

# 15

## TESTED SOULS

*The levels of magic are unflinching. They lie in the mastering is certain spells. First comes the wall or shield in most schools, then the dart spell, a projectile. Beyond that there are tendril spells, and a dozen spells with names I care not to mention until we get to shadow and construct spells. Only several sages and Braided Ones have existed in the Swathe's history that can cast constructs. No sorcer in the last fifty seasons has ever managed such a feat.*

*FROM WRITINGS OF SORCER SAGE QAS, 2115*

The skyriser thunked to a rest with careless speed, and I quite nearly staggered over the rope railing. Pardoned and blessed as we had been, the highwarders clearly couldn't wait to be rid of us. Perhaps they still thought us liars and traitors. I scowled at the biggest one amongst them in challenge before limping from the riser. The platform cranked back upwards at the same wayward pace. Haidak and Eztaral were still descending on their riser.

'What is the plan, Pel?' asked Atalawe, as she hoisted me up. Her usual cheer had returned, but my injuries complained loudly.

The old man exhaled as he moved along the bustle of the branch. At its edge, in a quieter spot, he hunched over to gaze down upon Shal Gara, still doused in the sheen of rain and a haze hiding her depths. Behind the bloodwood's leaves, a white semicircle of the sun goddess fought to be seen.

Pel put a hand to his dirty, bloody bandages and showed his stained teeth. 'You heard Danaxt. We prepare for war.'

'That simple, eh?' I said drily, unable to ignore the nauseous trepidation that the word "war" instilled in me.

'Not now that she has put us in charge and tied our fates to Shal Gara's,' Pel said, but the pride in his voice couldn't be stifled. 'Suffice it to say, I am surprised to still be standing. Bless the gods that Danaxt still has some sense in her old bones.' He reached to feel mine and Atalawe's shoulders and squeezed. 'The Scions have returned. Dark days might lie ahead, but we walk in the light once again. Teyak has been vindicated.'

Atalawe had a grin on her face it was difficult not to match. Survival was a blissful feeling when death hovered close.

Juraxi interrupted our moment. The warder held up a finger as if he had a question. 'If I may, I'd like to say my thanks. You were a fine group of people to run into. I didn't think it at first, but you seem to have saved my neck from the noose.'

'What will you do now?' I asked him.

‘What anyone can do in times like these: keep going on until something stops us.’ Juraxi flashed me a smile. ‘If a warder like me can be of any help—’

‘We’ll be sure call on you,’ Atalawe said.

Juraxi smiled. ‘You’ll be seeing me, I’m sure.’

I met his offered hand. ‘Hopefully in better circumstances.’

Juraxi chuckled as he too withdrew along the branch. ‘I believe that’s down to you.’

While Juraxi made good his departure, I rubbed my hands. ‘So how exactly do we prepare for war? Don’t I need a sword or armour or something?’

Atalawe chuckled beneath her breath. ‘So eager to see the demons again, Tarko?’

‘I want to be prepared. I’m a Scion now after all, aren’t I?’

‘Not yet, you aren’t, lad,’ Atalawe shook her head. ‘Not officially.’

‘Wait, what?’ I spluttered.

‘You’re not officially a Scion until we say you can speak the words.’

‘But I thought I had earned it?’

Pel frowned. ‘You will earn it when you learn how to be a Scion, as we all did,’ he told me, unyielding.

My indignation crumbled away in the face of a trepidatious intrigue. ‘You mean you’ll train me?’

‘Like you asked me in the forest,’ Atalawe needlessly reminded me. I had discovered two things in the loam: one, that meeting death was easier than it looked, and secondly, that I was in serious lack of the skills needed to keep that meeting at bay.

‘Well let’s get to it,’ I blurted. ‘Will I be learning magic or fighting first?’

‘Calm, Tarko, by the Three Gods. All in good time, my impetuous friend, but first things first.’

Pel massaged his bruised nose. ‘I hate to say this, but we must take you home, Tarko.’

‘I don’t want to go home. I want to help, Pel.’

*Why does the old blind man seem scared?* Serisi asked me.

I knew precisely why. ‘He—You’re worried about facing my mother, aren’t you?’ I asked. In truth, I wasn’t sure if I was ready either. I hoped the matriarch’s blessing would be enough to calm her.

‘You’re bloody right I am. I would rather face the demons at Sheertown again, but it is the right thing to do. Think of your mother and the last she saw of you. She deserves an explanation as much as you did.’

‘And I still have my questions,’ I warned him.

Pel reached for me until he found my shoulders and stared at me with his milky eyes. ‘As do I, Tarko. As do I,’ he said quietly.

‘Pelikai.’ It was Eztaral Kraid. Haidak stood behind her, tall and proud once more now he was out of the Crimson Crown and the threat of death – at least an immediate one – had vanished. I could still see the sweat on his forehead beneath his unkempt, singed hair.

‘How in the Six Hells you loamers survived Sheertown, I don’t know,’ Eztaral began, ‘I’m not sure I want to.’

'Luck and a lot of running.' Atalawe said before wagging a finger at her. 'Do you believe us now, Eztaral? Now that you've seen the demons with your own eyes?'

By the way the eagleborn bit her lip, she was highly uncomfortable. 'That is what I want to talk about. In private.'

Pel bowed his head. He seemed more relieved over Eztaral's words than Danaxt's decision not to hang us. 'That we shall, old friend. Give me an hour, perhaps two, and I will meet you in the old place.'

Eztaral departed in silence and with a pack of warders about her, I had meanwhile caught Haidak's stare. He said nothing to me until I turned to lead Pel away.

'A moment, Tarkosi, if you would.'

I watched him chew his words as if he hated their taste.

'I am... appreciative of what you said to the matriarch. You could have lied and sold me out to the Burrows,' he said in a volume few nearby could hear.

'As you could have,' I replied, unable to resist my moment.

'I... Thank you.'

'I can see how difficult that was to say.'

Haidak raised his chin. There was no hatchet buried between us yet, but at least he wasn't trying to have me hung from the branches any more. That was progress, and a weight on my mind I was happy to shed. I gave him a nod, and I had a feeling that was the last we would speak of it.

The highwarders manning the nearby platforms were kind enough to spare us the walk, and we were dropped slowly through the branches. The day was winding away to the end of the day. The city still dripped with rain, but the clouds had been replaced by smoke. An eager wind wafter the stink of wildfire. I had been glad to be rid of it, and now it was back. I grumbled away to the sound of Serisi drinking in the stench through my own nostrils.

'Don't get used to it,' I hissed beneath my breath.

The skyriser only took us so far, and the rest of the way was down to us. The highwarders were some of the same that had escorted us up in shackles. I smiled at them broadly as we left them standing and wondering how by the loam we were free.

'Atalawe,' said Pel. 'If you would be so kind as to find our old armour, and perhaps any urka, if you have some left, I'll meet you at the Terelta house in a short while.'

'Good luck.' Atalawe whistled as she walked away.

Pel was weaker than I was but at least he didn't have a twisted ankle. We made quite the pair of warriors hobbling and weaving about, leaning as much on either as we did holding the other up. It actually made me laugh more than once. The onlookers who recognised us were equally as curious. The attention went unnoticed by Pel. He heard the whispers, no doubt, but he was preoccupied with treading the branches of Shal Gara again. Or the prospect of facing my mother. All I got was a wry smile.

'Weren't those the prisoners?' I heard somebody mutter. I thought it was Serisi at first, playing tricks. I let their gossip into my ears. I wanted to know what the tree thought of me.

'The last ones of the war-party.'

'Talk of monsters, there was.'

'Creatures from the Scorch, I heard.'

‘Monsters, said a weaver in the Neathering. Monsters!’

‘Hah! Can you imagine?’

I wanted to stop, correct them all. I wanted to tell them just how wrong they were and just how scared they should be. I hadn’t struggled and almost died just for them to mock me. To jeer at all Pel and Atalawe had done.

Pel saw my bared teeth. ‘Pay no heed, Tarko, they’ll know soon enough when the matriarch sees fit to tell them. Danaxt is on our side now and that means we don’t need their approval. That way lies madness, and has ruined many a hero in the past. Look at me: what do you think disgraced me other than my fame and success. It’s like that ticabo pie I can smell there.’ He pointed out a steaming rack of pies on a baker’s stall, hollowed into Shal Gara’s trunk. ‘Once you have one mouthful, you want it all.’

