby girl was born into Zerah’s hands. Cas handed Zerah a couple of larger pieces of cloth so she could swaddle the newborn. Relieved, Zerah smiled and said to Luci, “You have a new daughter.” She quickly wiped the baby and wrapped it as best she could.

She handed her to Luci. “She didn’t take too long, all things considered.”

The baby coughed and cried, and Luci exhaled. “I’d hope not, being the sixth one. I couldn’t have gone much longer.” She reclined with the newborn on her chest and said, “A daughter! Thank goodness. I won’t be alone anymore.” She looked to Zerah. “Thank you.” And she closed her eyes.

After a few minutes, Zerah was happy that the dragon-killer hadn’t hurt the baby at all. She performed the usual checks to make sure everything had come out intact, piquing Cas’s interest.

The girl leaned closer and pointed at the umbilical cord. “That’s what was wrapped around her neck?”

Zerah nodded.

Cas was suddenly fearful again. “What are the wretchers going to do to us, Miss Zerah? Are they going to kill the baby?”

Zerah exhaled, still hesitant to explain. Hope remained, but it was fast waning. If only she had anything to fight with—*any* kind of weapon—she might have had some chance to get these women out alive. She remembered how the baby had almost died, then considered the shreds of rags around her. Most of them were too short and too delicate to hope to strangle a wretcher, but perhaps tying a few together would provide her with something worthwhile.

As if from beyond, an absurd idea struck her. She looked to the umbilical cord and said, “Casiena, do we have any dry rags left?”

Chapter 55

U pon entering the third level of the pyramid, the rescue party met a charging horde of ukori.

Iko stepped back outside and unshouldered his bow. He aimed around the corner and released an arrow that pierced an ukori's gut. Essili, Nabi, and Reya drew their swords and met the enemy head-on. The rest of the soldiers piled inside the pyramid, but they could do little. The hallway was too narrow for anyone else to join the fight.

From behind the clashing swords, Iko let his arrows fly, and the enemy fell. The rescue party held their ground, but the wretchers kept coming.

Reya was the first to fall. She was pulling her sword from an ukori when a blade sliced across her chest. She stumbled backward and fell to the floor. Her bright blue eyes stared blankly at the feet of her comrades, then they faded. Beiva and one of the young Lotherin men stepped up to take her spot in the melee. Iko pitied her, prayed for her, and continued working his bow.



Zerah was kneeling next to Luci when the ukori and wreg came again. Cas crouched behind her, trembling. After the ukori chose another woman, the wreg unlocked her chains. The ukori dragged the frightened woman toward the cell's exit, and as before, the wreg lingered momentarily.

Zerah got ready.

Wrapped around both of her hands, in pieces of the last clean rag to help with grip, was what remained of Luci's umbilical cord. It was a deadly thing—but too short to use on the ukori. But the wreg with the underbite? His neck was a twig.

The wreg dawdled until the ukori left the room. Then he picked up the pace. When he passed Zerah, she knew it was her chance.

She sprang up and extended her hands and weapon toward the wreg, whose back was to her. The chain around her ankle snapped taut, arresting the momentum of her lower half, and her top half fell forward. The umbilical cord slipped over the wreg's head and neck, yanking him onto his back as Zerah's chest slammed into the floor. The wreg squealed, but he was not loud enough to be heard outside the cell. Zerah pulled the umbilical cord tight around the neck, and the wreg gurgled.

On her belly with arms extended, Zerah did her best to strangle the little monster, but the awkward position didn't lend itself to her goal. He still gasped when she adjusted her grip, and he clawed at the cord, repeatedly gashing her hands. Using all of her strength, she spun into a seated position while pulling the vermin into her chest. The wreg grabbed his sword, and Zerah pulled the cord tighter. The panicked monster stabbed blindly behind him until he

pierced Zerah's shoulder. She cried out but did not relent. The wreg kept swinging and stabbing.

Cas leaped past Zerah, pulled a long knife from the wreg's belt, and drove it into his chest. Zerah dropped the cord and grabbed the wreg's sword-wielding hand to keep Cas from being stabbed. The wreg grew weak. Zerah pried his sword away and used it to slit his throat. Warm black blood spilled onto her. She threw his writhing body aside.

Cas hurried toward the wreg's keys. She freed herself, then she began unlocking everyone else.

Zerah kept the wreg's blade and dragged the body out of sight of the entrance. Women all around her rubbed their ankles and wrists where their shackles had been. They were all looking to Zerah for instruction.

The Citadel shook violently. The singing outside ceased. Zerah moved toward the window and, upon seeing what was outside, recoiled. The Praivuns' display had worked.

Azoch had landed on the platform and was surveying the suddenly silent hoard of wretchers surrounding her.

The women in the cell chattered anxiously. "Are we safe in here?" one asked.

No one answered, but Zerah doubted it. If Azoch wanted to open the keep, she could.

The dragon swung her long neck from side to side, then looked toward the top of the keep. The women bound overhead screamed. Azoch studied them, and it crossed Zerah's mind that the dragon might actually kill the women while leaving all the wretchers alone. She considered that the Praivuns' faith and sacrifice might have been rewarded. And how awful that would be if the survivors of Ivory City

were really up against the wretched vermin, their god, *and* a dragon.

But Azoch turned back toward the wretchers, breathed deeply, and spewed her fire-venom upon the vermin closest to her. Her igniter sounded, the venom caught fire, and at least a couple of dozen wretchers were set aflame. The dragon stepped toward another group of wretchers, and the courtyard came alive as the panicked vermin tried to escape. Azoch gave chase to those scattering.

Most of the wretchers fled toward the bridges and smaller pyramids. But a handful of them approached the keep.

“Cas, close the door!” Zerah said, not wanting the wretchers to know they were free.

