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STOWAWAYS

First in command of every bloodwood is its chosen Matriarch. The Envoy is responsible for exerting her matriarch's will and decrees. Beneath the Envoy, the seven Sages of each of the tribes command and offer counsel when called. So it has been for centuries, and how it shall be for many more.

FROM "GRAND CALL OF ORDER", WRITTEN BY TEMACH GUWIN

Pain woke me: fiery and greedy for my attention. It was a searing sun in the darkness of my closed eyes. I tensed myself, gasping, and endured until it settled into an almost bearable throb that matched my sluggish heartbeat.

Memory came next, wading through the pain. I recalled a club, and a wild-eyed Pel standing dark and menacing.

Panic seized me. I kicked out but found myself constrained, which did absolute wonders to calm me, I admit. I threw my hands up to feel my skull, convinced I would find it split and gaping open, and instead smashed my knuckles against something rough and solid. I scratched at it frantically before I managed to wrench my heavy eyes open.

Woven leaf strips and vine lay before me. I felt the same stiff wicker wall at my feet. It was a basket. Tesq had one of the very same. No wonder I was curled into an uncomfortable ball, and my knees were far too close to my chin. Somebody had dared to stuff me into a basket. More to the point, it seemed as though none other than harmless old Blind Pel was behind it.

It took all my concentration to still myself. My injury helped. I seethed through clenched teeth as the pain swelled again, pounding not just through my skull but my whole body. It was my punishment for trying to move so vigorously.

I noticed a particularly yellow firstglow glow piercing the tiny holes in the basket's weave. No rain had soaked its fibres. It was then the basket lurched as if the world jumped. I landed hard on my ribs and my head throbbed with renewed rage.

I was moving. Or rather, whatever this basket perched on was moving. It felt like a wagon. Though the basket was thick, it didn't muffle all the sounds around me. I could hear the roar of voices, and a pounding that took me an age to realise wasn't my armourer's anvil of a head. Even in my half-conscious state, it sounded exactly like marching feet.

Drums and horns blared from one side of me, along with the faint cheers of a city-sized crowd. Orders were brayed by hoarse throats. The roar of lancewings passed overhead. The snarl of an orokan far too close for comfort made me flinch.

Though it shot waves of pain through my body, I shuffled an elbow beneath my ribs to prop myself up. I hadn't been tied up, thank the Three Gods and their spirits. The basket was clasped in rope, but I managed to poke a finger between the lid.

The first thing I saw was Shal Gara, and from no angle I'd ever seen the bloodwood from before. From a distance and angle that was gradually increasing. I had never gone further than half a mile from the city, out to the furthest leafroads and gates, but never this far. I could almost see the full mile-high stretch of Shal Gara. People filled every platform and balcony I could spy, waving and cheering. Drifting petals of white and pink and red filled the skies like the endseason snows of the south.

I shifted upwards to adjust my view, and my chin scraped against the wicker as my mouth fell open. I was in Haidak's war-party.

A forest of feathered and decorated spears swayed around me. Warriors wearing snarling masks and draped in armour sat high on wagons of supplies. They blew shell horns with every other breath in their lungs. Others with drums of narin wood and tanned skin strapped around them thumped away in a rhythm I didn't understand. Wormsilk and silver lead pennants streamed in the same acrid breeze I had tasted the day before. A leafroad of wide wooden beams lay below us.

A boot stamped the wood in front of my narrow view. I tried to angle myself to see its wearer, but it was useless. Voices made me shrink back from the basket's edge.

'No troubles so far. They bought it.'

It was Pel's rasp of a voice, gruffer with the morning. I bared my teeth behind the wicker, half-tempted to pounce on him that very moment and get my answers.

A nervous voice spoke from my other side, accompanied by the scuff of boots on a leafroad. 'Don't mean nothing yet, Pel, you madman. Don't mean nothing in the slightest. Only been an hour. We've got days ahead of us. Three Gods, why did I agree to this?'

'You didn't. I did on your behalf, Brother. I find this all rather exciting,' chuckled a woman.

'You would. Because you're as much a fool as he is.'

Something patted the basket.

'Sure your friend is okay in there?'

I bit my tongue to keep from yelling out in complaint of being called a friend of Pel's. If that's what he thought, he could throw himself from a branch. *How dare he.*

I had assumed my first prized outing from Shal Gara would have been of my own accord: either running proudly and breathless from the city to the unknown, or an exile for being frankly too useless for any worker's calling. I had not expected it to be against my will.

Pel had kidnapped me, that much was true. I didn't know why in the Six Hells the beggar would do such a thing, or whether he had harmed my mother and sister in the process. Whether it was for some strange ritual, or urka madness, or he had stuffed me in a basket for a snack while he followed Haidak's war-party east, I had no clue. He was a disgraced sorcer. Nought but a beggar, yet here he was, marching with the finest warriors Eagleborn Baran could summon.

And so, despite the excitement of being further from the city than I'd ever been, not forgetting the notion of being amongst the lancers and sorcers I admired so much, I remained livid. I stayed silent as a corpse, coiled and ready, listening to the tramping of feet around me and the voices that discussed me.

'So why is it that you brought this scrawny loamer along?' asked the woman.

'You'll see, 'was all Pel admitted. 'He's more than he looks.'

The woman hummed. 'He looks like his father.'

'Precisely.'

'This feels like a mistake, I tell you,' said the nervous man.

'You quiet down now, Redeye,' hissed Pel.

'Eztaral will notice us soon enough. She'll bring all of Haidak Baran's wrath down on us.'

'Silence. You talk more than you used to, and even then you were a pain. This is my problem to face, not yours, 'said Pel.

I heard a muttered grumbling. And, to my curiosity, the yowl of something large and dangerous. It was then that paws investigated my prison. I felt their weight on the basket, saw the tips of the claws poke through the wicker. A snout soon followed, snuffling at my scent and no doubt the sound of my breath.

'Inwar! Away from there.'

I silently thanked whomever was listening that the creature went away. It was no barkwolf, but I didn't need to see its face or maw to know it was something I didn't want to meet.

As the hours dragged, I bided my time by eavesdropping. I gleaned that the woman was called Atalawe, and she was far too exuberant for Pel or her nervous brother's liking. Whatever beast walked by her side continued to paw at my basket, knowing I was awake and yet ignored by its master.

Hours more went by, until my arms grew numb from propping myself up and my head wound became still and manageable. The faint needles of lastlight poking through the basket became russet, and then died away to night.

I was almost asleep when a shrill horn called the war-party to rest. Whatever wagon I sat on came to a rocking halt. A yowl of an orokan rumbled through my spine. I heard orders to halt and make camp upon the leafroad, and after a short trundle, somebody tackled the ropes over my basket.

I coiled up, ready to spring. My heart hammered more pain into my head. I held my breath. As soon as the lid was barely an inch separated, I lunged.

To tell the truth, I was hoping my third fight would end up a lot better than my previous two. There was no plan except swinging my bunched fist as hard as possible at the first figure I saw. I didn't care that it wasn't Blind Pel my fist aimed for, all I knew was that I needed to fight.

My fist stopped in midair against a wall of leafleather. I immediately regretted my decision, and as the pain was flashing from my knuckles up to my shoulder, I was seized by the elbow, flipped over the painful extremities of my own arm, and found myself wheezing on the back of a wagon.

I clutched my arm, convinced it was broken. With my lungs slowly clasping breath again, I spent the painful moments looking up at my captors.

Blind Pel was there, turbaned and cowed like a sorcer in a grey coat and looking sorry for himself. His wounds had barely healed. Beside him was the wiry woman that had sent me arse over chin. I had expected a scowl or a victorious, haughty look. But the woman was smiling warmly, all teeth and gleaming eyes. She had a hand extended as if to shake mine or help me up. I wondered if she was as mad as Pel, but there was no blue hue of urka on her deeply scarred bottom lip. A wild crest of white hair ran along the crown of her head, she mustn't have been more than thirty seasons. Dried flowers and seeds hung in bracelets and necklaces around her neck and wiry arms. Vials of liquids dangled from them like candlevine bulbs. She looked like a common seedwitch, selling

potions and tinctures on street corners. On her splayed palm was the tattoo of the scholar tribe: an open eye. On her cheek, two lines for a rank of temach. A staff of ironpith was strapped to the woman's back.

