

# THE IMMORTAL SERPENT

*Book 1 of The Bloodstone Dagger*

K.E. BARRON



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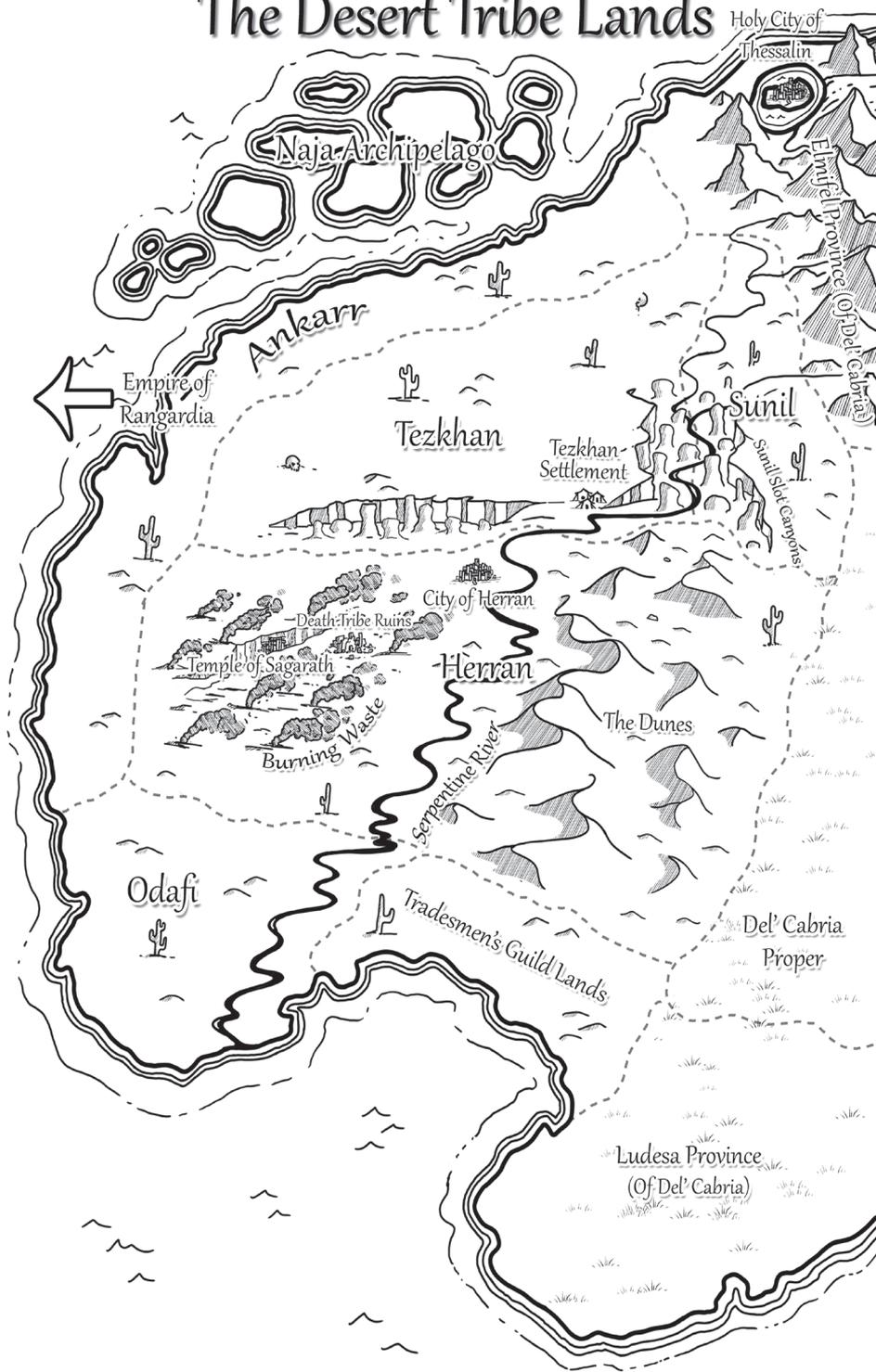
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*Dedicated to Tessa for going on this  
long, epic journey with me.*

# The Desert Tribe Lands



# East Del' Cabria







Earth gives rise to all things  
The source of life gives way to progress  
There is no progress without suffering  
Suffering brings death.

Ruins become overgrown  
Pain is washed away  
Pestilence devours the living and the rivers run dry  
The foundation collapses and all fall with it.

– Circle of Creation





# I

## One to Love, and One to Fear

Vidya's vacant stare hung over her mother's face. She studied the skin stretched tight and yellow around the mouth and eyelids, disfiguring her once flawless features. Exquisite cream-tinted wings laid to rest over her body, primary feathers freshly plucked. Dark, loose curls, just dusted with white flecks at her temples—the only perceptible indication of her fifth decade.

*She was such a beauty . . . then who must this be?* She didn't look real much less beautiful. Her slender neck was blackened with bruises and broken veins, the handprints of the one who inflicted such mortal injury now engraved upon her olive skin. Vidya's fists clenched and unclenched. Her cheeks burned with a sudden familiar heat from the smoldering fire in her stomach, making her want to vomit and scream at the same time.

Few women on the Island of Credence commanded the attention that Councilor Sarta once did. Even now, as her lavender adorned body lie stiff in rigor mortis on the marble slab before the Mothers' Assembly, she was monumental.

The island's most prominent mothers gathered around the Grand Altar to pay their respects and receive the words of the Archon Xenith who stood between the effigies of the Siren and the Harpy, waiting for all to arrive.

Vidya could no longer bear her mother's diminished form and turned her gaze to the sea instead. The swiftly fading sun cast fiery pink strokes across a heavily clouded sky that reflected down on the rolling water's surface, the wet beach glistening like stained glass.

When Vidya lowered her eyes to the crowd ahead of her, she gulped at its size. Not only was the Mothers' Assembly in attendance, but their daughters as well. Even some male faces appeared amongst the throng—most of them husbands, some of them military commanders and their lieutenants. The Citadel Plaza was almost full. Only a few stragglers, some slow-moving elderly, continued to plod up the white marble steps to take their places

before the altar. The sun bathed half their faces in a warm glow, but its falling draped the other in damning shadow.

Her sister Demeter, standing beside her and left of the slab, darted her eyes between the corpse and the crowd every few moments, struggling to keep her expression stoic with little success.

“I had hoped to see her before they defiled her wings,” she muttered with a venomous air.

“Such is required for the ritual,” said Vidya.

Demeter pursed her full, red lips that matched the color of her wig. “Mother believed you were meant for great things—even said the Harpy in you was more of a blessing than a curse.” She exhaled sharply through her nose as if repelling a sour odor and stretched out her pale blue wings as a not so subtle reminder of what she possessed that Vidya did not. “The opportunity has finally come for you to prove her right. See to it that you don’t waste it.” The conversation ended. Demeter again stood sentinel and stone-faced as if her sister were not there, or maybe it was just that she wished she weren’t.

Vidya shook her head. She would never understand why Demeter despised her so much. But she didn’t care anymore. There were more important things to worry about now; their mother’s death was only the beginning.

A humid coastal breeze swept over the altar, blowing Vidya’s mess of brown ringlets behind her and chilling her through her thin, linen ceremonial gown. Nerves hollowed her stomach.

It was time.

The Archon stepped toward the altar’s edge. She wore a light orange wrap-around dress, spirals of gray hair in abundance, held in place with a gold headband. Upon fluttering her flaxen wings, the chattering crowd silenced and instantly fell under her rapture. For a woman nearly in her seventh decade, Xenith still inspired undivided obedience. Frailty was not yet a trait she possessed, which was partly why the Mothers’ Assembly continued to elect her Archon all these years.

In a clear and disarming voice, she addressed the audience. “We are gathered here, at the altar of Yasharra, to mourn the horrific loss of our Mistress of Foreign Relations and Trade.” Xenith breathed deep and lifted her chest to steady her next words. “Her siren’s song forever silenced by a man from whom she had no reason to suspect ill will.”

The crowd remained silent, but uneasy eyes glanced off one another as the woman’s meaning sank in. “As your Archon, it is my duty to inform you, good Mothers of Credence, that Councilor Sarta was *murdered* by the Overlord of Herran, Nas’Gavari.”

