

# 7

## GRUDGES REBORN

*The tharantos is not just fearsome in size in aggression, but they are also perturbably smart. More than one fellow hunter has reported tharantos learning how to avoid and even fool traps. They also find weak spots in camp defences, and even recognise fights they can't win. It is this fact alone that keeps me awake every night I spend in the loam.*

*FROM THE NOTES OF HUNTER QUIB'S SCROLL "LOAM SURVIVOR"*

'Well,' Atalawe sucked her teeth. 'That wasn't quite the reception we were hoping for.'

Eztaral's calm had dissolved in a blink. 'What in the bleeding trees are you all doing here?' she snarled. She had the kind voice I imagined Inwar to have if the jāgu could speak. 'You're extraordinarily lucky I don't call for my lancers this very moment and have them throw you from the road, as we would with any stowaways!'

Pel spat blood on the ground. 'You know why we're here, Eztaral. We've come to talk some sense into Haidak and turn this war-party around before its too late. Before they come face to face with—'

'Don't!' The ravenborn brandished her fist again. 'Don't you say that word! Don't you dare speak that nonsense to me.'

It felt good to know I wasn't alone in my opinions, and hadn't yet lost my mind to the preposterous notion of demons.

'They are dead and gone and banished from this world,' Eztaral continued. 'The wildfires are the cause of nothing but an invasion of Scorch marauders. Look at you, Pelikai. Look what you've turned into. Blue-lipped from urka and looking twenty seasons older than you have any right to look. And you, Atalawe. Redeye. You've run yourselves ragged pursuing nonsense, I can tell.' Eztaral turned as if to leave but paused, feathered helmet strangled in both hands. 'I'll give you until firstglow to put the war-party behind you. If I see you again, my sword will not stay so clean.'

'If you believe all that, then you truly have forgotten who you are,' said the blind beggar. His face was a half-mask of crimson and a sweaty pale. His voice was nasal with his nose pinched tightly.

‘We’re not going anywhere,’ Atalawe spoke up as she helped Pel to his feet. ‘We took a vow.’

‘The same vow as you took,’ Redeye reluctantly added.

Eztaral stared daggers – humongous blades to be more accurate – at all of them. Her eyes found me shrinking away. ‘And who is this?’

Pel answered. ‘The reason why you should hear what we have to say.’

Eztaral took steps towards me. I could see the recognition in her eyes as she looked at my failed sorcer’s mark. ‘Who is he, curse it?’

Atalawe spoke up before I could. ‘The youngest son of the man you once considered a brother. The man you made a promise to.’

‘A promise that you thought died with Teyak,’ continued Pel. ‘But it didn’t, Eztaral. As much as you might think differently, the Terelta family still lives and so do the Scions. Through him.’

I crossed my arms. Being talked about and not to was infuriating. ‘I have a name, you know. It’s—’

‘Tarkosi Terelta. I know who you are,’ Eztaral grumbled. ‘You’re the wretch who almost got dropped from the lancewing nests by Haidak Baran not two days ago.’

The insult was jarring. It was the first time anybody had ever accused me of failing to live up to my disgraced father, and I didn’t expect its sting. ‘I mean,’ I scoffed. ‘I didn’t have armour on. And he’s five seasons my elder, so—’

‘Mhm. A fine shadow of Teyak, you are.’

Atalawe was peering at Eztaral. ‘I don’t understand you. You can’t seriously doubt the prophecies. Or the word of our ancestors who spent so long keeping the truth alive? It has been many seasons, but I can’t believe you would turn your back so completely on us.’

Eztaral scoffed. ‘My eyes have been opened. Yours remain shut.’

‘Then explain the omen of the black sun. Kī Raxa’s own last words.’

I had to give it to Eztaral. Her conviction was impressive. I could see the fine cracks in it, but she’d clearly spent a lot of time practicing.

‘I don’t have to explain myself to you,’ she said, shrugging her armoured shoulders.

Pel took a mortal risk by jabbing Eztaral in the arm with a bloody finger. ‘No, just to Tarko. Maybe you got lost in your headlong devotion to Matriarch Danaxt and her polished nobles. Maybe you can’t believe in the old stories as we still do, fine. Maybe it was all too much, and you wanted a grander life. I can understand all that. I can even forgive you for letting Teyak down. What’s done is done. But Tarko? He’s the one you swore to protect. You looked into Teyak’s eyes and vowed to keep him safe. You vowed to tell him of the Scions and our cause once he came of age, but instead you let Kol Baran ruin our leader, and let the Terelta family slide into obscurity, along with the rest of us. Though, I must say, Eztaral. Those feathers on your helmet and chest suit you well. Hope they were worth it.’

The silence was unwieldy. Eztaral bared her teeth. Her fist might have trembled, but it did not move.

The sound of lancers shouting for their commander grew louder. ‘Everything in order, Ravenborn?’ they called.

Eztaral’s hand was clenched so hard it was bone-white. ‘All is well,’ she barked to her warriors. With that, Eztaral turned her back on Pel with no more than a snake’s hiss.

Atalawe called after her, risking being heard. ‘Sleep well, old friend, while you can. We’ll see who’s right or not.’

I scratched my head to the sound of silence. ‘What just happened?’

Pel and Redeye fell silent, withdrawing to the fire to brood. Atalawe massaged her temples while Inwar licked blood from her knuckles. ‘I think, young Tarko, we may have just failed miserably,’ she said. Even then the wrangler found opportunity to snort in dry and defeated laughter.

I stood alone, torn between what and who to believe.

‘Was it something I said?’



The morning came to wrap us in haze once more. This morning, it was not a wet mist, but a drifting smoke that had no shape nor flow. It clouded the treetops, stung the back of the throat to make me cough, and tasted sour on the tongue.

The war-party moved on, slightly subdued by the stench of burning forest. I had never seen anything like it, and by the reactions of some of the warriors, they hadn’t either.

Despite her threats, we saw nothing of Eztaral but a distant figure amongst the gaggle of officers and nobles and people with far too many feathers on their helmets. Pel’s nose might have now sat crooked, but his mind was unwavering. He was set on following the war-party the entire way to Firstwatch. When I demanded to know why we weren’t turning around, Pel had only muttered was something about minimal options and sabotage and resigned himself to nibbling urka seeds until he sat in a familiar stupor.

Fifty miles. That was all that remained between us and Firstwatch. The Emerald Causeway meandered less while the Swathe became more spacious. The orange and injured sun showed its face infrequently, wrapped in streaks of dun clouds that defied the breeze.

It was around midday that the leafroad narrowed, and the Swathe gradually changed around us. Instead of six wagons abreast, the road shrank to two or three at most. The war-party bunched up, slowing down until the officers came to bay at their respective ranks. First the lancers yelled at the wilders, then the wilders yelled at the warriors. The warriors proceeded to yell at us porters. Even the pretend ones.

'Move that damnable orokan!' a warrior bayed at us, whacking Nod on his shaggy flanks. The beast yowled irritably, and Atalawe hissed at him.

'I'll thank you to be kinder to the beasts that drag your provisions.'

'Shut your yap and get moving.'

The skinnier leafroad now curved downwards through a copse of stout narin that curtained the Emerald Causeway with their hair-like leaves. To my horror, the road was slowly descending to the forest floor. There was no dangerous gloom here, however, but an open clearing between the trees that still bore signs of fresh logging. The Causeway continued as a road made of horrid dirt and gravel. It took me several heartbeats and a shove from Redeye to move from the safety of the wood to the earth. I had been born in the branches, and the ground felt far too soft and unsteady beneath my feet. Rotten as a leaf. The smell of the dirt was pungent. So it was I hopped back on the wagon and kicked the soil from my feet. I found Atalawe staring at me with brows raised and mockery on her lips.