Cas leaped toward the iron-bar door and closed it. Seconds later, a few ukori ran down the hallway toward the door at the opposite end of the keep. Zerah suspected the door at the far end of the hallway would have taken the wretchers into the central pyramid, so she was surprised when the ukori’s desperate voices didn’t dissipate quickly. She came to the iron door and looked toward the end of the hall. Apparently, the door was locked from the other side. They struggled to open it, but it would not move.

Zerah saw the prisoners’ chance to escape when she realized the door to the courtyard was still open. For some reason, almost none of the wretchers were heading toward the bridge to the southwestern pyramid, but they were all running to the other two. She wondered why they were avoiding it but quickly dispensed with the question. All that mattered was that the courtyard between the keep and that particular bridge was free of almost anything but its headless animal statues. She heard Azoch on the other side

of the courtyard. As long as the dragon was there, they had a window.

“Who wants to get out of here?” Zerah asked, turning toward the other women.

“What about the others?” one of them asked.

“There are ukori in the hallway,” Zerah said. “I think we have to make a run for the courtyard.”

“But the dragon!”

“You won’t survive if she turns her attention to this keep,” Zerah said. “Azoch is on the north side of us. Now is our chance. It’s clear to the bridge on the right.”

“That’s crazy!” one of them cried.

Zerah straightened. “You will not survive if you do not risk death. We have a chance now, and we may not get another. I am going, and I beg you to follow.”

None said anything else, but a few offered nods.

“Zerah,” Luci said, on the ground at her side. “I don’t think I can.”

Having forgotten Luci’s delicate condition, Zerah nearly cursed herself aloud.

“I can hold the baby, Miss Luci,” Cas said.

Zerah knelt beside Luci. “You want to go?”

Luci nodded. “But I am weak.”

“I can help you,” Zerah said. “Come on.”

Cas took the baby. Luci winced and let Zerah help her to her feet, then put her arm around Zerah’s shoulders. Blood dripped on the floor, and Cas reached for more rags.

Without warning, one of the women in the cell ran to the unlocked door, pulled it open, and dashed into the hallway toward the courtyard. The ukori at the other end of the hallway growled and grunted but stayed where they were.

Seeing that the ukori did not give chase, a few more of the prisoners followed. Zerah helped Luci hobble out, and Cas stayed close with the swaddled infant. Then the rest of the women moved toward the courtyard, too.

Outside was a nightmare. To the right, flames covered a quarter of the massive courtyard. Blackened bodies lay throughout the fire. To the left, hundreds of wretchers clogged the narrow bridge into the southeastern pyramid. Judging by the sounds at her back, the scene was much the same at the northern bridge, and Azoch was upon the poor vermin who were stuck there.

Seeing the bodies of armed wretchers lying on the periphery of the fire and along the prisoners' path to the southwestern tower, Zerah called out to the others, "Get their swords! Their weapons! We may yet need them!" She fell farther behind them with each step because of how slow Luci was moving, but the women heard her, stopped, and turned around. Most of them took a sword or a knife. Zerah still held a wreg's sword. "Now, go! Go! Don't wait for us!"



Iko's bow kept many of the rescue party alive. One of the Guard's archers had taken up a position on the opposite side of the threshold. That bowman was cautious and shot less than half the arrows as Iko, but it helped too. The ukori did not have any archers behind them. Nevertheless, the ukori had pushed the rescue party back so that they were nearly upon Iko and the other archer. The men behind Nabi and Essili had worked in a sort of rotation. A couple of the

Lotherin men fell. Rog was at the front now, and his shoulder bled freely, but his sword did not stop swinging. None had given up.

Alas, it would not matter. Iko could see that all their valiant fighting would only delay the inevitable. They could not hope to overcome the ukori before them and reach the prisoners. Furthermore, as they retreated onto the landing outside, they became vulnerable to Azoch, who had come and ruined the wretchers' celebration just overhead. All it would take was a glance in the right direction, and the dragon would see the rescue party and come upon it.

The ukori lurched forward, pushing the would-be rescuers back again. The entire rescue party would soon be on the landing. Iko drew *Blessed Ember* and charged into the melee. There was no hope for Casiena outside of an unlikely defeat of the ukori before him, and he had to try.

Chapter 56

The women were huddled together in the hallway when Zerah, Luci, and Cas came to the top of the pyramid.

“What’s this?” Zerah asked.

“The dragon can’t get us here,” one of the women said.

Zerah shook her head. “We can’t stay here. We can go down, cross the bridges, and get into the caves.” She repeated, “We can’t stay here. The wretchers will not stay away forever.”

She started down the hallway, and the women followed. No one was eager to run ahead anymore. It may have been for the best since Zerah understood the fastest way to descend the pyramid. If the others didn’t, they might have gotten lost on the larger lower levels while looking for the exit.

Within a couple of minutes, they had descended as far as the third story of the pyramid. As with every other level, Zerah proceeded to the middle of the level, then took a right to find the stairway that would begin ninety degrees from where the previous one ended.

She froze. Less than twenty feet away, she saw the backs of a dozen or so ukori who were trying to make their way onto the stairway. For a moment, she thought she had come up to a bottleneck in the wretchers’ efforts to escape, as on the bridges above. Then she saw bodies—a marikano and a

couple of Ivory City's guardsmen. Then there were shouts from the stairway.

"There are men here!" Zerah said, and she was hopeful. She set Luci on the floor and said, "We will get you out of here yet." She turned toward the women behind her. A number roughly equal to the wretchers had picked up swords. Never before would she have considered bringing such a crew to assault ukori. "Our men are on the other side! We must go to them! We can overrun the vermin."

To her surprise, the women did not cower. She doubted any had ever attacked ukori before, but she knew they understood that killing the big wretchers was the only way they would survive this night. A fire burned in their eyes. They gripped their weapons tightly.

"Cas, stay with Luci!" Zerah said, and she called the others after her as she ran down the hallway.

The ukori were so focused on their fight with the men that none noticed the women were upon them until their swords and knives plunged into the ukori's backs. The women stabbed and hacked viciously, as if they were intent on repaying the wretchers for all the evil they had done to them.