Fidgeting with his hands, a third stood behind. The nervous man. And a perplexing figure he was. His eyes were as red as a noble's, but his demeanour and the scruffy attire spoke differently. And had it not been for the black sorcer's robes, by his floppy hat I would have thought him a highfield farmer. The dagger tattoo across his left eye was evidence he hadn't just stolen a robe. As were his faintly dyed hands, stained red for an earth reaver. The three lines on his other cheek even ranked him as a maven in the sorcer tribe. My attention was drawn to the glowing vials of blue nectra poked out from within his coat, and the knife pommel his hand rested on.

What gave me most concern was the creature breathing very hard in my ear through long fangs. My cheek was already clammy with hot breath that smelled of rotting meat. I turned my head slowly to see a mouthful crammed with sharp ivory teeth, grinning at me. The beast was poised upright with its huge claws digging splinters from the edge of the wagon.

It was a jāgu. The striped black and green fur and four giant fangs gave it away. I had heard plenty a song of the beasts. Even seen them in paintings across Shal Gara's trunk.

'Easy now, Inwar. This isn't a meal for you.' The woman clicked her fingers in a curiously fast rhythm and the jāgu hopped back to the ground. Sitting its tufted haunches and closed its mouth with a humph. Two of its fangs hung down like knives hanging from a belt. The opposite fangs curved up over its snout, more like tusks. A spiked tail swished back and forth across the dust.

At last, my panic eased enough to gauge my surroundings. It was long past lastlight. Impenetrable gloom lurked at the edges of every direction I looked in. Trees of dark umber and green sprawled beneath and above us. The sky was awash with streaks of cloud that glowed a faint orange, either from distant fires or nearer city lights.

Like the rest of the war-party, the wagon was perched on a leafroad that speared the night and high canopies. Crowds of warriors and other wagons squeezed around us. The noise of camp being made was baffling to me.

I swivelled on my arse until I saw the shine of Shal Gara behind us. Dark bands of leaves and treetops crisscrossed her proud and stubborn glow. Though I still had to crane my neck to take all of the city in, the distance of leafroad between us stuttered my breathing.

'Sorry about the arm. I've a tincture for the pain if you wish—'

I knocked the woman's offered hand away with a petulant slap. 'What by the bloody loam have you done to me? Where is my mother and Tesq?' I demanded of Blind Pel.

The old beggar sighed. 'Don't you worry. They're safe back in the city.'

'I'll worry all I like. As should you be. I hope you know they're both going to skin you alive for this!' I hissed.

Pel blinked repeatedly. The threat had rattled him. He turned away from my scorching glower as if he felt its heat. 'They'll thank me, in the end. You all will,' he said.

'What is going on? Curse it! Have you gone truly mad?'

'Quiet down, you idiot,' the sorcer snapped at me. A red and grasping hand came for my throat as if to throttle me.

‘What’s the trouble here, you porters?’ A man with a wild nest of braids came swaggering down the row of wagons. His bare arms showed the sword tattoos of a warrior. The scar on his cheek showed him as a wilder, the third highest rank of the second-born, and therefore our better.

The woman’s smile grew even wider as she jumped to the leafroad. ‘None at all, sir! Just a bit of obedience training, so to speak. Young chap’s apparently not used to taking orders.’

‘Then he’d better learn! Eagleborn Baran expects the best of the best in this war-party. Who recruited you? Speak your names!’

The woman bowed deeply. ‘Temach Atalawe, beast wrangler of the scholar tribe, if I don’t say so myself. Hand-picked by Eagleborn Baran’s personal officers.’

The wilder jumped out of his boots when Inwar came padding from behind his master.

‘Three Gods! That thing should have a muzzle!’ exclaimed the warrior.

Atalawe chuckled. ‘Jāgu don’t take kindle to such methods, sir.’ She raised a hand and Inwar licked at her fingers. ‘You would lose an arm before you even got close.’

The wilder was already backing away when Inwar growled. ‘What’s a wrangler and a sorcer like you doing with these grimy porters?’

‘Redeye here is my brother, and these porters are old friends from a past life,’ replied Atalawe, gesturing to the brooding sorcer at my side. ‘Thought we’d pay them a visit given this most glorious day.’

‘Mhm,’ murmured the officer, now trying to keep Inwar’s curious snout away from his crotch. ‘Well, slap that worker into shape and you get back to your ranks. Or else!’

To the snap of Atalawe’s fingers, Inwar trotted back to her side. For such a terrifying creature with fangs as long as my arm, he was nothing but a purring cub to her command. Wranglers normally stuck to training the stubborn orokan to pull wagons, keeping lancewing hatchlings from escaping, or raising barkwolves to help hunters track the feathered and rather mischievous sezal lizards. How, where, and why by the loam Atalawe had wrangled a jāgu, I had no bloody clue.

Pel’s hand alighted on my shoulder. I shrank away. The pain still lingered in my head and arm, but I managed to shimmy from the wagon. Three steps, and I felt the raised edge of the leafroad at my toes. Past the struts and ironpith chains that kept the leafroad suspended in the treetops, nothing but a drop of hundreds of feet through dark and dangerous Swathe lay beneath me. Nobody but my kidnappers would have noticed my fall. Nobody would have heard my scream. Every warrior or worker in sight was far too busy manhandling bedrolls or tarpaulins for shelter. What a useless protest my death would have been.

‘Tarko, we mean you no harm,’ Pel urged. His blind eyes shifted back and forth.

‘Could’ve fooled me,’ I hissed. ‘You hit me over the head, abducted me, and stuffed me into a basket for an entire day. What am I supposed to believe?’

‘But all for the better, boy.’

‘Don’t call me boy.’

Pel growled. ‘We—I had no choice. There was no other way of getting you into the war-party. No time. You wouldn’t have come otherwise, wouldn’t have understood.’

I crossed my arms, shuffled closer to the edge. ‘You could have spoken to me, with words that don’t sound like the raving of a madman.’

If being called boy needled me, the branding of a madman incensed Pel. I saw the murk of his eyes flash as blue as his dry and split lips. I had never called him that until now. Both mother and Tesq had warned me not to, and now I knew why. His face was a storm busy brewing.

‘Don’t you call me that, Tarkosi. You act like I’ve done you some injury, when all I’ve ever shown you is kindness and care. There’s much you don’t know here, so have some respect.’

‘Maybe I will when you tell me what I’m missing, old man,’ I hissed. ‘Such as who by the loam you strange people are. Then, you can take me back to Shal Gara and perhaps we’ll forget this whole escapade. If you’re lucky, mother might not throw you from the branch.’

Atalawe’s chuckle was not comforting. Neither was her persistent grin.

Blind Pel felt his way back to the wagon and started rifling through the baggage and other baskets. He said no more to me or the others. The wrangler beckoned me away from the edge of the leafroad instead.

‘Come, Tarkosi. Plenty of time for arguing later,’ she said. ‘Away from that edge, if you please.’

‘How do you know my name, curse it?’

The woman tilted her head. ‘Pel just said it.’

I tenderly touched the swollen lump at the back of my skull. I felt dizzy, which was far from a state you wanted to be in on the precipice of a leafroad. ‘Right.’

The next few moments passed by like the gossamer threads of a dream. I was lost in a whirl of distraction. This new world was barely a day’s journey from Shal Gara, and yet it felt all too new, and all too eager to introduce itself to me. From the occasional pound of drums and the songs rising up from different ranks, to the yowl of beasts as they called to other creatures hidden in the dark spread of the canopy.

A horde of bats spun through the canopy, drawing me back to the scar of streaked sky. The obsidian between the clouds was studded with stars. I had never seen them so bright. Even beyond the roof of bloodwood leaves, the lights of the city stole the stars’ fires. I couldn’t help but stare like a newborn.