I said nothing. The louse-mines had caught my attention. We were passing the Branch of Hoot, where I had hauled lice back in forth in barrows only several days ago. It felt like a whole season had passed. The same fat worker in the puke-yellow tabard was tending a flat wagon that wriggled something awful. Forty lice might have been packed under its net.

*What are those things? They look delicious.*

‘Bloodwood lice. And no. Just no.’

‘Fine observation, Tarko,’ Pel mocked me.

I didn’t see Ralish amongst the workers, and I turned my face just in case. I heard the man bark to another passerby, remarking on the repulsive wagon.

‘Beats me!’ he was saying. ‘The lice are practically throwing themselves out of their burrows for some reason today. I don’t mind though, makes my job easier!’

‘Strange,’ I muttered.

‘I might be wrong, seeing as I’ve spent the last two days running from death and using more urka than I should, but do I remember you in one of those wonderfully yellow tabards the night I...’

‘The night you knocked me out and kidnapped me? Yes, yes you did.’

‘Karonak kicked you from the nests then, did he?’

‘Like a turd on his shoe.’

‘How was working in the louse-mines?’

‘All one day of it? Surprisingly satisfying.’

‘You finally found a calling you can stomach? By the Three.’

‘Don’t tell me I have to go back to those mines.’

Pel’s stern face broke into a smirk. ‘Nothing will ever be the same now. But don’t you worry about tomorrow. We’ve got to survive today first, and—oh shit.’

Axera Terelta was standing outside my diminutive cottage. She had filled Pel’s usual spot, with her warder’s cloak wrapped around her to stave off the dripping rain and hood down low. Mother leaned heavily against the wall, but when she saw us, she exploded into the leafroad, almost knocking over a man balancing clay vases in his arms in the process.

‘Tarkosi Terelta! You come here this bloody instant!’

I felt Pel detach himself from me and linger in a shadow between a patch of candlevines.

‘Oh, no! No you don’t, Pelikai Maladaq! I see you there and you aren’t getting away with anything. Don’t you dare walk away from me, you useless, good-for-nothing, disgraceful, son of a loam-eating bastard! I swear to all the spirits I’ll chase you down and skin you!’

*Is this your mother?*

‘Mhm,’ I said, trying my warmest and most apologetic smile.

*I like her.*

Pel shuffled up behind me, arms open to the canopy like a godseer and head low.

Mother stood before us, arms cross and face quivering with emotion. ‘I am so furious I could actually strangle you, Tarko! What in the Swathe possessed you to run away? I thought you were dead, curse it! Fallen or crushed in a mine or worse, but to think you *left*? That you would run off to join the war-party like you did? How *dare* you do that to us? To our poor hearts, Six Heavens and Six Hells!’

Guilt swarmed me like goblins hungry for the salt of sweat. I went for the only defence I could think of: the “but everything’s turned out alright” approach. ‘The matriarch freed us, Mother. We have her blessing.’

‘I couldn’t bloody care! And *you*, Pelikai. To think you didn’t stop him, but went along with him? What by the bleeding trees were you thinking, you old fool? I’ve let you loiter by this cottage all these seasons out of the goodness out of my own soul because you were a friend to Teyak. I’ve fed and watered you, curse it, and this is how you repay me?’

‘Axera!’ Pel clasped his hands. ‘It wasn’t his fault.’

‘Speak quicker, curse you.’

‘Tarko didn’t have much of a choice in the matter. I sort of... *took* him. Against his will.’

Mother smacked Pel around the face with the back of her hand. I thought the man might crumple to the ground, but the old loamer had some ironpith in him. He rubbed his cheek and dabbed some blood from his lip.

‘I deserved that.’

‘You’re bloody right you did! He could be dead by now, just like his father, and that would be two Tereltas you’ve gotten killed now, wouldn’t it? Damn you, Pelikai!’

Pel bared bloody teeth. ‘I did what I had to do, Axera. Tarko not only survived, he excelled. Proved himself every bit the Terelta I remember.’

Her sharp fingernail came an inch from Pel’s eyes. ‘Don’t,’ she said. The word was like an arrow striking bark. ‘Don’t you dare fill his head with this nonsense just like Teyak’s was. I swear, if this is anything to do with your little band of cretins—’

‘It’s too late for that,’ I said. ‘I’m one of them now.’

‘Well...’ Pel winced.

I was adamant. ‘I will be.’

‘Don’t you dare!’ Mother smacked me, too, cuffing me around my head so much that Serisi and I both seethed.

‘Stop that!’ I yelled.

Mother looked at me, full of rage but taken aback. A shade of disgust lingered in her face. I had never seen such an expression before, just as I had never spoken so loudly to her. ‘You have the gall to talk to me like that, after what you’ve done? Inside, now! Before I change my mind and permanently lock the door on both of you.’

Like the chided children we were, Pel and I followed mother up the ladder. The old beggar took some helping.

Tesq was crouched in the corner. She glared at me under her heavy brows and said nothing. A cup of fruit wine was clasped in her hands. Mother stoked the hearth through its guard. I heard Serisi hiss as the sparks arose. Pel and I perched on short stools and waited.

‘Call it false hope,’ mother said, ‘but when I figured the war-party was where you’d gone, and I imagined you safe with such a force around you. But when Haidak Baran and the others returned with news of a brutal massacre, I feared the worst. No, not feared. *Believed.*’ Axera drew in the breath she had been running out of. ‘I had not even begun to mourn for my dead son when I heard of survivors, and not just any survivors, but traitors to the bloodwood. Imagine my surprise when I hear from the lowest levels, from loam-warders like me, that these traitors come in the form of a young man with a crossed-out sorcerer’s mark, a blind man, half-dead, and a middle-aged scholar with a stripe of white hair and a staff.’

Pel shrugged. ‘Atalawe was in on this, too.’

‘Yeah, I figured,’ Mother snapped.

I frowned. ‘You know Atalawe?’

‘Barely, and that’s not the point. Down we go to the jails, Tesq and I, to find you. The warders would only speak to me on account of me being one of them, and they tell me yes, the boy and all the other deserters and traitors are down in the Burrows, of all places. Further down we go, but they wouldn’t let us see you. Matriarch’s orders. Gods no, I think to myself, and once more, you put my very soul to the test, Tarko.’

‘We stood in the dripping rain for hours until the highwarders came to fetch you,’ Tesq muttered. I hadn’t thought she cared this much to be so angry. ‘When we saw you in ropes and heard the booing crowd, all our doubt disappeared. They called you a traitor. A turncoat to Shal Gara.’

‘That wasn’t easy for me, either, you know,’ I complained.

‘Humiliating, is what it is. Another blow for the Terelta family, just as we were climbing again. Now you bring this upon us? Today a stranger spat at my feet when they heard the gossip,’ mother said.

‘Is it true, Tarko? What they say about you?’ asked my sister.

‘Are you mad?’ I spluttered, but both mother’s and Tesq’s eyes shone with injured anger. ‘No, Mother, of course it’s not. Don’t you notice the profound absence of highwarders around me? Or the lack of ropes on my wrists? It’s not true, Mother. We aren’t traitors. Pel tried to help the war-party. The matriarch herself realised that and saw fit to spare us. Not only have we been pardoned by the matriarch, but we’ve been given her blessing.’

While Mother was less intrigued and still quietly fuming, Tesq cocked her head. ‘To do what, exactly?’

Pel held up his hands. ‘We better start at the beginning.’

My mother’s voice was ground out in her throat. ‘Please do.’

‘When Teyak was alive—’

Mother immediately thumped her fist against the wall. ‘Gods, not that beginning, you idiot.’

‘Fine. You might have written Teyak Terelta off, but to him I still owed my life.’

‘I know. Both he and you have told me many times.’

‘Part of owing him my life was also upholding a vow we had both taken. He, I, Atalawe, and Eztaral Kraid. One to protect the Swathe against an enemy it had forgotten. When the black sun came, I knew it was time.’

‘Mother was shaking her head already. ‘If you say monsters or spirits or whatever they’re all up in gossiping about in the markets, I swear, I will throw you out of this house so fast—’

‘Demons,’ Pel said. ‘Teyak and the rest of us was right all along, Axera. Not only do demons exist, they’ve come back.’

‘Right!’ A footstool clattered as mother moved to grab Pel.

‘We saw them!’ I yelled. ‘We saw them with our own eyes, Mother. Ran from them.’

Axera Terelta came to a halt with her hands around Pel’s neck and the scruff of his battered, stolen armour.

