

# 1

## KINDLING

*The first-born shall be the heir  
The second-born the warrior  
The third shall be the worker  
The fourth-born to the scholars  
The fifth shall be the healer  
And the sixth shall forever wander  
the boundaries of the Swathe.*  
*THE BLOODLAWS, FIRST WRITTEN IN 1236*

There was no good day to be executed.

‘The sky ain’t right.’ Juraxi said as he struggled against the rope bonds tied tight and rough around his wrists.

No answer came from any of his captors. Big Thatch shook out the black-dyed mosscloth sack before him. *Made it easier to scoop up his decapitated head afterwards without messing up their gloves*, Juraxi supposed. He shuffled nervously in his white prisoner’s tunic.

It was likely a way of making the most of his neck in its last moments, but Juraxi furiously bobbed his head to the midday sky once more, bruised purple and yellow at its mountain-clawed edges. The sun was at its highest, and although it roasted his skin, there seemed a faint gauze across it.

‘See? Looks like an ill omen to me. Maybe we should choose another day,’ Juraxi urged, blinking sweat from his eye.

Superstition got the better of Swik, the greenest, skinny wretch of the three. He was a sapling with a mop of rare and unruly flaxen hair. Juraxi had a bet placed in his mind that the boy would hurl before the sword came down.

‘He ain’t wrong, Igran. Look at it,’ Swik muttered. ‘Since when ’ave you ever seen the sky like that?’

The third and oldest of the executioners stabbed his huge, obsidian sword into the loam. The black, half-moon blades had been freshly sharpened. He took some time adjusting his polished warder’s uniform of leafleather scales. The man never let not a speck of dust alight on his colours if he could help it.

‘He dies today. Just like the higher ranks ordered,’ Igran said. His bushy brows were the only hair his face held onto. They were furrowed as he examined the sky. ‘Besides which of the Three

Gods would bother to complain at the death of this murdering sack of cowardice?’ He chuckled, exposing amber teeth.

If the sky bothered the lump of fat and bone they called Big Thatch, the man didn’t show it. He came at Juraxi with the opening of the sack stretched wide like toothless jaws.

‘Last words *before* the sack, Thatch. Bleeding trees. How many times must I tell you?’ Igran cursed him.

The oaf took back his eager steps and scratched at the fringes of his shorn, greying hair. If he had a tail, it would be wagging profusely, as if he were a barkwolf pup perched at a wrangler’s elbow, waiting for scraps.

Juraxi sniffed the air. *Brushwood and ash*. He looked up and down the edges of the immense forest looming behind them. It was no smell of Firstwatch. There must have been travellers on the Scorchroad, camping downwind and late to breaking their fasts.

The Scorch had never failed to enthrall him. It was a view worth making his last. As black and featureless as the Swathe was emerald green and bursting with life, the burned wasteland stretched as far east as the eye could see and mountains allowed. Ridges of red-rusted iron zigzagged across the dead earth until they culminated in a sharp and vertical protrusion of obsidian a hundred feet high. Kī Raxa’s Blade was no bigger than a thumb at this distance. Juraxi had always thought the rocks resembled the shattered stump of a tree rather than a blade. Others saw claws or even a crown. The children of Firstwatch and the surrounding towns dared each other to touch its broken fragments spread across the plain. Juraxi had played such games, and had never brought himself to lay hands on the Blade. Nobody from the Swathe but the metal and stone miners dared venture further than the spur of obsidian, for beyond was the domain of the Scorchfolk. Bandits, marauders, and warlords, all.

The thin barrier they called the Loamsedge was the only separation that stood against the Scorch: a mile-wide scrubland prone to scavengers and the chosen workplace of Firstwatch’s executioners. It hugged the forest’s edge, running along the meandering, endless wall of foliage and trees like a frayed hem of a coat.

‘Go on then, out with it,’ Igran intruded on Juraxi’s thoughts. ‘Have your last words. Pray, if you wish.’

As Juraxi drank in the view one final time, he pondered what poignant words would define his unremarkable life. When he found none, he blew his sweaty locks from his face and decided to try one last time to save his worthless, pale skin. ‘I’m innocent, and I swear it on the Three and all their spirits. You know the curse of killing an innocent man. You could simply let me go, you know. I’ll walk the Loamsedge. I’ll even head west into the Scorch, if that’s what it takes. You’ll never see me again,’ Juraxi said.

Igran wrinkled his nose. ‘You fancy letting him go, Thatch? Bleeding trees. You can’t even remember when you last shat, can you? And you, Swik?’

The mention of curses had got the skinny lad flapping his jaw. His eyes had to be dragged from the strange sky. ‘Er...’

‘No, is the answer, Juraxi,’ Igran snapped. ‘If we don’t come back with your head for the matriarch, it’ll be us out here on the Loamsedge kneeling before the sword. You think we’re fools, you filth?’

Juraxi’s pleading turned to begging. ‘You could say I ran. Escaped you somehow!’

Igran looked bored. He seemed far more interested in a seed stuck between his teeth. Juraxi could see the offending pip, black between the pipe-smoke yellow.

‘Any better last words?’ asked Igran.

Juraxi tensed against his ropes once more. ‘I didn’t kill her. It was that accursed husband of hers, I tell you. He tried to slice my throat just the same but I fought him off. It was too late for... I didn’t kill her,’ he hissed. He didn’t favour the way his voice cracked.

The black sack shut out the daylight and conveniently hid his sob. Thatch shoved Juraxi’s head to a bow and roughly exposed the skin of his nape. He was rude enough to pat Juraxi on the head and belch as he thumped away. The mocking from an oaf of his degree was vinegar to a wound.

Igran’s voice came close for a moment. ‘I don’t rightly care who you killed and why. You betrayed your marks and your tribe by taking innocent lives.’

Juraxi’s panic wanted to protest, but he bit his tongue between his teeth and chose different words. ‘See they treat my mother and father well,’ he told Igran. ‘Don’t punish them for my sins.’