‘Tarkosi.’

I jumped. ‘What?’

The Atalawe woman was staring right at me. I studied the faint wrinkles cresting the corners of Atalawe’s lips. They bunched as she bared another warm smile. Her sorcer brother fidgeted nearby. His hand was still on his knife, his red gaze still suspicious.

‘I said, are you hungry?’ Atalawe said. ‘I know I am. They say all you get to eat on a march is the dust from the wagons and shoes in front of you. I haven’t missed it.’

Beyond the confusion and fear, hunger had been the last thing on my mind. But as soon as Atalawe had spoken the word, like pulling a lever, my stomach growled so loudly, Inwar stared at me with narrowed, bejewelled eyes.

‘I’ll take that as a yes!’ Atalawe laughed. Her good humour was bizarre to me. I had never met somebody so effervescent. It was irritating.

‘Who are you?’

‘Like I told that wilder, I’m a fourth-born, a temach rank in the scholar tribe, a wrangler by trade, and a seedwitch at heart, however the other scholars might look down upon such pursuits.’

I blinked. ‘And how is it you know Blind Pel?’

‘Known him a long time now. We fought side by side in the Scorchwars, for one.’

‘And what’s with him? Your brother?’ I pointed to the sorcer, who was busy pacing back and forth, flinching at every thud and bang of the camp.

‘Redeye’s a nervous and untrusting sort. Always has been since he fell out of his mother. We share a father, but I see him as my whole blood. Sit, you buffoon,’ Atalawe ordered him as she arranged crates to perch on. At last, Redeye’s hand left his knife, and he sat opposite me. The glaring he kept up.

I hovered standing, refusing to accept normality, while on another crate, Atalawe broke out provisions. Salted and dried meats and fruits were sliced with a flint blade. A spherical sandglass vial of something thick and offensively pungent was poured into bark cups. The wrangler held up one to me.

‘Akiga juice. Good for your soul. Rests your nerves. I won it off another temach in a game of nutshells.’

I felt like I was betraying my indignation for accepting the cup, but my parched throat moved my arm for me. The juice smelled sickly sweet, like sapwater, but had a green tinge and the charming consistency of molten wax.

‘Drink it.’

The stuff nearly choked me. A sharpness of vinegar almost caused me to immediately spit it out. It burned as it slid towards my stomach. Whether it was the effort of drinking it or the juice itself, but the akiga deepened my dizziness.

I reluctantly sat. ‘Where are we?’

‘On the Emerald Causeway, a day’s march from Shal Gara, and several more from Firstwatch.’

I knew the name. The Causeway was an ancient leafroad that connected half the bloodwoods in the Swathe. Merchants and military plied it constantly. It was also a road I had spent hours staring at for most of my seasons, wondering where across the canopies its moss-covered curves led.

‘You ever been this far from the city, Tarkosi?’ Atalawe asked with a smile that made me think she already knew the answer. I wondered what part she played in Pel’s kidnapping.

‘No.’

‘Then you’re in for a treat, young lad! I’ve walked this leafroad many a time,’ she said, pausing to ruffle Inwar’s green and tufted ears. ‘It’s one of the safer roads in the Swathe, especially with a full war-party around you.’

In my mind, my anger and confusion wrestled with a guilty thrill at having finally escaped the city. I studied Atalawe some more. Scholars had the freedom of first or sixth-borns. They preserved the old songs while pursuing the unknown. Some became architects for the city’s roads and buildings, or tallied the flow of merchants, or wagged their tongues on corners, educating any who passed. A few trained beasts or studied the wilderness. Others mapped the ever-changing Swathe or the stars above. Almost all, however, were content to remain in the city, in dusty, vine-lit rooms bent over carvings and dry parchment.

‘You don’t look like a scholar,’ I told her.

‘Good! I never could stand the feathered robes the scholars insist on wearing. Itchy, to tell the truth. My tribe are a bunch of fusty loamers who think they’re better than the rest of the bloodwood. They are pompous, far too concerned with tradition.’ Atalawe spoke while she took a blackened bowl of clay from the wagon and set it on the leafroad. Tinder was arranged, and taking two sparkstones from her pocket, Atalawe struck them together in a spray of sparks. Within moments, a small fire was crackling. ‘No, Tarkosi. I was born different. Songs and parchments can be lost or rewritten. Better to see the world with your own eyes, feel it, taste it. Live it,’ she said.

My gaze shifted to Redeye. ‘And you. You don’t look much like a normal sorcer.’

Redeye’s lip twitched. Atalawe answered for him.

‘Redeye’s one of the finest mudmages Shal Gara’s ever seen.’

Mudmage. It was a slur term for the earth reaver sorcers, the lowest order of magic in the sorcer tribe and not considered as fine an art as the orders of air and water. The earth was of the loam, after all. I would have still given a limb to be one of their order.

‘But you’re only a maven,’ I had to point out.

Redeye snorted.

‘You should learn that the marks of rank and tribe can lie, Tarkosi,’ Atalawe repeated in a singsong voice. ‘Looks can deceive.’

I sucked my teeth. ‘That they can,’ I said. ‘Just like you lot pretending to be porters. Or what was it, visiting old friends?’

Atalawe tapped her flint blade on the crate before stabbing an apple. She fixed me with a twinkling gaze as she took a bite and spoke around a mouthful. ‘A war-party isn’t much without its supplies, is it now?’

I felt the smile stretch my cheeks. *Lies*. ‘So you’re telling me you’re here because you want to do your duty? Please. I wasn’t born this morning. You’re far from the best of the best Baran promised the matriarch. You’re here for some nefarious reason, I’d wager.’ *Traitors*. The word crossed my mind for the first time.

The question hung like an unclaimed fart between us, wrinkling noses. Redeye’s hand slowly moved back to his knife. Atalawe chuckled to herself around her slice of apple. ‘You didn’t tell us he was a smart one, Pel.’

Redeye grumbled. ‘I don’t trust him. This was a bad idea bringing him.’

Pel was now crouched on the wagon, still and watching the rest of the camp as if he still had eyes. ‘You want to throw Tarko off the leafroad instead, Redeye?’ he asked gruffly.

The sorcer and I watched each other’s every move. ‘Maybe it’ll be for the best. He’s got the kind of mouth that will get us caught,’ he said. ‘Not too late to change our minds and go back.’

Blind Pel arose and jumped from the wagon. His heavy boots pounded the leafroad. Rags swirled around him. ‘Fortunately for Tarko,’ he said, ‘you don’t get a say.’

‘What is going on?’ I demanded. ‘Tell me straight and swiftly or I’ll start yelling for that wilder, and all the other warriors. I’ll bring this whole war-party down on your traitorous heads.’

Pel curled his lip. ‘That would be a mistake.’

‘Then start talking, old man.’

I watched the shadows from candlevines and cook-fires play across Pel’s wounded face, rough and pitted as bloodwood bark. The urka seed stain on his lips was coloured black in the light. Once more, his eyes roamed across the camp and the treetops the Causeway perched in. Over the muted roar of warriors and voices, Pel started to explain.

‘Eagleborn Baran is an impetuous bastard—’

‘That much is obvious.’

‘Hold your tongue, Tarko,’ Pel snapped at me. He paused to bend an ear to the warriors that hovered nearby, swigging from flasks and chatting idly about glow and how many heads they’d count between them. ‘As I was saying, Baran is an impetuous bastard, but he’s no fool. He simply knows

no better. He honestly thinks he is marching east to fight marauders and wildfires, and he is dead wrong. What's more, he's going to get every soul in this war-party killed, and him along with it.

I looked around the ragtag circle, but Redeye and Atalawe were staring right at me. This was no news to them, it seemed. Though I hated the petty man, I had no designs of death on Haidak Baran. Not that I hadn't thought about it, of course. Perhaps imagined various ways... But this was frankly preposterous.

'You're wrong. How can that be possible?' I spluttered. 'Haidak's brought forty thousand warriors, wilders, hundreds of lancers, and several thousand of the best sorcers Shal Gara has got.'