‘Don’t you dare lie to me, Tarkosi.’

‘I may be largely useless, clumsy, and not much of a thinker, but I am not a liar. I’m tired of people laughing in my face for what I know now exists.’

*Our little secret.*

Mother seized me instead and looked deep into my eyes. Like any mother, she knew my face better than I did my own and I was terrified what she would see in it. The fire of a demon behind my eyes, maybe, and the one secret I could not yet give up. Pel spoke as she studied me.

‘I took Tarko against his will, Axera, but I took him to help me save the war-party from walking into the trap the demons had laid for them.’

‘Why him?’ mother whispered to Pel, still looking at me. ‘Why endanger my son’s life like that? Why risk your own at all, you cretin?’

‘I took Tarko to remind Eztaral of her own vow. Being second to Haidak Baran I hoped she would turn the war-party back. Yet like all the others, refused to listen to us.’

‘Of course she did, you idiot. She has no honour. Not since she left Teyak alone his last night.’ That would be forever etched in my mind.

Pel sighed. ‘Unwise as it may have been, she was our best hope. When we tried to sabotage the war-party instead, they captured us. The demons attacked not moments later and through luck or the very hand of a god, we managed to escape with our lives. An arrow wound put me to sleep for the rest of the journey.’ Pel gestured to his wound. ‘The rest, Tarko can tell you.’

I met my mother’s heavy stare square on. ‘It’s all the truth,’ I said. ‘Swear on the Three Gods. We managed to survive the loam to come back and warn Shal Gara of what was coming. The rest you already know. The matriarch believed us enough to put us in charge of defending the bloodwood.’

Mother crossed her arms. ‘All of you?’

‘All of us.’

‘You?’ Tesq scoffed. ‘A worker?’

I narrowed my eyes. ‘I’m no worker any more.’

‘No,’ mother hissed.

‘What? Don’t you believe me?’

Axera shook her head. ‘My mind begs me not to, but I believe you. I just simply won’t allow it.’

‘What?’

‘You heard me, Tarkosi. I won’t have you putting yourself in such danger. I know the life of a warrior and this is not... not *you!*’

I poked at the crossed mark beneath my eye. ‘You should know better than most people, Mother, how much I’ve always wanted anything else than what the gods gave me,’ I said. ‘I used to think it was father’s fault, but now I know it’s Sage Baran’s fault, I have a chance.’

Pel looked at me with an eyebrow raised.

‘You are a worker. You are not a sorcer or a warrior.’

‘But I could be! And if what I saw in Sheertown comes to Shal Gara, we’ll all have to fight for our lives. I’d rather be wielding a sword or a spell than a shovel when that day comes.’

‘No! Enough!’ mother yelled at me. ‘Fighting... *demons*, Tarko? This is ridiculous. It’s time for you to realise your place!’

Wood shrieked as I stood and made for the door.

‘Tarkosi Terelta! If you leave this house, the door might not be open for you when you decide to come back,’ mother warned me.

I hesitated on the ladder’s first rung for a short moment. ‘I’m sorry for what you think of me, but this my life.’

My feet thudded on the leafroad, sending a shock through me. There was little pain from my ankle, which was surprising. Perhaps I was too full of emotion there was no space for the pain to fit. I could understand their anger but their doubt was too much to bare. It was as if I was a stranger to them.

I slumped at the railing, staring out at Shal Gara’s limits. The weak daylight had died in the haze of rain and smoke. I saw torches where usually only candlevines glowed. Patrols bearing fireworm lanterns crisscross the leafroads below me, far more and frequent than usual. It looked like Eztaral was already hard at work.

*I do not understand much of families and their ways*, Serisi admitted. Her voice was as brusque as usual, but not as harsh.

‘Fortunate,’ I hissed at her. ‘Families are always complicated, even the ones that don’t look it. Always somebody to tell you what to do, just like the bloodwood. Don’t you demons have families?’

*We are born from two fires joining. You could call these mothers and fathers, but most do not know or remember theirs. We exist as the horde. We live and we die as the horde.*

‘You said you demons can’t die. Who’s the liar now?’

*Our little secret, perhaps, Tarko. We can die. Many of us have starved to death without the light of the fire. Others, your kind once killed with magic and obsidian and water magic.*

I shrugged, mulling my mother’s words.

*But your mother, she seems to – though I cannot understand why – care for you.*

‘Because I’m hers, or so she told me once. She’s stuck with me.’

*All I know is my father, and I am bound to him just the same.*

While I was wondering how in the Six Hells two demons procreated, and whether I even wanted to know, Atalawe came marching along Kī Raxa branch. Somehow she had rescued Nod out of whichever pen he was being held in and put him to work. Baggages were piled on the orokan’s back, and a number of heavy sacks were slung over the wrangler’s shoulder.

‘Tarko! Where’s Pel?’ she hollered.

‘He’s inside. Talking my mother down from disowning me, or so it sounds like.’ The shouting was muffled but evident.

Atalawe whistled a low and cautious note. She passed me a sack without a single comment. ‘Did it not go well?’

The sack was heavy, and my tired muscles struggled. ‘Mother thought me dead, then a traitor, and now she’s forbidding me to play any part in the Scions or this war.’

I heard the rasp of Pel’s boots on the ladder. The door shut above him but I heard no slam of the bolts.

‘Let’s go,’ I said, but Pel caught my arm and practically staggered against me.

‘Go back inside, Tarko.’



‘You heard what she said. Don’t let the sun go down on your anger. You’ll only wake up with resentment in your heart. I’ve been down that road. You shouldn’t.’

‘But I can help.’

‘And so you shall. We’ll take the evening and convene at firstglow.’ Pel and Atalawe were already poking Nod back the way he had come. ‘Shal Gara can wait for you a few hours more. You need to sleep, first and foremost. In the morning, come to the Branch of Yacada and we’ll see what kind of help you can provide. No arguments and keep talk of Sheertown and our fiery foes to yourself until then. If you’re to be a Scion, you obey those who outrank you.’

‘That’s a cheap trick,’ I mumbled, as I strangled the ladder with my hand. ‘Wait, what about this?’ I held up the sack.

‘It’s yours!’ came Atalawe’s cry, and it was the last I heard or saw of them that night.

Inside the cottage, the mood was sombre. Only the hearth made a subtle crackle. Mother stood with arms crossed. Tesq loitered beside her.

I shut the door. ‘It wasn’t locked.’

Mother marched towards me. It looked as though I were getting another cuff around the ears, and I was about to protest when she seized me in a hug that crushed the breath from me.

As quickly as she had embraced me, mother shoved me back. ‘And it won’t be, just as long as you don’t dare to worry us like that again. I will not send another Terelta to the loam, you understand me?’

‘Perfectly,’ I said. I should have held my tongue, but it was a skill I had never honed. ‘But you know none of this was my fault.’

I could see mother’s patience being tested, but all she did was nod. ‘Pel explained himself.’

Tesq looked me up and down. ‘I’m glad you’re alive,’ my sister admitted, although making a point to barge past me and disappear behind her curtained hollow.

‘I am going to help Pel and the others, you know,’ I told my mother. ‘I’m involved now whether any of us like it.’

*In ways she couldn’t imagine.*

‘...and I know this is what I’m meant for.’

Mother’s stare switched between my eyes. ‘Pel has given me his word. Anything that happens to you I will do to him twice over. Now, to bed with you. I don’t care if the matriarch’s given you her wrinkled old hoof in marriage, under my roof, I am in charge. Not even a demon will change that.’

Mother pointed to the other ladder and my tiny room. I obeyed, grateful for not having to sleep outside. She didn’t question the sack over my shoulder, nor me trying clumsily to wedge it through the hatch.

Misfit hissed at the loud clatter I made as I closed myself away. He was hanging upside down from the branch holding up the roof, his striped tail swishing. He stretched his tiny claws out towards me. I held out my right hand, but to my surprise, Misfit hissed again and backed away along the branch.

‘Do I need to apologise to you, too?’

*What in the void is that thing?* Serisi demanded.

‘It’s called a shrewbat.’

*It is vermin.*

‘No, this is a pet. There’s a big difference. It’s a friendship, sort of. His name is Misfit. Fell into my window when he was nothing but a pup and stayed here ever since.’

*This vermin does not seem to like you.*

Whatever I had done, the little creature refused to come to me. I blew a sigh, already far too tired for any more arguments, even if it was with a shrewbat.