The old man finally spat the seed from his blistered lips and by the sound of it, gave a kick to the leather-clad wretch beside him. ‘Read him the rites, Swik.’

The ancient words counted the precious and fleeting final moments left of Juraxi’s life.

Swik commenced reading aloud in his pipe-reed of a voice. ‘May the Three Gods of sun and soil and rain have mercy on your soul...’

Dry grass crunched as Igran took up a broad stance. A shake took up residence in Juraxi’s limbs. No matter how he tensed, he couldn’t deny it. Every horror he had heard of the executioner’s blade taking a dozen swings rushed through his mind.

‘...may your body feed the forest that fed you...’

Juraxi heard the grunt of hefting a heavy blade. Thatch’s meaty and unbearably warm hands pushed against his back to keep him still. Every muscle seized up in expectation of the blade at any moment.

‘...and we consecrate you to the spirits of sap and nectra, of the loam, the bark, the root, in honour of the—’

A deep voice cut Swik off.

‘What in the Six Hells is that?’ It was always shocking to hear Thatch speak. No more so than now.

Juraxi almost fell backwards as Thatch gave up the pressure on his spine. Relief drowned him despite the circumstances. ‘What’s going on?’ he shouted through the sweltering sack.

Nobody answered him. All Juraxi heard was Igran whispering in what sounded like horror. The sword thumped to the earth near his knee.

‘What by the loam is that...? That ain’t right. That ain’t right at all!’ By the sound of his half-toothless gums working, it took him a moment to summon some saliva. ‘Get your unwashed arses on the path back to Firstwatch!’

‘W—what’s happening?’ Swik stammered.

‘Now, Swik!’

By the sound of boots scattering on scrubland, it seemed Igran was already running. Thatch too. Swik wasted no time dashing after them. The idiot had the gall to mumble an apology to Juraxi before sprinting away.

‘You can’t just leave me here!’ hollered Juraxi.

A deep, earth-shuddering boom shattered the silence.

‘Bleeding trees!’ he cursed.

Spitting and seething, Juraxi felt for Igran’s heavy blade behind him. Cutting his hands and wrists more than once, he slipped the rope under the hook of the obsidian sword and began to slice. It took far too long and a dozen more injuries before he was able to free himself and drag the sack from his head. Smearing blood and sweat across his face, he rubbed his eyes to ensure they were indeed working and then saw to the ropes around his feet.

To a rending rumble, the Kī Raxa’s Blade was starting to collapse at its base. Shards of obsidian likely twice Juraxi’s height exploded into the air as it tilted, teetered, and then crumbled. It took a few moments for the thunder of its fall to reach him, and with it came a foul stench. It washed over the Loamsedge, and all Juraxi could taste on his tongue was bitter ash. The cold breeze that normally seeped timidly from the Scorch became a forceful, hot wind. Behind him, it made the smaller trees at the very edge of the Swathe recoil. The emerald crown of the forest sloped to greater heights the deeper one looked, where taller trees like the bloodwood of Firstwatch grew. Could Juraxi have seen further beyond those woods, he would have witnessed the tallest of them all: more ancient bloodwoods that rivalled the black mountains of the far west for height and scraped a mile or more high. All Juraxi saw was clouds of leaves arising alongside scores of birds taking flight.

It was then he saw it: the disc of the sun bore a wound on one side. To his horror and confusion, darkness had begun to carve away its light. It was indeed an omen, and a fell one at that. The sun goddess herself was beset by darkness.

Juraxi frantically wiped blood across his white jerkin. ‘Father! Mother!’ he yelled in dread. Arms windmilling, legs wobbling yet urgent, Juraxi sprinted for the safety of the Swathe. To any onlookers, it would have looked bizarre, as if the condemned now chased his would-be executioners. Juraxi cared not: he was no murderer to begin with.

The path was a tunnel through the tangled foliage and walls of branches the warders liked to weave. Filled with gloom between patches of candlevines, it was wide enough for three wagons abreast and meandered between the diminutive ironpith and narin saplings. Their trunks were barely an arm’s stretch wide.

Bare-footed, Juraxi pelted along the bark-chip path like a man with jaws gnashing at his heels. Even when he passed Swik, rocking back and forth nursing a sideways ankle, he did not stop. *Crime and punishment be damned*, he told himself.

A journey that had taken an hour shambling in rope shackles was a blur to Juraxi’s panicked mind. Though the bark and scattered rocks cut his feet, he persevered until he spied the scarlet colour of the bloodwood’s leaves dominating the rest of the immediate forest. Like all bloodwoods, this was a giant amongst ordinary trees. Firstwatch was a sapling by all rights, barely grown at a thousand feet from root to crown, and yet already it stretched triple the height of the canopy.

The town that called it home was one giant watchtower. The timber buildings of Firstwatch spiralled around the bloodwood’s colossal bronze trunk and sprouted into boughs that were broad enough to support a web of streets and leafroads. Those roads were already abuzz, with runners sprinting between hand-carts and citizens. A few drums from the high towers were already tolling at the sight of the fading sun.

Thatch and Igran were ahead, dragging their heels with exhaustion and yelling to the warders and warriors that perched in basket-like platforms that hung from Firstwatch’s branches.

‘Summon all the warriors! All the sorcers!’ Igran was yelling, doused with fear-sweat.

‘Sound the alarm!’ Thatch barked breathlessly.

The confused shouts ran down. ‘What news!’

‘Is it marauders?’

‘Fetch everyone! There’s an ill omen in the skies! The Blade has fallen!’ Igran yelled as he pointed madly at the sun between the branches. Juraxi felt his knees weaken as he stared. He barely needed to shield his face; the sun’s light was that of evening. A dark maw had swallowed half of the sun already, and was swiftly devouring the rest.

The uproar spread like a potent stench. Older warriors, old enough to remember the omen, scrambled up rope ladders or sprinted across the loam to Firstwatch’s spiral tower. Others cowered in terror. Most stood about, confused and fearful.