The congregation erupted in frightful chatter. “No!” a Mother called out. “How could a *man* hold any violent desire toward a siren?”

“Impossible!” rang other voices.

Xenith beat her wings again and hushed the crowd. “Nas’Gavarr is no mere man. The desert tribes worship him. They call him the Immortal Serpent. He has lived for two hundred years. Maybe more. Somehow, he is able to resist the touch of a siren, and one of Sarta’s caliber . . .” trailing off, Xenith turned her head away from her audience and frowned at the sight of the dead siren on the slab. Her gaze did not hold for long. “He is a threat, the level of which our republic has never before faced.”

Gasps and frightened chatter picked up tenfold. Vidya glanced down to her mother’s corpse once again. *She is a goddess compared to the likes of him. And he took her beautiful neck in his hand and crushed it like a thin reed.* Her nostrils flared, and she began to shake. Demeter’s bottom lip quivered. *What does she know of fear—of rage!* Vidya thought. *She didn’t bear witness to it. All she did was greet him at the gate along with Mother and I, then watch him disappear behind the chamber doors.*

Xenith continued, the fatigue of hard memories clear on her face. “Sarta wished to discuss peace terms with the invader. She took him to the War Council already in session, and it was there he murdered her in front of the entire Siren Council and our military leaders. ‘Man will rise, and the Siren will fall. Your goddess cannot protect you now.’ Those were his words of peace!”

Vidya closed her eyes tight. That single word clawed at her insides. *Protect.* She had joined the infantry to protect the republic from her enemies and yet in that moment, when Nas’Gavarr snapped her mother’s neck with one hand, she could do nothing to protect her. The air in her lungs shook out of her. *After tonight, I will be set on course to avenge her.*

“Blasphemy!” women screamed.

“Why would he do such a thing?” shouted a siren, her voice on the verge of cracking. “The Herrani pulled back their fleet yesterday!” An older siren next to her wrapped a comforting wing around her.

With a steady hand to the buzzing crowd, Xenith calmly continued, “The recent attack on our ports was nothing more than a show of force and a distraction. Just a few months ago, Nas’Gavarr killed a Senator of Del’Cabria, and they have since declared war. It appears Credence is next.”

“Does that mean we must join with Del’Cabria?” a prominent Mother of the assembly asked in horror.

The Mothers of Credence were anything but comfortable with such an alliance. For hundreds of years, the insatiable kingdom on the mainland had threatened to expand their dominion to the little island nation to the south, and they didn’t allow women the right to their own lives let alone the right to govern.

“Absolutely not,” Xenith reassured everyone. “King Tiberius will undoubtedly demand that we become another Province of theirs. No

matter the protections offered, we will not accept. Even if it allows for peace tomorrow, the cost of such—our sovereignty, our way of life—is a price far too high. We can continue to rely on Rangardia in the event of an invasion.”

“Well then, what do you plan to do about this, O Archon?” a father blared, a few paces from the altar.

“*That* is why the Siren Council invites you all here tonight!” Xenith said with a sudden fervor. “For we are not here to eulogize our departed Councilor. No! We are here to bear witness to Yasharra’s true might. Tonight, good Mothers of Credence, we will prove just how false the Overlord’s claim is. Our goddess will not only protect us. She will avenge us!”

A potent silence enveloped the crowd, making way for the harmonic and soothing voices of three young sirens walking up the altar steps. Three male prisoners in chains followed dutifully behind them. They were shirtless and unkempt, but tall and muscular. Enraptured by the sirens’ song, they allowed themselves to be led to a large square pool filled with water before the Harpy’s effigy. Vidya could taste the men’s fear from where she stood a few feet away, but each was powerless to the wishes of the sirens who accompanied them. *And that power had no effect on Nas’Gavarr.* A tremor ran down her spine.

Xenith stepped toward the Siren’s effigy to her left and gently grazed her fingertips along its base. The statue stood twelve feet tall, body and face immaculately chiseled in white marble with glowing wings raised into the air and delicate fingers playing the harp. “Yasharra has two daughters. The Siren, beautiful, wise, and just” she began. “She requires a man’s total devotion. She keeps them contented and grants them purpose. As women, we must care for Yasharra’s creation as we do our own children.”

The Archon then walked over to the other statue on the right. The Harpy’s effigy was crouched atop its pedestal, face contorted into a frenzied shriek forever fixed in bronze. Her wings extended as a menacing vulture, casting its shadow over the prisoners standing in the pool beneath.

Xenith stepped under its wing and placed her hand on its stone base. “Then there is the Harpy, wayward and fierce! She requires no such gifts of spirit like the Siren, only the flesh and blood of dishonorable men. For those who disobey Yasharra’s will by disrupting her peace, the Harpy punishes them and thus restores order. . . . One to love, and one to fear.”

“One to love, and one to fear,” Vidya repeated reverently with the rest of the crowd.

And fear they will, thought Vidya as every Mother, father, and daughter before her squirmed in anticipation of what was to come.

“And by honoring that balance,” Xenith said, “we honor Yasharra’s creation. The status given to all womankind is because of the blood we share with her. In every Crede woman, there is a piece of her within us, be it the Harpy or the Siren . . . but only the Siren governs here.”

“The Harpy shall never rule Credence again!” everyone declared in unison. Demeter’s voice more manifest in Vidya’s ear.

“We rely on the Siren for stable leadership. This stability is more important now than ever. But, it is time for the Harpy to wake from her slumber and inflict her wrath upon our enemies!”

The silence of the crowd was then swallowed up by an eruption of cheers. Demeter cast her eyes down to her mother, refusing to meet her sister’s gaze.

Xenith turned to the three men, still kneeling in the Harpy’s fearsome shadow, and lifted the middle one’s chin to look upon him. His wide, bloodshot eyes begged for deliverance, but he said nothing. “These three dishonored warriors will give their lives and be absolved of their crimes. For the first time in one thousand years, the Harpy’s power will be made flesh!”

Mothers cheered, the sirens sang, and the three criminals trembled. The young sirens assisted them to their feet and shackled their chains to the effigy’s base above their heads. The Harpy needed her sacrifices to suffer, and the law was such that they needed to have committed violent crimes to warrant that suffering. These men were either rapists, murderers, or both, but the ritual technically required none of these. They need only be warriors. Unlike sirens who were born, harpies were made.

“Step forward, Vidya, daughter of Sarta,” Xenith beckoned. Vidya’s stomach flopped as she went to stand by the Archon. She kept her arms taut at her sides.

“Do you accept Yasharra’s gift so that you may become her instrument of war?”

Amongst the crowd, Vidya caught sight of her two closest friends whom she knew from infantry training. Phrea gave her an encouraging nod, and Daphne waved awkwardly, not smiling, but not frowning either. Vidya nodded back to them while trying to keep her nerves under control.

“I do,” she said as loud and clear as she could.

“And with the power she grants you, do you swear to only use it to serve and protect Credence?”

Every eye in the audience fixed on Vidya. She glanced back to her sister for reasons she wasn’t sure. Demeter nodded subtly, out of reassurance or acceptance, Vidya couldn’t tell.

“I do.” She bowed. “For Yasharra and for Credence.”

The crowd erupted in cheers again. Vidya turned to the Harpy’s effigy and the men shivering in the knee-deep water.

They had slumped over, hanging from their chains in defeat. One of them with tears streaming down his face, the other two shaking in terror as each siren stepped into the pool, knives in hand. A vacuum of silence fell over the audience once more. Standing before their sacrifices, the sirens made deep incisions to the femoral arteries of their respective charges, as they’d been

trained to do in order to perform the annual sacrifice made to the Harpy. The prisoners screamed in pain but it didn't take long for them to weaken, and the sirens left the pool, exposing the men and their gushing blood to the audience.

Vidya watched the dark droplets sink to the bottom of the basin then disperse through the water like a faint crimson smoke. The sight of it paralyzed her. It brought her out of her body for a moment, and she barely registered Xenith's gentle hand coaxing her forward.

"Now enter the bath," she whispered in her ear.