I tried to work the knot to the sack Atalawe had given me, but my fingers ached so much I gave up. Instead, I slumped against it like a pillow and listened to the dripping of the rain-soaked city all the while turning Serisi's broken claw around in my fingers.



*Tree after tree came crashing down to the whooping and hollering of demons and their grub-faced warriors. Through the eyes of a ghost I flitted amongst their churning horde, searching for something I knew not.*

*I saw hulking specimens standing as giants amongst swarms of navik. Their heavy iron armour crashed as they wielded axes against the charred trunks to the pounding of drums. Demons in robes of iron leaf held fire between their claws. Great orbs of it spun before their shining, grinning faces. Others wielded the wildfire as tendrils, encircling trees and scorching them in black spirals and forcing the wildfire ever onwards. Everywhere the dream whisked me, I saw them. Five thousand and more I passed before I saw him.*

*At the head of their number, the demon king stood tall upon a fallen tree, alone and aloft as a watchtower upon a mountain. Black wings wide, his sword pointed ahead, his chest swelled with a desperate anger. Below him, rivers of navik swarmed around the tree and on into the unburned Swathe.*

*A blink transported me behind the king's shoulder, and across his armour of spines, I gazed at the lights of a distant Shal Gara. In the sky of smoke, I saw black claws outstrip the horde and reach for the city's shine. A tempest filled the air with lightning and thunder. As I stared, the clouds revealed the giant serpent's eye, one that opened into a maw of teeth that looked fit to swallow worlds.*

*It was the roar of a demon that dragged me from my horror. The demon king faced me, claws reaching for my neck.*

# 16

## A P T I T U D E

*While the learned soul strives to break each limit of knowledge, the fool's stupidity knows no such bounds.*  
*A PROVERB OF SHAL GARA*

Misfit was perched on the sack alongside me when I woke with a start. His big eyes went even wider before he scurried away in fright.

'Suit yourself, silly beast.'

The sweat was a slick on my forehead. An ache in my left hand was revealed to be the demon's claw, its markings etched into my palm. I had apparently gripped it all through the night. Even now, it was tough to let go of it. Instead I ripped a thick fibre from my bedding and tied the claw around my neck. Even against my bare chest it didn't burn me.

I poked my little window hatch open to find Shal Gara wrapped in a haze that was part mist, part smoke. A lancewing blasted over the branch above and disappeared between the leaves.

Strange, how firstglow was such a dreaded time when I was bound by work. The first day of freedom, and it wasn't early enough. As I drew my leaf window shut, I caught sight of the dark veins running up my forearm. They had grown since the loam. The sandglass wound had gone past the stages of red welts and gone straight to scabs and shiny skin of scarring.

I probed my ankle. The faintest whisper of pain was all I felt. Every bruise I'd felt the day before had disappeared in my sleep. Not daring to question why and how that had happened, I chalked it to a good night's rest and not having demons nipping at my heels.

All that gave me pause was the nightmare. It had been different than the dreams that had come before. They felt fainter. More like nonsense, but this had the clarity of a memory. And worse, a consistency that made me think twice about sleep. Even now, when I thought of the demon's stare and put a hand to my neck, I shivered.

With fingers eager for distraction, I began to tear at the knot to the sack.

□

'I don't know what you've done, Tarko, but all of Shal Gara is abuzz,' mother called to me at the sound of the hatch and the ladder creaking under my feet. She turned only to freeze. The surprise on her face was tempered by a narrowed stare. 'Well, look at you.'

Tesq rubbed her sleep-wrinkled eyes to check if she could see straight. 'What in the Six Hells are you wearing, brother?'

It was a good question. The armour wasn't like any I had ever seen the second-born or sorcers wear. Grey leafleather scales covered most of my torso and neck in an overlapping fashion. In a triangle across my chest, copper plates had been woven. Over my shoulders sat more copper in curved arcs that hugged my skin. My arms were clad in archers bracers, laced with ironpith plates, and I had gloves of leafleather, perfect for hiding my wound away. A tunic and kilt of hide protected my nethers and legs.

In the burnished shine of a sandglass mirror, I studied myself and came away grinning. 'I think I don't look like a worker any more.'

My mother muttered, attacking the grains she was grinding in a clay mortar. She was not as impressed as I was. I'd thought a night's sleep to blunt her reticence but no such look.

'We already have one warrior in the family, and I haven't seen Texoc in four seasons.'

'I think we both know now that if father hadn't died the way he had, I would have been a sorcer all this time, and Texoc would be right here in Shal Gara. We should start blaming Kol Baran for that, and not father.'

'Five days in the forest and you think you know the world.' Mother told me coldly.

'I know what Pel and Atalawe told me. I've seen Kol Baran look at me.'

Mother slammed the pestle down so hard 'And here's you wearing the same kind of armour I had to sell to gemlenders to keep us from ruin.'

'I thought you'd accepted this?'

'For as long as Pel keeps you out of danger. Doesn't have to mean I like it.'

'Did you threaten him?' I asked.

Tesq snorted. 'Of course she did. Said she'd feed him each finger, toe, and eye before she threw him from the tallest branch.'

*My kind of woman*, Serisi spoke to me. I twitched at the surprise and played it as a shiver.

Mother shrugged. 'And I'll be sure to see my threats carried out.'

I smirked. Mother didn't. There was more healing to happen between us. I saw that the fear of losing me hadn't yet subsided. The guilt of keeping the true nature of my predicament from her started to creep through my gut.

To my fault, I escaped quickly, lifting the hatch to let the noise of a rudely awoken Shal Gara into the house. The smell of fires was thick. Tesq, born with highly sensitive nostrils, or so she

claimed, sneezed immediately. It was just a such a shame she didn't have such sensitivity when it came to cooking something edible.

Tesq shooed me away with a yawn. I knew she dreamed the same: anything but to be lumped with the heirs' mantle. 'Away with you, brother. Go be useful for a change.'

My boots thudded loudly on the branch's leafroad. I was immediately stared at by a passing warder, probably trying to figure my rank and order, and what the in the hells I was wearing. I smiled and nodded as he went by.

I needn't have gotten too excited about the attention. The rest of the branch and the roads around the trunk were full of people far too busy or just plain uninterested. Mother was right: the city was abuzz. The messenger children scarpred faster than usual. Half the merchants were busy shuttering their stalls and peering into the forests through the slats, keeping an eye out for something to prove or disprove the gossip traded at their counters.

Further talk of wildfires and monsters had spread in the night. I overheard the same conversations as yesterday, although now more hushed and without as much laughter. I clenched my jaw, vindicated by the worry I heard in their tones. Not that I craved their fear, but their belief.

A night-haired woman stepped into my path, arms crossed and eyes shining. She had been leaning against a louse wagon that I hadn't noticed. 'Dear me! Is that Tarkosi Terelta, I see? Or is it some gloomsprite that's stolen his body?'

'Overseer Ralish,' I said. 'What're you doing here?'

Ralish hooked a thumb behind her and laughed. I had been distracted enough to forget which branch I was on. The louse-mines churned closeby.

'Oh, of course.'

*Who is this, Tarko?*

'Here to work, then? You're a bit late. Missed a few days, didn't you? And here was I thinking you would fit in.'

I smiled awkwardly. Ralish appeared to be irritated, and I was the culprit.

'Didn't you... didn't you hear?' I asked cautiously.

Ralish rolled her eyes, each the colour of the true sky. 'Of course I did, you dolt. I thought you'd found another calling or run away, but then yesterday, who should march past in ropes but you?'

'You saw me, then.'

'Half the bloodwood saw you being taken to the Crimson Crown. Yesterday you were a traitor and today you're free and wearing armour, or so it looks like. Whatever you've gotten yourself into, there's something else in your eyes than there was before. Though it could be the bruises around them.'

I couldn't stop the guilty laugh that snuck from me. 'It's a long story. One that you wouldn't necessarily believe, but it involves the massacre at Sheertown and the wildfires.'

Ralish tutted. 'Two of my cousins were in that war-party.'

I winched. 'I'm sorry to hear that.'

'Gossip says they're more than just wildfires. Monsters, they're sayin'. You were there, what do you say of it all?'

The Matriarch's orders rang in my head like a horn. 'I say maybe they're right,' I muttered.

'Fine. Keep your secrets then, Terelta, 'Ralish replied with a sour tone. 'Shame. Thought you made a good fit in the tunnels. You could've have made a difference here.'