It would have been nice to emerge into a blaze of sunshine, but the sun was still too marred in smoke and her own darkness. The goddess was now an amber curve trapped behind ever-darkening clouds of orange and steel smoke. Even in that burdened half-light, the meadow that filled the clearing shone with wildflowers. Tall standing stones crested a slight hill at its centre, where the road looped before delving back into the Swathe. Their weathered carvings held my attention for barely a moment. It was the crowd of dishevelled people swarming at the far end of the meadow that drew my gaze.

'Form ranks!' came the bellow of an order. The war-party displayed its training as the shielded warriors surged forwards to form a barrier. Archers readied their bows. Wilders whooped as they swung their axes above their heads. Sorcers spread out behind us, hands clutching nectra vials. I felt a rush run through me, though it could have been the shudder of Inwar's rumbling roar.

'Who are they? Are they the marauders?' I asked

Atalawe shook her head. 'Not unless my eyes fail me, Tarko. They look like Swathefolk. Refugees running from something.'

'Hold!'

The order had the gruff bark of Eztaral's voice. I wasn't the only one who turned to watch the ravenborn barging through the knot of wagons. Haidak was astride his golden lancewing. It hovered perfectly still over the war-party's heads. The bird's blurred wings kicked up a plume, making some of the rear porters scatter for cover.

Eztaral bustled past our wagon without a glance. She was too busy howling at her fighters. 'Hold, I say! They're no enemy, they are our people! Stow your weapons!'

Behind me, Pel slid from the wagon and whispered something to Redeye. The sorcer slunk away into the ranks of warriors.

The war-party held its crescent formation of shields while arrows found their way back into quivers, swords in scabbards, and moody wilders slumped in the grass or angrily trimmed the

meadow of its wildflowers. Like me, plenty still stared uneasily at the faint sketch of sun and heavy sky. I could have sworn a storm brewed above us. The breeze was unusually warm, never mind the pervasive smoke that had hundreds coughing over and over.

Eztaral waded through the grasses with her sword trailing behind her. Several of the people approached her with hands clasped. They looked filthy, and that was the only kind way to put it. Smearred in mud or clay by the looks of it. Their robes and pelt tunics were burned and blackened at the hems. Whatever they discussed, it was heated but brief. Eztaral spent most of the conversation shaking her head and pointing back west. Another woman tried to cling to her armour, but Eztaral gently prised her free and shook her head some more. Others wrung their clothes or yelled in anger. Brief though it was, the delay apparently annoyed Haidak Baran. His lancewing roared overhead and made half the grubby citizens scatter.

‘I’ll bet Eztaral’s realising she might be wrong after all,’ said Blind Pel.

‘You’ve got too much faith in her.’ Atalawe shook her head. ‘The woman’s grown stubborn in her seasons and somehow weak at the same time. And even if she does believe, she clings to Haidak’s coattails so tightly she wouldn’t dare oppose him.’

‘I expect this kind of doubt from your brother, not from you.’

‘Maybe we should talk to Haidak instead of trusting in Eztaral. Warn them, at least,’ I suggested.

‘Look at you, Tarko. Thinking like one of us already,’ Pel muttered, sounding entirely unenthused about the prospect.

I snorted. ‘I’m looking after myself, is all. If you’re right and we’re all doomed as you say, then I’m not going to sit back.’

Drums moved us. Feet fell in time with a sombre, soulless song that marched the war-party across the meadow. Seeds and spores floated where the warriors detoured from the road.

The shabby crowds parted for us. Their reactions were as haunting as their wide and red-rimmed eyes. Some pleaded with us, pawing at warriors or wagons as they passed, urging us to turn around.

‘Shadows! Creatures of fire and smoke,’ a few yelled at us, over and over. Others in their midst and in their right minds hushed them. I saw a few more in ashen robes, watching from beneath hoods, dejected and solemn.

My doubt in the nonsense of demons was rife. ‘Who are they?’

I met Pel’s clouded eyes but the old sorcer said nothing. I looked to his hands. They still carried the faint blue dye of the water order.

‘Can you still use your magic, if you need to?’ I asked him.

‘It’s been decades since I have.’ Pel spat blue over the side of the wagon and bared his teeth. ‘I should think not.’

‘How very comforting,’ I sighed. ‘I still think I should know how to fight.’

Before Atalawe could voice whatever was making her smirk, Pel interrupted her.

‘Atalawe,’ he said. ‘What would a seedwitch of your calibre suggest us to slow us down?’

She laughed bright and clear. Her wiry hands were already digging into the folds of her layered tunic, rustling her necklaces of dried flowers and seeds. ‘Ha! I have an idea or two,’ Atalawe said, before hopping from the wagon with a bundle in her hands. Like her brother, she too vanished into the rear ranks.

Before I knew it, Nod’s reigns were thrust into my hands. ‘Erm...’

‘Keep the beast straight is all,’ Pel said.

Eztaral was busy yelling at her officers when we passed her once more. Pel and I caught a single and fleeting glance from her. The woman’s forehead was deeply furrowed beneath the painted arrow and shorn hair blowing across her red and green eyes. Harrowed, was how she looked. A sorcer with a dozen silver rings on her white-dyed fingers stood closeby to the ravenborn. I saw her mouth moving rapidly but Eztaral kept shaking her head. I wondered how her neck wasn’t always sore.

The journey through the clearing was fleeting. Though the road never rose up into the branches again, the trees stood apart from each other in sparser order. The war-party had barely formed its column again when the sky began to empty upon us. Grey flakes pirouetted and span through the gaps in the green canopy. One landed on the back of my hand, and I examined it closely, but it crumbled far too easily.

‘Is this the snow Atalawe spoke of?’ I said between coughing.

Pel put his hands to the air and rubbed his fingers. ‘No, lad. It’s ash. Wood and leaf, all burned up.’

The ash didn’t stop falling, and the war-party didn’t stop moving. Within an hour of marching, the whole forest was covered in a thin dusting. The colours of the forest died around us with every mile. Grey and sulphur yellow reigned in their stead, and the haze made a mystery of anything beyond the nearest trees. I struggled to see either end of the war-party’s column.

The ash stung the eyes and tasted bitter on the tongue. And if you were unlucky enough or stupid enough to breathe the ash in, it made you retch to the point of vomiting. I should know: I did all three in as many minutes. Luckily, I wasn’t alone. A nearby warrior fell from formation to hurl his guts. Those who had masks wore them. Others ripped cloth and wrapped it around their faces.

Redeye appeared as if from nowhere, sidling up to the wagon and spitting in the ash. I nearly jumped out of the seat.

‘They’re refugees of a settlement near Firstwatch. Place called Sheertown,’ he said without preamble. ‘They pleaded for Haidak not to go on, but they weren’t listened to.’

Pel chuckled. ‘I know how they feel. What did they say? What of Firstwatch?’

‘Consumed by fire but still standing, apparently. Maybe able to save, maybe a pile of ash by now. What few sorcers and workers that stayed behind managed to keep the flames from spreading deeper into the Swathe.’ Redeye sniffed. ‘A few said the fire had a face, or that it chased them with a mind of its own. Most others swore they saw men through the flames. Men in rags with weapons of iron and bone. Sounds like marauders to me, Pel.’

'Where did you all hear this?' I asked.

The sorcer glowered. 'I've got sharp ears, boy.'

'Not to mention that Redeye has a wonderful ability to go unnoticed when he wants to,' explained Pel.

I imagined it was largely because nobody noticed someone so sullen and boring, but nodded all the same.