Vidya snapped out of her stupor and made way toward the pool. She lifted her dress and stepped in, doing her best to ignore her own reservations and the agonizing moans of the dying sacrifices. The water was much warmer than she'd expected, giving her a stab of nausea. Uncontrollable shivers coursed through her, and she could no longer feel her hands and feet. Vidya was no stranger to gore since she had enlisted in the infantry. Even before then, she had enjoyed watching the men fight each other for sport. She also had contended with more than her fair share of that same violence inflicted upon her by her husband in Rangardia, and she upon him in return. Memories of her time there bubbled to the surface, but she was too anxious to send them back down.

Macabre images of a marble tub filled with bloody water flashed through her mind. *Don't look in it . . . it's too late.* A scream threatened to burst from inside her. Reflections formed in the glassy pink water, and she couldn't be sure they were her own.

Taking deep breaths, she tried to calm herself, but standing up to her thighs in a pool of blood only made her want to clamber back up to the altar and throw herself into the sea. *No, I must do this.* Vidya walked to the center of the pool then turned to face the audience. She forced a smile through tears overflowing from her eyes.

Xenith began to recite the invocations. "With the blood of three, she will be given the strength of three, the resilience of three, and the longevity of three."

Vidya kept her eyes closed as she knelt down in the water. The blood was slippery beneath her knees, the metallic smell overwhelming her senses. The water grew colder, now up to her waist. She swallowed hard, trying her best not to vomit before the Assembly.

"Their flesh and bone will become her flesh and bone," Xenith said.

The sacrifices passed out, and their whimpers were reduced to naught. Their once tanned, olive complexions rendered slate gray, their blood almost completely depleted. If they weren't already dead, they would be in a few more minutes. Their paleness brought back a flash of what she had found in the blood-filled bathtub of her past. *Don't look!*

Vidya snapped her head away from the drained bodies and watched one of the young sirens empty a bag of her mother's beautiful cream plumes into the pool. They floated around her, becoming stained instantly with blood. *It's all right. Mother would have wanted this.*

"And the siren's feathers will become her feathers," Xenith announced. "Tonight, let us sing our siren's song to the Harpy and may Yasharra's wayward daughter finally return home!"

With a mighty beat of her wings, she ignited the crowd once again. The cheers, mixed with the siren's ever-singing voices, danced across the Altar like a hallowed wind.

Vidya sat down in the water, now neck-deep. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and held it before laying her head back and letting herself be fully submerged. The symphony of voices turned into a distorted drone. Vidya's skin prickled, becoming numb as her mother's blood-drenched feathers clung to her body.

Then, the water took on a mind of its own as it whirled over and beneath her, pushing the feathers around to her back as she struggled to hold her breath. Her arms and legs started convulsing, forcing her screams into the thickening liquid.

Shrieks from her own memories ripped through her to join with the muffled ones in her present. *What did you do? You sick bastard!*

Vidya's chest heaved—*I need to get out!*

Bursting from the surface, she gasped for air, choking back the blood running down her face and gagging on its brackishness. She clawed for the pool's edge and dragged her limp, trembling body out of the water, her dress stained red and clinging to her like a second skin. Pain shot through every one of her bones, in her shoulder blades worst of all. She tried to get up, but her legs were too heavy, her arms were too weak to support her weight even on all fours. She collapsed to her stomach, blood dripping into the cracks between the marble.

Storm clouds swirled above the Harpy's effigy, and a thundering boom cracked through the sky. The audience gasped and murmured, all their fears returning at once.

The pain in Vidya's back grew insurmountable. Each muscle and sinew stretched and contorted inside her, making her wheeze with every agonizing breath. Her bones popped and snapped—she could not find the wind to cry out. A new appendage tore through the skin, then another, extending from her flesh and reaching for the thundering sky.



# Nothing Can Offend a Fae'ren

(Seven months later)

The sun beat down hard and relentless on the rolling dunes, creating waves across the desert. Small gusts of wind blew swirling sheets of sand that rose and fell in impossibly perfect patterns. Jeth focused his eyes on the distant amber peaks and the valleys between them.

Then the subtle sound of sand falling to his right. A tiny reptile head, the same dusty color as the mound it peeked out of, slithered from its hiding place. The snake wound sidelong and sidled up against Jeth's long bow, set down next to him. It was small. A viper with plenty of growing to do.

"Hey there, little fella," Jeth said.

He snatched the snake up, quick and precise, and held it below the jaw as it wound its body around his forearm. It was unlikely the little viper would produce much venom at this age, but he couldn't be too sure. He slid down the dune a few feet and let it go. It lifted its head, mouth opening wide in a silent threat. Jeth couldn't help but chuckle. "You're a real menace, now aren't you?" It disappeared in a flash to safety under the sand.

Scampering back to the top of the dune, Jeth lowered to his stomach once again. When he adjusted his eyes back to the distant hills, a palanquin of blue silk and gold appeared on the horizon. *Finally.*

"I see them," he called out before taking his bow in hand.

A head popped up from behind a ridge twenty strides away. Keeping low, Olivier rushed to Jeth's side. "Where?"

Jeth pointed out the palanquin in the distance. The box was being carried on two horizontal brass poles, tied to two camels being led by two camel pullers. One at the front, the other at the rear. Ten mounted escorts rode at the sides.

"Those are Herrani warriors. This has to be the Saf."

"They're too far away. It could just be a mirage," said Olivier.

“Trust me, Oli.” He raised an eyebrow and cocked his head.

“Right. It’s about damn time.” Olivier shifted uncomfortably in his sweat-stained uniform.

Jeth couldn’t agree more. Donning blue and white buttoned tailcoats and tan wrap-around head scarves the desert folk often wore had allowed the soldiers to blend in with the sandy terrain while keeping the sun from frying their scalps. But he wasn’t used to wearing this much clothing back in the tepid old-growth forests of Fae’ren Province, let alone in an arid desert climate. They had spent two excruciating days sitting in wait for the party that was now coming toward them.

“I’ll notify the others.” Olivier went over the dune’s ridge and disappeared down into the rift where four other soldiers were hiding. Jeth took an arrow from the quiver strapped to his lower back and waited for the palanquin to get within range.

The entourage became clearer as they descended the first dip in the sand dune. Each warrior wore charcoal-colored brigandine armor and light, wide-legged pants with leather shin guards bound up to their knees. Massive, curved swords hung at their sides. He counted nine males and one female. The Herrani allowed women to fight in their armies if they wanted, but this was the first he’d encountered since enlisting. The thought of her up against one of their men made him queasy.

Olivier returned. “Everyone is ready and out of sight. We take out the biggest threats first, and in the confusion, Baird and Tobin are going to rush them. They’ll chase them further down the dune where Loche and the major will cut them off while we cover from up here.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Jeth.

“I still don’t see why the sorcerer can’t just—” Olivier shook his hand in the air above his head “—put them all to sleep or something.” He brushed the wind-blown sand from his ginger mustache, only to leave more behind.

Jeth shrugged. “Apparently, the most powerful wizard in Ingleheim needs to save his energy to fight the Overlord.”

“That means it’s up to us bowmen to handle everything, as always.”

“Don’t mind. I plan on earning my keep.”

“Why?” Olivier scoffed as he got his bow ready. “So the urlings will see you as their equal? Keep dreaming, my Fae’ren friend. You can single handedly win Del’Cabria the war like the Great Gershlon before you, and they still won’t let you near their women.”

“Pfft. Urling women don’t do much for me, anyway. They’re so strange looking, I mean . . . what’s the point of having such long pointy ears if they don’t give them a hearing advantage?”

The palanquin disappeared between the dunes. Jeth hoped it would reappear on top of the next ridge in a few moments.

“I don’t know, I kind of like them,” Olivier said. “Besides, there’s more to

a woman than her ears, for Deity's sake."

"Yeah, like her eyes. Why are theirs so far apart?"

"For someone with such good eyesight, you can't see real beauty when it's right in front of you." Olivier chortled.

"It's not that they're not beautiful, just no more than human women. If the urlings didn't keep them so far out of reach from men like us—not that I blame them—they wouldn't seem so great. If you want the next best thing, get yourself a Fae. They look a little like urlings but with smaller ears, and there're no laws against them cozying up to a human every now and again, just as long as you treat them nice."