Juraxi caught the glitter of a lancewing bird and its rider speeding through the canopy in stomach-churning manoeuvres until it broke from the canopy. The drone of its iridescent wings shook leaves spinning to the forest floor.

‘Oi!’ Thatch hollered. Despite the situation, he had found wind in his barrel chest to chase Juraxi.

‘Leave off, you fool!’ Juraxi howled back at him. The man was a lump, but a disconcertingly fast lump.

Juraxi was not headed for the bloodwood, but for the small ring-shaped village gathered around the giant trunk. Thatch cottages and huts blistered the tree’s foundations, squatting under or perching atop the root arches that spread far and wide. Smoke from cooking pits and crafters gave the tree a hazy halo. Candlevines, thinking it was the beginnings of evening, were already blossoming across rooftops and up the spiral tower.

The early gloom had drawn dozens from doors and curious heads from windows. The fear was spreading quickly. One woman as grey as endseason clutched at her chest and threw herself down upon the loam, shrieking.

Thatch had somehow run into a wagon, and was currently entangled with a shocked and broken merchant. Juraxi ran only harder, dodging between a gang of carpenters hauling planks and poles. He had spied his father’s hut. Lungs aflame, he hurtled towards it, too close to halt now.

Those around him had different ideas. The shout was incriminating.

‘It’s the murderer! Juraxi!’

Less than twenty paces from his father’s door, the pole swung from nowhere and hammered into his gut. Juraxi flipped over it to land in a heap in the dirt. The pole was prodding at him, trying to keep him from getting up.

‘The matriarch sentenced him to death!’

‘He must have escaped! Three Gods, look at the blood on his hands and cloth!’

Juraxi’s head was spinning but he fought like a madman to be free. Rough fingers had laid claim to his leg. ‘Get off me, you idiots! Have you not seen the sky?’

‘Juraxi!’

The utterance of his name cut through the tumult like a needle through cloth, especially spoken in his mother’s shrill voice. Between the tangle of flailing limbs, Juraxi saw her standing in their doorway with father clinging to her arm, his clouded eyes wide and searching. His mother’s tear-

crimson gaze was already too much to bear. She stared only at the bloody hands the sword had given him.

‘What have you done now, Juraxi?’ she cried out.

Juraxi had been pinned by three men, face in the dirt and limbs spreadeagled. All he could do was scream, gaze locked on his mother, begging her to look at him. ‘No, Mother! I... Look at the sky! Something’s happening in the Scorch, like the stories you once told me!’

The only warning was a momentary spark, sputtering in midair. The shockwave that followed ripped every breath of air from Juraxi’s lungs. The pressure crushed him into the earth. Juraxi swore he heard his skull crack. A scorching heat seared the side of his face not shoved to the dirt. In the blur of his one useful eye, he saw the carpenters severed just below their shoulders by an invisible blade of force, missing Juraxi by inches. Blood boiled in midair.

The shockwave spread in a flat disc, halving or blasting apart anything it came into contact with. Houses were reduced to splinters. Juraxi saw his mother and father disappear in a hail of debris. Their screams were cut viciously short. Fire burst into life wherever the destruction spread. The disc reached almost to Firstwatch’s roots before it held fast.

Juraxi’s jerkin and trows were aflame; he could feel it. Howling with pain, he crawled as fast as he could to safety. Painfully close to his head, the air shook as it grew even hotter. Black smoke swirled around him as he crawled to safety.

Somebody seized him by the shoulders and dragged him across the loam. Though it tortured his seared skin, Juraxi had no strength to fight. Choking, he stared aghast at what he had barely escaped: a roiling plane of air barely inches thick but now more than fifty yards wide. Golden fire ringed its edges. An obsidian darkness lay at its centre. Smoke billowed from it, already beginning to fill the cavernous space beneath the boughs of Firstwatch. Within the depths of its black swirls, a magma glow began to rise.

‘What in bleeding trees is happening?!’ bellowed the plump lad dragging at Juraxi's arms.

‘I don’t know!’ Juraxi screeched to the stranger, but the answer came without hesitation.

Something deep and mighty groaned as the air crackled once more. There, in the belching darkness, a huge hand forged of charcoal, brandishing brimstone claws, reached from the pit of shadow and ash.

In the soulless eyes that followed, Juraxi saw death stretching for him.

*Several hours earlier*

*(Longsun, 2310th Season)*

## 2

### A B L A C K S U N

*Only an idiot treads the loam alone. Or at night, Or at all, for that matter. There's a reason the ancestors left it behind for the safety of the bloodwoods.*

*FROM A "MISPLACED" SCROLL FOR SALE IN A NEATHERING MARKET*

Nothing ate quite like a blasted lancewing.

A month, I had spent working the nests in the high branches, and still their appetite awed me. No sooner did I filled a bucket with sapwater did one of the bastards swoop in and guzzle it down. Their table manners were far from acceptable. If it wasn't the draught from the birds' violent and rapid wings, it was their spear-like beaks and tongues that knocked the wooden buckets flying.

With a deafening roar, another lancewing skimmed the rooftops of the nests. I reached to shield my face and cursed as sapwater slopped onto my blue worker's tabard. The bird slid through the air sideways as it turned, its emerald wings a blur that defied the eyes. It hovered momentarily as it surveyed the long network of platforms, perches, and nests that lined the bloodwood's huge branch. As though the lancewing heard my muttered threats, it chose me and landed swiftly on a perch that lined the precipice of my section. It uttered an impatient and piercing trill at finding its trough empty yet again.

I sighed deeply.

Framed in the shafts of light that pierced the gaps of the bloodwood's high canopy, the lancewing's plumage shone as though coated in gems. Green as the carpet of canopy leaves below, its tight-knit feathers wore a dazzling sheen. A sapphire stripe ran from its ridged crest to its broad, oar-shaped tail. The leafleather saddle upon its back was, for now, empty of rider.

I recognised this one: it was a ravenous bully of a bird. Its great black eyes watched me as I hesitantly approached, poised and pensive. A black tongue darted from its beak, as long and as thin as a whip.