'No objection from Eztaral, or complaints from the others? The sorcers? Surely they can feel the magic in the air?'

I instinctively looked up. 'There's magic in the air?'

Redeye glowered. 'Very faint but yes. But that could be Firstwatch burning. It's too young a tree to have nectra flowing through it in any great amount, but enough for a good sorcer to notice. And no, no complaints from Eztaral. Haidak presses onwards like the idiot he is. I don't like it, Pel.'

I threw up my hands. 'Why do I feel like my part in this plan of yours is already over?'

'Because it is,' Pel snapped. 'With the omen and the wildfires, I expected Eztaral to cave at the sight of Teyak's son, but she didn't.'

'But you said when I came of age, I would learn my place.'

'If we can't change this war-party's mind, there might not be a place for anyone, never mind *you*. You think these demons have come to enjoy a campfire? They would see the whole Swathe burned to cinders if they were given a chance. Every soul a blackened corpse and every bloodwood burned to its roots. There is no future for us if they win. Get that into your thick skull.'

I blinked at Pel, too shocked to process his words. He had already turned back to the sorcer.

'Spread your fear, Redeye. Make the sorcers doubt Haidak's decision to move forwards. With any luck, Atalawe will have found an answer by the time—'

It was at that moment a trumpeting cry came from one of the foremost orokan. Through the ash, I saw it rear up and slam its claws into the ash and soft moss that lay underfoot. The wagon the beast pulled slammed into its back, causing one of the porters to cartwheel into the muck.

I would have laughed had Nod not done the very same to me. As he jolted to a halt, I slipped from my perch on the wagon and found myself in a scrambling fall down to the ash. Blustering and wiping the dirt from my face, I watched as each orokan around us halted in the same nervous way. It was as if we had found a line that they refused to cross. The orokan began to puff themselves up, looking around and bleating at each other in their ragged voices. Their sleepy, solemn eyes were unusually wide.

'What by the bleeding trees is going on?' I asked, accidentally mimicking the officers that marched about in irritable circles, looking for answers and finding none.

'Something's turned the beasts' moods, sir!' cried one nearby porter.

Another was throwing his weight against his orokan, but it swiftly nipped at him. ‘They’ve been spooked!’

‘How peculiar,’ said a breathless voice behind my shoulder. I turned to find Atalawe picking ash from her braided ridge of hair.

‘Did you do this?’ I asked her.

‘Hush, Tarko,’ Atalawe warned between breaths. She looked pink in her smile-wrapped cheeks. ‘It’s a wrangler’s job to know beasts and flora, but it’s a seedwitch’s calling, like my mother before me. It’s wonderful what a knowledge of tinctures, leaves, and poisons can do for you.’

Pel’s whisper seemed shocked. ‘You poisoned them?’

‘Gods, no! I used tharantos ichor. Males exude it during mating season when they’re particularly aggressive and hungry. Orokan avoid its stench like the plague. Those who don’t get eaten.’

‘Won’t it just fade away?’ asked the doubtful Redeye.

Redeye received a hearty clap on the shoulder from his sister that made him stumble.

‘You let me worry about the beasts and the birds. Orokan are even more stubborn than our old friend Eztaral. They won’t move for hours.’

Though it now seemed pointless, I climbed back aboard the wagon. The soil still felt far too soft beneath my feet for my liking. Ahead of us, the war-party adjusted its wary ranks, now facing out into the forest as if an ambush was coming. Spear and arrow-points bristled like a quillhog’s spines.

Eztaral was currently yelling at whole crowds of porters and officers. She fired off orders as if they were slingstones. People sprinted to do her bidding. However, as I knew all too well from the life of a worker, unless you were a matriarch, there was always somebody above to yell down at you. And no matter how far you climbed, the Three Gods still ruled the Six Heavens.

Once nothing proved remotely useful at moving the orokan, and with the ash growing heavier, Eztaral was soon being howled at by Eagleborn Baran. It was hard to catch the detail of Haidak’s words, but a few shouts climbed above the rest.

‘... then we move on without the porters!’

‘That is not wise!’ Eztaral’s voice also rose.

‘This battle will be swift and decisive, I tell you. We will resupply on our return.’

‘Then we should leave a contingent here to protect the wagons and porters. Not to mention the war-party’s rear.’

I flinched as Haidak’s gaze swept across the war-party. ‘No, Ravenborn Kraid. They and their beasts have let us down direly. Leave twenty warriors to keep them in check. No more!’

‘Curse that Haidak,’ Pel hissed. ‘He treats battle tactics as if they didn’t have lives attached to his decisions.’

Eztaral was marching towards us, weaving angrily between warrior, beast, and wagon. The rage in her face was evident even at a distance. A distance she swiftly closed.



While I expected to be arrested at any moment, Pel did not move. He did not panic. Instead, Eztaral pushed her officers away and came alone to bare her teeth at our wagon.

'If you had anything to do with this, I'll treat it as treason to the matriarch. I'm looking at you, Atalawe. I haven't forgotten your seedwitch tricks,' she hissed.

'No, just everything else,' replied Pel. 'You know Haidak is marching all of us into our doom. I can see it behind your eyes.'

'You're wrong, old man. Wrong about a great many things,' Eztaral snapped. She pointed a finger at me. 'I feel sorry for you, boy. For the lies they fed you, just like they fed me for decades. Pel, if I see you and yours again, I will have you all bound and dragged back to Shal Gara behind a wagon.'

The ravenborn left us silent. Pel shook his head. The urka seed blue was still bright on his lips, contrasting nicely with the ashen colour of his cheeks. I wondered how lucid he was.

'There is still more we can do. More that we have to do,' he grunted.

'What?' I spluttered. 'Eztaral just said if we do anything else, we'll be dragged to death. No vow is worth dying for, surely.'

Pel clenched his wrinkled, scarred hands into fists, over and over. 'Perhaps I've judged you wrong all these seasons, Tarko. I won't explain myself to you any further. I am what I am. Chosen what I've chosen. You are a child who knows little of what he is involved in.'

'And whose fault is it that I'm involved at all?' I hissed. 'I won't have my life gambled with and endangered any more.'

Pel shrugged coldly. 'Suits me fine. It's what I promised your father.'

I'd expected him to get down from the wagon and do something. Anything, except stare blankly at me. I turned away to witness the war-party shouldering what supplies it could carry, but I still felt the beggar's eyes boring into the back of my head. Atalawe whistled tunelessly. Redeye picked his nails with his knife.

Even when the drums sounded, and the ranks separated from the wagons, the Scions remained wordless. They waited for something, I wagered, but I had no idea what.

'They're really going to leave us here?' I asked, voice hoarse from an hour of not speaking.

Atalawe nodded. 'All except those unlucky lot.'

Just shy of two-dozen figures stood in the swirling ash of the war-party's wake. Most of them were wilders, but a lancer stood amongst them, shoulders slumped and face dejected while he watched his comrades disappear. I wondered which officer he had vexed to get lumped with warder duty and a lack of glory. The porters stomped about moodily while they made a circle of their wagons and recalcitrant orokan.

'They'll be safe enough far from the action. And smart enough to run if they have to,' Atalawe told me. She sniffed the acrid air. 'Sun's almost set.'

The sun was still lost amongst the burdened ceiling of fiery and granite smoke-clouds. The veil of falling ash cut the forest's height in half. It had felt like lastlight for half the day already.

'How can you tell that just by sniffing?'

Atalawe pointed to a patch of nearby flowers with broad, star-shaped petals. They were slowly closing, even before my eyes.

She winked. 'The forest always knows better.'

'Redeye, Atalawe. Come with me,' Pel ordered abruptly. 'Bring your weapons.'