"You're speaking from experience, I take it?"

Jeth chuckled. "More from outside observation. Fae women don't touch fellas like me."

"Why? Because you're a scrawny varmint who doesn't treat them nice?" Olivier said snidely.

"I'm not scrawny, and I do treat them nice . . . or I mean, I would . . ." Jeth paused, not wanting to divulge his life story while waiting for their targets to get in range. "I've got a girl in Ludesa Province . . . if things go right out here, that is."

Memories of Lady Hanalei's soft red hair and mischievous green eyes drifted through Jeth's mind.

"Ah, say no more." Olivier patted him on the back, shaking sand loose from the folds in his scarf. "There is nothing like the ladies back home, I tell you. I got one waiting for me there myself."

"Then, let's get this mission over with so we can return to them, aye?" Jeth said, patting Olivier on the back in turn. *If she hasn't agreed to marry someone else while you're gone, otherwise these last seven months will have been for nothing.* He pushed the thought from his mind.

The palanquin's golden tip lumbered up the next ridge. Jeth wiped the beads of sweat from his brow and tucked a wayward lock of matted brown hair back under his head scarf.

Olivier harrumphed in good spirits. "If this doesn't turn into a suicide mission you mean, then yes."

The palanquin began to make its descent down the second dune.

"Guess we'll see, won't we? Our targets are in range."

"Alright." Olivier picked up his bow and ran back to his vantage point.

Jeth nocked an arrow and drew it back on his bowstring. He honed his eyesight, bringing the front Herrani warrior into stark focus apart from the others. His eagle-like vision, and his total control of it, came in handy in identifying targets, almost as if he were peering through a spyglass.

"I got the shot. Prepare to take out the big fella on the right after I get the one on the left," he shouted over to Olivier.

"Right." Olivier took aim.

Jeth could no longer feel the dry desert heat as he blocked out all other senses save sight. He and the target were all that existed. With a deep breath, he exhaled and let the arrow fly. It cleanly pierced the warrior's forehead, knocking him off his saddle with scarcely a sound.

Before the Saf's entourage could react to the first death, Olivier's arrow zipped through the air and hit its target in the armored shoulder.

"Dammit!" he griped.

Jeth already had his second arrow nocked and shot the warrior in the side of the neck, finishing the job.

"Don't steal my kills!" Olivier spat.

"Sorry. Hey, there goes Grunt Number One and Grunt Number Two." Jeth brought Olivier's attention down to Baird and Tobin, rushing out to attack.

Tobin expertly dodged a sword swipe from one of the warriors before finding an opening and thrusting his spear through the man's side. Baird, on the other hand, didn't wait for an opening. He drove his spear into the horse's neck, killing it first before impaling the female rider trapped underneath. The horse's agonizing screech ripped through Jeth's ears, and he had to scale back his hearing to concentrate. *The urling doesn't fight fair, but at least he's effective.* He couldn't help but grimace.

The pullers tried to direct the camels as far from the violence as possible only to find Major Faron and Master Loche approaching from the other side. Two more Herrani warriors from behind the palanquin rode to meet them where they clashed tulwar to long sword.

A dismounted warrior rose from the sand where Tobin had left him. "Hey, Tobin's man is getting away . . . he's coming in behind Loche."

"Got him." Olivier aimed and released in a single movement, hitting the Herrani in the throat, the older swordsman left unaware of the danger he had scantily avoided. "We're still outnumbered down there."

"Not for long," Jeth said.

He shot off another arrow to take out one of the warriors surrounding Baird, but those fighting Faron and Loche were moving about too sporadically for Jeth to fix his aim on any one.

His assistance this time would prove unnecessary. A Herrani's throat was slashed near to the bone and another's skull cracked. The older camel puller tried to join the fight, but soon had his torso run through with a spear. The soldiers dispatched all who remained, leaving only the rear puller standing. The young man dashed to the front camel, but Tobin restrained him in a bear maul. Baird stuck his spear into the sand and strode to the halted palanquin with his chest goosed.

Olivier threw down his bow and stretched his arms behind his head. "There. Our job is done. All the warriors are dead, and Baird's got the bride."

Baird climbed the brass poles and reached into the palanquin. As soon as

he put his head behind the silk curtain, he went flying back out and landed flat on his ass.

“I wouldn’t say that yet,” Jeth quipped.

A young, white haired woman, draped in sheer blue silks, face covered up to her eyes in a glittering veil, and armed with a tulwar, sprang from the palanquin. As Baird attempted to get up, she tackled him, sat herself astride him, and raised her blade high, preparing to drive it through his chest. Loché grabbed her by the arm from behind and pulled her off. She spun around and sliced open his forearm, then kicked him away. Baird rolled to his spear, yanked it from the ground, and came at the woman.

“Do not hurt her!” Faron warned.

Spinning around, the Saf slashed at Baird. The blade bit into the wooden shaft of his spear that he used to block her attacks. The big urling held the weapon crossways and gave it a good spin, wrenching her weapon from her hands before pushing her hard with the shaft. The Saf gasped for air, then fell backward and rolled up to her feet with a burst.

Baird came at her again; this time she was ready. She grabbed hold of his spear, brought herself close, and kneed him hard in the groin. Now it was Baird gasping for air as he released his weapon to her and collapsed to his knees. With his own spear, the Saf whacked him across the head and proceeded to wail on the other surrounding men.

Major Faron sliced the spear in two with one swing of his sword, knocking both pieces from her hands. Jeth watched in awe as the now unarmed Herrani woman leaped and rolled away from each soldier’s advances, the blue silk tails of her top billowing behind her, creating a spectacularly elegant image amongst the chaos.

Tobin tried to trap her from behind with the shaft of his spear, but she elbowed him in his sunburnt face and flipped him overhead. Faron came at her again. The Saf kicked up her tulwar from the ground to her hand, then cast the sand into Faron’s face with a flick of the blade. Jeth laughed out loud, more out of disbelief than in humor.

All four men circled the woman. She stood in a defensive stance, breathing hard, her steel pointed out. As Faron began to speak low, Jeth honed his hearing to listen in. “. . . not going to hurt you. Put the sword down and cooperate.”

It then dawned on Jeth, a non-violent way to end this.

He nocked an arrow.

“What are you doing?” Olivier said with a start.

Jeth shut the world out again as he focused on the Saf’s silk tails trailing along the ground behind her. He let go of the bow string. The arrow pierced through her garments and into the sand at a diagonal. She gasped and spun around, stared at the arrow as if unsure what to think and gave the tails a tug. The men capitalized on her confusion and all advanced at once. She roared

and swung her sword, but Faron blocked it and disarmed her. From there, they subdued her while she attacked only with curses.

“Great shot!” Olivier exclaimed, jogging over to Jeth.

Faron forced the Saf to her knees while Tobin went to tie her wrists and ankles. She looked around furiously before settling her gaze on the two archers at the top of the dune. Rage blazed through her pale blue eyes. They were her only visible facial feature, yet they had the power to make Jeth’s spine tingle. He grinned and waved, but his gesture only increased the severity of her angry stare.

“Hah! Now there’s a woman who will never touch you.” Olivier slapped him on the back before sliding down the dune. Jeth chuckled and gulped.

By the time he reached the rest of the task force, the palanquin had been taken down from the camels, and the Saf’s hands were tied to one of them. Her feet were bound together, so she sat sideways between the two humps. He’d never seen a Herrani woman this close before. The ones he had come across were from the poorer villages, wrapped head to toe in robes to protect their skin as they worked in the glaring sun. The Saf, however, wore sheer fabrics adorned with glittering garnets but left much of her honey brown skin exposed. His gaze poured over her ample bosom and drew down to her exposed midriff. It was only seconds before her furious glare found him again, and he immediately averted his eyes.

The portly horse master Roscoe came out of hiding with the team’s mounts. He transferred some of their heavier gear onto the other camel’s back, along with the Saf’s belongings, including silken pillows, clothing, accessories, and weapon. The young puller’s life was spared so he could manage the camels. Olivier, who was also the field medic, went to bind and treat Loche’s wounded arm with alcohol.

The old man ground his teeth in pain.

“You’re lucky, sir,” Olivier said. “The gash isn’t too deep. It should heal on its own well enough.”