'Don't you dare. Not again. Not this time,' I told it. 'You just wait until I empty it into the trough, you hear?'



As I laid the bucket down to get a better grip on the sugar-encrusted bucket, the lancewing darted for its sapwater and near skewered my arm in the process. Insult to injury, the bastard beat its wings for balance, driving me sliding across the deck. The thin serpent of a tongue made depressingly short work of a bucket it took far too long to fill and carry. It was no wonder the nests had to remain abuzz with hands all hours of the sun, from firstglow to lastlight.

The bucket thumped on the wooden deck as the lancewing jostled it. I saw the events unfolding before me. Already that day, I had lost half a dozen buckets. I didn't dare think about my weekly total. I refused to let another one fall because of these winged pests. I could not fail again. Another lost bucket, another mistake, Headman Karonak had said, and I would be headed to the louse-mines. There were few positions of work more ignoble, detestable, and lower on the social ladder of Shal Gara than louse-mining. And I should know: I had already tumbled down half the ladder, bouncing from calling to calling as I fell.

Just as I expected, the lancewing reared up and the bucket caught on the sharp tip of its beak. Failing to grab it, the bucket began to clatter and roll towards the edge of the nest's platform, where the bloodwood branch ended. Desperate to save it, I sprang into a mad dive, sliding on my backside across the sap and shit-smearred deck to seize the bucket before it tumbled into oblivion.

'Bleeding trees!' I yelled as my momentum overtook the bucket. I snagged its handle, but not before my mosscloth shoes skidded into empty space. I felt firm decking disappear from beneath me.

Sensing my spare hand grate against the nest's edge, I seized the lip of the deck and held on for all my worth. So it was that I found myself dangling more than half a mile above the loam and lesser canopies, a bucket in one hand and my eyes bulging.

'Bastard birds,' I muttered to myself as I stared inexorably down at the teeming leaffroads and branches of the city of Shal Gara below me. They stretched a mile down to the forest floor, hidden by lesser trees and canopies, and I dangled above them like a ripe fruit. Terrifying, of course, but there lay the excitement.

With a snarl of effort, I hurled the bucket above me, got two hands on the deck, and slowly hauled myself back onto solid footing. Rolling onto my back, I stared up at the green sky of the canopy and let my lungs heave.

'You alright, Tarko?' one of the nearby nesthands called my name. Boon sounded genuinely considered. The others smirked behind hands or shook their heads in disappointment, but she stomped forwards and effortlessly shoed the lancewing from its perch.

'As I'll ever be,' I gasped. 'Three Gods, that was close.' I nursed the ache in my one arm, and cursing the lancewing that still hovered above us, looking innocent as a chick and yet somehow as mischievous as a sprite.

A woman whose arms were thicker than my waist, Boon hauled my light frame upright with ease. She smacked me on the back with such force that all the precious air was driven from my lungs.

'You tit,' she said, always talking far too loudly compared to how closely she stood. 'Why didn't you just let it fall?'

‘You heard Headman Karonak earlier, right? He’ll have my skin for a waistcoat if I lose one more bucket,’ I replied.

‘So you’d rather plummet to your death?’

I wrinkled my nose as I wiped the white shit from my uniform of the blue tabard and mosscloth trews. ‘It would be better than giving him the satisfaction.’ I grinned. Impetuousness was a quick path to trouble, so my sister loved to lecture me, and Boon seemed to agree as she bared her yellow teeth in grimace.

As well as an overseer, and therefore a senior to my position as a lowly rank of hand, Boon was my elder. Thirty seasons, or so she had told me, and already her mouth was rotten. She wasn’t the only nesthand who snuck palmfuls of the sapwater. The stuff was highly addictive, said their whispers. I found the stuff unbearably sweet to the point where I had almost vomited my first try. Boon was always proud to remind me it took some getting used to. I had merely added it to my growing mental list of things I was apparently useless at.

I smeared sweat across my forehead with the back of my hand. ‘In all honesty, it’s because I can’t bear to fail again. Karonak’s got the louse-mines in mind for me, I tell you. And it’s not just that prospect; I can’t get banned from yet another calling. Sixteen jobs in four seasons is a sure sign of a useless worker, and at this rate, I’ll end up begging for scraps or banished. That’s if my mother and sister don’t strangle me first.’

Boon grumbled incoherently in thought as she guided me back to the nests: tall, skinny triangles of buildings made from woven leafleather. Their awnings cast a deeper shade of cool than the canopy above. Throughout the day, they remained almost completely empty until the shadows grew long and the sun faded behind the leaves. Then the nests were promptly stuffed with the feathered nuisances until firstglow arose once more.

‘I guess...’ Boon offered with a sigh. ‘Just be less terrible at this?’

‘It’s those bloody birds, Boon. They don’t like me. Either that or it’s these confounded buckets,’ I said, knocking my bucket against a railing. ‘Why don’t we get some pipes or gutters and pour the sapwater in from afar?’

‘Platform’s got to stay clear for the lancewings, see. That’s why we’ve got no ropes or skyriser platforms here. Perches, buckets and troughs is the way hands have always done it. I told you: the lancewings need a while to come trust a new hand. They got good eyes for faces and a better sense for what’s in your skull. Takes their lancers seasons to build a bond strong enough to ride them.’

I nodded while I absently watched two lancewings duel overhead between the bloodwood leaves. The birds spiralled around each other while simultaneously careening between lesser branches. It was stomach-clenching to watch. How the lancer riders even stayed affixed to their saddles, never mind expertly wielding long wooden glaives, was baffling. The staccato crack of their blades was audible over the drone of wings and of Shal Gara around us. Within moments, they had disappeared into the daylight beyond the bloodwood’s leaves.

‘Is that what makes the lancers such arrogant bastards?’ I narrowed my eyes.

‘Told you before, Tarko: you sound jealous when you talk like that. Especially to the other nesthands who don’t know you like I’ve come to.’