'What I'm involved in, Ralish, will make a whole world of difference,' I replied. 'A real difference.'

I couldn't stop the words or my guilty wince. Ralish saw it immediately. 'Well, I wish you the best, Tarkosi Terelta. Maybe see you around. I'll be right here, working towards nothing.'

'That's not what I meant...'

But Ralish was already walking away. A nearby worker was picking his teeth with a splinter. He puckered his lips and laughed. I put my back to louse-mines and kept walking.

*You have quite the silver tongue, Tarko.*

'Don't you start, 'I hissed at my demon.

*Is that your mate?*

'No,' I laughed, 'she's not my mate.'

*Do you have one?*

'No,' I said. It had never been a priority. I already struggled to not trip over at least once a day and hold a worker's position for more than a week. 'And what about you. Does the mighty Serisi have a worthy mate?'

I managed to climb up two branches on spiralling leafroads before she answered.

*My father will choose for me once the Swathe is won,* she said. There was not a single rise nor fall to her voice.

'How does he choose?'

*Righteous combat, of course.*

'Of course.' A billow of steam wafted around us, as a nearby kitchen opened up vats of soups for queuing workers. My nose must have been ruined by the stench of smoke, but the smell of the food still gurgled my stomach. Gems rattled in wooden tins at rapid speed as bowls were doled out. Slices of meat were being carved off a giant haunch of lizard leg.

'So, you're like a prize?' I asked her.

Serisi ground her fangs. *I am no prize, mortal. I am the one who fights. I am a warrior, daughter of the king and one day queen should chaos choose me.*

Several times in the past days, the notion that Serisi was my enemy had slipped from my mind. I cursed myself as it returned, and for daring to ignoring the fact that inevitably, she would stand before me, likely hungry for my blood. The cold splinter of fear stung my chest. I elbowed

the thought out of my mind. I would cross that leafroad when I was forced onto it. There was trust to gain first, both from demon and Scion alike.

*What are you thinking, Tarko?*

‘That our lives here sound easier,’ I bent the truth, huffing slightly with the effort of taking so many stairs in heavy armour I wasn’t used to. By all rights, I should have been breathing like a forge bellows, but my feet kept hitting the stairs with relentless attitude. I weaved between carts and orokan wagons and those clamouring outside their doors to watch the hive of activity. ‘Look around at all these people, free to live and be. There is no conquest, no chaos.’

*But your world is slanted. There is plain for all to stand on equal footing, but a ladder to climb to reach your sunlight. Chaos has little care for rank. Are you free to live and be as a worker?*

‘I... Well. That’s more... The thing is—’

*Aha! You do not believe in it. You see your precious order as a chain and manacles.’*

‘It works if you believe in it. Order is how the Swathe flourishes, and from what you’ve told me, chaos is nothing but violence and destruction. I know which I would fight for,’ I said, adamant. ‘And what of your world? Your endless rust-red plain?’

I had expected her to seethe and roar at me, but there was nothing but silence.

‘Serisi?’ I said, drawing a flinch from a woman passing by. I bowed in apology and scuttled on. I wished this armour came with a mask like the lancers and wilders.

The demon did not answer me again. Perhaps she saw Atalawe before I did.

At last, I had reached the Branch of Yacada. It was far above the Midern, almost in the crown of the Bloodwood, but did not stretch as high as the lancewing nests. Atalawe leaned against a railing and her hands clasped around her ironpith staff while she admired the flashes of emerald feathers above. She was wearing a hooded jacket and tunic of the same copper and grey as my armour, but a thin mosscloth. The usual belts crisscrossed her chest and hips, and polished vials and pouches hung from them. Only the kilt seemed to match my armour. It was definitely not what I was wearing.

The wrangler grinned at me broadly when she saw me. I of course grinned back, thinking she was eager to start the day, but her clapping confused me deeply. ‘Ah, Tarko.’

‘What? Why are you looking at me like that?’ I demanded.

‘You didn’t look deeper in the sack I gave you, did you?’

I had not. The armour had been far too enticing. ‘Erm...’

‘We only wear armour for battle,’ Atalawe chuckled. ‘Come on, this way.’

To Serisi’s laughter, and while I pulled off the bracers on my left hand with a loud humph, Atalawe led me along the branch and away from the bloodwood’s trunk.

‘You’re walking well today. Barely a limp,’ she noted.

I nodded, still bemused by it myself. ‘Still aches, but barely.’

Atalawe looked proud. ‘Then it looks like my tinctures and mother’s recipes work even better than I thought!’

‘Any sign of Redeye or Inwar?’ I asked, hopeful.

Atalawe shook her head and stabbed that subject dead. ‘Keep up, lad. This way.’

Few bloodwood branches grew straight, and Yacada Branch was such an example. At one point in its ancient growth, the branch had twisted around itself and now a thick knot dominated its middle to form a natural hollow. Carpenters had given it walls, windows, and a door, and either they had been shoddy carpenters, or it had been seasons since they had wielded their hammer stones and saws. Vines grew across the walls like cracks in old skin. The paint that hadn’t peeled off had stained the wood with its weak colours. had been carved across the door, and two out of three windows were without sandglass or shutter.

Atalawe opened the door with a creak. The inside was narrow, dark, and vine-lit, but she ushered me in despite my hesitation. We wound through the narrow, rift-like space between the wood. I ran my hands across the bark, made smoothed over centuries.

A smoky light lay beyond, where the rift opened out into a roughly circular space. Walls made of tree-bark rose like the side of a bowl. The entire clearing was open to the higher canopies. A few vine leaves tried their best to keep the light out, but I could stare up into the highest branches and the orange sky. The sound of a waterfall came from the far end of the space, where a skinny stream of rain water splashed down the wall and into some hidden rift. Mosses swarmed it from every side. Apart from tables that lay about the place, some slumped with their legs broken, the space was mostly empty. There was, curiously, a suspicious patch of dried blood on the floor just near the entrance. A circular and painted card lay in it, also smeared red. I looked sideways at Atalawe.

The woman just shrugged. ‘There were some squatters that had to be kicked out. A hive of urka addicts to be precise, gambling their tiny gems over talta cards. This is the Scions’ Den, not a place for thieves and cheats.’

I couldn’t argue with that. ‘I like the name.’

‘Pel’s great-grandfather thought it up.’

At the far end of the clearing, figures stood in the haze of firstglow. I made out the hunch and bald head of Pel. Eztaral Kraid was there also, judging by the formidable shape. She marched at us without hesitation. She wore a simple grey ironpith mail and a copper mosscloth cloak similar to Atalawe’s. An obsidian sword was at her hip once again, and across her chest, a gleaming white and tawny eagle feather. The mark of her new rank.

A robed and distinctly unarmoured Pel shuffled towards me. A new mosscloth turban perched on his bald head. He looked a fraction healthier and colourful than he had the day before, though his face and arms were a patchwork of salves and bandages. Atalawe’s potions must have been at work. He also wore a grin for my attire.

‘A fine morning to you, Tarko. And my my, you’re bold to be training in full armour,’ he wheezed.

‘I... shut up.’



‘Good to see you alive after your encounter with your mother, Tarkosi. Though you are a little overdressed for the occasion, it has to be said,’ Eztaral greeted me gruffly. ‘Now that you’re finally here, we can at last get started.’

While my head spun, Atalawe coughed. ‘Surely you’ve got something else to say to the lad?’

Eztaral thumbed her nose and stood arms crossed. ‘Yes. Fine. I apologise,’ she said, looking me square in the eyes as if her script was written on my face. ‘I apologise for my disbelief on the Causeway. It seems I lost my way from the Scions’ path. How and why is my own business, and what it cost us is my own burden, but I will remember my vow to your father Teyak and Kī Raxa’s calling. There. Happy now, wrangler?’

As apologies went, the eagleborn’s was awful. I could have been angry, but I knew what guilt looked like. To throw her mistakes in her face would have been cruel, and it wouldn’t have halted the demons one bit. ‘I have a feeling Haidak would have been too proud to turn back no matter what,’ I replied.

Eztaral’s mismatched gaze twitched. I saw her green eye narrow, intrigued. ‘You’re right, Pel. He’s older than his seasons say. I was expecting a brat, just like how Teyak started out.’

Pel shuffled towards us. His lips were a fresh blue and his eyes fidgety. Clearly he was channelling some urka magic. ‘As we all did,’ he replied.