“I sure hope you’re right, lad.” Loche took a swig of the liquor himself and wiped the excess drops from his graying stubble. “I’ve had plenty of cuts and scrapes in my day, but this one stings worse than a fair lady’s rebuff.”

“That’s probably the alcohol.” Olivier took the flask from Loche’s hand and placed it back in his medical bag.

Loche waved him along, muttering a thank you, and went to review his maps.

The Mage from Ingleheim, Meister Melikheil, rode up on his white steed. He wore dark desert robes over his tailcoat and vest, yet he didn’t appear uncomfortable in the heat. Jeth stared at him, one part with wonder and another with nervous caution. The man’s imposing presence sent shivers down his spine on the best of days. He spent most of his time meditating and standing watch over nothing in particular, staring out into empty spaces with

an air of superiority like a conqueror acquiring great nations in his mind. *Although, what do you expect from a man whose people worship an active volcano.*

“Master Loche, how far is the nearest watering hole?” Faron asked the navigator.

Tobin turned from readying his mount to scoff to his fellow spearman beside him. “A watering hole? Near these dust mounds? Hardly.”

Loche pointed to his maps and said, “If we keep heading northwest, we will reach Sunil territory by nightfall. It’s relatively neutral ground and a little less destitute. There’s a lake formed by runoff from the Serpentine River.”

“Finish watering your horses, soldiers. We have a long trek ahead of us. Tobin, keep an eye on the hostage.” Faron mounted his bay gelding and went to the front of the party.

“I’ll keep two eyes on her, Major.” Tobin winked at the girl who narrowed her own eyes in disgust.

“And if she tries anything, I’ll keep more than my eyes on her,” Baird added. He took her pant leg and rubbed the sheer fabric between his fingers. The Saf kicked him square in the face with both feet.

Baird staggered back, clutching a bloody nose. Olivier shook his head and went to tend to it, but Baird jerked away from him and turned back to the captive. “Bitch! How would you like to be tied to the underside of that camel!”

“Stand down, soldier!” the major called down the line.

Melikheil nudged his horse away from the men. The epitome of disdain.

“Aye, Major.” Baird spat blood onto the sand.

When the major turned away, Olivier held a handkerchief out to Baird. He snatched it, wiped the blood from his long hook nose, and stormed off. Olivier made a face and Jeth couldn’t stop himself from snickering.

Baird spun right back around. “What are you laughing at, bowman?”

“Definitely not you getting knocked about the head for the third time today, that’s for sure.” He cringed. *Why can’t you say nothing for a change? Nothing is always better.*

“You need to learn to shut that filthy gob of yours.”

“You know, I was just thinking that. . . .” he replied with a nervous chuckle.

“I will quite enjoy wiping that shit-eating grin off your face, Fae scum,” growled Baird as he took steps toward him.

“Fae scum? No, Fae are the pointed ear people of Fae’reen. I have round ears.”

“You dare correct me?” Baird seized Jeth by the scruff.

“I just mean, if you’re going to insult me, do it right, that’s all.” He winced again. *Take the urling oaf’s advice and shut your gob!*

“Don’t bother with him,” said Tobin. “Nothing can offend a Fae’reen. Despite all our efforts to civilize them, they remain shameless. One cannot insult something with no shame.”

“Immune to insults? What about sound beatings?” Baird raised his fist, and Jeth flinched. This time his mouth stayed shut. A punch in the face was preferable to being caught fighting an urling way above his station, regardless who started the brawl.

“Sir Baird, you shouldn’t over exert yourself after that blow you took to the gonads. Are you sure you don’t need me to take a look at them for you?”  
*Oli, always with the perfect timing*

“Excuse me?” Baird let Jeth go and stared at Olivier like he had just told him the sky was brown.

“He’s a medic,” said Jeth, readjusting his scarf. “He wants to make sure your balls are all right.”

“Where do you two get off speaking to me this way?”

“Soldiers!” barked Faron. “Mount up and move out!”

“Major, these humans need to be reminded of their place.”

“All of you stop prattling on like petulant children and get back on your bloody horses!” He narrowed his severe gaze at all four men, his angular features tautening, his lips forming a hard, thin line.

“Aye, Major,” the soldiers said in unison. Baird flashed both Jeth and Olivier a dirty look and climbed his mount.

As the task force rode, the bowmen fell farthest back while the spearmen rode in the middle with the camels. The swordsmen, horse master, and sorcerer rode up front. The Ingle Mage moved his hands about, pulling at the air as if playing an imaginary harp. A mist began to form and lift as clouds above the soldiers’ heads. Sprinkles of water coated Jeth’s sweat-stained skin as he rode underneath them. For all the unease the Ingle Mage brought, it was all worth it for his water magic ability alone.

“Thanks for your help back there, Oli,” Jeth said.

“Don’t mention it. Boys like Baird and Tobin need to be corrected sometimes . . . too bad that often results in a beating for those doing the correcting.”

“Not sure I understand your methods, though. Talking about a man’s testicles wouldn’t be my first choice to diffuse a situation.”

“As a medical professional, I was legitimately concerned for the poor man’s injury.” Olivier laughed.

“It’s nice to know that our balls are safe in your hands.”

Olivier’s freckled face reddened as he cleared his throat. “Alright, that’s enough now.”

“I’d let you examine my balls, Oli.” He grinned. He always got a kick out of how easy it was to embarrass Del’Cabrians, even the human variety from Ludesa Province.

“I should’ve let Baird knock you around a bit. It would do you some good.”

“I’d let you treat my *wounds*,” he said, feigning offense.

“I’ll give you some wounds if you don’t shut it.”

The two men got their laughs out as Tobin and Baird shot frequent glares in their direction.



The sand gave way to dry, rocky plains as the task force came upon Sunil territory. Towering sandstone formations materialized on the horizon, an otherworldly backdrop that could never be reached no matter how long they rode toward it. The temperature cooled considerably as the sun started to set, but the winds only picked up speed.

Jeth welcomed the change of climate and took the opportunity to remove his headwear, allowing his brown fairy locks to tumble down to his shoulders. He dropped his reins and let his horse follow the herd unguided as he wrapped a few of the front strands from either side around the others and carefully tied them together to keep the matted sets from flailing in the wind.

As Loche had indicated, the task force came upon the watering hole around nightfall. The small basin was located at the center of an expansive arena of red castle-shaped cliffs, hoodoos, and plateaus.

The men all dismounted and started making camp for the night. "Jeth. You take first watch." Faron said, passing him by with a crate of supplies in hand. Jeth rejoiced inside at not having to help with the tedious nightly routine and took off to the top of the highest reachable plateau he could find. From there he had an excellent view of the Sunil Tribe Lands.

The sun set, and a brilliant yellow light streaked across the entire horizon. Out from the desert edge, the clouds shifted from yellow to the brightest oranges he had ever seen, a disquieting sight. He was trapped in this barren landscape, so dry and hot that the sky burst into flames each night.

"All there is out here is death," he whispered to himself. For a split second, he felt a longing for the sights and smells of his forest home, but pushed those sentiments back down where they belonged. "There's no going back. It's not your home anymore."

When the sun had sunk beneath the earth, the night swallowed up all but the stars. The one full moon, and the second crescent moon, emitted just enough light that he could possibly make out travelers below, but there were none.

A few hours later, Olivier joined him on the plateau with two oil lamps. "You should go get some gruel before it's gone."

Jeth's stomach growled audibly at the very mention of food. "Thanks. Good luck seeing anything out there." He started off toward the path.

"Jeth, wait!" His friend held out the second lamp to him, brows cinched with a smirk on his face. "You'll need this to light your way . . . ?"

"Oh, right. Thanks." Jeth took it from Olivier and made his way back to camp. As valuable as his eyesight was for seeing long distances, it didn't help

him much in the dark.

When he arrived at the pot of bean stew brewing above the fire pit, he had to scrape the last bits from the bottom. On his way to find a seat, Baird accidentally on purpose bumped him, knocking his bowl to the ground.

“Real nice, Baird.”

“Sometimes the man on watch misses out on dinner. . . . Ever so sorry.” Baird brushed past him to take a seat by the fire, leaving Jeth staring down at his fallen meal. *Most of it should still be good*, he thought. With shrugging sigh, he recovered what he could from the ground.