Boon did not know me. A bitter handful of weeks was not time enough to know somebody, but Boon was constantly boasting how easily she saw to the heart of others. And as much as it had come to irritate me, she was most often right.

‘Maybe I *am* jealous,’ I admitted, still staring but now with squinting eyes. ‘That’s because it could have been me. Should have been.’

‘Psh.’

‘Not a lancer, but I could have been a sorcer. That’s obvious to see.’ I prodded at the mark tattooed across my left eyebrow, lid, and cheek. The indelible mark of a mistake made when I was but five seasons old: the ornate black dagger blade of the sorcer tribe. It was crossed at its tip by another tattoo barely three days older. It broke the blade at an angle, running along the ridge of my cheekbone. ‘I bet I would have wielded magic with the best of them.’

Boon’s laugh was cruel. After she set her bucket down beneath the nearby vat of sapwater and punished its handle, she pointed a chubby finger at my tattoo and almost blinded me in the process.

‘Yeah, but you ain’t, Tarko. They explicitly marked you as one *without* magic, Tarko. In your next life, maybe, but for now you’re a third-born son just like I’m a third-born daughter. Just like every one of these nesthands you see. We don’t drink nectra and cast magic. We don’t ride lancewings. We’re not scholars or bone-fixers. We’re workers, and we toil for the better of our bloodwood. That is all the Bloodlaws demand of us, or do I need to remind you yet again, Hand?’

‘No, Overseer,’ I said, using her formal rank as she had mine, and bit my tongue to keep from saying more. The subject was ever-present, and its ability to cut me after all my seasons was astounding, and deeply annoying.

Boon raised her fists. Not in anger, but to show off the tattooed glyphs on the back of her hands: the simple marking of three crossed nails. It was the mark the third-born had worn for almost ten centuries since some noble saw fit to write the Bloodlaws. I bore the very same tattoos on my hands. Like almost all in Shal Gara, on our right cheeks were the mark of our ranks within our tribe: simple, straight lines branded at an angle. I wore none as a greenhand. Boon wore two.

‘Get your mind out of the canopy and stop dreaming. Head down and work on, ’Boon said. ‘That’s our calling.’

I ran a sweaty hand into my locks, dark as obsidian blades, and frowned.

‘Better fill your bucket up swift-like. Your wild antics have not gone unnoticed, ’Boon advised quietly, nodding down the branch to where something was amiss. Headman Karonak could be spotted – and heard – yelling a path through the crowds of workers. I positioned the bucket under the vat’s tap and grimaced. His presence had the wonderful ability to set any crowd of blue-tabard workers into a frenzy of activity. Not a foot or finger remained still while Karonak was in view. Or, more importantly, when one was in view of Karonak.

The headman came bustling through a herd of nesthands who spared a fleeting moment to smirk in my direction. The tapping of Karonak's walking cane was an angry drumbeat, and his gaze was set solely on one pair of nesthands in particular. To me, the man had the appearance of a frog stuffed into a wig of grey hair.

'Loitering! Loudmouthing, and no doubt lollygagging!' Karonak barked at both Boon and I. 'How I detest it!'

I flung my shoulders back and urged the tap to dribble faster.

Boon tried her hardest to stand up for me. 'Terelta almost fell, sir. He's just catching his breath.'

'I witnessed it with my own powers of perception, thank you, Overseer Boon, and that is precisely what has perturbed me!'

Karonak had a way – no, an unfortunate obsession – with long words. I'd become certain it was in effort to hide the old man's severe lack of importance in the city, like flowers sprinkled upon a lancewing turd. Karonak used his extruded words like weapons, most often combining them with inordinate amounts of spittle. In being a bully, he was not alone in the highest of the ranks of the worker's tribe. But he was exceptional at it. A bastard of a man in frog form.

I flinched as a fleck of the man's spittle struck me square in the forehead. 'I was doing all I could to save the bucket, just as you asked me to—'

A thump of Karonak's cane against the deck silenced me.

'That is not what I requested of you! Should one of my nesthands descent at rapid pace from this branch, and be so unfortunate as to land within the cargo of a merchant or artisan, or gods forbid, the transportation of a noble, whose detestable responsibility do you believe it is to make restitution when you're inconveniently deceased?'

It took me a moment to translate the man's tirade. 'Yours?' I guessed.

'Assuredly! I am responsible for this entire branch, young hand. Five-hundred more workers toil here alongside you, and each upholds the veneration I deservedly demand. But not Tarkosi Terelta. No!' Karonak used my full name as if it were an insult. Several other nesthands, busy filling buckets from their identical vats, watched on with broad grins.

'I suspected the other headmen were saddling me with a useless burden when they dispatched you to my nests, and I am vindicated!' Karonak was yelling.

'But you said not to lose any more buckets, sir—' I tried again.

'Not at the expenditure of my pocket, you poltroon! One further blunder, Terelta, and I shall dispose of you so rapidly, you will wish that you *had* fallen.'

Shutting off the tap of the vat with a vicious clank, I clutched my bucket and bowed my head. I had already worked for more than a dozen headmen and headwomen, and every one of them was the same: they delighted in rolling their shit down the steep hill of superiority. I'd often wondered if it was the same in all seven tribes. Surely the sorcers didn't have to deal with rotten little men with inferiority issues.

I did what I always did: I pasted a polite smile upon my face and recited the words I had learned to say. I stared at the three lines of a headman's rank on Karonak's cheek as I spoke. 'Thank you for the lesson, sir.'

Once Karonak was done glowering and had found another nesthand to eloquently howl at, I stared to the false scarlet sky for restraint.

'Tell me, Boon. In all your seasons—'

'You mind your tongue.'

'—have you ever found a calling where you're not cursed if you do and cursed if you don't? Because I sure haven't.'

'Never had that problem, Tarko!' Boon remarked cheerily. 'Been here almost fifteen seasons now. You? You walk too tall and you don't take enough care. Just like the rest of us, before we learned our place in the way of things. Sooner you learn yours, sooner you'll feel happier with your lot. You'll be part of the foliage like the rest of us. You'll understand eventually.'