Atalawe snickered. ‘Especially you, Pel.’

‘That’s enough,’ Eztaral tutted. ‘We’ve got a lot to do whilst Haidak is seeing to the lancewings squadrons and the outer defences—’

‘One second.’ Serisi muttered the question and I said it aloud as I looked between Pel and Atalawe. ‘Why do I get the impression that she’s now in charge?’

‘Because *she* is, thick-skull,’ Eztaral replied.

‘But you left.’

Atalawe explained. ‘Eztaral was the head of the Scions after Teyak couldn’t lead any more. Pel has led us ever since Eztaral left.’

So,’ I said. My mother’s accusation of Eztaral abandoning my father had stuck in my mind. ‘Just like that, you change your mind about the demons?’

The eagleborn stepped uncomfortably close to me. ‘Oh, I’m sorry, I thought the time for stupid questions was already over. Seeing as we know each other very little, Tarkosi, let me illuminate you. You see, I’m not an idiot, nor any other kind of person who doesn’t change their minds when the world changes around them. And a flaming sword being swung at your head tends to alter a perception. I made a mistake and I am here to rectify it. So yes. Just like that. Is there anything more?’

‘No,’ I mouthed. decided it was best to keep quiet. Eztaral had shades of my mother and none of the love.

‘As I was saying,’ Eztaral continued between strides around the Den. ‘Haidak is seeing to the outer defences. Sage Saronash has dispatched lancewings to watch our new foes and to other bloodwoods to ask for reinforcements. It’s left to the Scions to raise enough might to fight back.’

‘And on moving the bloodwood,’ Atalawe reminded us.

‘You think you can actually do that?’ I asked.

Atalawe ignored my doubt. ‘No me, lad, but Shal Gara will move herself if she so chooses.’

‘That is why I want you back in your tribe’s scrollcaves, Atalawe, digging through everything you can find as if you were an orokan gorging itself on ūlana fruit,’ ordered Eztaral. Atalawe couldn’t leave quick enough, spinning her staff around her as she walked.

‘You,’ Eztaral waggled a finger at me.

I stood tall. ‘Me?’

‘Yes you, greenhand. You’re lucky Pelikai here is long enough in his yellow teeth for me to listen to his request to make you a Scion. According to Atalawe you survived not only Sheertown but the loam as well, which is no mean feat that I can easily ignore. While I suspect it’s more to do with luck than anything your father left you, we need every scrap of help we can get, even if it is a scrawny excuse for a worker.’

‘So you will train me after all.’ I exhaled, relieved.

‘If you stop lying to us.’

Eztaral’s words choked me. ‘Lying? What do you mean?’

‘Eztaral,’ Pel began. ‘He—’

‘You’ve said your piece, Pelikai. I want to hear it from him now.’

Serisi was equally concerned. *Tarko... Do they suspect us?*

‘Hear what?’ I asked.

‘Don’t be coy now. We need answers, and you’re going to give them to us without a single question asked. Understand?’

‘Alright,’ I said, finding myself shuffling on the spot as if somebody had challenged me to fight. My throat was like sand.

‘Where did you get the nectra from to cast the earth spells you did in the forest? And don’t try to lie. And don’t you dare even think of lying to me. I’ll smell it from a mile away and I’ll beat the loam out of you for it?’

‘I didn’t,’ I said.

‘Lies. Atalawe told us about the whole event, for Three Gods ’sake, boy. So tell me loud and tell me quick, greenhand, where did you get the nectra to cast that magic?’

‘I didn’t have any, I said!’

‘I told you, Eztaral,’ Pel clapped his hands, peculiarly agitated. ‘Just as I said. He had no nectra.’

‘What are you accusing me of?’ I demanded.

‘What we’re talking about, young and very naive Terelta, is how in the Six Heavens and Hells did you summon an earth spell without any nectra whatsoever. Unless you’re saying Atalawe was mistaken?’ asked Eztaral.

I stared between her and Pel until the truth came forth. ‘I—I don’t know. It just happened. I’m still not sure if it did happen.’

‘Have you ever touched nectra?’

‘Of course I haven’t.’

‘What did I say about lying?’

*Be careful, Tarko. You have seen their vehemence. This Eztaral will have us both killed if she finds out,* Serisi whispered in my mind. Although I had little desire to trust her, I believed the demon in that moment. Eztaral’s gaze was too serious, too severe, and yet I had to say something.

I turned to Pel and my words came out in a stream. ‘Redeye left behind a vial of nectra the night you three sprinted into the forest and left me behind with the porters.’

Eztaral ground her foot against the dirt. ‘Ah yes, your sabotage. What was it again, Pel? Tharantos musk? I should have bloody known at the time.’

‘When Redeye insulted me, I decided to keep it. Petty, I know, but I did what I did. When the demons attacked Sheertown I tried to use the nectra—’

*Careful.*

‘—and instead I ended up smashing it in my hand.’ I showed them the healing slices the vial had cut in me. In the light, the glow had disappeared but the black veins were telltale.

‘Rookie error,’ muttered Eztaral.

Pel seized me with his wrinkled hands. No matter how much I tried to shrink away, he held me fast as his clouded eyes examined me, and fingers probed. The old beggar seeming shocked and a fear gripped me. ‘It’s a fatal error in most instances. Sorcers who survive are the lucky ones. Drinking nectra is the only way to survive and channel its power. In your veins it’s a poison.’

‘So Atalawe told me,’ I said, my voice breaking with hope. ‘She also said I would have been dead within an hour. And yet here I am alive days later.’

‘She speaks the truth. All the same Atalawe or a healer should look at this.’

I withdrew my hand sharply. ‘No, that can’t be. I feel stronger than ever.’

Resolute, Pel shook his head. ‘A human isn’t meant to be able to survive this.’

*Yet you are not entirely human, though are you? It appears I saved you from this poison.*

I shrugged Serisi away.

‘The point you and Pel keep conveniently missing is that this fortunate or unfortunate happenstance has clearly given you some power you shouldn’t have,’ Eztaral surmised.

I wasn’t sure to be terrified or excited. The gleam of my future as a sorcer was immediately tarnished. ‘What power?’ Why shouldn’t I have it?’

‘Oh, you mistake me, boy,’ said Eztaral.

‘I don’t like you calling me boy.’

*Or worm.*

‘Well, boy, I don’t much care,’ Eztaral told me, looming close. ‘It’s not the fact that you *shouldn’t* have this power, it’s that *nobody* should be able to cast magic without nectra. If you ask

me for my opinion – which nobody has barely given a thought to do – I wholeheartedly believe it to be a spurious accident, but if it turns out to be true, I’m damn well going to use it, Tarkosi! I’m going to put it to work. I’m going to wring you out for all your worth.’

While I was still attempting to comprehend what Eztaral meant, she and Pel abruptly backed away from me. ‘Let’s see it, then,’ the eagleborn ordered, already sounding unimpressed.

‘See what?’

‘This supposed magic of yours, you dolt!’ yelled Eztaral. ‘What, did you think I wanted a dance or a song? It’s time to go to work! Show us this power that you used so effortlessly in the forest. If you can.’

I had no idea what to do, but the challenge had been laid down and I wasn’t about to ignore it. I took up the centre of the Den and made a show of stretching until Pel buried his face in his blue hand. Feeling some heat in my cheeks, I brushed my hands, feeling the twinge in my right palm, and reached for the dust around me as I had seen earth reavers do. I strained, reaching with shaking fingers to grip the earth.

Nothing happened.

‘What an anticlimax,’ Eztaral sighed. ‘I told you, Pel. Atalawe was dead wrong.’

‘Give him a moment, for gods’ sake. You’re not the sorcer here, I am. Nothing of magic is simple.’

I crooked my fingers at the dust, beckoning it forwards. I stared at a small leaf, willing it to rise up to my hand, or tumble across the dirt, or even shiver in the slightest. It refused me. I could almost see a pattern of a face in the leaf’s veins, and it was grinning at me.

‘You’re trying too hard,’ Pel instructed, when the clearing remained painfully still.

‘Then what? Try less? That’s ridiculous.’

Eztaral was examining her fingernails. ‘Says the barely schooled.’

‘The mind is the power. Calm is the key. Emotion is the disturbance,’ said Pel. ‘Feel the earth around you and believe it can move. Imagine it. We sorcers don’t create, but we borrow. We take and manipulate to our will.’