'Where are you going?' I asked. 'Or doing, for that matter?'

I got no answer. The others faded into the haze of ash without a word. The only reason I stayed put was the fact Atalawe had left Inwar snoring under the wagon. The jāgu was smart. It was the only place to sit where I didn't need to brush ash from myself every few minutes. It had already formed a stodgy mud beneath the ironpith wheels and boots.

Timid fires were struck up between the circle of wagons. Porters and workers and those left behind hunched over the flames to mutter words of discontent. More than a few watched the forests around them with narrowed and cautious eyes.

I stayed on the fringes by Pel's wagon, even when I heard the word "demons" mentioned for the first time. Jeers followed, and then swift silence as minds battled with the possibility. I knew the feeling. Wildfires and marauders were easier excuses. Palatable to the soul and the mind. Yet my belief was like thick bloodwood bark, slowly being hollowed out by wriggling, squirming louse of doubt. Even my instincts had apparently betrayed me. Every time I took a breath, I could feel a tension in the hot breeze that sent a shiver through my limbs, as if a predator hung above me. And yet to give in, to accept what could actually lie behind that smoke, proved Shal Gara a city of liars or idiots. *If Pel was right...*

'Gah!' I said aloud, making Inwar rear up. I shook my head as if I could shake the imaginary consequences of that question out of my ears. There had never been a bigger if. I thought of Pel's blue lips. Or Redeye's doubt. Of Eztaral's harsh and mocking laughter. I told myself over and over until their shapes emerged from the ash once more.

They carried bundles in their arms that crunched and clanged as they threw each down. Inwar and I stayed put, peering through the ash as they emptied piece after piece of armour and warrior garb onto the ash. There were breast and backplates and made of layered and treated leafleather so thick as to be strong as heavier ironpith. Scales of the metallic wood decorated vambraces and leg guards. Without a word, the others started to change out of their clothes. Redeye looked particularly put out having to remove his floppy hat and sorcer's robe. Beneath hid tightly curled scarlet hair that matched his eyes, and a wiry fellow of middle age and many scars.

'Watching me get undressed, are you?' the sorcer tutted at me.

Instead I eyed the ironpith mask in Atalawe's hand: a wilder's mask carved to resemble a snarling barkwolf.

'Do I dare ask where you got warrior's armour and clothes from?' I spoke up.

Atalawe grinned through the barkwolf's mouth. 'From several very helpful and willing warriors. Where else?'

'Did you... kill them?'

Pel snorted. 'They're quite comfy under a wagon or two, and won't be waking up for several hours. By then we'll be long gone.'

'On our way back to Shal Gara, I hope.'

Atalawe smacked her armour with a palm as if she were trying to remould it. 'No, lad.'

'Pel thinks it's somehow a good idea to go chasing after the war-party,' muttered Redeye. 'I don't agree, but what do I know? Nobody ever listens to me.'

'Is there one for me?' I wasn't sure I wanted a disguise, but I had to ask.

Pel tutted, testing different pieces of armour with his hands. 'Not for you, Tarko, no. You made your position on this very clear. You did your bit in front of Eztaral and that's admirable, but I see now your father's legacy is not one for you. The Scions will do as we vowed. You,' Pel paused to spit more blue on the dark ash, 'are staying here with Nod and the wagon.'

I shook the ash from me. 'Until when?'

Pel shrugged. Leafleather armour croaked. 'Until we're either successful, or we're not, and you see for yourself.'

After rearranging his vials of blue nectra in his armour, Redeye bundled his sorcer's robe and threw it at me. I caught it awkwardly. 'Pray you're a fast runner,' he hissed.

'You can't just leave me here.'

'Would you rather come with us?' Atalawe asked.

'I...' A dozen reasons to nod or shake my head came to me. One half of my mind called me a coward and a fool, the other half praised me on my wise decision to stay put. Once more, I stood wondering if I was too useless to matter, and hating those who stared down at me.

I shook my head, feeling sour and vindictive. 'No, I wouldn't,' I muttered. 'Good luck to you all.'

Pel nodded in a way that cut me to my core. 'Thought as much.'

There were no goodbyes, no farewells, not even so much as a look back. I looked around to find Inwar staring after his master, and for a moment my worry stilled. That was until Atalawe clicked her fingers in that rapid pattern, and the jāgu burst after them. I was left alone in the ash-choked and gathering dark, with nothing but mutters in my ears, and my own churning thoughts for company.

I looked around at the gloomy forest. I couldn't even see the road any more. I was too turned around to remember its direction. With night approaching and nothing in the way of light, I was directionless. Lost. The thought prickled my skin.

No matter how hard I tried to make out the shapes of Pel and the others, the evening had already swallowed them. I turned to Nod in desperation, but the orokan was a curled-up mound of fur, enjoying a fitful sleep full of grunts and moans.

In anger, I threw Redeye's cloak on the ground. My foot lifted above it, ready to stamp, when a colour caught my gaze.

Beneath the black folds of cloth, the ash was stained a faint blue. I blew ash from my nose, blinked hard, and looked closer. *Blue*. My eyes didn't lie.

Reaching to investigate, it took a mere shake of the cloak for the nectra vial to tumble out. It clinked against a fallen twig with a clink.

The vial and I looked at each other for a while before I snatched it up from the dirty loam and clutched it close. I had heard of nectra thieves executed on the spot without due justice. Mother had told me of a man selling stolen nectra in Neathering markets for the price of a dozen orokan. And I had once seen a sorcer beat a man bloody for daring to touch one of her vials. They were the most precious items in Shal Gara by an arguable mile, and here was I, holding a full vial of the stuff. It was of clear sandglass from the far west, imported and wrapped with silver thread. A silver cap kept the viscous blue liquid within.

*What if Redeye needed it?*

The excuse that popped into my head was a flimsy one. I knew it plainly as I knew between down and up, and perhaps it was Pel's harsh words that actually moved me, but that was the excuse I needed to start running. Not west and towards home, as all logic demanded, but in the direction of Pel and his fellow morons. Even if it took me staring a battle in the face, I would at least know the truth. With any luck, I would find the chance to laugh in Pel's face for too long. All I had to do was avoid the night's terrors until I found them.

With ash pelting my face, I ran headlong into a darkness I had been taught to fear since I was a child.

# 8

## I N F E R N O

*None of us truly knows how nectra works. The majority of scholars maintain it is a gift from the gods. Those of us who have dug deeper believe it an essence of the Swathe. A distillation of its elements that the ancestors turned into what we call spells and magic. I find myself wondering what feats and dangers they went through in the name of discovery, when we sit proudly on the comfort of their foundations.*

*FROM THE STUDIES OF ORAKAL ATAMI, WRITTEN 1661*

The night was cloying. Whatever light the fauna around me shone with, it was already buried in ash. An orange glow to the sky kept the true black of evening at bay. There were no moon or stars to guide me, but I had found dark hollows of footprints, and what seemed like a road beneath the ash. Or what I thought was a road; the ground felt solid enough.

So it was that I ran in quite literally blind hope, clutching the nectra vial close at hand. Its faint light was more blinding to me than it was helpful in pushing back the darkness. It didn't stop me holding it like a torch, and it didn't halt my mad dash through the forest.

A scuffle snapped my head to the side. Somewhere in the darkness, I heard an unmistakable snarl. My heart climbed up my throat until it choked me. Surely my end was not to be this swift. I clenched a fist as if that would help defend me. Why I hadn't found or stolen a weapon, I didn't know. My decisive bravado withered immediately. I found myself running at my very limit: feet pounding the loam as I stared breathlessly into darkness that refused to give me any detail.