Across the melee, Zerah saw Nabi working a blade. Then her eyes met Captain Essili's, and she heard him say, "The women are here! The women are here, and they've brought swords!" And the men outside raised their voices and worked their weapons ferociously.



Iko pulled his blade from the side of an ukori, and the wretcher fell. There, on the other side of his enemies, Zerah vanquished one of the ukori. Beside her was one of the Lotherin girls from Gelida and so many others he did not know.

Watching their blades find their marks unceasingly left him in awe. Joy flooded him.

Reinvigorated, he and the other men and marikano mowed down the ukori. The last of the vermin did not see *Blessed Ember* coming for its neck until the moment its head was cut cleanly from his shoulders.

In the sudden silence of the hallway, Iko scanned the women before him and did not see Cas. "Is this all?"

Those men and women who knew each other embraced and shed tears.

"There are still more locked in the keep," Zerah said. Her eyes met Iko's. "As for yours..." She stepped out of the way and motioned down the hallway.

Twenty feet away, next to a rather pale Luci Shuckwine and baby, Casiena sat on the floor in her torn and rumpled blue dress. Without thought, Iko was running to her, and he found himself next to her on his knees and beheld her. She was standing now, and her smile revealed that a tooth had been growing in place of her missing front tooth. Her dark, untidy mess of hair was a mirror image of her father's. And from her blue eyes, tears of joy and relief rolled down her cheeks. They embraced, and Iko cried. Through the thin fabric of her dress, he felt her fragility. The wretchers had not fed her enough. She was thinner and bonier than usual, but she was more beautiful than ever before, and he could not bear it.

It was strange that over the last few weeks, even when Iko had persevered, part of him had thought that this moment would never come. He had not been able to envision a reunion so joyful. And he would have been right if it had not been for Zerah. For Elex, Essili, and Nabi. For the guardsmen and marikano at Ambrial. For Rog, the Ekarians, and the women who had picked up swords. There would never be adequate words to express his gratitude. He would never be able to repay them.

A crowd approached, and Iko was barely aware of them.

“Go.” Zerah urged Iko to take Cas out the way he had come in with the others. Many of the reunited farther down the hall were doing just that. Bennick Shuckwine was carrying Luci and the baby near the back of those fleeing the pyramid.

Iko beheld the crowd around him. Essili, Nabi, and Rog were among them. There were even a few of the recently freed women. “Are you going back?” he asked.

“We must,” Zerah said.

“Your girl was not alone up there,” Essili said. He looked at Cas, and the corner of his mouth rose. “Though I insist you get her out of here as soon as possible.”

Considering they’d be running toward Azoch, Iko asked Zerah, “Do you still have the arrowheads?”

Zerah nodded. “I couldn’t let the vermin get them, could I?” She pulled them out of her pocket.

Iko took them and removed three of the few arrows that remained in his quiver. Using his knife, he scraped the pitch and elk sinew cordage from the arrows, and, with a bit of effort, he pried the arrowheads free without damaging the shafts. He placed the dragon-killing arrowheads in their place.

“They going to stay put without pitch?” Rog asked.

“They should be good for their purpose,” Iko said. “I don’t think you’ll be reusing these if you miss.” He pulled fresh sinew from his pocket. Ever faithful, he had prepared for Zerah still having the arrowheads. Soon, the arrowheads were affixed. “Who will be taking these?” he asked the crowd, holding the dragon-killing arrows toward them.

“That’s not even a question,” Essili said. He grabbed the arrows and held them to Zerah. “Though I’m the better shot, just to be clear.”

Zerah took the arrows without protest. The sudden fire in her eyes told Iko that she would make the most of her opportunity. “I need a bow,” she said.

Iko unshouldered his own and handed it to her.

“Thank you, Iko,” Zerah said.

Iko dismissed the gratitude. “I am forever in your debt. Good luck.” And he carried Cas toward the exit.

Chapter 57

Free from the weight he had carried so long, Iko dashed from the Citadel with Casiena in his arms. Most of the other escapees had gone ahead of them, so they were alone as they stepped onto the first bridge to the outer spires. But when they reached the spire at the end of it, they found the Shuckwines and their new baby just inside its temple. Luci was seated on the ground, breathing heavily.

“Are you alright?” Iko asked.

Bennick answered. “She’s in pain.”

“Stop your worrying,” Luci said. Her eyes were closed, and she blew a breath out forcefully. “It’s normal pain. It’s just not a normal recovery period.”

“You’re sure?” Bennick asked. He was holding the baby.

“I’m sure. Can we go slower the rest of the way? It’s the jostling that’s getting to me.”

Bennick nodded. “It’s not much farther to the caves.”

Azoch roared behind them. Iko glanced toward the Citadel and saw no one visible upon the still-burning courtyard. He was relieved to see that the keep was still not aflame. The dragon was upon the southeastern pyramid, pecking and clawing at its doorways. She was trying to extract the wretchers inside, and Iko figured her fire-venom was depleted for now.

Unexpected movement upon the northern pyramid caught his attention. Flames shot out of some of its doorways, illuminating a figure on its exterior. But the figure was not upon the walkways. It was climbing straight up the outside of the pyramid. Confused, Iko watched as it climbed from level to level with rare strength and agility. It was large and inhuman but far too graceful to be an ukori. It twisted its head, revealing a dull purple glow in its eyes, and Iko gasped.

The figure was Makus.

Bennick asked, "What?"

"Makus!" Iko said.

"Who?" Luci asked.

"He deserted their army," Iko said, mind elsewhere. He was considering the one reason Makus would be climbing to the top of the Citadel: His demon wanted him to protect Azoch. "He's going to try to stop them," he said to no one in particular.

A befuddled Bennick asked, "Why would he want to do that?"

Knowing any explanation would fall short of the truth, Iko answered, "He is consumed by a darkness that defies reason."

"He's only one man," Luci said, still not understanding.

"He's a Night Warrior. They're the best fighters I've ever seen."