Atalawe let a chunk of meat sizzle in the fire. 'That's right. On the matriarch's blessings, he's emptied Shal Gara of its best warriors and most of its air and water sorcers overnight. Four thousand to be exact'

'Baran's raised quite the force alright, but it won't matter. Not one bit.' Though Pel's voice cracked at the edges with its usual; hoarseness, there was an urgency I'd never heard in him. 'If luck's not with us, they're all going to die.'

The silence was prickly. Fire and dripping fat crackled. Redeye chewed at one of his nails. From the scabs and dried blood around his fingers, it was quite the habit. Pel stared unblinking.

I felt my mouth flapping like the limp jaws of musktooth fish. 'How? Why?'

Blind Pel almost looked smug in his confidence. 'Because Baran doesn't know what he's up against,' he replied. 'Not in the slightest. He thinks he's going to be dealing with scrubland marauders or a jumped-up, untrained Scorch warlord that'll take one look at Shal Gara's shining leafleather and turn tail.'

I scoffed. 'And you know better, do you?'

Pel bared his blue teeth. 'Better than anyone else in Shal Gara.'

'Possibly the whole Swathe,' cackled Atalawe.

'It isn't marauders setting fire to Loamsedge and Firstwatch, no encroaching mischief-makers to be smote.' Pel said, voice cold and unwavering. 'Demons, Tarko. Demons have come from the beyond Scorch to burn the Swathe.'

They each glared at me, waiting. I looked between the ragtag group and their stone eyes. They were unflinching, even Redeye beneath his floppy, ridiculous hat.

It was the worst joke I had ever heard. 'Ridiculous,' I laughed. I wasn't quite sure if I even knew what a demon was. Something of fire and smoke and nonsense. A figment to keep pesky children in bed, and even then, tharantos and gloomsprites were far better at that job.

Pel tilted his head. 'Is it, Tarko? Is it so ridiculous? With the black sun and the smoke already on the horizon? You can smell it even now, faintly on the breeze: that bitter smell. That's not just the smell of wildfires, but the stench of a bloodwood burning with demon-fire.'

'No, there are no stories, songs, or scrolls about demons. Not a single carving,' I argued.

The old beggar's laughter was cutting. 'They have been forgotten, Tarko. Over a thousand seasons they've been changed or erased completely, breeding complacency and forgetfulness in our minds. Opening ourselves to ruin and fire without a care in our hearts. We hold to the Bloodlaws, we grind away in our chosen roles, bending the forest to our order, and thinking ourselves supreme from our bloodwood heights, and yet we forget there is another world. One of fire and brimstone that is waiting to burn and crush us beneath its heel.'

Pel was breathing hard. There was none of the slur to his voice that was normal when full of urka seed. No crossing of his blind eyes. No half-finished sentences. Once more, with his uncanny ability, he fixed me with a direct stare.

‘I can’t believe it,’ I admitted. I refused to. It was too incredible, too fanciful, too calamitous to understand, never mind believe.

‘And neither would anyone else, because they’re all too confident in the Swathe’s bountiful might that they can’t see another option. I tried to tell them, boy. Who do you think gave me these wounds? I marched right up to the Crimson Crown and I yelled at their gates for hours and hours until the matriarch and her sages appeared at the windows of their court. They had the highwarders escort me away and give me a beating out of sight. Blinded, they are, but not us.’ Pel pointed between Atalawe and Redeye. ‘We are what’s left of an order that have kept the oldest songs alive all these seasons. In desperation and in devotion, we’ve made sure to be ready for this day. One that’s been prophesied for centuries, although I never thought I’d see it in my lifetime.’

‘You’ve heard of Kī Raxa?’ Atalawe asked me.

‘Of course. I live on the Branch of Kī Raxa, for gods’ sake. That’s a story I have heard. Everybody has. She was a sixth-born and Shal Gara’s champion, who turned the marauder warlords of the Scorch back a thousand seasons ago.’

Even in such dire conversation, Atalawe somehow found time to grin. ‘No, Tarko. She was the champion who turned the demons back and sealed their world away so that they couldn’t return. Or so we thought. The warnings she left have rusted and crumbled away, until now we are left with nothing but overconfidence, throwing our best in to a battle we don’t understand and are ill-prepared for.’

‘Then why aren’t you running, instead of fighting? If this is that serious and hopeless, why aren’t you saving your own skins?’ I asked, feeling the same impulse in my own sweating feet.

Their slow shake of their heads mocked me. Only Redeye seemed to agree with me; his icy outer skin melted for one moment in an emphatic, pleading nod.

‘Because we are the Scions of the Sixth-Born,’ replied Pel, with a tremble of pride in his voice. ‘An order who made a vow to Kī Raxa, and whose ancestors are born with the curse of the truth. There are no others but us that know what waits beyond the edges of the Swathe. We took the same vow, Tarko. To keep the bloodwoods safe no matter what comes against them. Just like your father Teyak did.’

Atalawe and Redeye nodded solemnly. I narrowed my eyes.

‘You should know better than to talk about my father, Pel. Especially such ridiculous lies. My father was a useless drunk who ruined my life before it had a chance to start.’

Pel loomed over me. ‘Your father,’ he uttered, ‘was our friend.’

‘Friend?’ I shook my head and pushed past him. Pel didn’t try to stop me. ‘A friend would have stopped my father from trying to murder Sage Baran, from getting in the pockets of gendlenders and drinking alehouses dry. That’s how I know this is all lies. Madness. Every bit of it, and why you’ve involved me in your ridiculous ideas, I don’t know.’

My mind full of arguments and insults, I put those crazed people behind me and ambled in their opposite direction. I kicked at the wagon’s tires in frustration. Ignoring the pain in my toes, I dragged myself past the wagon and into the lively sprawl of Shal Gara’s finest.

‘Where are you going, Tarko?’ Pel shouted after me.

‘Home, no thanks to you!’

6

PAST'S SHADOW

*All shall be paid a tithe of gems for their service to the Bloodlaws, and in relation to their tribe.
DECREE OF MATRIARCH HELAQASA OF DORLA SEL, 1431*

I had no idea where I was going. I simply followed the distant lights of Shal Gara like a beacon of safety.

The gloom was a hungry mould, seeping anywhere a fire didn't burn or candlevine bulb glowed. Where fire or fauna couldn't shine, luminescent paint and dust ran in striped patterns across wagons and even some of the beasts, now fitted with nosebags and blinders.

I weaved through a pair of snoring orokan, and watched warriors using a nearby treetop as target practice for arrows and slingstones. My pace slowed so I could hover and watch. Every miss was ridiculed. Every missile that hit its mark, cheers and beakers were raised to cackling laughter. I watched the slingers with judgement.

The scent of glory was in the air. The war-party ran with excitement instead of the fear I imagined one would face marching towards battle. There were patches of silence between the raucous camps. Some meditated or prayed to wooden carvings of ancestors they had made precious room for in their packs. These individuals were the old and wizened kind, the ones that presumably had seen their days of drinking and shooting at trees.

As I wandered between the busy leafroad, I saw an order dividing the camp, as with Shal Gara. Not all second-borns mingled together. They clumped together in their respective ranks. Even if I hadn't spent enough seasons staring at them to know their ranks, mother had drilled them into me.

Then lowest of ranks were the warders, all of which had remained in the city. The next were warriors, and they filled wide stretches of the camp. The further I moved down the leafroad to the rear of the war-party, the higher the ranks climbed. Wilders, decorated with orokan pelts and grimacing barkwolf masks, sat about honing their broad obsidian swords and axes.

Beyond them, lancers strutted about in dun leafleather armour and beaked or fanged masks. They camped in a section of leafroad where their tents formed a wall of mosscloth and pelt. Expensive fireworm lanterns of iron pitch and sandglass stood on poles. Campfires crackled

between them. Here, the sorcers gathered, but even then they kept to themselves. Their dark, hooded groups glowed blue as the sorcers checked and polished their vials of nectra.