*Feet.* Paws, maybe. I heard them drum alongside me, then swing behind to chase me from the opposite site. I was being toyed with.

'Bleeding trees!' I hissed to myself. *What had I done?* As I fled, I looked around in despair for a stave of wood or something sharp that would keep me alive a little longer.

I glanced over my shoulder and saw silver eyes staring back at me. I caught the brief flash of white fangs open wide. 'Three Gods help me!' I hissed aloud and in startling, idiotic volume.

My last thoughts – as I heard a roar behind me and turned to see claws outstretched – was that I was an idiot of bloodwood-sized proportions. I wondered if this was what death was: a waterfall of regret accompanying me to the Six Heavens. *Was I even worthy of such places? Had I been enough of a dutiful citizen?*

All these questions and a torrent more screeched through my mind as I felt sharp claws seize me by the shoulders and push me to the ground. The weight upon me was shocking. Hot and stinking breath blew past my ear.

To my credit, I didn't go out limp and squealing. I thought I would, but some savagery within me fought back. My elbows and fists hammered the creature. I roared and spat and told it all the ways it could go fornicate with itself before it – blessedly – let me go.

Before I could roll over, sharp jaws seized the back of my neck. I felt wet fangs graze my neck. And then a tongue. The creature had the gall to taste me before it ate me. My last hope was that I would choke it to death and teach it a vengeful lesson.

The voice cut through my rabid breaths and struggles.

'Easy, Inwar. Scrawny wretch like him wouldn't make much of a meal now, would he?'

*Inwar.*

Sense flooded back into me as the weight lifted from my back. I was not angry, nor scared. Relief was a breeze washing all panic away.

I pushed myself up to see Atalawe, Redeye, and Pel looking down at me. Their faces were stuck between amusement and indifference.

'Nothing gets past Inwar,' Atalawe chuckled as she helped me up. 'He heard you coming from the camp, blundering through the loam like a one-legged drunk.'

Redeye watched me intensely. 'Changed your mind did you, coward?'

The word stung me. So much so, it made me palm the vial of nectra. Besides, my excuse now sounded even weaker than before. 'I...' I stuttered, trying to think up another reason. The truth came out instead. 'I need to see for myself.'

'Bigger fool than I thought,' Redeye said, already walking away into the darkness.

Pel chewed for a moment before speaking. His eyes had the same glow about them as a sorcer's. It had taken the darkest night to notice it. He was nodding slowly as if appreciating my change of heart. I didn't have it in mine to correct him.

'Put this on,' he said, swinging a bundle from his back. I was surprised to see it was a fourth set of warrior's armour.

'You knew I'd come?' I asked, feeling stupid. 'You tricked me. Baited me with you words.'

Pel smirked. 'I said nothing except what you needed to hear. Now, keep close and keep quiet. The war-party isn't far. Haidak's marching them through the night, the idiot.'

With that, Pel strode into the gloom. The others and Inwar followed. I hung back momentarily to check on what I felt were gaping holes in my back before slipping on the armour. To my surprise, the jāgu had barely scratched me. A faint smear of blood stained my fingers, and that was it. I didn't dwell on how, as I was already being left behind, and I struggled with the ties and clasps of armour my hands had never touched before. The leafleather was heavier than I expected, weighing me down in a way I wasn't sure I liked. Lastly, I slid the vial of nectra between the ridged breastplate and tied it to the thick leather belt.

We walked in silence. The others held a constant vigil on the darkness, one that I copied, even though I wasn't sure what to look for. My imagination dreamed up all manner of grinning teeth and gleaming eyes to keep my head flitting about.

The notion of marauders was constantly on my mind. More so than demons. Once again, I had no idea what one looked like, but I imagined they would be bristling with flame and easy to spot in the night. A foe with a blade hiding behind a tree was much more likely. It was an easy way to keep my worry at bay, knowing my enemy was mortal. Able to bleed.

That was until the forest started to take on a fiery glow. Red light sketched the broad shapes of tree trunks and branches ahead of us. The breeze became difficult to bear, unbearably hot and laced with thick smoke. The others wore their stolen masks to keep it at bay. I covered my mouth with a corner of the cloak I still wore over the armour. All I could taste was ash and char.

I don't know how long we marched for. Pel did not run nor dawdle, but kept up a solid pace that never let up. I wasn't sure of it was firstglow or the wildfires, but the light grew gradually. The ash was chased away by the scorching winds, replaced by cinders and sparks that flurried and spun. One landed in a gap in my meagre armour and singed me before I could scratch it away. I raised a cloth hood over my head and growled.

'Are we close?'

Pel blew ash from his obsidian blade. 'Not close enough.'

'Oh. Good.'

I swore I could see shapes in the smoke. I could hear shouts. The ash-littered ground before us, even on the hard-packed road, had been churned by forty thousand boots. At least it was an easy trail to follow. No birds or animals could be seen. All that filled the air was a slow and constant rumble of fire, broken every now and again by a crash of a defeated branch or tree.

The firelight was fierce by the time we took a moment to rest, outshining firstglow even if it had risen. The sky had been replaced with charcoal smoke. The Swathe's trees still huddled close, even if they didn't scrape the heavens like those deeper west. The Loamsedge trees were only a few hundred feet tall. And yet between their trunks, I caught my first glimpse of the wildfire's flames.

Deep between the trees, I saw tongues of fire bursting above the canopy. They were fleeting, never the same for a split second. The further we walked towards them, the more I felt their raw heat. After several more curves of the road, we came within distant view of Firstwatch.

'We were too late,' breathed Pel.

From what I knew of Shal Gara's songs and the gossip that ran up and down the city like vines, Firstwatch was one of the youngest bloodwoods. Stunted by its age and tortured by the hot Scorch winds, it stood at the very limits of the Swathe as a watchtower for what lay beyond. I had even seen painted carvings of it: a bloodwood curled in on itself with spirals of a large town in between its stubby branches.

Now, the bloodwood they called Firstwatch was burning. The scent of the wood was one I had never hoped or wanted to smell. A skeleton of existence was all that stood of the bloodwood.

No life remained except what the fire fed upon. It was the same feeling as staring upon a flayed body: skinless, bared to the bone. Lifeless and inhuman. I had seen such a thing only once, when a murderer had once run havoc in the Midern. The body had been brought up past Kī Raxa Branch, and I would have gladly stared at it again to save myself from the sight of Firstwatch.

Thick branches, still carrying the charred remnants of city buildings and roads, were stark black against a blinding inferno of yellow and scarlet flame. Smoke streamed from any portion of the tree that wasn't already aflame. A section of branch crumbled before my eyes and fell to a landscape of coals. Sparks cascaded in waves under the breath of the hot winds. Lightning blasted through the smoke and carved a nearby smouldering tree in half. Thunder rolled behind the roar of the inferno. North and south, the entire edge of the Swathe I could see was aflame.

'I never thought I'd see such a thing with my own eyes,' Atalawe breathed.

Her sorcer brother was wringing his red-dyed hands. 'This is a fool's errand, Pelikai. I've said it once and I'll say it again.'

Redeye backed away. Pel heard his steps and dragged the man forcibly onwards. The old man's firm hand also pushed against my shoulders. We stumbled towards the monstrous spectacle, having to use our hands and borrowed shields to hide from the heat emanating from the fire.

'And to think,' Atalawe said, for the first time with no smile, laugh, nor mirth whatsoever, 'that once upon an age, the bloodwoods moved to escape such fates.'

'What do you mean "moved"?' I whispered, seemingly the only one listening. Pel and Redeye were enraptured. 'Trees don't move.'