As long as Makus had the element of surprise, the entire rescue party was in danger. Zerah was in particular danger since she was trying to kill Azoch, and Makus had already demonstrated that he would not hesitate to harm even her for the sake of his demon.

The rescue party came into view on the outside of the southwestern pyramid. They were two levels from the top and the bridge that would bring them onto the courtyard. Iko was tempted to call to them and warn them of the danger overhead, but he couldn't bring himself to risk dragon fire upon Cas and the Shuckwines.

And the relief born of pulling Casiena from the clutches of the Praivun Alliance was torn down the middle by grief.

Here was his chance to escape with his daughter, and for the two of them to be together in whichever way he chose. Here, at last, was the moment he had sought for years. They could go to Deiland, to Moraburg, or into the West, where there was the hope of finding other believers. He had only to cross the bridges, give Cas some food and rest, and they could be off without reservation.

Alas, his friends and countrymen were fast approaching an unfathomable malevolence, and they were not prepared for it. Iko knew what it might cost to stand against it. But he also knew what his flight from Colimina might cost. He remembered Jona Phainor's willingness to put his own life aside.

Iko set Casiena on her feet and knelt in front of her. "I have to go back, Cas." He looked to the Shuckwines. "Can you take her to the caves with you?"

"We can," Luci said. "But why?"

"No, Father!" Cas cried. She threw her arms around his neck. "You can't! I just got you back! You can't die, too!"

Iko embraced her, then took her by the shoulders and pushed her so that their eyes met. "It has fallen to me, Cas. They do not see what they will soon be up against, and I can't abandon them."

Cas nodded, crying. “Do you promise you will come back?”

“I will come back.”

“Do you promise?”

“I promise,” Iko said. He hugged Cas tightly, then kissed her on the forehead. “Wait for me in the caves?”

She nodded again, but she cried out as Iko ran onto the bridge. “Father, come back! Come back, Father!” And her pleas were drowned out by a deafening roar of Azoch.



The anxious rescuers burst into the courtyard, eyes fixed upon Azoch on the far side. There were no vermin in sight. The dragon was still preoccupied with whichever of those had fled into the southeastern pyramid, and she was roaring and pounding, uncaring about the flames she swam in.

As most of the rescue party left behind the headless statues to cross to the keep, Zerah stopped behind a stone lion and beheld Azoch. The monster’s winged back was to her, so she dropped her slight wreg’s blade and unshouldered Iko’s bow. Its smooth, polished hickory grew slick with her sweat as she nocked the first of her dragon-killing arrows. She dashed from statue to statue to get closer, leaving behind bloody footprints. She hoped to get within a few feet of her target without being seen.

But she did not have luck on her side. Azoch spotted the crowd sprinting toward the keep and, with a soul-piercing roar, unwound herself from the pyramid. She spread her wings, glided onto the courtyard, and gave chase. Her heavy

footfalls accelerated, and her prey ran faster. Zerah feared the dragon would soon be upon her friends, then stepped forth and let her first arrow fly. It struck the monster's ribcage over her heart, but as feared, the dragon scale was too hard for it to get through. The arrow ricocheted downward and shattered against the courtyard's hard stone.

The dragon was undeterred. Fortunately, by the time the beast arrived at the keep, the rescue party had made it inside and slammed its heavy iron door shut. Azoch measured the wood and stone structure calmly before she began battering it with her head. No one would escape her that easily.

Two panicked ukori stumbled out of the keep and distracted the dragon from her task. The rescue party had gotten the better of the wretchers who had remained inside. One of the ukori promptly took an arrow to the back and fell to its knees. The other slammed the door shut, then slid an iron bar lock into place to trap the rescue party inside. He tried to flee, but Azoch saw him and pounced. In a single leap, she was upon him. She took him into her jaws and sent him into the air with a violent twist of her head. He cartwheeled off the Citadel and screeched like a wounded dog while he fell to the bottom of Miqa Canyon.

The dragon returned her attention to the keep, and Zerah realized she'd have to get much closer to be sure one of the two remaining arrows found its mark. She ran toward the open area beyond the statues.

A purple-eyed figure stepped out from behind a headless serpent, and Zerah stopped. Silhouetted by fire at his back, Makus was a skulking shadow. His eyes were as dull as they'd ever been, and they did not belong to Zerah's friend.



Makus was relieved to see Zerah unharmed, but he hated that she was the one who held the poison arrows. Speaks had only foreseen that *someone* would pose a grave threat to Azoch this evening with the arrowheads she had carried from the arcanotaur's nest. But he wasn't surprised. Who among the rescue party or freed prisoners could have convinced Zerah to forgo the opportunity to exact her revenge? Who would she have trusted to fulfill what she thought was her life's calling?

Makus stepped toward Zerah, and she recoiled. She tried to go around, but he blocked her way.

"Please don't," she said, frightened. "Let me go to them. Let me kill her!"

Makus raised his hands. "I mean you no harm, my friend."

"Then get out of my way."

"I can't do that," Makus said. He hated how he hurt her. He hated the bewildered horror in her eyes. He stepped toward her. "I know it's difficult to understand, but—"

"It's insanity!" Zerah stepped back, keeping her distance.

Makus bristled. He knew what ferocity Zerah was capable of. He understood the lengths she would go to accomplish what she had come for. She would fight until she could fight no more, and Makus did not like what that might mean for her.

Zerah softened. "Whatever spell has ensnared you, I can help you overcome it. We can free you from whatever's seized your soul." She indicated the keep, where Azoch was still shrieking and bellowing as she hammered its burning walls. "Let me go to our friends."

“I am under no spell,” Makus said defensively.

“Then what madness explains what you’re doing? Saving dragons? How can you have forgotten what they’ve done to us? What *she* did to *me*!” Zerah nodded toward Azoch. “Why can you no longer see her for what she is?”

At Zerah’s words, the faintest recollection of how Makus had understood the dragons before Speaks came to mind.