“Oh look, he’s going to eat it anyway,” Baird jeered. “I keep forgetting that dirt is a delicacy where he’s from.”

Roscoe snickered as he slurped down his stew, making such revolting smacks, Jeth was forced to scale back his hearing. The camel puller, mending the camels’ saddle blankets, made eye contact with him as if to say—*Are you going to take that from them? Aren’t you supposed to be one of them—?* At least, that’s what he imagined the young Herrani was thinking.

A myriad of backhanded responses were at the ready, but Loche was sitting there already giving him a reprimanding eye. Swallowing hard, he plunked himself down on the rocks opposite of Baird and Roscoe and shoved a spoonful of stew in his mouth to ensure that no words would come out of it.

Roscoe snorted through his pig-like nose. “How do you find it, Fae’ren?”

He gave a broad grin, his mouth full. “It’s your best batch yet, Roscoe.” The grit of it made him want to gag. “In fact, it could use more sand.” He took some from below the rock he sat on, daintily sprinkled it into his stew and followed up with another bite. The jarring crunch of the particulates was unpleasant, but it was worth it just to witness the disgusted look on Baird’s face. Roscoe snorted with laughter and shook his head.

“You’re lucky you’re proficient with that bow. Otherwise, they’d have you cleaning out the chamber pots at the prisoner of war camps with the rest of your ilk,” Baird huffed.

“Luck has nothing to do with how proficient one is with a bow, just as it’s not with your spear,” said Loche. He had finished eating and was now sitting by the water basin cleaning and redressing his wound. It had swelled considerably since they set out from the dunes. A hint of rot hung in the air. *That’s not good.*

“Of course, Master Loche, all I meant was . . .” Baird stammered.

Loche pointed to Jeth with his thumb. “This lad here might be the best archer this army has. Pay respect where respect is due, will you?”

An awkward hush fell over the campfire. Flames popping under the cast iron pot were the only replies Loche received. The swordsman returned to wrapping the bandages around his arm, his teeth grinding and eyes watering.

“You need help with that, sir?” Baird’s voice was demure.

“It’ll be fine. Needs more alcohol. Excuse me, lads.” Loche rose to his

feet with a groan, nodded to Baird and Roscoe—not Jeth or the puller—and lumbered toward the tent he shared with Faron.

The remaining three men ate in silence. Jeth couldn't bear to finish his stew now that the jest was over. "Where's Tobin?" he asked, trying to break the tension Loche left behind.

"Sir Tobin," Baird corrected, "is guarding the desert bitch." He motioned his head toward one of the far tents behind him.

"Tell me, *Sir Baird*." Jeth made a slight bowing motion with his head. "Do you call every woman you come across a bitch or just the ones that kick you in the face?"

Baird put down his stew, jaw tight, but Loche's warning must have had some effect on him. He didn't move to attack this time.

"That white-haired vixen is a daughter of our enemy, the most wicked sorcerer of our age. Don't think for a moment she wouldn't cut our throats in our sleep if she had the chance. Desert people possess reptilian blood, you know? They can't be trusted."

"Sure, but Fae'ren have the blood of fairies, and urlings the blood of the ashray. Most of us can trace our lineage back to some ancient being or other, so what's the difference?"

"For one thing, the ashray are pure, enlightened beings, the naja are savage beasts, and fairies probably don't exist."

Jeth snorted into his bowl. "Alright then." *Don't ask the Fae'ren sitting right next to you or anything*, he thought.

Baird continued his haughty rant. "Del'Cabrian ladies are dignified and carry themselves with poise. They dress modestly and strive to be pure in the eyes of the Deities That Cannot Be Named. Now, recall how the Saf was about to present herself to her betrothed."

"Doesn't leave much to the imagination," Roscoe said as he licked his bowl clean.

Baird looked over to the slobbering human beside him and turned up his lip in disgust. Roscoe belched. "I'm going to make sure those horses are good and pegged down for the night. See you lads in the morning." And with that, he was gone.

Baird continued, "Desert women are all a bunch of obnoxious, self-serving whores that dare to fight as men do. I say, if they refuse to act like ladies, then I will address them accordingly."

Bringing his attentions back to his bowl, Jeth rolled his eyes, wondering how many desert women Baird had the pleasure of meeting before he came to such a conclusion. He was satisfied with leaving the subject alone until a small male voice peeped up.

"Women of Herran have as much right to fight for their tribe as anyone else," said the camel puller.

"Did anyone say you could speak, desert dog?" Baird snapped.

The puller cast his eyes away and continued washing the blankets, yet all the while Jeth heard the puller's heart rate pick up at an alarming pace.

Just then, Faron burst from his tent and marched over to the campfire. "Sir Baird, you're replacing Olivier on watch tonight. Send him to my tent immediately."

"Aye, Major." Baird tossed his bowl aside and went to task.

"And Jeth," said Faron as he walked over to him.

He stood with a start and nodded. "Yes, Major?"

"You will spend the night watching Meister Melikheil."

Faron's order caused a tingling sensation at the base of his spine. Since their operation began, there had been no need to guard the Mage. Why now all of the sudden?

"Come." Faron motioned for him to follow. "As you know, our mission is to prevent the union of the Herrani and Tezkhan tribes by abducting the bride. But she also serves as our means for drawing out the Overlord to do combat with Meister Melikheil."

"Right here at this camp?" He gulped, trotting along to keep up with the taller man's stride.

"He intends to use his spirit magic to confirm when the Overlord will arrive. Once we know of his location, we will return to home base and leave the Saf here with him. It will be your job to monitor him while he performs his spell and report his findings back to me. Understood?"

"But how does he know Nas'Gavarr is going to—?"

"Is that clear, soldier?"

"Aye, Major." Jeth saluted and scurried off, only to realize that he was heading toward the Saf's tent. Spinning on his heels, he made way to the pavilion at the south end of camp.

Reluctantly, Jeth peered through the flaps to find the statuesque man sitting in a chair in the center of the tent with his long black hair tied back, and mustache and goatee freshly trimmed. His eyes were closed, both hands placed over the top of his brass walking stick. Melikheil had removed his desert garb and wore a black buttoned tailcoat and cravat. He appeared even more out of place than usual. A cold sweat started to trickle down Jeth's back.

"M-Meister?" he peeped as he stepped inside.

The Mage opened his dark eyes languidly and proceeded to stare through him like he were nothing more than an apparition. Melikheil wouldn't answer, so he resumed. "Have you started without me?"

"No, I'm gathering essence aura to prepare," he replied in his severe Ingle dialect. He then stood, towering above Jeth almost twice over, hence the extra tall tent to accommodate him.

"Great . . . uh . . . Meister . . . or do you prefer Herr Wizard?" he blurted with a nervous chuckle.

Melikheil's daunting gaze narrowed down at him as if considering whether

he should crush him like a bug. *Yes, let's attempt to jest with the most powerful Mage in Ingleheim and Del'Cabria combined.*

"Meister is fine," Melikheil stated, blunt as a hammer, then turned away, allowing Jeth to exhale. "I assume your major informed you of why you are here." Melikheil moved the chair from the middle of the tent.

"Sort of. . . ." he said. "He told me you can track Nas'Gavarr with magic. But permission to ask how?"

Melikheil grabbed his bed roll and started laying it out on the floor. Just then, a little brown serpent slithered out from beneath it, running straight into Melikheil's boot. Without hesitation, the Mage squashed its head with the end of his staff and flicked it out of the tent.

The glint in the Mage's eye made the breath catch in Jeth's chest.

"Yes," he replied. "His daughter would have a rapport with him as would all his children. She would have reached out to him the moment we captured her. I will be projecting my spirit into the Spirit Chamber where I will be able to sense him."

"Right, right." Jeth nodded, not having a clue what the man was talking about. "And you need me to watch you do that?"

"Spiritual projection is difficult and dangerous for any Mage. If my spirit roams too far from my body, it can become lost forever." Melikheil took a seat and motioned for him to sit in the chair. "If you see me convulsing at any point, hit me as hard as you can in the chest. That should bring my spirit roaring back. Understood?"

"Convulsing, hit you, got it."