I thought I see a tear streak a path through the wrangler's charcoal-smeared cheek. 'Rumours and some ancient songs say they can. Maybe still could, if they so wished. The demons would come every nine seasons, and every nine seasons, the bloodwoods would migrate west to escape their flames. Fascinating, no?'

I was too distracted to take such knowledge in. I was far too bewitched and simultaneously horrified by the flames and the sight of a bloodwood burning. That was enough for me to loathe the culprit. Whether they were marauders or demonkind, I no longer cared.

A shrill call turned our heads from the inferno of Firstwatch. A wail of anguish that could only be something wounded or dying. It turned out to be the former: an elderly woman, slumped up against a large mound of earth stretching like a wall between distant Firstwatch and us. It split the road in two. The woman was wounded, burned along one side of her face. Her clothes had been burned to rags and her hair singed short. A splintered stave was stubbornly clutched in one hand.

'Lost!' the woman cried to us as we emerged from the haze and clutches of the thicker forest. 'All lost!' She recoiled when she saw the jāgu amongst us, but Inwar stayed put at his master's heel.

Atalawe moved to help the woman, but Pel shook his head. He instead kept his distance, his sword now in his hand. 'Can you hear us, mother? Which way did they go? The war-party?'



'North! As should you if you want to see another day. To Sheertown. People are still trapped behind its walls, gods save them!'

Pel didn't seem even a smidgeon perturbed by the woman's plight. 'Why that way?' he demanded of her.

'The people, I said! When the marauders came and set alight to Firstwatch, they moved north to strike at Sheertown.' The woman winced as she lifted her hand. 'Fifty miles of forest burns!'

Feeling the heat on his cheeks, Pel was already moving in a northerly direction.

'Lost!' the woman screamed after us. I watched her until the haze stole her from view.

'We could have helped her. 'I caught Atalawe muttering to Pel.

'Wrong. We need to reach the war party while there's still time.'

'She was injured, 'I added. Pel recoiled as if he had no idea I was there. He stumbled, almost falling, and both Atalawe and I caught him. With a snort, he stuffed a handful of his precious seeds into his mouth. Even in the flickering firelight, I saw the blue shine in his eyes as he shrugged both of us away.

'There are many forces at work in the Swathe, Tarko. Not just the churn of nature and the will of the gods, but of foul minds opposite to what we Scions believe. Minds that hate the order of the Swathe and long for chaos instead of the order humanity has forged. They remember the same stories as us, and they would happily see the demons return.'

'If that's true then they're bloody idiots.'

Pel smiled then, a rare thing since the sun had been wounded. His bruised face creased into wrinkles. 'You *are* your father's son, Tarko. You think that as an insult, but perhaps one day, you might think that a compliment. I will tell you after we have done our duty.'

'If we all manage to live through it, 'Redeye muttered behind us.

Atalawe shoved her brother. 'I've never wandered as far as Sheertown.'

Pel explained. 'From what I've heard, it's a flat town, one that sits on the ground rather than the treetops. Surrounded by walls of stone all around it and barely a tree within them.'

'Sounds abhorrent, 'I whispered.

Pel's resolute march led us north in the war-party's trail. When I wasn't wincing in the wildfire heat or choking on ash, I spent most of the next hour staring back at the burning corpse of the bloodwood. Every tree in the Loamsedge was either aflame or already turned to ash and cinders. More than once, I caught Atalawe and Redeye staring in the same direction, and we shared the same look before they turned back around: one you could have called fear.

Our distraction caught us off-guard when the walls of Sheertown loomed out of the smoke. Made of cut and stacked stone, the featureless walls stretched twice my height in places. Burned and wooden slats sharpened to points ran across their tops like teeth. Whatever vines had wrapped

the stone were now streaks of ash and brittle charcoal. They crumbled under my hand as I reached to touch the wall. It was smooth. Still warm.

In the light of the fires burning painfully close, the length of the walls could be seen. Something had broken through a broad section, scattering blocks across the earth both inside and out. I could see tapering points of towers with zigzag roofs behind the smoke. Their paint had been scorched. Narin trees also, their leaves burned away and bark smoked black. One was burning like a torch.

‘Where’s the war-party?’ I asked, growing more nervous by the minute. Somehow I hadn’t been able to keep my hands from trembling since witnessing Firstwatch burn.

‘This way,’ Pel said. His determination and unwavering voice was little comfort, but enough to keep me moving. My neck grew sore from the amount I looked around at every crack of twig or crash of burning branch. My skin felt as though it was beginning to blister in the constant waves of heat. I didn’t dare take the cloth from my mouth for fear of choking. The walls shielded some of the roar of the fire and the falling cinders, but by fractions only.

Inwar abruptly snarled. I saw a shadow in the murk ahead, where there looked to be some sort of gate in the middle of the wall.

‘Somebody’s ahead, Pel,’ Atalawe hissed.

Pel flourished his bow and had an arrow nocked before the sentence was ended. Inwar scratched the ash with his claws. Atalawe’s staff howled as she spun it in a blur. Redeye cowered under his hat, but raised his hands, one glowing blue with a vial. I looked around for a rock, a stick, or something else other than my fists, and prayed Pel was wrong.

Eztaral Kraid’s gruff voice suited the rumbling inferno well. ‘Arrest them!’ came her order.

Bursting from the haze, the ravenborn and a dozen lancers has us surrounded in moments. Their obsidian-tipped spears jabbed intolerably close to my face.

‘Take their weapons!’ Eztaral ordered, seizing Pel’s bow and snapping it over her knee. ‘And make sure to muzzle that beast!’

Before the lancers could take a step, Atalawe whistled sharply. Inwar bolted into the forest in a blur of black and green. Dirt sprayed in lancer faces while the jāgu had utterly vanished in the undergrowth. A few warriors tried to sprint after him. I listened to their futile shouts receding into the forest.

‘I warned you,’ Eztaral howled at us. ‘I bloody warned you not to interfere, did I not? Curse you all and your mothers for spawning you!’

‘You know these people, Ravenborn?’ one of the lancers asked as he menaced me with his spear. I wanted to bat it away, but I was too angry at Pel. At myself for following. *For daring to believe.*

Eztaral stared right at Pel as she spoke. She was so enraged she didn’t see Haidak Baran waltzing up behind her. Haidak was in full silver armour, lancewing feathers streaming and his snarling mask covering his face.

‘Saboteurs. Mischief-makers. And common thieves, by the look of their stolen armour!’ Haidak interrupted. ‘Don’t be shy with the words, Kraid. That is what they are. They oppose me, and therefore they oppose Shal Gara and our matriarch. The best word for such scum is “traitor”, or am I wrong?’

Eztaral shook her head. Her lips were so taut they had turned pale. ‘No, Eagleborn Baran.’

Haidak removed his mask and approached to survey us. He didn’t seem to recognise Atalawe, sneered at Pel and Redeye, but when a lancer dragged my hood – and a good handful of my hair – from my face, Haidak almost fell on his arse with surprise.

‘My my! Tarkosi Terelta! By the gods and all their spirits,’ Haidak spluttered. You *are* far from home, aren’t you? I didn’t think you had the balls to leave the city, never mind tread the loam. It seems it took betraying your bloodwood and fellow citizens to coax you from the city. I should be shocked, but it makes sense. Your fruit hasn’t fallen far from the tree of your father.’

I caught Eztaral’s scowling eye.

‘Who are these other traitors you’ve fallen in with? A dubious sorcer, a common seedwitch by the look of her, and a beaten-up old blind man, no less,’ asked Haidak, finding amusement in knocking Pel’s snakeskin turban from his bald head and trampling it in the dust.