But then he remembered the god’s pleasure and shook his head to rid himself of the memories. He recalled what Speaks had explained to him. “I do not deny this purification is painful, but it is necessary,” he said. “You know the histories of our peoples—what the world was before the dragons came. Endless wars. Genocides. Abuses of power and utter contempt for our brethren. Don’t you understand? We *earned* the dragons. We had to be broken—reduced to ash to rise again and be what we ought to be.” He pleaded desperately, “Our world is still ill, Zerah. Please, go now and save yourself. Drop your bow and allow Azoch to continue her work.”

Azoch’s fire venom ignited behind Makus. The courtyard shook, and he saw fire reflected in Zerah’s eyes. She gasped and tried again to step around Makus, but he still would not let her by.

“Our friends will die!” Zerah said.

“There is nothing you can do for them. Leave now. Save yourself!”

Zerah gritted her teeth. “Let me go or kill me.”

Makus didn’t get a chance to respond. He detected a figure fast approaching from his right, spun toward it, and came into a fighter’s stance.

Iko leaped forward, blade drawn, and put every bit of his strength into a vicious blow directed at the Night Warrior's neck.

Chapter 58

Makus bent backward, and the tip of *Blessed Ember* grazed the skin over his throat. Most people would have fallen flat on their backs after such a sudden and awkward evasion, but Makus maintained his balance and made an effortless transition into a back handspring. Iko charged as his adversary landed, slashing and stabbing. The Night Warrior evaded the flurry with little effort as he backpedaled.

Zerah disappeared into the headless statues.

Iko remembered all that his father taught him about using a sword. He minded his footwork, he maintained his balance, and he varied the timing and angles of his strikes. Alas, even without a weapon, his adversary was masterful. He seemed to know Iko's next move before Iko did.

After measuring Iko for a time, Makus brought his hand after one of the swings and pushed the blade from behind, adding to its momentum and knocking Iko off-balance. He repeated the maneuver a second time. Iko fumed and swung more wildly. And when *Blessed Ember* came again, Makus met it with an open palm traveling perpendicular to its path and knocked it away. He kicked Iko in the gut, sending him into a statue and knocking the air from his lungs.

Iko dropped to his knees, gasping for breath. The top of the Citadel fell eerily silent as Makus approached him. There were no screams, and the dragon's bellowing had turned into a gentle purring. The fire crackled and popped in the distance. Iko searched the ground desperately for his sword. He did not see it but saw a wreg's bow a few feet away.

Zerah's voice rang out from somewhere among the statues. "Come to us, Azoch!" she yelled loudly. "There are more of us among these statues!"

Makus turned toward the call. Iko dashed toward the wreg's bow. It was full of splinters and much lighter than he was used to. He readied one of the few remaining arrows from his quiver. But when he stood and turned toward where Makus had been, he found that the Night Warrior had disappeared.



Makus understood what Zerah was doing. If she could get Azoch to come to her, she could hide until the dragon was close enough for a clean shot. He had to get to her before she could do that. He dashed from statue to statue, careful to stay out of sight of Azoch as he approached the area from which Zerah had called. He listened carefully for any approaching footsteps of a stray wretcher or Iko.

Zerah yelled again. "Come to me, beast!"

She may have been fifteen or twenty yards away, but no more.

Much to Makus's chagrin, Azoch complied with Zerah's request. The dragon left the keep and walked across the courtyard.

Makus spotted Zerah as Azoch entered the statues. She stepped out near the edge of the courtyard, not far away and behind the dragon. He stepped toward her and, to his surprise, the liquid warmth of Speaks entered his extremities. With his second step, the sensation pulsed through his veins toward his heart. Makus embraced it, knowing that the gift of Speaks was an affirmation of his intentions and actions.

Zerah strung one of her two remaining arrows, and Makus charged.

She saw him before he reached her, adjusted her grip on the bow, and swung it at him like a club. Makus caught it with his left hand, pulled it across Zerah's chest, and shoved her backward into the nearest stone creature.

She clutched one arrow in each hand and pressed against the bow. Makus held her against the statue with one arm and used his free hand to pry one of them free and then squeeze it until it snapped in half. He threw the two halves into the open courtyard.

Speaks's euphoria surged toward his heart. He reached for the final poison arrow, anticipating bliss beyond anything he had ever experienced.

But the ecstasy was shattered when an arrow pierced his left shoulder from behind. Makus cried out and faltered.

Zerah flipped the arrow in her fingers, gripped it like a dagger, and plunged it into Makus's chest beneath his arm. He screamed once more.

Azoch's footsteps stopped.

Makus headbutted Zerah, dazing her. He pulled the arrow from his side and threw it into the darkness.

A second arrow whistled through the air and struck Makus's lower back. He screamed again in agony and fell to one knee. Fire coursed through his veins with every heartbeat.

The ground beneath Makus shook with increasing intensity. The dragon had heard his cries and was coming to him.

Zerah shoved Makus backwards and leaped toward the broken arrow in the courtyard. He caught her wrist and threw her tumbling back into the statues.

She scrambled to her feet and turned toward the approaching dragon. Makus could not see Azoch from where he stood, but Zerah's wide eyes told him she was very close. Fire venom spattered onto the ground as Zerah rolled away. It was a weak, sputtering stream. The dragon's fire was near its end.

The stream ignited, and Makus cried out, fearing the worst. "No!"

The flames dissipated, and he saw Zerah crouched safely behind a statue. But she had no escape. The dragon was too close and heading right toward her.

Zerah was about to die.

He hadn't imagined it would come to this—that his allegiance to The One Who Speaks would cost so much. Until now, he'd thought he could satisfy the god while keeping Zerah safe. Alas, he had failed, and it was too much to bear.

Makus started to turn away. But in the moment before his gaze left Zerah, her eyes found his and stopped him cold.

The terror and helplessness he found in them took him back to Elex's final moments and the regret that followed.

He had never wanted to experience that again. Yet he had similarly doomed Zerah. But there was something worse in his friend's eyes—something about the way she looked at him caught him off guard.