A lancewing roared overhead, trimming leaves from overhanging treetops: one of gold and a streak of blue. The pennants of the tents flapped as the bird landed amongst their tangle. I weaved in another direction, trying to find a way around.

I soon found it: a narrow strip between a crooked tent and the perilous edge of the leafroad. I stared into the darkness that sat between me and Shal Gara's glow. The lights of the war-party could only reach so far. Wild candlevine shone here and there. Streaks of glowing moss wrapped around tree trunks, shining a path down into the murk of the loam far below. The leafroad was a meandering tunnel through the night-soaked canopy. Its pale and well-trodden wood planks stretched a mile before it was swallowed by the shadows.

'Oi! You there!' a voice shook me from my staring. A lancer with no helmet and shockingly pale eyes had taken an interest in me. A green feather hung from his ear.

I tried to slide my worker's tattoo's inside my sleeves, but he'd already seen them.

'What are you hanging about here for, porter?' he demanded. 'Get back to work, you lazy creature.'

Behind him and between the tents, I saw a bustling horde of lancers and sorcers tumbling around Eagleborn Haidak Baran. He looked angry, and from his brisk march, eager to be somewhere.

The lancer banged his spear on the wooden road. The noise and his shout drew looks from the others. 'You hear me, boy? Get gone!'

He reached to shove me, but a brisk shoulder barge from somebody behind me beat him to it. The force sent me stumbling up against a nearby snoozing orokan. I got snarled at for my troubles and turned to see a hooded Blind Pel wagging a finger at me.

'Curse it, you wretch!' he said in a gruff voice. 'What have I told you about wandering off, eh? Lazy as he is stupid, this one, sir! A thousand apologies for the disturbance.'

'Get back to where you belong, both of you,' the lancer ordered.

As Blind Pel seized me by the collar and dragged me back the way I'd come, I heard the lancer mutter, 'Worker scum,' before returning to his post.

No sooner had Pel dragged me behind a tall wagon did he throw me against its painted sides. Glowing dust spiralled between us.

'Are you trying to get us noticed, Tarko?' he snarled at me. I thought I saw a sorcer's glint in his blind eyes. The grip around my neck was strong, quivering as if he reminded himself not to squeeze. 'If Haidak recognises you here there'll be no explaining it. We will be finished before we started.'

'I couldn't care less. I'm trying to go home,' I gasped.

'All these seasons, I've watched you moan about being stuck in that city, about its Bloodlaws, and now you can't wait to get back to it? I don't understand you.'

‘I didn’t want to be forced into it!’ I hissed. Pel didn’t get it. Freedom was what I lacked. To be press-ganged into some batshit cause was no choice of mine.

Pel relaxed his grip. His tone became pleading as he somehow guessed my thoughts. ‘Then *choose* to help us.’

‘To what? To help you fight *demons*? To interfere with the war-party? Even if I believed you, Pel, I’m nothing but a worker!’

His grubby finger poked at my face, right at my regretted sorcer’s mark. ‘You,’ he said, ‘just like anyone, can be much more if you simply believe. There’s much you don’t know, but you can help us, Tarko. You can help all of these people.’

‘Can I now? And just how am I supposed to do that?’

‘By reminding somebody of a promise they made.’

‘Oh, is that it?’

‘If the Three Gods and their spirits are with us, that will be all we need. You could save them all, Tarko. Be a hero like Kī Raxa or Suluz the Strong.’

I wondered who was the bigger cretin between us. Pel and his urka-made stories of demons, or me for falling for the faint promise of mattering. He not only throttled my neck, but my curiosity. I put my cheek to the glowing paint and stared at Shal Gara. I tutted. At very least, if Pel was as insane as I believed he was, I wouldn’t have to lie about being kidnapped.

‘You’ll be explaining this to mother and Tesq when you get me back to the city.’

Pel let me go, leaving me to brush the paint and powder from my tunic.

‘If you don’t somehow get us all killed in the meantime,’ I added.

‘I’ll keep you alive, Tarko. That was the last promise I made to your father. Besides, if I let you die, then I hope I better go with you. That would be a preferable fate to telling your mother I got you killed.’

The humour was dark as the gloom but I still managed to splutter at it. It was utterly laughable. ‘She’d skin you alive and throw you to the loam.’

‘That she would. Perhaps we should have brought her instead, let her fight the demons.’

Demons. I sighed, wanting to hear no more of them. I sniffed the air once more, but I couldn’t tell if it was the campfire smoke or the acrid air I smelled.

Pel and I bent our heads low as we walked back through the diminishing ranks. Soon enough, we were past the wilders and back amongst the sprawl of lowly warriors.

Inwar bared his sabre-fangs at us as we entered our little hollow made of wagon, slumbering orokan, and the endless darkness of the Swathe. Atalawe had lit a small fire within a clay bowl as wide as a shield. She clicked her fingers sharply and the jāgu retreated. Redeye was nowhere to be seen.

‘Where’s your brother?’ Pel sniffed at the air. For a blind man, one who had even taken my stiff arm to walk through the war-party camp, Pel was far too observant for my liking. I had always wondered, but now it was getting infuriatingly curious.

‘Wandering, much like you.’

‘How do you do that? How do you see as if you weren’t blind?’ I asked Pel, suspicious.

The old beggar tapped his nose. ‘Magic.’

He and Atalawe picked at the morsels she was roasting over the small fire. I stared at their glow. I was never normally given the chance to simply sit and watch the simplicity of flames consuming a log. It calmed me, transfixed me. I watched it until my eyes grew dry.

‘Fine,’ I grumbled to the silence. ‘If I’m to be part of this madness, how exactly will an old promise turn this war-party around when they wouldn’t listen to you before?’

‘This time, we’ll speak to the right person.’ Pel picked at his cuts and bruises as he spoke. ‘Somebody, hopefully, with enough power and enough sense to listen.’

I was momentarily crestfallen. ‘You don’t mean Haidak, do you?’

Atalawe laughed. ‘Three Gods, no. Haidak thinks he has power and adoration. He has no idea what he faces. He’s just something pretty to look at, and a pup to his father’s commands.’

‘No,’ replied Pel. ‘A woman named Eztaral. A woman who owes your father a debt, like I said. As we all do.’

I understood this talk of my father less than I did the threat of demons. I remembered nothing but a man who argued constantly with mother, who came home doused in ale and bruises across his face from gemlenders who had run out of patience. Tesq, two seasons older than me, had told me all I needed to know about him.

‘What debt could anyone possibly owe a man like my father?’ I asked.

For the first time, Atalawe’s resilient smile faded. It seemed as though I had insulted her.

‘My life, for one,’ she spoke, voice like two stones colliding.

Pel nodded beneath the shade of his hood. ‘Mine too. And if Redeye was here, he would say the same. Your father, Tarko, was the head of the Scions. He led us for decades.’

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. The man had barely managed to get home for supper on time, if at all.

Pel held his hand up to the fire as if he were causing its ripples. ‘I told you: there’s plenty you don’t know. Teyak Terelta was the son of a sixth-born just like all of us. He was a sorcer of great power. Beyond me... beyond half the paragons in the sorcer tribe. He could have been a Painted or Braided One by now.’

‘Mother said he was a passable air carver in the Scorchwars, but that he squandered his gift.’

‘No, boy. He was much more, but Sage Baran put a mighty effort into ruining your father’s reputation because of his beliefs.’

‘And what were they?’ I asked, feeling myself becoming irritable with confusion.

‘That one day, an omen of a black sun and smoke in the east would come, and with it demons. He tried to warn the council and the matriarch time and time again, but they called him a liar, maddened by magic, and cast him from the sorcer tribe. His reputation crumbled over the next few seasons while the recalcitrance of the matriarch and her sages drove him to desperation. Baran knew this well, having gemlenders pursue him. At last he provoked him into a fight in an effort to ruin him completely, and it worked.’

Atalawe exhaled. ‘Teyak almost killed Baran that day.’ She and Pel stamped their feet in unison, making Inwar look up from his slumbers.