And there they were: the four words I had come to loathe. *You will understand eventually.* They were a promise idly and freely offered and yet always broken by every job I had held. The fact I was the common denominator still didn't make existence seem any kinder. I did not want to understand. The notion sounded hideous to me, no matter how many times I heard third-born daughters and sons bray about the grand call to fit within society. To follow the Bloodlaws for the glory of order. It made me feel like a dull rock amongst gems, out of place. I grumbled under my breath as I eyed the two lancewings that had just alighted on the perches.

'You're up, Terelta! Try not to die this time,' yelled a grinning nesthand on the neighbouring stretch of deck. Boon and I hustled forwards. Sugary sap slopped down my arms despite Boon not wetting the deck with a single drop.

'For the hundredth time,' she lectured, 'you've got to be quick on your feet. Assertive! Don't be afraid of the lancewings. They're skittish, so plan for that as well as use it. Fill the trough and move away, and don't bloody let go of the bucket.'

I stared at my lancewing, failing to admire its dazzling colours. It was the hungry look in its eye that I watched carefully. 'No. There's a better way,' I said with a shake of my head.

'Get those lancewings fed and back in the air!' hollered another overseer.

'What are you doing now, Tarko? By the Six Hells!'

I shut my ears to the shouts and walked determinedly for a knot of rope lying useless on a railing.

'Do your job, greenhand!'

I snatched the rope and lashed it around both my arm and tight around the bucket handle. Dangling one half over my forearm, I marched to the trough. As expected, the lancewing darted for the bucket instead. I held onto it firmly, but the force of the beak dislodged it from my hands. Before the whole bucket of sap could be wasted, I hauled it back to myself, much to the

lancewing's apparent surprise and indignation. The bird thrummed its wings, knocking me back a few steps, but still with my bucket in my arms.

'Fixed it!' I cried.

'Impressive, but you're still wasting time and sap,' hissed Boon.

'Noble incoming!' came a cry, urging every nesthand in earshot into activity. There was a not so subtle battle to tend the finest of lancewings whenever they called at the nests. High in the canopies of Shal Gara's bloodwood, the employ of a nesthand might have seemed glamorous to many, but it was gruelling. Not just in my mind, but in every nesthand's proud admission. It was a crowded position with little advancement. Any method to get favoured, noticed, or generally above your colleagues was executed swiftly and without mercy.

I was pushed to the deck by an overseer as young as I was in the rush to tend this most prized specimen of lancewings. Its shadows flitted over me, not to mention gusts of air that made me shield my face. The bird's golden wings had a deeper, growling tone, not to mention that it was accompanied by four other birds in arrow formation. Much larger than its kin, the noble's lancewing was a fiery amber in colour with a throat of blue so iridescent that it seemed to me that I stared into a pool of water surrounded by fire.

'I swear all I've done these past weeks is pick you up off the deck,' complained Boon. 'Come on! Make yourself useful.'

Whether it was her muscle, ample size, or the dark threats she uttered to her fellow nesthands, but somehow she cut through the crowds. She made enough way that I could sneak behind in her wake. Others noticed all the same.

'Him?' they asked.

'He'll embarrass us all!'

'Watch out, he might just end up falling at the noble's feet!'

The ability to ignore people had become some what of a power of mine. In any case, I was more interested in watching the birds land in one neat arrowhead around their leader. The riders were lancers, but the noble in charge was of much higher standing. Around his neck hung a large eagle's feather, the symbol of an eagleborn of the warrior tribe, and therefore the highest position a second-born could ever hope to attain without worming into the matriarch's court as one of the seven sages.

This eagleborn was clad in fine silver and hardened leafleather armour, from his boots to his feather-plumed helmet, yellow as the sun-goddess. A red-painted mask of ironpith covered his face, carved like a beak mid-snarl and lined with teeth; an eagle screaming. The man's glaive was as long as his lancewing's beak and studded with jagged razors of obsidian and sharp, hardened ironpith in between.

I peered, not in fascination or admiration, but in scrutiny. I could not yet see the family glyph of his breastplate, but it seemed achingly familiar. Worrisome.

The man removed his mask and helmet in one fluid motion, and in that moment my suspicions were confirmed. Ignoring the scarlet eyes that proved him of noble lines, the cascade

of bloodwood-red hair was unmistakable in any part of the city. On his right cheek he wore the six marks of his rank. I found the heat rising in my face. My jaw clicked as my teeth clenched in unease.

‘Wine!’ yelled Haidak Baran as he swaggered across the wooden deck. The swarming nesthands shrank back in respect.

Haidak was not barely five seasons older than I, a second-born, and yet due to a malady taking his older sister to the Six Heavens, also now heir to the illustrious Baran family. And, let’s not forget to mention, a hero amongst the warrior tribe, a frequent cause of racing hearts, and the son of a sage.

The nesthands that had reached the perches first worked in their separate crews, several workers to each of the lancewings. Sapwater spilled in their eagerness. Not only did they keep the troughs topped up, but once all the riders had dismounted, they readjusted their saddles and preened the birds’ metallic feathers with moss brushes. Platters of small insects were brought forth and proffered as if in prayer. The sun goddess did take her likeness from a lancewing, after all. The birds attacked the platters with their whip tongues.

‘By the loam, bring me wine!’ Haidak snapped.

It was Karonak himself who escorted the painted clay bottle of wine across the platform to the shining Haidak. His grovelling was loud and clear.

‘Without exception, it is the most splendid of days when you select to honour our nests with your presence.’

I watched Haidak brush his infernal hair from his face while staring flatly at the headman. He swiped the clay bottle from Karonak’s hand, threw his head back, and poured wine liberally into his mouth. Leaving the blue liquid to dribble down his neck and beneath his armour, Haidak held out the flask to one of his lancers. The nearest man reached, but not before the eagleborn dropped it to the deck. The clay smashed and wine splattered several nesthands.