‘I am Pelikai Maladaq, once a sorcer of the water order, and we are not here to sabotage or betray you, Eagleborn Baran, but to help. You’re making a dire mistake. There are no marauders out there, but something worse that neither you or your war-party are ready to f—’

Eztaral cut Pel off. ‘We’ve seen them with our own eyes, you blind loamer! Mangy Scorch-scum. They fled into the smoke and surrounding forest. The war-party is searching the town this very moment.’

Haidak smirked as he saw me staring daggers at Pel. ‘There’s no honour among you Midern and Neathering filth, is there?’ He clapped his armoured hands. ‘Bind them and take them into the town. Let the others see these treacherous lice for what they are. And when we return to Shal Gara, we shall have them hanged for their crimes.’

Dread gripped me, but anger seized tighter. Call it my father’s fire, the kind I had seen many times in slammed doors and broken bottles on the street, but I let it control me. There was no use pleading, and I refused to whine. Haidak had already made his decision. ‘That’s if you survive this little war of yours, Haidak!’ I snapped. ‘I hope this talk of demons is true. At least then we’ll be rid of each other at last, thank the gods.’

Suitably insulted, Haidak drew a silver knife from a scabbard at his back and pointed it at me. His red eyes flared as he came at me, hunting blood. I tried to escape the grip of the lancers behind me, but I was not strong enough.

Eztaral cut in front of Haidak and beat her commander to it. The ravenborn cuffed me across my cheek, incidentally opened up the wound Haidak had already carved days ago. ‘Traitor!’ she yelled at me while I groaned in the fallen ash.

Pel fought ceaselessly as they wrapped coarse rope around his wrists. ‘It’s a mistake, Haidak! A trap! Don’t you see it, you halfwit?’

The old man's warnings went ignored and unheeded. Our shields and weapons were dragged away and thrown aside as if they were contaminated by our treachery. The lancers confiscated the nectra hanging from Redeye's crossed belts, much to his muttered threats and squirming. He didn't have the fight in him the others did. Pel kept yelling until their fists drove the wind from him. Atalawe snarled and scratched at any lancer that came near, as if she had been a jāgu in woman's skin all along. A spear to the back of the head put her on her face.

I was hauled up so viciously my shoulders almost popped from their sockets. My heart pounded against my stolen breastplate. I still feared death, but now it would be at the hands of my own people. What would my mother and sister think of me, to hear I was a traitor and conspirator? A halfwit who went chasing after the promises of a mad, blind beggar? I hung my head, but a lancer dragged me upright by the same patch of scalp that already ached.

'You've ruined me,' I hissed at Pel, busy wheezing in front of me. I knew his sharp ears heard me. The turn of his head was subtle, but I saw it. 'Ruined us all.'

After curving through a squeeze of narrow streets between square buildings, we found the war-party crammed within the walls of Sheertown. The town's innards consisted of sprawling plaza dotted plentifully with buildings carved of stone and wood and roofed with blackened thatch. Most of the fires inside the walls had been reduced to a smoulder. The towers I had seen were clustered at the centre of the plaza. What drew my eyes were the handful of dead bodies that lay about, yet to be cleared. Several had arrows protruding from their backs. Thin arrows with crow-feather fletching.

*Marauders.*

I wished Pel could see them and see how wrong he was. By the look of his wan face, I sensed he somehow already had. He was blinking wildly in the smoke, looking around every facet of a town churning with nobody but Shal Gara warriors.

They removed their helmets and masks and hissed at us as we were hauled past. It was fine theatre for anyone but us actors playing traitors.

'Behold traitors to Shal Gara!' Haidak declared to his fighters over and over, bringing about loud rounds of booing.

At last we were pushed to kneeling at the base of a stone tower. Eztaral and Haidak stood over us, the latter spinning his silver knife in his gloved fingers.

'Once we've dealt with the enemies of the Swathe, we'll deal with you,' Haidak said. By the amount of yellow teeth he showed off, he delighted more in our murder than in the war he'd come to win.

'Look at it. Look at the walls,' Pel whispered frantically until the shout burst from him with force. 'Look at the walls, Eztaral! Marauders, traitors, or whatever you believe, you're standing in a stone noose!'

Haidak rapped his knuckles on Eztaral's breastplate. 'Ravenborn Kraid, have the sorcers see to the rest of the fires before we march north. These Scorch-scum will not evade us for much longer.'

Eztaral followed Pel's urgent glare to the stout stone walls. She whirled around, scanning every building until she stared at the narrow gateway behind us.

Haidak looked insulted. 'Did you hear my order, Ravenborn? You will do as I command!'

In fact, she did not appear to care less. Eztaral pushed past her commander and tested the limits of her impressive lungs. 'To ranks! Shields at the ready! Beware archers!'

Eztaral's disobedience came too late.

At the eastern walls of the town, a burning tree exploded in flames. Great scarlet towers of fire scorched the sky. There, as I cowered, I swore I saw a form to that rising inferno, of greedy eyes and a grinning mouth.

The heatwave blasted the town, scorching my face and knocking me onto my side against a dazed Atalawe. With a deep and yawning roar, the tree fell inwards against the walls. Stone crumbled beneath the weight of its scorched trunk. Sparks and debris arose in gusting clouds. The first cries came from the warriors struggling to form ranks in tight spaces, either burned or crushed beneath the blazing branches and bricks. Masked by swirling cinders, none in Sheertown saw the flaming arrows falling. Myself included.

My first clue was one clattering against the stone slabs barely inches from my feet.

'Bleeding trees!' I cried, hunkering closer to the tower. The others did the same while the warriors ran for different cover, shields raised. One of the lancers who hadn't been so quick on his guard caught an arrow in the narrow gap of his neck. He fell gurgling blood through his lancewing mask. Pel pounced on him. At first I thought he was helping him, but he was wrestling a knife from the man's belt.

Bodies collapsed all across the crowded plaza, writhing as the fire enveloped them. Shal Gara archers peppered the wall of fire in vain hope. Spears and slingstones were thrown in every direction and unaimed panic.

'Sorcers!' I heard Eztaral screech while the arrows were still falling upon the crowds of warriors.

Half-blind, I watched the sorcers spread across the plaza throw back their robes and brandish glowing vials of nectra. There was no hesitation to gulping the magic down, and within moments, I saw their eyes shine blue and their veins course with light. Towards the flames, the sorcers strode. I felt the ground tremble as the earth reavers broke the paving stones with their spells. Walls of rock and dirt grew across the plaza. Warriors threw themselves against them for cover. Above their heads, air carvers weaved complex patterns with their white-painted hands and cried sacred words. Smoke swirled around them, and together, they weaved their power together to push back against the heat. Arrows tumbled from the sky to be stamped out or to relight the thatch roofs. Only the water weavers looked to be without magic. Most strained and clawed at the ground.

'What's happened to the water sorcers?' I yelled.

'The ground's too dry with the fires burning so long!' Redeye shouted over my shoulder.

'By the loam!' Pel had cut himself free and was currently working on Atalawe's ropes. 'And no wagons with water to call upon!'

I saw them: a paltry handful of water sorcers had managed to drag water from forgotten vats and jars and privies in the buildings. They manipulated it like potters with clay: driving tendrils of water into the air, poised like scorpion tails, or spinning whirlpools to catch arrows. Even in that moment, with arrows raining down and terror in the air, I was in awe.

The sorcers advanced until they stood in a broad line between the warriors' ranks. With their combined spells, a wall of swirling and debris dust pressed against the flames. Every step they took, the inferno was thrust back an equal amount. The fallen tree's branches crumbled under the pressure of the magic. Behind them, shield barriers bristled with spears. Archers bent their bows and waited for a face to fill with arrows. Wilders spun their axes and broached their war cries. Inch by inch, Shal Gara magic pushed the fire back to the broken wall until it was almost evicted.