He saw what he had become.

Until very recently, he'd been Zerah's protector and closest confidant. He'd been her friend. That was who she searched for as she anticipated her death. But she did not find him. Instead, she found a monster who had thwarted her life's calling at the pivotal moment and doomed her to the same fire that had taken her young boys and lover.

A trace of Speaks's pleasure came upon the breeze as if to tempt Makus to turn away from Zerah—to let the dragon do what was necessary. But the sensation was weaker than before, stymied by the pain of Iko's arrows and the horror of his friend's plight. Seeing clearly, Makus rebuked what Speaks offered. He suddenly hated it. He knew he'd chosen it over his friend and could not have regretted it more.

The unbearable weight of the truth hit him, and he almost fell again. There was no justifying Zerah's death as a good or necessary thing. There was no twisting the dragons' darkness into light. And not only had Makus doomed Zerah, but he may have doomed the entire world to ages more beneath the dragons' sky when tonight could have been the beginning of the end of tyranny.

Makus was horrified to admit that part of him had understood this all along. He had never been fully blind to the evil of The One Who Speaks. He had accepted the god's lies while knowing deep down they were lies. Then he had lied to himself—buried the truth for reasons he could not comprehend. Only now, when faced with Zerah's untimely

end, could he hide it no more. She was right that he had been under a spell. The god had deceived him into participating in a sinister scheme beyond his understanding. As Azoch approached, it may have been too late to make amends for his grievous error.

But he was going to try. He could not hesitate.

Zerah shut her eyes tightly.

Makus dashed into view of Azoch. The monstrous white dragon was less than fifteen feet away—a mere step away from seeing Zerah—and crouched ready to pounce. Her head swung toward him, and she let out a ferocious roar.

Makus swallowed in fear and took a single step back. “I am the one you must have!” he yelled.

Azoch’s forelimbs gripped the statues on each side of her and propelled her forward, giving her the appearance of a massive serpent lurching toward Makus.

He forgot his excruciating pain, turned toward the broken arrow in the courtyard, and ran. The dragon’s hot breath was upon his back as he reached the poisoned arrowhead and picked it up. He spun and threw it toward Zerah as Azoch’s jaws closed upon him.



Iko stepped toward the edge of the statues and watched Azoch take Makus into her mouth. She shook him until his limbs were limp and sickeningly twisted, then threw him across the courtyard so that he skidded across the stone and struck the burning keep as a formless mass of flesh and bone.

The sight left Iko in shock. Partly because seeing someone he knew so horrendously mangled was deeply unsettling. But it was also because he could hardly believe what Makus had just done. He remembered the evil in the marikano's eyes a few nights earlier—the cold admission that he'd murdered Elex. The way he'd attacked Zerah just a few minutes ago. He'd been beyond saving, as far as Iko was concerned. Yet he had just called the dragon upon himself to keep her away from Zerah? Iko would have never thought it possible.

Preoccupied with the riddle and the sight of Makus's body, Iko lingered on the edge of the courtyard too long. Azoch saw him when she turned to return to the statues and charged. He dashed back into the forest of stone. He was just far enough from the dragon that he had a few seconds to hide. Azoch didn't find him when she arrived, so she started searching, snarling.



A flood of emotions overwhelmed Zerah as she beheld Makus across the courtyard. She was still angry about what he had done—in shock that he'd been violent with her in the name of whatever lunacy he'd fallen into. She was horrified that he was *dead*. But most of all, she was furious that Azoch had cut his life short at the moment she'd known her hope for him had not been misplaced.

She crouched down and picked up the poisoned arrowhead. The dragon was still close and apparently preoccupied. Now was the time to make the beast pay. She remembered her family. She remembered Makus and the destruction of

Ivory City. Rage welled within Zerah, propelling her bare, bloody feet toward her nemesis. She recalled the locations of the dragon's thinnest scales. Beneath her wings. Beneath her limbs. The underside of the lower jaw.

She had just started running when a banging sound echoed across the courtyard, catching her attention. Then there were screams that she realized had been there all along, and they grew louder and more panicked by the second. She turned toward the keep and found it an inferno. The door the ukori had barred was shaking violently, and she remembered her countrymen were inside. Essili, Nabi, and the guardsmen were the voices she heard, and they were being burned alive. Zerah remembered that the other exit from the keep was locked. None would escape without help from the outside.

The chance to kill Azoch beckoned, and Zerah knew it might have been her last. A swift current rushed toward the dragon, and it would bring her the revenge she desired. But she knew she would die after plunging an arrow into Azoch. She did not fear such a death, but if she was not there to open the door for her friends, they were dead too.

Fists clenched, Zerah pulled herself away from Azoch and ran as fast as she could toward the burning keep. She emerged into the open courtyard and was not far across it when Azoch roared. The ground shook. The dragon was coming after her.

Azoch did not take flight, but the speed with which she closed told Zerah that there was no escape for her. She pushed fear from her mind and thought of those in the keep. Her legs became weaker, and she ran harder. Her feet burned

unbearably. She couldn't see out of one eye and tasted the blood dripping down her face. She gripped the broken arrow.

She reached the door, slid its heavy iron bar away, and flung it open.

The last thing Zerah saw before Azoch's teeth sank into her midsection was Bane Essili's unexceptional brown eyes filled first with relief, then horror. Their silent exchange lasted no more than a second. For Zerah, it was an eternity. There was a flash of gratitude in those eyes, and Zerah was content.

But she was also in pain. With a sudden jolt, Azoch leaped into the air, and her knife-like teeth dug deeper into Zerah's sides. She felt the warmth of her blood saturating her shirt and pants, and she saw it falling to the courtyard. They rose higher and higher, and Zerah knew what Azoch was doing. She had seen it done before. For no possible reason but hatred, the dragon would take her as high as she could and drop her to her death.