"I've done this many times before. I don't anticipate you having to do anything, but it's hard to say how far my spirit must roam."

"What if Nas'Gavarr doesn't come—sends someone else to retrieve his daughter on his behalf?"

"He won't," Melikheil said. "Through their rapport, he should be able to sense my spirit in her vicinity. He knows who I am. He knows what I am here to do. And he will face me." Melikheil laid down on his back.

"Do you really think you can beat him on your own? I-I mean, not that I doubt you, it's just . . . the Overlord is immortal and that."

Sitting back up, Melikheil ran his tongue over his teeth. Jeth feared he was getting on the Mage's nerves. "You are smart to doubt, young herr. No Mage in history has come up against Nas'Gavarr and lived to tell of it. However, I'm the first one who truly understands his power. No man is immortal, but some can find ways to live unnaturally long lives. Nas'Gavarr is the only Mage known to hold dominion over all three components of existence . . ."

"Essence, spirit, and flesh," Jeth finished.

Melikheil nodded, raising a black eyebrow. "Ah, the Fae'ren people are not ignorant of magic, I see."

Jeth shrugged. Back in Fae'ren forest, the fairies taught him about the

essences of fire, water, wind, earth, light, and life force. All he remembered, however, was that some people were in tune to the auras that those essences emanated. Those people were known as Essence Mages. He didn't know much about Spirit or Flesh Mages, only to be extremely wary of them.

"I believe Nas'Gavarr uses a combination of essence and flesh magic to keep himself alive, making him near impossible to harm," Melikheil said.

"But you can harm him, right?"

Melikheil brought in hand his staff, adorned with a sapphire clutched in the talons of a brass raven. "I have discovered how to concentrate essence aura in such a way that I have stored years' worth of it in this sapphire that otherwise could only have stored enough for a few days if I'd absorbed it naturally."

"Really? How?" Jeth stared at the tiny blue gem, wide-eyed.

The Mage placed it on the ground beside him and waved a long index finger. "Enough. All you need worry about is making sure nothing happens to me or this staff while I'm out, or we are all doomed." He laid back down, clasped his hands over his stomach, and closed his eyes.

Jeth sat and stared at Melikheil lying there in his black suit like a cadaver awaiting its funeral.

After a few moments, he whispered, "Are you projecting yet?"

There was a long silence before Melikheil uttered a curt, "No."

"How do you even do it?"

The Meister sighed again, this time louder. "By making my spirit strong enough to exist outside the body. It comes through a process known as spirit breaking."

"How do you break a spirit?" he asked, not sure if he wanted to know.

"Years of self-torture."

Jeth said nothing after that. Was the Mage making it all up to intimidate him? People from the Mountain Ranges of Ingleheim were known to be as intimidating as they were tall, and they were certainly tall.

He managed to remain silent for the next half hour, only honing his hearing to listen to Melikheil's strong, droning heartbeat.

Eventually, he felt brave enough to get out of his chair and walk over to the vacant Mage. *There's really no spirit in there. You're looking at a live body with no sentience; you could probably do anything to him, and he wouldn't be aware . . . anything but hit him in the chest.* He waved his hands inches from the man's face. "Meister . . . Meister Melikheil . . . ? Herr Wizard?"

No reaction. *You better find something to occupy yourself. It could be a long night.*

He spent the remaining hours sharpening his arrowheads and repairing damaged fletching while the wind whistled through the hoodoos, and the dried shrubbery rustled against the rippling canvas of the tent. He allowed his thoughts to wander along welcome memories of Lady Hanalei's soft red hair and captivating smile. Then came the not so welcome memories. The

fairies and how they callously—

“Three days,” a deep croak sounded from beside him.

“Gah!” Jeth threw his carving tool.

The cadaver rose from its coffin, erect and silent. Jeth’s heart pounded in his chest.

“Nas’Gavarr . . .” Melikheil looked straight ahead at nothing “. . . is three days from here.”



# 3

## The Pecking Order

“So, how did you end up in Ludesa anyway?” Olivier asked with a heave as he and Jeth lugged a tin basin sloshing with fresh water from the lake.

Now that the task force knew when Nas’Gavarr would be upon them, they spent the next day preparing supplies. The two were busy packing the lake to take home with them. Or at least that’s what it felt like. Without Melikheil to provide water, they would need as much for the long journey home as they could carry.

“To find work, why else?” Jeth replied. They hoisted the basin between their shoulders and carried it up the sandy embankment. “I break horses and herd cattle at a ranch there.”

“I’ve heard lots of your people are laboring on Ludesan farms,” Olivier said. “I always wondered why they’d leave the communes that supposedly provide for their every need.”

Jeth scoffed. “Maybe a long time ago. Now, it’s plagues, poverty, and other gifts from the good ol’ Confederation Period.”

“The Second Wave passed almost a decade ago.” The men lowered the basin near Faron and Loche’s tent. “Is it still that bad living there?”

“A question only a *true* ignorant imperialist would ask.” He chuckled.

“You do realize my province was also swallowed up by urling expansion.”

“Sure, a hundred years before Fae’ren and by will of its own. Not a drop of blood spilled if I remember the tales.” He grabbed a bundle of empty waterskins piled near Roscoe, cooking the day’s lunch, and handed some off to Olivier.

“True, Del’Cabria never had to invade Ludesa with swords or bows, but they invaded all the same. Most of us didn’t like it any more than your people did,” the red-headed bowman replied. “We did have more time to adapt to urling rule, I suppose.”

“And now your province is the second richest in the Kingdom.”

“That’ll happen when you produce most of the Kingdom’s food. Maybe Fae’re should do something similar,” Olivier said with a toothy grin beneath his mustache.

“Like what? Provide the Kingdom all its drinking water? No, wait, Elmifel Province has the monopoly on that . . . as well as all the wine.” Jeth winked.

“You got all that wood.” Olivier bent down to start filling the waterskins along with Jeth. “If your people didn’t worship all the trees, you could cut a few down and make a fortune.”

“We don’t worship them. . . that much . . . just one really, and it’s a very impressive tree, mind you.”

“I bet it is.” Olivier grinned.

Jeth often enjoyed his and Olivier’s political discussions, even when they trod on sour territory. Ludesa Province was home enough for him, its people, for the most part, warm and accepting. No one paid too much mind to where a man came from as long as he understood his place and worked hard. For Jeth, any place at all, even at the bottom, was a step up from where he had been.

When they returned with full waterskins over their shoulders, Major Faron was talking to Baird just outside the Saf’s tent. Faron was stone-faced as always, and Baird bit his cheek with anxiety and nodded repeatedly. “Go retrieve Sir Tobin from watch and come to the Meister’s tent for a briefing,” Faron finished.

Baird did as he was told, and Faron approached Jeth and Olivier. Both lowered the waterskins, and Olivier erected himself, taut as a bowstring. “We’re right behind you, Major.”

“No. You need to tend to Master Loche again, his wound is getting worse.” The major swallowed hard and wiped sweat from his glistening cropped hair that made his pointed urling ears appear even longer.

“Aye, Major.” Olivier marched to his patient’s tent.

“Jeth, you will watch the Saf. She hasn’t eaten or drunk a thing since we arrived. See to it that she does. I don’t want her dropping dead of dehydration before the Overlord gets here.”

“Aye, Major,” he repeated with a curt nod and left.

Faron called after him, “Oh, and don’t talk to her any more than you have to and absolutely no touching her unless to prevent her escape.” He then turned on his heel and was gone.

Jeth’s nostrils flared as he stretched his neck to the side with a crack before picking up one of the waterskins. *Tell that to your spearmen, for Mother’s sake*, he fumed within his mind.

Still shaking his head, he went to Roscoe at the fire pit to grab a bowl of stew and headed for the square floorless tent where the Saf was being held. He walked through the rolled open flap and found her curled up on two cushions, her wrists and ankles bound with a rope tied to a metal peg,

embedded deep into the ground underneath a chair. The tent's canvas filtered the blazing sun's light and gave the entire space an apricot hue.

He placed the bowl of stew on the small table near the sleeping hostage, and she immediately jerked awake. "Wha . . . ?" Her voice was muffled under the veil she still wore. It no longer lent her an air of opulence or mystery. It was just something she hid behind.