For a blessed moment, it truly looked as though Shal Gara's finest had gained the upper hand to survive the ambush. I thoroughly believed it myself, and then, like every soul within those walls, I saw the dread face appear to shatter our hope.

It was revealed as the fire withdrew, like skin peeled from a black and charred skeleton. It remained motionless, a sickle-moon smile spread across its inhuman lips and orbs of fire burning in its eye sockets. Ridges of bone like the roots of gnarled trees spread in a crest around its wolfish features.

The creature emerged from the fire to stand against the power of the sorcers' spells. Its body was the same knotted and twisted bone, covered in a charred hide. Fire shone within its cracks like sorcers' veins. A black crown hung around the beast's neck. Ten foot tall, it must have been, a burning edifice perched upon a broken tower. A curved sword of black iron lay in one hand. In its other, a gleaming jewel of white flame clutched between elongated and hooked claws.

I had only just reached my knees only to fall again in shock. Pel seized me by the scruff of my breastplate.

'Do you believe me now, curse you?' he shouted in my face.

I could only make my head bob limply up and down. My mind was dizzy, my legs weak. My freed hands were shaking. Despite his proximity, I couldn't look at Pel, only the demon.

I was not the only one: the war-party stood stunned. Spells sputtered out. Eztaral's orders halted for the briefest of moments. Patches of warriors started running for the gates. Beside me, Atalawe had picked up a discarded spear. Redeye clamped a vial of nectra between his teeth and cracked his knuckles. I thought of my hidden vial, but it was madness to use it. Without training it was as good as poison to me. Instead I seized the copper knife from Pel as he sought a sword. Redeye gave him a vial, but Pel pushed it away.

'We need to get out of here!' he barked. 'They're already dead and don't know it!'

To punctuate his point, the demon raised its fistful of fire to the blackened skies. White lightning coursed through the smoke. To the north and south, blackened and fire-wrapped shapes swarmed above the walls. Flames billowed at the demons' backs. Swords and vicious axes of metal glowed in the heat. Some took aim with huge longbows. Each one of them bayed to their master in a deafening cacophony.

'Pel!' I yelled, coming to the abrupt agreement that we were indeed stuck at the centre of the fiery trap. He dragged us westwards to the gate as the demons began to charge the war-party. 'We're doomed!'

'Not yet we're not! Redeye!'

Mid-dash, the sorcer spun on his heel to face the fire. His noble eyes now shone a piercing blue. I flinched as he unleashed his magic and broke the paving stones behind us with a mere flick of his fingers. Spikes of earth burst upwards to swat flaming arrows from the air. I made a mental note to thank the sullen sorcer when we arrived in the Six Heavens.

Panic seized the town in its jaws. I stumbled as we hurtled towards the gate. I rolled, glancing my head from the stone, but somehow came up sprinting. Atalawe pushed me ahead as she took aim and threw her spear at a blazing shape chasing us. I didn't know exactly what threat a spear posed to a demon, but it roared loudly enough for mine and Atalawe's liking. Bringing up our rear, Redeye conjured a pillar of earth that had a fist at its forefront. The demon took the blow before the spell exploded in a black curtain of dirt.

'Best mudmage around, just like I told you!' Atalawe howled. She had one hand on Pel, guiding him where he seemed to be lagging. Though his legs might have been weak, the old beggar showed no such worry in his snarling face.

'Run, curse you all!'

I spared a breathless glance behind me to see the mass of towering demons clash with the warriors. Bodies cartwheeled through the air. Blood hissed and steamed against burning hides. Hot iron cleaved through lances as if they were twigs. Sorcers railed at the demons with every spell they knew, but in the confines, charged from almost all sides and with terror in their hearts, the pride of Shal Gara failed swiftly and bloodily.

The horror became too much. My legs pounded the earth. I threw all my attention into hurtling into the narrow gaps between the buildings, but the horror followed. Bodies slumped across the pathways, arrows still burning in them as if they were candles. I tripped on one, and fell with none of the grace as I had before. Gravel stung my cheek. A stone against my temple put some dizziness in my eyes, and in the murk of smoke and panic, neither Atalawe nor Redeye saw me tumble.

'Wait!' I cried after them. Only Atalawe turned. I could see Pel yelling, but no sound reached me. Before I got halfway to my knees, barely inches from grasping Atalawe's stretch hand, the cottages either side of us exploded in flame. We were torn apart as the shockwave tossed us like pebbles.

Fire burst through their triangle windows. A piece of stone the size of my head hammered me in the side, fortunately denting my armour instead of my ribs. I scrambled blind through dust and smoke. Burning thatch rained down on me.

‘Pel! Atalawe!’ I rasped, crawling as fast as I could in what I hoped was the direction of the gate. My dagger was gone. All I had left to myself was the nectra vial.

‘Atalawe! Wait, curse you!’

The only attention I brought myself was that of a demon, only visible through the smoke by the fire streaming from it like a mane, and the burning eyes hooked on me. This particular monster was shorter, yet still towered over me even as it thumped through the debris on what looked like hooves. Claws slashed a path towards me, scattering thatch and rubble left and right. I saw its face now as I scabbled to escape: framed by fire, grey as ash between the scars and twisted antlers. Its skeletal grin was gleeful in its thirst for prey. I was transfixed.

My scabbling only got me so far. I felt the immovable chunk of wall at my back, and with it, all my hopes tumbled into a bottomless void. The surge of demon heat made me shield my face. I expected to feel my skin crackling at any moment. The realisation was a blade to my gut.

I was going to die.

Anger, not sorrow, welled up in me. A coward, Redeye had called me. Pel had manipulated me. Haidak had seen nothing fit for me but execution. This was not how I had planned to die, remembered as a traitor, a fool and a coward, before my time in the grip of demon’s flame. No. For all my downfalls and massive errors, I would not meet the Six Heavens or Hells like that. Not while I still took breath.

It was then that I dragged the nectra vial into the smoke and firelight. The demon kept coming, quickening its charge. I raised the vial in my right hand, trying desperately to undo its lid before I was ripped to bloody shreds. I had no idea what I trifled with, but I knew it wasn’t dying curled up in a shivering heap.

My time ran out as the demon brought its claws to bear. I threw up my hand, but before I could get the vial anywhere near my lips, fingers of burning stone seized my fist. I didn’t need the musical crunch to tell me the sandglass shattered in my palm. The vial’s shards running my hand through were clue enough. I cried out in pain.

A claw punctured my arm just below the shoulder so it could draw me closer. Shivering from the pounding ache in my arm, I stared back boring into its cinder-white eyes and roaring maw of black fangs and fire with what I hoped was a casual sneer. As its jaws widened, I saw a white light searing through the demon’s veins. The screech that filled my ears was not anger. Pain tainted the monster’s roar. I was on the verge of hope when the same fire shone through my dusty skin, coursing up my arms and across my chest. My own serving of pain wracked me. My cry was lost to the growing whine of forceful wind. I battled to escape, willing to sacrifice an arm in the face of such pain. Yet even the mad convulsions that seized me could not separate myself from the demon. Nor it from I. Before the light blinded my eyes, I saw the fear and confusion plain on the demon’s face as it tried in vain to be free of me. The bellow of the wind grew all-consuming.



An explosion of light ripped us apart. I felt my limbs fall free of my body. I felt the fire consume my skin. I felt every brick that rained down on me, crushing the light from my eyes and breath from my lungs. A dark came swift as raven's wings.

At least I had not died a coward.