I did what Pel told me, and went one step further by closing my eyes. I let my hands hang limper than before, but still facing the dust. I tried not to tense a muscle and tried to empty my mind. It was punishing with a demon stuck in it.

*What’s wrong, Tarko? Perhaps it seems you are no wizard.*

‘Will you please!’ I yelled, utterly forgetting myself. I kept my eyes screwed shut.

The eagleborn’s forehead was so furrowed I could have planted seeds in it. ‘Please what, boy?’ she yelled. ‘You want more space? Cup of water? A fresh bucket of dirt? Hurry up, because right now you’re failing to impress me.’

‘Don’t rush him, Eztaral!’

Eztaral snorted. ‘You think of him as Teyak, Pelikai, but Teyak is dead and gone. I feel that as rawly as any of you and yet he can’t be replaced. You should stop trying before you hurt yourself.’

I was scrunching my eyes hard, watching the colours behind my lids flash and swirl. I shut everything out, from the bickering of Pel and Eztaral to the demon breathing in my head. I thought of the rain pattering on my roof in the hovel of a room I called mine, and all the times I had dreamed – wished with all my heart – to have a choice of my own.

‘By the Three and all their spirits,’ breathed Pel.

I opened my eyes, expecting to see a cloud of grit and tiny stones about me and a dose of pure shock on Eztaral’s face.

There was not. Instead, Pel was working his stained lips, eyes to the ring of sky. Eztaral was picking at a dirty nail. I hung my head.

‘Whatever in the Six Hells happened in that forest, looks like it’s of no use to us,’ she said. ‘I’ll have Atalawe train you in the blade and the staff as much as we can before the demons arrive. Perhaps you’ll survive long enough to prove yourself. Come, Pelikai. There are far more important matters that need our attention.’

Eztaral scuffed the dust as she about faced and made for the doorway. The nauseous feeling in my gut deepened with each step she took. Pel was dragged along slowly, shuffling

*How disappointing, Serisi said. You must be embarrassed, Tarko. As a proud warrior of the Voidborn, I know I am. I actually had some high hopes.*

‘Shut up,’ I snapped between gritted teeth. My cheeks burned with a mortified fire. ‘Not now.’

*If I stood in your place, I would teach this eagle woman a lesson with my claws.*

The demon was quite right. I wanted to chase them down. I pushed all my fury and frustration into my gut and I did the only thing I could think of – or do, for that matter – and swung my hand as if I held my loaded sling and imagined an aim at Eztaral’s scorning back.

The eagleborn stopped dead as a handful of dust was whipped from the ground and smacked her in the back of her tattooed head.

Eztaral turned her head to examine the dirt lying on her shoulder. She took a moment to brush it away before looking to Pel. The old beggar was grinning ear to ear like I’d never seen, blue lips straining to keep up.

‘It is true,’ he whispered. ‘By the bloody Three, it’s true.’

‘It may be true or it may be a trick of the wind, Pel, you old dreamer. Do it again, boy!’ Eztaral ordered, whirling on me. ‘Prove yourself.’

‘If you hadn’t noticed, I don’t know what I’m doing,’ I hissed.

‘The mind is the power,’ Pel repeated. ‘Calm is the key. Emotion is the disturbance.’

It took me a long time to find the same concentration to repeat the spell. I didn’t know if it had a name. I did not know how it was accomplished. I did not even know if it was really me and not Serisi, but I fixed my imagination into the dust I felt beneath my cloth shoes.

When I managed to open my eyes without the spell fading, I found a faint, ring-like haze of dust hung around me. It collapsed instantly.

Eztaral stayed silent and foot tapping.

*What does it take to impress her, I wonder?*

‘Again, and this time, manipulate it,’ Pel breathed, as if he too were worried to break my concentration. He spoke so plainly as if I had been a sorcer for decades. It was empty advice, lacking anything applicable, and yet somehow I could feel a pressure under my fingers and in my head I might have called magic. It took both the physical action and the clear thought of something in my mind, but lo and behold, after a dozen tries, I held the cloud steady enough to move it. The stirring lasted for barely a moment, and the spell faded when I let myself bray with laughter. A headache pounded in my head, but that didn’t stop my elation.

‘This is unreal!’ I cried before finding Eztaral bearing down me. She seized my left hand in a grip that was like ironpith.

‘Unreal how it may be, you need to remember that this is no game, no trick to impress the ladies of your branch, no butterfly to admire the colours of. I might only be a second-born and have no dagger across my eye, but I know enough to know magic is not just some ability, it is a gift of the gods that you should be feared and respected. And if for one breath you think you’re special, don’t forget that the demons just reduced our very finest sorcers into mush and burned bones. Magic is not our secret weapon, boy, it is *a* weapon. You might have been given a gift but if it doesn’t help us kill demons, it doesn’t help us at all. Rein your marvel in and remember this is about Shal Gara and the Swathe, not you. Do you understand me?’

I saw a faint blue hand reach to rest on the eagleborn’s.

‘Eztaral,’ Pel said. ‘The lad’s spent seasons dreaming of such a thing as magic. Be still.’

Eztaral worked her lips as if she had plenty more to say. It was Serisi that explained her to me.

*She is afraid.*

The demon was right. I saw where the passion and fire in Eztaral came from, and it was fear. Plain as day, I saw it. I saw the fire of Sheertown in her stare.

‘I was there, too, you know. I know what’s coming to kill us better than most here. Better than everyone, to speak the truth. So if you think this is a game to me, then you’re sorely mistaken. This bloodwood is my home and if this gift keeps it safe, I wouldn’t dare squander it. Pel’s right: I’ve dreamed of mattering since the day I understood the word, and I will. You would be wrong to think otherwise.’

Eztaral released me and Pel her. She withdrew and with a clearing of her throat, she uttered her order. ‘Again.’

Once more, I stilled my heart and bent my hands to the ground. I felt a shake as the dust peeled from around my boots and rose up around me.

‘Manipulate it. Direct it,’ Pel urged, pointing to the side of me where a target of wood hung against the wooden walls. ‘Earth reavers can build walls, fashion darts from dirt, and create a cloud to obscure an enemy. Try to bend it to your will.’

It took me half the morning until I could shape the dust into something I was able to throw, but at last, with magic pounding in my head, I found I could drag enough dirt into some semblance

of a ball and force it at the target. The target rocked back and forth, but only marginally, like a wet sock had been thrown against it. It was paltry, but it was magic. And magic that I had created, no less. I still couldn't quite believe my mind was attached to the body that was casting the spells. Any amount of it entranced me, and I understood I hadn't known true obsession until that moment.

It did not, however, impress Eztaral. Even Pel grinned as I managed to pass challenge after challenge.

I thought I had managed to impress her when I slammed stones into the target so hard that several actually stuck in the wood. I turned to Pel, who was nodding appreciatively, but Eztaral only thumbed her nose once more and took a breath.

'Again!' she yelled.



With Eztaral and I understanding each other at last, the hours fell away to practice. I spent the day in a daze of headaches and elation as the magic swelled within me. Spell after spell was told to me, and spell after spell, I seemed to manage. Through it all, the pains in my skull and bones subsided, until I was able to summon earth almost naturally. Almost. It still required a huge amount of effort and concentration. And calm. The kind I had desperately sought but never found. Pel was right: my mind was the power, demon and all.

The spells had names, or so Pel told me as I trained. One by one, he drove me through them, never letting up until I had managed them at least several times. And by managed, I mean barely.

A rush was the sweeping spells that moved like waves across the earth. Fort spells stayed still and grew tall to form walls. A dart was like an arrow or slingstone, designed to strike and stab. And then there were difficult tendril spells that moved like the needles of weavers.

There were spells I didn't accomplish but got close to. The thunderclap for example, where two stones clashed together around an enemy's head. Time after time, I got close, but failed, much to Eztaral's chuckling self-satisfaction. Or construct spells: magic for the Braided and Painted Ones only, or so I was told. Constructs were shapes forged of earth or water that the sorcer wielded. And here was I, who had barely achieved an accurate dart and an accidental tendril.

As the hours limped by, the practice gradually turned from an effort into somewhat of a reflex. Magic was like an endseason leaf, delicate and one squeeze away from crumbling. To seize it between your fingers too tightly turned it to dust.

When the faint glow of the sun goddess beyond the smoke slipped behind the western canopy, Eztaral finally called a halt. I was sweating from every pore in my body, breathless, and nursing a headache I hadn't ever felt before. I could even hear Serisi huffing hard as if she had trained with me.