Pride was a poison, or so I believed. It turned a mind against the shared pleasures of one’s fellow man. A man like Haidak only found pleasure in the mockery and downfall of others. I didn’t need to have Boon’s knack for insight to see that. Not to forget, he was the perfect copy of his father: first-born Sage Kol Baran. He was one of the two men responsible for orchestrating the downfall of the Terelta name. The other man had been my own father.

Haidak perused the crowds of nesthands, every one of which were either agog at his armour or the huge lancewing behind him. Which, as it happened, had drained its trough.

‘More sap!’ came the cry, and buckets came running through the crowd. Boon raised her hand and whistled, and before I knew it I had one thrust into my arms.

‘Go, greenhand!’ Boon elbowed me forwards.

‘Let another,’ I tried to protest, but a shove from the line slopped sapwater over the deck. ‘Bleeding trees,’ I muttered as I accidentally caught Haidak’s eye. I ran alongside Boon, trying to use her for cover. These lancewings were thankfully calmer than the others. This time, I had no trouble emptying the bucket into the trough.

‘See?’ Boon said. ‘Confidence.’

My slumped shoulders reflected no such accomplishment. I had turned to see the eagleborn was now standing barring our way. His glaive rested in one hand, creating a long angle where it rested on the deck.

‘If it isn’t Tarkosi Terelta!’ Haidak brayed with amusement.

Mistaken jealousy turned the heads of the crowd to me. I briefly contemplated whether dashing over the edge of the branch might have been preferable. I found myself hating tradition instead. A higher rank had spoken to me directly, and as such I was now bound to bow my head. I did so alongside Boon.

‘What a displeasure to find you here,’ continued Haidak. ‘Last I saw of you, you were trying to be a weaver, or was it a cook? Or armourer? Farmer? I forget. Now I see they have sent you up here to serve sapwater to my lancewings. My my, what kind of worker are you that you aren’t good enough for a single calling?’

Snickers and whispers of gossip spread through the nesthands.

*And I wonder why that is, Eagleborn Baran.* I wanted desperately to say the words, but my lips were sealed too tight.

Haidak clicked his gloved fingers. ‘Headman Karonak! I shan’t have my lancewings tended by such useless filth as *this*.’ He pointed straight at me.

Karonak was quick to remedy the situation. ‘Return to your nest this instant, Terelta!’

I did so with fire in my face and jaw bunched. I didn’t blame Boon for trailing several yards behind. I wouldn’t have wanted to be seen a friend to me either.

Boon was still keeping a distance. ‘Filth, he called you. What did you do to him?’

‘Me?’ I glared, stopping halfway. ‘I didn’t do a thing except get born into the wrong family. And that’s a long story for another day.’

‘Sap!’ yelled another overseer.

‘Looks like you’re up, Boon,’ I said.

‘I...’

‘Terelta!’ Karonak had not wasted any time coming to find me. ‘You!’ he yelled. There was no audience around us this time, just Boon and a handful of elder hands taking breaks in the nests. He tapped his cane at the ground before me feet. ‘I have no curiosity for how exactly you affronted one of the finest families in Shal Gara, but I shall not have your transgressions tarnishing the proud performance of my nests!’

I knew where this conversation was going. I felt the frustration blooming in my chest. This situation had occurred too many times it was now a rehearsal. The only comfort I could grasp in these moments was the fact that I hadn’t lost this job through my own impetuosity. This was once again the fault of my father. He had seen to it that the stench followed my family long after



his death. It never made my continuing fall from grace any easier, but I knew nobody better to blame.

Knowing what was next, I was reaching to remove my nesthand's tabard when a piercing note struck the nests quiet. It stole the words poised on Karonak's tongue. He and Boon turned sharply to look down the branch. Another lancewing emitted a similar shriek as I stared. The birds had their beaks angled to the canopy, heads waving back and forth as if studying danger.

The shadow descended across the colossal bloodwood canopy. The shafts of sunlight that fell across the city grew dimmer, barely noticeable at first, but the longer I watched the more obvious the change became. Momentarily, it seemed merely the shadow of a cloud, but the sky I could glimpse was a clear cerulean. A cold spread with the darkness as it washed through the whole forest around us. It was barely midday, and somehow evening's lastlight was already falling.

With bellowed orders and a roar of wings, Haidak Baran and his ranks of lancers tore up into the leaves to investigate the strange shadow. Shredded fragments of leaves, errant feathers, and dust snowed in their wake as every nesthand craned their head to the canopy.

'What is it, Boon?' I whispered, somehow afraid to break the tension of the moment.

'I... I don't know. Headman!' she called to Karonak. 'What's going on?'

Karonak's lips were moving but nothing was coming out. I saw his slow and wary shake of his head. His eyes, normally shrouded in wrinkles from squinting angrily at anything and everything, were fixed wide. His jowls hung loose.

Around us, the other branches had fallen silent also. The bustle of Shal Gara had turned cautious and muted. Beasts pulling carts and wagons lowed fearfully. Smaller frogs and lizards that called the bloodwood and canopies home shrieked and whistled as the darkness gradually deepened. Bats took flight alongside bewitching flocks of minuscule waif birds. A cold wind stirred the forests. The giant leaves above us shifted solemnly, showing cracks of sky between their red. To my eyes, it looked like the longsun blue was turning a faint purple as if lastlight was on its way. But it was midday. The sun was at its apex. I peered like all the others. Pointing fingers and shouts were raised.

'Look there!' somebody cried.

I saw it at the same time as the shout drew sounds of fear from the crowds of nesthands: a creeping black edge eating at the very sun goddess herself. It was fleeting, glimpsed between the leaves, yet the icy prickles still ran across the backs of my arms.

Sonorous drums sounded across Shal Gara, prompting further worry. I had only heard those drums once, on the first day of my ninth season. That day, the horns had escorted a new sage to Shal Gara's ruling court, the Crimson Crown high above us. Haidak's father, no less, and that was nine seasons past.