‘It sent your father into a defeated spiral. He lost his rank, his tribe, and his respect.’

I shook my head slowly. To believe Pel branded my mother, sister, and my own memories as liars. To believe him not only meant that I had been wrong for seasons, but that I had spent them sullyng the name of a father who was undeserving of it.

‘I...’ Words failed me. My world, as small as it was, had mutated so drastically in such little time I hardly recognised it. My head spun like a winged seed.

The wrangler was not dejected for long. Before I could make sense of it all, she placed a conical lid upon the fire pit with a clunk and held her hands to its warm pottery. ‘Think no more on it tonight. It’s too much for a young mind to handle to learn of demons, never mind the truth of their own history. Our tongues have wagged enough for tonight. The road to Firstwatch will not be simple or safe,’ she said.

Before I could bluster or flap my jaw any more, Atalawe bedded down against the orokan’s furry side. Inwar coiled his front paws over her like a terrifying blanket. By the time I looked to Pel, he had already shut his eyes, crossed his arms, and hunched over. In the faint glimmer from other lights in the camp, I saw his mouth muttering in prayer to the Three.

I had no choice but to curl up where I had sat: on the rough surface of the leafroad and feeling the heat gradually die away until I shivered in half-dreams born of a thousand questions. Skittish conjurations, fictions of my own making.



To the blast of rude horns and even ruder drums, I awoke to a world I didn’t recognise and, to my delight, soaked to the bone in dew. I humphed.

Mist hung between the treetops. Like blankets of cotton, it clung to their barren spiked tips as if clouds had been snagged in the canopy. The leafroad was slick and glistening with moisture. Light speared the mist, and in fainter patches an orange sky of firstglow could be seen. No breeze blew across my cold skin. Muddled birdsong filled the thick morning air. Lesser ravens cawed and clucked. The fringes of the leafroad were wrapped in mystery.

‘What by the loam is going on?’ I asked, clutching my wet tunic to me. I looked back to Shal Gara but the city was shrouded in mist like the rest of the Swathe. Gone. The lights had been a rope around my waist. I was truly cut free and lost.

‘The war-party’s moving on,’ Atalawe yelled at me. She, Redeye, and Pel were standing by the wagon. The old beggar was absently carving one of his animal shapes into a pebble of wood. Atalawe was busy fastening our orokan into its harness. The fellow looked as sleepy as I felt, but that was nothing new for the average orokan. The beasts of burden were known for sleeping for days in a row if their masters let them.

With sleep-numb legs, I tottered up and took a breath to stretch my aching back. Sleeping on the bare leafroad had put a crick in my neck and pain in my sides. And still, I smelled smoke in my nostrils, though I refused to pay attention to it.

Pel spoke to me while he checked on an ornate curved bow beneath the bundles upon the wagon. Why in the Six Hells the blind old beggar had or needed a bow, I didn't know.

'You smell it, don't you, Tarko? This isn't mist, but smoke. And it's not from dead campfires.'

'Let me guess. Demons?' I croaked.

Redeye scowled at me. Pel put a finger to his lips. 'Remember now. We aren't supposed to be here. If we want to pull this off, then you need to play along like us.'

My mind was still a mess of questions I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer to. The night before had opened sore wounds long closed. Play along, I could do. I still clung to the promise of mattering. 'I'm a worker, aren't I? I know how to work.'

'Good boy.'

'Don't call me that.'

'You're just like your father.'

'Don't say that, either.'

I grumbled something foul as I climbed the wagon and threw myself in between the sacks and crates of random supplies. Atalawe took the seat and gripped the reins. Around us, Haidak's war-party pulled itself into its ranks and practiced formations. The orders were few and the warriors well-trained. A long shell-horn blast from the back of the column set their heavy boots to the leafroad.

With a flick of the reins and a musical whistle between her teeth, Atalawe moved us along the road towards the east. I hadn't seen much in the dark, but I now realised a small sea of wagons, porters, and their orokan stretched behind us. We plodded along in close formation behind the bulk of the war-party.

I turned around to look to Pel, but found Inwar grinning at me with his giant teeth, tongue lolling and breath far too hideous for the morning. Blind Pel seemed deep in a concentration I didn't understand, murky eyes half-closed and muttering once more to himself. Redeye stared at me, but every time I met his eyes he looked away. Or spat a charming gob of spit on the wooden road. Atalawe whistled as if she didn't have a single care in the world and traded jokes with nearby porters. How she was so calm and carefree was mystifying, but all I knew was jealousy of how few shits she seemed to give for the troubles of her place in the world. Atalawe was one of few exceptions by the look of it. I wouldn't have described any of the souls that walked at the arse-end of the war-party as morning people.

I spent whole morning was spent staring out at the Swathe passing me by.

It was a fine distraction to my strange plight. Instead of dwelling on the burning questions of my father's true self, or the fact that demons not only existed but were invading the Swathe, I watched a world I had longed to venture into slip by to the tune of rattling wagon wheels. I found

myself forgetting all else as I watched treetop after treetop amble past the edges of the broad leafroad. I even switched to sitting beside Atalawe for a better view. Fascination mixed with trepidation as I kept watch for the dangers I had spent a life being warned of.

Before long, merchants and travellers appeared along the Emerald Causeway. The beat of the war-drums ordered them to move aside. I will admit, even though I was an imposter, an actor, I felt almost proud to be amongst the war-party when they began to clap and cheer for Shal Gara's finest as they passed.

By midday, the haze had cleared somewhat and the full sweeping sprawl of the Swathe was once more revealed. Beyond the shadow of Shal Gara, ironpith, pine, cedar and narin trees sprouted to scrape at the sky. Though they were barely half the height of a bloodwood, they clustered together in a thick emerald canopy. The leafroad forged a path across their highest reaches, meandering through the lofty branches that sloped like a mountainside down towards the east.

The sky, however, remained marred. There remained a dun orange tinge to the heavens between the crowded treetops. The sun goddess was still eaten by darkness. I swore a larger portion of her had been carved out since yesterday. She wore a crimson halo I had never seen before. The sight caused me a shudder, and I wasn't alone. It set off a muttering and a mumbling in the front of the war-party.

The leafroad had changed course by the time the sun had slipped from its zenith. I noticed while I stared up at the sun, hand shielding my eyes, when I felt the ground falling out from beneath me. Where the road had been flat before, supported by tree after tree, it now descended into the darker world below the canopies. While leaves and branches stretched overhead, turning the light russet, the Causeway delved deeper. Songbirds trilled along to our drums and tramping feet. Lancewings pirouetted overhead between the branches as they ran patrols around the war-party.

It was late afternoon when the leafroad reached the colossal pillars. I had already seen their dark shapes between the foliage. Giant ironpith trees stood like roofless columns around the leafroad. No tapering treetops for these ironpith giants. Matriarchs long-dead crowned with flowers sat at their peaks. Beaks of ravens and lancewings cast long shadows. The snarling faces of barkwolves, jāgu, and tharantos glowered down at us as if angry they couldn't snack on the delicious morsels below. Or orokan with eyes shut and long claws crossed, and faces of heroes stared stoically to horizons unseen. Red and silver paint had faded here and there where the sun shone through the hole in the canopy.

'The Ancestor's Towers,' Pel breathed in my ear.

Despite the sunlight, the air in their grove took on a colder touch. Between the carved pillars, great beards of silver moss hung from the branches. Blue waif birds flitted between hollow nests where they sung their droning songs. From other branches, it chilled me to see skulls swinging on long ropes. Not all of them were human. Rough-hewn teardrops of pink quartz, jade, and striped obsidian hung suspended like droplets caught in a rainbow.

No birdsong broke the stifled air. A silent reverence held sway between the Towers. It felt to me like a payment of respect, but also a mark of fear. I felt an unease as the war-party halted

between them. A sickly scent of flowers pervaded. Every scrape of boots or orokan claws made me flinch. Redeye coughed as quietly as he could manage but heads still swivelled accusingly.