'Well that proves it,' Eztaral spoke at last. She hadn't moved in several hours, merely watching. Always watching.

‘Proves what?’ I said, my chest heaving. I was caked in the dust I had been working on all day.

Pel spoke for Eztaral. ‘It proves what Atalawe and I had hoped. That you’re an anomaly, and that somehow, against all odds, the nectra that seeped into your veins has given you an aptitude that no sorcer has possessed in centuries.’

I was already beaming.

‘In the last hour, you’ve cast spells I used to see Redeye struggle with even seasons into his training.’ The old beggar bowed his head at the mention of the missing sorcer.

As always, Serisi was there to fill Pel’s moment of silence.

*Look at you, Tarko. Who thought you would be such an interesting vessel to be caged in after all? Perhaps you won’t die so quickly when my father arrives.*

I wasn’t sure if thanks were in order, but I nodded my head all the same.

Pel pushed his emotions away and spread his hands wide. ‘I can see you’re happy about it, Tarko, but this means nothing if it can’t help us. Earth, you seems to have an aptitude for, but we should test you for other orders of magic.’

Eztaral shrugged. ‘A lump and as inexperienced he might be, but he’s got a way with the spells I can’t deny. However, Pel, your hope is as blind as you are. I know as well as you do that few if any sorcers can manage more than one order.’

‘And how many can cast spells with no nectra?’ I piped up, cocky.

The eagleborn glowered at me. ‘It’s not just that you have no nectra, boy, it’s that you have a dangerous amount in the wrong place.’

Pel interceded once more. ‘And, as such, we need to explore this power. Try the air, Tarko. Try to grasp what you cannot see.’

It sounded like nonsense, but by now Pel’s cryptic encouragements were starting to make some sense. Dust and earth I could sense like strands of spiderthread dragging at my fingers. To attempt to seize the air or bend it to my will was as exactly as futile as it sounded. I strained and I clawed my fingers back and forth, looking most likely like a complete idiot.

Eztaral seemed to agree. Pel kept encouraging me until Eztaral got bored, and busied herself with rolling a barrel from the clearing’s wall. The barrel sloshed as she righted it with one hand.

‘I think we can safely say this isn’t air carving is not the order for Tarkosi. But if you must sate your curiosity, here.’ With a blade of a knife, she cracked open the barrel’s waxed lid, and revealed dark water within.

I took a breath, simultaneously hearing the ground of Serisi’s teeth at the mention of water.

‘Now, Tarko,’ Pel said. ‘You’d think air would be the toughest order of magic, being so intangible as it is. Water, though we can feel it, cup it like dirt, is stubborn. It has a mind of its own.’



Pel started by plunging my hands into the cool water. I hissed as it stung my injury. ‘Of all the magic that demons we have on our side, water is the order they supposedly fear the most. Just our luck that it’s also the most difficult. Only a fifth of all sorcers are water weavers.’

The pain grew in intensity. I hadn’t even begun to try to bend it to my will; the water felt like fresh shards of sandglass in my hand. I ground my teeth until it became too much to bear. Serisi growled in my head, becoming increasingly high-pitched.

‘I cant, ’I hissed as I snatched my hands from the water and wiped them on my new leafleather. Naturally, the cloth was waxed to be rainproof, and it took me a moment to rid myself of the pain that seemed to permeate my whole arm.

Eztaral caught my arm as I took a step backwards. Her hands were cold to the touch. ‘What’s wrong with you?’ she demanded.

‘It must be my injury, ’I said, far too quickly for my liking. ‘Something to do with the nectra.’

‘That enough for today, Eztaral,’ suggested Pel. ‘We’ve worked Tarko harder than any sorcer initiate on their first day.’

‘That’s because he’s got much to learn, you old fool.’

‘Does this mean I’m now an actual sorcer?’ I interrupted. Though initiate was the lowest rank, and I seemingly had an aptitude for the lower form of magic orders, it was still a sorcer’s rank. It was the death of my existence as a mere hand. As such, I hung on Pel and Eztaral’s silence as though it were the brink of a high platform.

‘No. Not until Sage Dūnekar says you are. But we shall see, ’Eztaral hummed. ‘Perhaps you should curb that swollen head of yours and see how it’s really done. Want to show him what a true sorcer looks like, Pel?’

The old sorcer hid his faint blue hands in the sleeves of his Scion’s coat. ‘I am forbidden. Disgraced, remember?’

Eztaral wielded a finger at him. ‘I won’t have your skills wasted when the time comes.’

‘Dūnekar won’t allow it. And it’s been seasons, Eztaral—’

‘I don’t care.’

While they argued, my attention was drawn to the flaming torch in the corner of the clearing.

‘What about fire?’ I interrupted.

‘What of it, boy?’

‘It’s another form of power, right? Another order of magic. Shouldn’t I try it?’

Eztaral grinned. ‘I’m a great fan of confidence in the right places and times, Tarkosi, but there was only one sorcer who could bend fire to their will and that was Kī Raxa, and you are not even a shadow of hers.

Serisi whispered in my ears. *Perhaps you’re something different altogether. Perhaps we are.*

'I think I should try it,' I insisted.

Pel said nothing as Eztaral's smile withered. 'Don't get arrogant now, boy. Stronger and smarter than you have tried and failed.'

I took that as a challenge and stepped towards the torch.

'Tarkosi! I gave you an order.'

'Let him try, Eztaral.'

'Fine!' she cried, 'I normally abhor wasting my time, but I haven't had a good laugh since before the war-party, so by the bleeding loam, why not? Come on then, get on with it, boy.' She put her elbows on the edge of the barrel and her chin in her hands, playing a youngling listening to a story.

The torched crackled just beyond my arm's reach. The amber flames danced their jig before me. I let my attention fall into their unpredictable flicker and glow, letting all else in the clearing grow gloomy. Fingers clawed, arm and head aching, I found the calm between the darker spaces of my mind. All I felt was the growing warmth of a demon claw hidden against my chest.

I reached, aiming only to push the fire as if I were an interfering breeze. There should have been more heat against my hands, but all I felt was a pressure instead. Eyelids barely open now, I snarled with the effort of trying to bend the flames.

And there, just as I thought I felt a magic bite my fingertips, I saw two black slivers of eyes staring out from the flames, and I recoiled sharply.

'Told you,' Eztaral said from over my shoulder. She and Pel had snuck up behind me. They were staring at the flames as intently as I was. 'That kind of magic is for demons and ancient heroes only. Not jumped-up, would-be sorcers that are more mistake than miracle.'

It was in that moment I decided I didn't like Eztaral. And yet somehow, her approval was as gleaming a prize as being able to warp fire with my bare hands. Just as gleaming, and just as unreachable.

I hung my head and glared at the dust beneath my boots. At least I had that power. I stretched my left hand downwards momentarily, but Eztaral slapped my wrist.

'None of that. Your training is done for the day. Be here all the earlier tomorrow.'

'What then?'

Eztaral snorted. 'Why, more training of course, Tarkosi! What, did you think you'd be ready to go to war after one day? Ha! We will train tomorrow, the next day, and so on, until the day you are ready to fight and ready to be called a Scion. And you better hope the demons don't beat you to that day. This is war, Tarkosi, and I'll wager demons don't sleep like we do. Neither will you if that's what it takes. Go to Belarhana Branch, where the scholars have their scrollcaves. You can help Atalawe with whatever she needs to get this bloodwood moving.'

I still couldn't quite understand how exactly a tree moved, but my curiosity was enough to get my tired legs shuffling across the dust. Pel and Eztaral remained behind, arms crossed and watching me go. If I had a tail, it would be somewhat tucked between my legs. The day was a

strange mix of elation and doubt. To be lifted from the workers' tribe was all I'd ever wanted, but it was jarring to find myself so ordinary once again amongst the sorcers.

'And Tarkosi,' the eagleborn called to me before I weaved through the dark of the narrow branches, interrupting my muddled thoughts. 'No matter how much you might want to, I don't want you using even the faintest scrap of magic outside of the Scion's Den. You won't bother a mote of dust, understand? Sorcers have been exiled for less. Do you hear me?'

'I do.'

Eztaral just squinted at me in suspicion, before Pel shook his head. I ambled through the half-dark and out into the bustling city.

*That Eztaral... Serisi smacked her lips. I am starting to like h—*

'Don't you dare say it,' I hissed, as I pointed myself down the bloodwood. 'Don't you dare.'