'Vacate the nests!' Karonak had recovered himself and pounded his cane against the deck. 'All of you! Back to your homes and abodes. Crews of overseers remain only!'

'What's happening?' I yelled at the headman. He ignored me on his march through the crowds and chastised another gawking nesthand.

‘Begone with the rest of you!’ he ordered. ‘Return at firstglow tomorrow!’

The frustration and anger was still a cinder in my gut, and so without another thought, I began to push through my fellow workers. Not in panic, not in obedience, but in abject curiosity. I didn’t have a lancewing to fly me upwards, but I needed to see the sun.

‘Where are you going, lad?’ Boon yelled after me, noticing my head pointed upwards instead of back to my hovel further down the trunk.

‘I need to see this!’

To the drone of other lancewings taking frantic flight from their perches, I muscled through chattering throngs and along the wooden platforms towards the trunk of Shal Gara. There, the branch of the bloodwood widened to several hundred feet. Lines of wagons queued to supply the nests with their sapwater. There was pandemonium as they tried to turn about on an already crowded branch. The hairy orokan harnessed to each wagon yowled and scraped the deck with their long, dull claws. On quick feet, I weaved through them despite their yells.

At the end of the branch, the bloodwood’s trunk soared above me, immovable as a cliff. The daylight was always dimmer below the canopy, but they glittered with blooming candlevines and fireworm lanterns. They too must have thought evening was coming.

The nests sat in the top third of the bloodwood, below where the trunk split into its very highest branches. The city of Shal Gara spread upwards along every available scrap of wood. This was the canopy, and there, white-wood mansions hung from the branches like hives, sweeping highfields of maize and vegetables glimpsed as much light as they could, and great towers thrust above the leaves. In their midst, clutched between two curling branches, was the Crimson Crown: the matriarch’s court, and a building I had long maintained looked like a fattened and upside-down pear.

The spiralling walkways that wrapped around the trunk in great sweeping arcs and platforms bustled with comers and goers. To go left took me down the trunk to my own branch. Right took me aloft past a gate of warders, and into higher reaches of the bloodwood that one of my station was not usually seen or allowed. My mosscloth trews, tabard, and tattooed marks distinguished me unmistakably a worker. Never mind the sporadic and guilty smear of lancewing shit and sapwater.

Fortunately for me, the I couldn’t have hoped for a finer distraction than the darkness swallowing the sun.

I turned right and set foot to the stairs less-worn. With legs long-used to treading stairs and ladders, living life in vertical rather than on the disgusting flat loam of the forest floor, I climbed at a rapid pace. A single glance back showed me Boon trying to follow me and failing.

An inexplicable panic was slowly spreading through every branch of Shal Gara. Even the nobles, women and men in fine wormsilk threads, gawped upwards, or pelted back to their homes as if they were aflame. Normally they would be staring at the mop-haired worker in their midst, curling their lips and asking the warders to remove me.

Climbing until the trunk started to narrow, I took a junction to a branch that formed one of the pillars of the canopy’s sky. It reached up at a violent angle that was barely walkable. It was a

thin branch, only thirty feet wide. Homes of white plaster and polished wood clung to every spare inch of platform.

Rarely had I gotten the chance to climb so high. I did not look down, or even out from the branch; I walked on with my head fixed forwards. Upwards, for the strange sky. I wasn't alone. A nobleling of barely ten seasons barged into me and mumbled an apology before seeing my tattoos. His face was full of wonder for the canopy. The wind shifted the leaves, but gave us glimpses only. I pressed on.

Beyond the tallest branches, the towers that reached above the canopy had built their roots. These were not for average citizen, no matter how noble they were. Warders in leafleather scale and bearing obsidian swords guarded their doorways, silently daring me to outstay my welcome while they kept one eye on the sky. The drums were still beating. Shouts and yells filled the air.

I kept moving until the branch reached its end. There, a leafroad suspended by ropes stretched to another nearby branch. It was already filled with onlookers, and a stout gate guarded by several warders blocked our way and held back the crowds. Tall and lithe as I was, twisting through the packed bodies took nothing but time and some sharp elbows.

I spotted a chance and took it: pushing back through the throng to an unguarded spiral of stairs that led up the outside of a mishmash of spherical buildings.

'Get down, worker scum!' The shout followed me. Somebody was giving chase. I could hear the stream of threats but I was already too far up the spiral to turn back now.

When the stairs became nothing but a rickety ladder to a rooftop, I climbed as fast as I dared. Wooden slats shifted under my scrambling cloth shoes. The canopy became tangible, and for the second time in my life, I touched the false sky I had been born beneath. And what was more enticing was that the rooftop, now growing steeper by the yard, ascended above it. Fingers biting into any gap I could find, I broke out into an uninterrupted daylight I had never felt on my skin.

Below me, endless green Swathe soared in all directions. Crowns and peaks of rusted scarlet betrayed where the bloodwoods grew between the lesser forest. The closest was still unfathomable miles in the distance. Clouds hid the distant east, but not a mark besides soaring ravens and vultures spoiled the pure sky. Nothing but air lay before me and the sun.

My breathless awe was short-lived. The cold wind needled my spine as I looked up, and witnessed calamity.

The sun had been partially swallowed by a dark void. Like the crescent of the waning moon, a black maw cut into its burning fire, and continued to spread. Unnatural shadow lay across the emerald land. I felt my mouth hanging loose, and whatever heat pounded in my face drained. It was instinct that made my heart stutter, not understanding.

A door burst open and footsteps clattered behind me. I turned to see two armoured warders stumble onto the rooftop. But their chase ended abruptly as they froze staring at the sun as I had.

'Bleeding trees...' one stammered in whisper.

I had seen all I needed to. I hadn't a clue what I'd seen, but if there was one thing I trusted in Shal Gara, it was my own eyes. Closely followed by my gut. To the squawking cries of waif

birds and parrots rising from the canopy, I swung a foot over the lip of the wooden railing and threw myself to the whims of roof tiles and gravity.