More than a few warriors broke formation to bend a knee and pray. I stayed where I was, too haunted by the carved stares above me. I watched their painted eyes, expecting them to move and watch me back. They were not graves, but they felt the same.

‘This is the mark of Shal Gara’s boundary,’ Atalawe whispered. ‘Every traveller that passes by pays their respect to the ancestors for safe travels and friendly passersby. Our heroic Eagleborn Baran will do the same, as is traditional for any war-party. Not since the Scorchwars has it happened.’

I heard Pel’s bones pop as he turned around. ‘And here he comes now,’ he said.

Pel was right: Haidak emerged from the rear of the column. ‘How by the loam...’ I mumbled. I was quickly becoming convinced the man wasn’t blind, magic be damned.

The ranks around us parted for their commander without an order. Wearing a helmet crested in proud golden feathers, Haidak marched with purpose and his eyes straight forwards. Silver-handed sorcers and polished lancers trailed behind him. No cheers for him, but nods of respect as if none of us were worth his attention. My mischievous side told me this was a perfect opportunity to boo him, but I got the sense it wouldn’t have ended well. I bit my tongue just in case he spotted me and hunkered behind Atalawe as he passed. Pel threw a threadbare cloak at me and tutted.

Haidak walked until he stood at the front of his war-party. I imagined it was a place he was less than used to. A wreath of knotted vines and white flowers was delivered to him by a ravenborn. Wordless, he raised it up above his head, turning to each ironpith giant. To me, it seemed the gloom between the trees darkened. A breeze made the jade pendants and skulls sway.

When the respect had been paid, Haidak proceeded to the edge of the leafroad and dropped the wreath to the forest floor several hundred feet below.

‘Poor bastards think it’ll keep them safe, too,’ Pel muttered, barely audible. ‘Won’t make a blind bit of difference.’

‘You don’t believe in the power of the ancestors?’

‘I believe in them. Them, the Three Gods, and all their spirits. I know what roles they play in this world. I just know that demons have no such cares nor respect. They are not of our realm.’

A screeching horn broke the silence and somehow the spell of the ancestors’ grove. I nearly vacated the wagon’s seat. And my bowels, to tell you the truth.

To the baying cry of a ravenborn standing by Haidak’s side, the war-party lurched onwards. Not a word was swapped between any of the warriors. They stared upwards at the faces of human and beast.

In abject superstition, I mumbled something that resembled a prayer to the ancestors and the Three Gods. I didn’t know what to pray for except survival, but that felt incredibly appropriate considering my company. The Terelta family had few living members beyond my immediate relatives, but whichever ancestors I had lost in the past, I prayed they would watch me, whatever

mad Pel had in mind. I may have even muttered my father's name, with much squirming and dislike.

Pel, as it happened, was staring unashamedly in Haidak's direction. The eagleborn had remained on the edge of the leafroad. His arms were crossed as he examined every fighter and wagon that trundled past him. I hoisted up my hood and glared at the backside of the orokan pulling the wagon. Fortunately, we were now in the centre of the leafroad. Another flat cart piled high with throwing spears blocked his view of us for the most part.

I watched Pel with curiosity. For all his secrecy and caution, he was bold as day now. He sat upright and with his head barely covering his face. I chanced a glance in the direction of his blind eyes. Beside Haidak stood a woman in dull grey armour that only enhanced her muscular form. I recognised her immediately. She was without her helmet now, her short-shorn hair flattened like straw, and sweat glinting around the patterns tattooed across her skull. The black feather about her neck made her unmistakable. It was the ravenborn that had stopped Haidak from punching my lights out or throwing me from the nests.

'Who is that?' I asked.

Pel was too focused to answer. Redeye sniffed at the air, once again tinged with smoke beyond the perfume of the Ancestors' Towers.

'That,' he said, 'is Eztaral Kraid, first of the ravenborn, and the one that will hopefully help us.'

'That's the woman you're trying to talk to?' I asked. 'She stopped Haidak from giving me more of these.' I pointed to my bruised eye that was tender to the touch, and had swollen in the night. At least the wound had scabbed.

Pel's head snapped around. 'When?'

'Yesterday in the lancewing nests, barely an hour past firstglow. The first of this week's beatings, apparently.' I rubbed my skull to make Pel feel guilty. *But no.* That, conveniently, his clouded eyes didn't see.

'Did she recognise you? Call you by your name?'

'No.'

'Has it been that long?' asked Atalawe.

Redeye tutted. 'Eztaral's just climbed that high and forgotten herself. Along with the Scions and Teyak. She's not going to listen, Pel. I told you this would be pointless, didn't I? We should sneak away tonight after lastlight. Cut our losses.'

Atalawe slapped her brother's knee with a chuckle. 'You and your worrying, Redeye! You're not getting out of this that easily.'

Redeye tugged at the wide brim of his floppy hat in frustration. He went back to twiddling a flat disk of carved wood over his knuckles and muttered under his breath.

Pel had replaced his hood and closed his eyes. 'There's no going back now. We'll speak to Eztaral tonight. A promise is a promise.'

I hoped for my sake, it was.



That was how I came to spend the rest of the day: staring. Sometimes walking alongside the orokan, – whose name I'd discovered was Nod – yet mostly riding alongside Atalawe as she prattled on about the wonders of this plant and that fungus, but always staring. Staring at the forest in all its colours and ever-changing patterns. Staring at the warriors and the jerked movements of their armour. Staring. I felt as powerless as a man stuck in a dream.

I quickly realised the woman barely her tongue a rest. I didn't mind one bit, for she acted as an effusive guide while I watched the Swathe slide by.

'See that slender tree there, with the purple fronds, its berries will make you piss for days, whether you want to or not. Redeye ate a bunch of them when we were kids. Nearly flooded the cottage, didn't you?' Atalawe tittered. Her mood was infectious. I found myself laughing along, much to Redeye's scowling. I climbed the wagon once more and sat beside her.

'And that harsh call, that ratatat noise? That's a kanalat. A snake with two heads that constantly argue with each other. They're never seen near bloodwoods. As for the reason, that's escaped myself and my fellow scholars for centuries. You see? The bloodwoods aren't the only wonders of the Swathe, Tarko. The forest and its beasts were here for untold seasons before we crawled from the mud to the trees.'

Inwar had heard the kanalat's call too. He sat up, tense and growling. Atalawe ruffled his tall and tufted ears. I reached out to do the same, but the jāgu curled his lip to show off his other fangs. I huffed.

'Takes a long time for them to trust, Tarko. Don't you worry,' Atalawe said with a grin. 'I take it from how wide your eyes have been this march, that you've never seen the true Swathe.'

'Only from Shal Gara's canopy,' I admitted, feeling somehow guilty.

'Ha! The real Swathe is not in its never-ending treetops, but far below this false sky of ours.' Atalawe pointed upwards to the discoloured sky between the leaves above. With lastlight, it was now a deep orange, fading to an angry red. The jagged gaps of light were slowly closing the deeper the leafroad sloped into the branches. The trees were also shrinking in gradual measure, no longer quite as mighty as those we had put behind us. With the day waning, faint mists rose from the dark and overgrown forest floor to welcome the war-party. I only caught glimpses of the void-like darkness between the lower leaves, which were almost as broad as bloodwood leaves in their quest to soak up as much precious sunlight as they could.

Growing up in the city, the forest floor had always been treated not just as a long and fatal fall, but as a forbidden place. A realm of almost constant night where the dark hides all manner of death and gnashing teeth. To think about treading its dusty soil was abhorrent to any that lived in the Neathering and above. I shivered.

‘Down there is the true face of the forest, all its delights and dangers. A world within a world with death and life in constant churning balance. You’re wise to fear it.’

‘It can stay down there where it belongs,’ I replied. ‘I always wanted to see the Swathe, like my brother, Texoc. He was sent to Stormbeaten after my father...’

‘Now there’s a bloodwood and city I could never grow tired of. Stormbeaten. Littered in flowers in longsun, and during endseason the ocean storms bring blizzards that can last a week. And when they clear, all is white and perfect. All the edges are gone from the world. There is nothing that will cause your heart to skip like seeing a bloodwood draped in snow, Tarko.’ Atalawe sighed. ‘Especially one as old as her.’