It was a clear night, and the full moon bathed the mountains below in cool, silvery light and shadow. The burning Citadel was the exception. She could soon see all of moonlit Anuthura, which might have been beautiful if Zerah had been so high for another reason. She saw women and the rescue party streaming from the keep, and at the edge of the statues, she saw Iko staring up at her. The air grew colder as they went higher, or perhaps that was the blood loss.

Fading, she twisted and pulled herself up so she could see Azoch's eye. In the night, its iris seemed gray. "Why do you hate us?" she asked weakly.

The gray eye shifted toward her, and Azoch growled. With a start, Zerah recognized intelligence in the dragon's gaze

she had never suspected. She thought the dragon understood her.

Not having forgotten the dragon-killing arrow in her hand, Zerah plunged it beneath the scales of Azoch's cheek, and blood flowed. Azoch screeched and brought her arm toward the wound and scratched at it, but the arrow stayed put. The dragon's talons cut Zerah's arms, and she cried out. Azoch rose.

Resigned to death, Zerah closed her eyes and waited to fall. Her stomach dropped with every beat of Azoch's wings.

The dragon listed. She coughed and gagged, and her wings weakened. After a moment of stability, her flight faltered again. She was suddenly wheezing—laboring for every breath. She tried to continue upward but faded. Then her wings gave out for good, and the beast fell with Zerah still in her mouth.

Chapter 59

Iko watched Azoch plummet toward the opposite side of the courtyard with Zerah in her jaws.

Essili grabbed Iko's arm. "We have to get out of here! It won't take the vermin long to see what's happened." He had found *Blessed Ember* and handed it over.

Azoch's wings fluttered futilely as she fell. She twisted so that her back struck the courtyard first. Her head whipped back, throwing Zerah from her mouth. The justice tumbled across the courtyard. Iko sheathed his sword and ran toward her.

"Iko, we can't," Essili called. "She's gone!"

Zerah didn't move as Iko approached. Her bloody body glistened in the moonlight, and her shirt was ripped where Azoch's teeth had stabbed into her midsection. One of her legs, obviously broken, twisted grotesquely.

He knelt next to her. "Zerah?"

She didn't respond.

Nabi and Essili arrived.

"She's still breathing," Nabi said.

Iko saw Zerah's chest rise and fall slightly, and he breathed a sigh of relief. He bent over and reached for her.

"We must be careful." Nabi knelt beside him. "Straighten her first. Captain, grab her there. Iko, support her here."

The three carefully positioned Zerah as Nabi ordered, then lifted her and hurried toward their exit. Iko felt a broken rib and repositioned his hand. Nabi kept Zerah's head and neck supported. A few guardsmen and marikano arrived and offered their strength to the effort. More arrived than were needed to help.

Essili gave orders to some of the extras. "Beiva, take three to cut the bridges on the west side. Use the outer bridges to keep clear of the wretchers. I'll do the same on the east."

"Yes, sir."

They carried Zerah out of the Citadel as quickly as they could safely carry her broken body. She was unconscious the entire time.

When they reached the caves, Casiena rushed into Iko's arms, and they both cried tears of joy. Then they watched silently as Nabi and the others did everything they could to keep Zerah alive.

Chapter 60

Within a week, a vote of no confidence from the remainder of the Guard sent Val Campo from the throne. Bane Essili took his place until Ivory City could be rebuilt and hold a lawful election. Within another two weeks, an arcanotaur was found and slaughtered in the Septentrio Mountains. Four full wineskins of its blood were brought back to Ivory City, and thousands of dragon-killing arrows were produced. Black fletching marked the arrows, and every guardsman was allotted a half-dozen. Any other citizen could have up to three.

The arrows breathed life into Ivory City. At first, most of its residents elected to stay in the caves since they expected another dragon to show up any day. But after a couple of weeks without seeing any such dragon, some of them became emboldened. For those most eager to step onto the long road to recovery, the gift of their own dragon-killing arrows had given them enough confidence to take the risk. Activity trickled back onto the streets, and they were slowly cleared. Bold businesses opened their doors, and some residents with intact homes even moved back into them.

Iko spent his days with Rog, clearing debris for the sake of the rebuilding effort. Bennick and Kruick had been with them, too, but they had gone back to retrieve the rest of the

Ekarians. From sunrise to sunset, they hauled charred wood into piles in the fields to be burned. Conversation didn't exactly flow freely when Iko was left alone with Rog, but for the most part, they worked well together. As long as their focus remained on their shared objective, the tension that had defined their relationship in Jynsomn was noticeably absent.

"I think I'm done for today," Rog said on the evening before the next full moon. His hands were on his hips as Iko threw the last of their load into the fire. His black beard dripped with sweat, and like Iko, he was covered in soot and ash.

They were a couple of hundred yards south of Ivory City. It was unseasonably warm and humid. The sun had dipped below the mountains, and the orange sky smoldered. The crickets had begun chirping beside the crackling fire.

Iko nodded in agreement with Rog and picked up a heavy oak branch he had carried with them since finding it on the edge of the untamed lands within the city.

"You going to throw that in with the rest of it?" Rog asked.

Iko shook his head. "It's going to be my new bow." He presented it proudly. "It's perfect. Don't you think?" He'd been carrying a guardsman's bow since Godskeep, and he hated it.

Rog raised his brow and took the wood from Iko for inspection. "I've never made a bow, but I'll take your word for it." He tossed it back, and Iko caught it.

Iko bent to pick up a handful of flowers he'd collected that afternoon.

"What are those for?" Rog asked.

"Cas asked."

The two walked back into Ivory City, planning the next day as they went. They had nearly finished clearing the remains of a pair of houses and decided they'd help to remove what was left of the wall the next day. Essili had mentioned he was eager to get a new wall in place, but they couldn't do that until there was room for it.

When they arrived at Dunbardin Castle, they parted ways. Rog headed for the tunnel to the caves, and Iko headed for the servants' quarters, where Cas had been spending most of her time. Several of the injured had been kept there, and Essili had allowed Luci Shuckwine and her new baby a room while Bennick went back to Jynsorn to gather the rest of their family. The quarters were at the bottom of the castle and close enough for escape into the caves if it came to that.