‘When did you go there?’

‘Oh, I’ve been all over, Tarko. Walked from Scree to Dorla Sel, Rasqax to her twin Rōkama Dar. We have all travelled far and wide. Those who founded the Scions were all sixth-born like Kī Raxa, fated to range the Swathe and patrol its edges and keep its maps accurate. Their wandering spirit lives on in us. And, as a scholar, I can go where I please,’ she said with a chuckle.

‘Sounds perfect,’ I said, hiding the jealous grind of my teeth.

Atalawe gave me a look that I first thought was smug, but I caught a mischievous spark in her eyes. From his perch on the back of the wagon, Blind Pel cleared his throat. Pel went back to carving a lump of wood into a jāgu’s face, and Atalawe shifted the subject.

‘The lusifers are starting to shine,’ she told me.

‘The who now?’

‘Those broad plants down there.’

Atalawe pointed past my nose to where a crimson light could be seen between the lower branches. The giant fern’s shine seemed to pulse like a heartbeat. As my eyes adjusted, I noticed further patches of glow spread between the thick tree trunks.

‘Forest always knows best,’ Atalawe explained. ‘There’s a strong poison in those ferns. Got to dig to their stubborn roots to get at it, but no finer potion for an arrow.’

I wrinkled my nose. ‘I’ve always preferred a sling and stone, if you ask me. I’m quite the shot.’

Pel broke his silence and stopped his carving to correct me. He patted the short bow and quiver of arrows at his side. ‘A good shot you might be, slingstones are no good against armour.’

‘You sure about that?’ I challenged.

‘Are you? If I’m not mistaken all you’ve tried your stones on is pottery. Make that face all you want, I’ve heard your little antics,’ Pel tutted. ‘There’s more to archery than pulling a string, Tarko.’

‘Yes, lots to worry about when you’re both hiding at the rear taking potshots, I imagine,’ Atalawe snorted. ‘It’s all about a solid ironpith staff, Tarko. Brutal force up close and personal, but not too close like a sword or short blade.’

Redeye tutted. ‘And magic beats both. You should know that, Pel.’

‘He knows that if I give you a good whack to the head while you’re in the middle of a spell, all that magic’s for nothing, sorcer,’ said Atalawe with a wink.

I tried using the ensuing silence to my advantage. ‘Maybe I should learn to fight, if I’m supposed to help in this plan of yours. You could teach me.’ I probed them, staring at each in turn beneath my hood.

Redeye shook his head. ‘Don’t give him a weapon, Pel. He’ll stab us first chance he gets.’

‘That’s not your role in this, Tarko,’ Pel replied sombrely.

The refusal wrinkled my nose and I poked at Pel. ‘Then how exactly does one fight a demon, then?’

‘Keep your voice down,’ he snarled. ‘And the average person don’t fight a demon, they run from them, or so the stories go. Pray we don’t have to.’ He had cocked his ear, ignoring me. ‘We’re stopping.’

A horn blew moments later, sounding a halt to the war-party. The thousands came to a stamping halt, drummed fists against chests and shields, and yelled as one. Formations dissolved into camps with startling speed. I had barely extricated myself from the dishevelled wagon before Atalawe had cracked two sparkstones together and lit the beginnings of a fire in the clay bowl. Redeye hunched over it with Inwar as his side, and both stared at me with dead gazes.

‘Watch the fire,’ Pel ordered, and with Atalawe’s subtle guiding arm, the two disappeared between the wagons. ‘We’ll be back shortly.’

There was not much to be done but sit opposite the sorcer and meet his noble eyes. It wasn’t long before I realised I was inadvertently in a staring contest.

‘What?’ Redeye snapped at me.

‘What does nectra taste like?’ It was the first thing I could think to blurt.

‘Can’t you remember? You’ve got the mark, haven’t you?’

‘No, I can’t.’ The memories were far too entangled with tragedy. I had also been a day over five seasons old. Memories from that age are either vivid as a punch to the face or a forgotten shadow. Nothing in between.

‘It tastes like fire, boy. Tastes like the very blood of the bloodwoods. Like the power of the ancestors themselves. Something so few can understand.’

I nodded to his words, letting the flames crackle between us. I waited for him to stab an apple with his sickle knife before I pointed out the obvious. ‘You know that doesn’t really answer my question... right?’

‘Three Gods,’ Redeye hissed. ‘It tastes bittersweet. Like sour berries. Salt and earth.’

‘There we go. Wasn’t so hard, was it?’

The sickle knife was jabbed in my direction. ‘Pel said you’d be no trouble. No nuisance, he said.’

‘Guess Pel doesn’t know me as much as he thinks he does.’

‘Guess not. Well, you won’t be with us long, thankfully.’ Redeye’s puckered face cracked into a smirk.

Before I could ask the sorcer what he meant, Pel returned with Atalawe. She set to feeding Nod and Inwar while Pel propped himself against the wagon. ‘Eztaral’s on her patrol. It’s almost time,’ he said.

The wait was plainly tense for the others. Blind Pel stood at the rear of the wagon, hood up and arms crossed. Atalawe was a rare mute. The only conversation was the crunching of bones between Inwar’s fangs and the sputtering of the flames. Redeye glared at me from under the brim of his hat.

‘Tarko,’ Pel whispered at last. ‘Come here.’

I stood at the side and stared across the camp. With the long day of travel, it was more muted than the night before. Yellow moonlight cascaded through the narrow rifts in the canopy. No wind disturbed the smoke of the campfires. Columns of it arose to the heavens like totems. Occasional laughter broke the general rumble of wagging tongues and snoring from those who were tired out.

Through the tangle of wagons and scattered tents, a broad-shouldered figure came striding. She walked alone and with slow purpose, feathered helmet tucked under her arm. The firelight scattered over her fine armour but it offered no shine. Her head swivelled back and forth, constantly surveying every detail of her warriors and the darkness beyond.

‘Stay there.’ Pel whispered to me before stepping out from behind the wagon. Eztaral was still several yards away, nodding to the salutes of some warriors. My heart thudded against my ribs and I hardly knew why.

‘What is darker than night may never grasp the light,’ uttered Pel, as Eztaral drew close.

The words, though I didn’t recognise them, stopped the lancer in her tracks. She turned, eyes already shrewd, hand falling to the large sword at her hip. ‘What in the Six Hells did you say to me, porter? Speak quickly before I have your tongue cut out.’

Pel drew back his hood, showing his bruised face and frosted eyes to this proud warrior. ‘When Swathe’s days grow dire, we will stand against the fire. Where others will fall, the Scions refuse to falter.’

Eztaral stepped closer, her grim mouth slightly ajar. Her mismatched eyes were shrouded in a frown. Her sword slid from her scabbard with a whisper of polished stone. It was a thick strip of blood-varnished ironpith clasping a straight obsidian edge, instead of the usual undulating swords that had three or four bladed arcs.

Pel kept speaking, undeterred. ‘To Kī Raxa, the Three, and the spirits, we make and keep this vow.’

I felt Atalawe at my back. Redeye lurked close. I watched Eztaral and her sword closely, drinking in every nervous detail.

‘Eztaral Kraid. It’s been some time.’ Pel extended a hand towards his old friend.

The ravenborn replaced her sword in her scabbard without taking her eyes from Pel’s. ‘That it has been, Pelikai Maladaq,’ she said gruffly, but Eztaral ignored the hand. Instead, she removed her gauntlet, tucked it into her helmet, and then punched Pel straight in the face.

I had been too deep in pondering the old beggar's full name and why I had never heard it before. I couldn't help but gasp as I heard the crack of Pel's nose.

Pel sprawled against the wagon, his turban fallen at his feet. Blind eyes blinking, he swore through a trickle of blood. I saw Atalawe wince, but even Inwar didn't growl.

'Anyone else have something to say?' Eztaral hissed at our small circle. 'Hmm?'