Iko knocked on the door to Luci's bedroom.

"Come in," Luci said.

Iko pushed the creaking door open to find Cas holding the baby next to Luci.

Iko laughed and nodded toward Cas and the baby. "That's brave of you, Luci."

"Cas has been very helpful," Luci said.

Iko smiled.

"I used the extra time and that kitchen to make a little stew. There's some left if you want it," Luci said. "Beef and potatoes."

Iko suddenly smelled the savory stewed meat wafting down the hallway, and his mouth watered. After such a day of work, he couldn't have asked for anything more.

Cas handed the sleeping and swaddled infant back to Luci and went to Iko. They waved goodbye to Luci and quietly shut the door.

“Did you get them?” Cas asked.

Iko presented the flowers to her.

“Oh! I didn’t mean so many. I don’t think they’ll all fit in the vase.”

“I wanted you to have your pick,” Iko said.

They walked hand in hand down the hallway to the candlelit kitchen. Cas took a seat on the counter and arranged the flowers in a simple wooden vase she’d found. Iko ate what remained of Luci’s stew while Cas told him about her day. She had taken the baby on a walk *twice* by herself. She’d helped Luci in her effort to learn how to read, and they’d found a fascinating book about sea monsters. Essili had also come by looking for Iko.

“What did he want?” Iko asked.

Cas shrugged. “He said he’d come back after sunset.” She observed the flowers and nodded in satisfaction. “I think it’s ready.”

They walked back down the hallway to a different room, and Cas knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Zerah said inside.

They pushed open the door. Iko still had not gotten used to the sight of Zerah with splints on every limb and bandages covering much of the rest of her. A gash across her forehead was healing at last.

She had been treated with marikano medicine, which Nabi had insisted was most fortunate. The humans of Ivory City had yet to master pre-dragon medicine, but the marikano of Lake Portumnus had many highly trained physicians, and some had served Bhal Adair. They had elixirs for pain and festering wounds, and very specific protocols for treating various broken bones.

“I brought these for you,” Cas said, raising the vase.

Zerah offered a faint smile. “Thank you. This room needs a bit of life in it.”

Zerah’s thanks was sincere enough to convince Cas, but Iko heard sadness behind her words—the sadness Cas had meant to remedy with the flowers. Zerah had hardly engaged in conversation with anyone since coming back to Dunbardin. She’d been distant—preoccupied. Essili had suggested it was because she’d been confined to her room except when Nabi had carried her elsewhere. Nabi thought it was because there was still much uncertainty about whether Zerah would fully heal. Iko thought they were both right but that there was more to it. He just didn’t know what it was.

Cas placed the flowers next to the bed. She explained to Zerah how she’d helped with Luci’s baby.

And within a few minutes, Essili was there with a piece of paper in hand.

“Where’s the rest of Luci’s beef stew?” Essili asked. “I was looking forward to that.”

Taking him too seriously, Cas scrunched her face in disapproval. “You can’t rely on Miss Luci to feed you. She’s got a baby to worry about. Can’t you tell someone else to do that now?”

Essili smirked. “I suppose I can.”

“Cas says you were looking for me,” Iko said. “News of the wretchers?”

“Still at Colimina,” Essili said. “The ukori have started eating the wregs.”

Cas’s eyes widened.

“I’ll spare you further detail,” Essili said. “That’s not why I came, anyway.” He handed the paper he’d held to Iko.

Iko raised his brow. "What's this?"

"Statement from one of our men. From when Azoch came," Essili said. "Zerah's already read it, and we thought it may interest you."

Iko read it.

I, Brunto Fornswip, hereby swear that this statement is as true as I can recall. I have added or taken nothing away from my recollection of this event. When I found Miss Dori Felsmit among the rubble, she appeared to have been mortally wounded. Wounds on her legs were consistent with dragon bites, as far as I can tell, but obviously, the dragon hadn't bitten her in half, as she could have. Miss Felsmit was also frostbitten, unlike anyone else I found following Azoch's attack. I found no explanation for the frostbite. Miss Felsmit was delirious when I found her. She spoke only the following words, and requests for clarification went unanswered before she died. She said, "It hates us. It hates us. It lied to me. It hates us. Don't believe it. It hates us." This concludes my statement.

"I don't understand," Iko said. "We all know the dragon hated us."

Essili nodded. "That's what everyone else thinks, too. That she was referring to the dragon."

Iko tilted his head. "You don't think it is Azoch?"

Zerah broke her silence. "Azoch couldn't have lied to Dori, could she have? Not too long ago, she claimed to have talked to a god."

Iko's eyes widened.

"Dori was also banished shortly thereafter, and shouldn't have been in the city when Azoch came," Essili said.

Zerah added, "We wonder if she may have gone to Azoch and the dragon carried her back."

Iko mulled over the information for a minute. Makus had gone near Azoch to protect her, ostensibly at the behest of his demon. "You think she knew Makus's demon? The One Who Speaks?"

"I do," Zerah said.

Essili shrugged. "But we don't know anything about gods. We were hoping you could help out."

"I'd never heard of The One Who Speaks until Makus mentioned it," Iko said. "But I can certainly look into it."

"Do that, will you?" Essili said. "I can't say I've been sleeping too well with all this on my mind."

"Sure," Iko said. "Anything to help."

Thank You!

Thank you so much for reading *Fear of the Sky*! If you enjoyed this story, please consider leaving a review on Amazon or Goodreads. Even a few words can help others discover it.

-Kris

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Meet the Author



Kris Ackoury began his creative life as a musician before turning to fiction, where he found a lasting home. He writes character-driven stories that blend the danger and adventure found in favorites like Jurassic Park, Star Wars, and The Lord of the Rings with ideas drawn from thinkers like C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton, and Cardinal Robert Sarah. When he's not writing, Kris is usually trying to keep up with his five young children or spending time with his lovely wife. This is his debut novel.