Jeth put his arms up and backed off. "It's all right, it's just food."

"Oh," she muttered, glancing at the bowl then waved it away with her bound hands.

"Suit yourself." He unscrewed the cap on the waterskin's spout and held it out to her. "You do need to drink something. You're in a desert."

The Saf gave him a dry, *I know. I live in one, you moron*' glare.

"Alright then, more for me." He cast his head back and drank the refreshing liquid in obnoxious gulps until it ran down his face.

The Saf stared up at him, blinking furiously. "Stop that!"

"Oh . . . you want some?" he offered.

The Saf snatched it out of his hand, and he chuckled to himself as he sat in the chair. She put the skin under her veil to drink, but the cumbersome material got in the way. With a grunt of frustration, she unclipped it from her hair band and tossed it aside. She drank with such urgency the skin deflated into a crumpled hide. Breathing hard, the Saf wiped her mouth and threw the skin back at him where he plucked it out of the air. His gaze caught her unveiled face, and he fumbled it before it hit the ground.

Her skin, decorated with tiny iridescent gemstones around her cheekbones and temples, illuminated like bronze. Her soft, youthful features, full lips, and ice blue eyes made her look both innocent and wicked all at once. A powerful combination.

"F-feel better now?"

The Saf didn't move or say a word, only continued to stare at him with eyes like frost in the desert heat. Jeth's pulse quickened.

"You're the archer that put a hole through my wedding garments." Her Herrani dialect made the words sound like a river flowing off her tongue, a river that could pull Jeth under and drown him if he weren't careful.

He nervously scratched at his scruffy beard and shrugged. "Shouldn't matter now, because you're not getting married anymore. Though, I suppose you'd rather be with your new husband than tied up by enemy soldiers."

The woman pursed her lips and narrowed her unsettling gaze. *When did you start sweating so much?* Jeth thought.

"And look on the bright side," he continued. "It's rumored that the Tezkhan Chief already has about . . . ten wives he stole from other tribes so . . . you can probably do better."

After a few blinks of her long white eyelashes, her features softened, and she appeared about to grin. She didn't.

She ran her hands down the blue silk material of her pants, stopping at the tear made by his arrow. "He is a barbarian, no doubt about that, but lucky for me, I get to contend with eight more right here. I think I would have preferred the company of Chief Ukhuna of the Tezkhan raiders."

"Ouch." Jeth mimed being shot in the heart and then bent down close in his seat as if to tell her a secret. "In your present situation, it might be hard for you to believe, but we aren't *all* bad."

"Oh?" She raised a white eyebrow in feigned interest and leaned into him with a matched conspiratorial tone. She spied around the tent and flashed him a dangerous smile before continuing at a whisper, "Last night, the blonde one with the sunburn insisted on watching me urinate because he thought I might try to escape. As if I could make a run for it mid-stream with an armed soldier holding the rope tied to my ankles." Her smile slanted into a scowl that paralyzed him in his seat. "So, if you were wondering why I refused to eat or drink . . . now you know."

Jeth released a drawn-out sigh. "That's uh . . . sorry . . . and they're supposed to be the civilized ones."

His stomach churned, recalling how he too had contended with numerous brutes like Baird and Tobin for most of his life. He relied on his quick-witted remarks and good humor to distract them from the notion that he was dirt beneath their feet. "Don't worry. You won't have to put up with us much longer."

She scoffed and drew her gaze down to her hands. "Isn't that Mage you brought with you going to try to kill the Overlord?"

He scratched his head again. "Uh . . . you know, I shouldn't be talking to you."

She shook her head and before long, she laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"Your wizard is doomed." The Saf giggled like it was a joke she alone understood.

Jeth could only shrug in response. If anyone could defeat the Overlord of Herran, it would be Meister Melikheil, but he was not about to explain why to the hostage.

"Are you going to eat that?" Jeth leaned over to pick up the bowl of now cold stew on the table.

The Saf grabbed it and held it away from him.

Jeth sat back in the chair as the Saf finally ate a few bites of her meal. In the meantime, he took out his knife and started cleaning small granules from his fingernails. Twenty minutes later, the Saf was done.

She wiped her mouth and asked, "Where are you from, Del'Cabrian?"

Squirring in his seat, he said, "Oh no. I'm not telling *you* that."

"Why not?"

"Because anything I say to you, I might as well be saying to your father.

And I'm not especially comfortable with him knowing where I'm from." Jeth slid his knife back into his scabbard.

"Do you really think the Overlord cares where you're from?" She snorted. "As if you're that important, he'd waste his precious time tracking *you* down."

"He's got all the time in the world."

The Saf pouted, saying nothing more as she slumped against her propped up pillows. Jeth tapped his fingers on the armrest, resenting the silence until she looked up at him from under long lashes, eyes round. *What's the Overlord going to do to your home? You're never going back there*, he thought. "Why do you even care where I'm from?"

"I don't know. . . ." she began in a softer tone, smoothing out her pants. "You're different than the others. You don't speak like them or look like them. They don't seem to accept you as one of them, and yet you fight alongside them. That is very curious to me."

Her frost-blue eyes continued to blaze into his, generating a heat within the tent of which the scorching sun outside was not the source.

"I've been told I can be very intriguing," he said. *No one has ever told you that, not once.*

The Saf bit her bottom lip to stifle a giggle. "I see." She then became serious. "You don't owe those men anything. Why fight for their way of life? For their king?"

Jeth thought back to all the abuse he'd been subjected to since enlisting. Despite his archery skill, which allowed him to be a part of this integral mission—one that could win Del'Cabria the war—he feared his achievements would still go unrecognized. *You probably should have stayed on Talbit's ranch.*

"I was told that the only way a man like me can move up is through military honors."

"Move up what?"

"In status—the pecking order."

"I don't understand that." The Saf shook her head.

"You don't have social statuses in Herran?" he asked with surprise.

"You mean a system in which the privileged on the top rule over others based on some made-up standard? No." She looked him straight in the eye. "For you to risk your life out here for a chance to move up in this silly *pecking order* means that it must be very hard on the bottom."

"Not so bad," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Back where I'm from, everyone is relatively equal. Everyone contributes, and has a voice . . . well, almost everyone." He cleared his throat, not wanting to get into why he couldn't be a part of that because of some inane superstition.

"Then why desire to move up at all?" She inched closer, looking up at him from her knees.

"Some of us have to play by other people's rules to survive." He crossed his arms over his chest and shifted away.

“And that is why they will never change,” she said. “So, stop playing the game.”

“You think it’s that easy, do you?”

She nodded. “In Herran, Sunil, and Odafi, all men and women are free to do as they please and will bear the responsibilities that come with that freedom.”

Jeth raised an eyebrow. “Like the freedom to choose who to marry for instance?”

“Freedom to marry at all.”

“To be clear. You’re *choosing* to marry Chief Ukhuna of the Tezkhan raiders and are in no way being forced to by your father,” he said with suspicion.

The Saf laughed out loud. She was missing one of her upper molars, but it did little to challenge her beauty and, in fact, added to her charm. “Yes, I’m choosing to marry the Chief, but only temporarily.”

“Huh?”

“Your major didn’t tell you, did he?”

“Tell me what?” His nerves fluttered about in his stomach. *You shouldn’t be talking to her for this long, you goat.*

“I’m not a daughter of Nas’Gavarr,” she said.

“What? Are you a decoy or something?”

“Nas’Gavarr has no use for decoys. I’m a thief, posing as Saf’Raisha, intent on robbing the Tezkhan Chief of something extremely valuable.”

“Why are you telling me this?” His eyebrows cinched together as he cocked his chin to the side.

She closed the last small gap between them and whispered, “I can be persuaded to split my part of the earnings with you. If . . .” she bit her lip again and shrugged, “. . . you let me go?”

He leaned back and chuckled deep in his chest. *Of course*, he pushed his tongue against the inside of his cheek. This was not the first time he had been manipulated by someone who saw him as a fool. He could smell it in the air before she’d opened her mouth. Yet there was something about her proclaiming she was not the real Saf that gave him pause.

“You don’t want to keep fighting this war, do you?” she said in breathless wonder. “You deserve much better than this. These Del’Cabrians will never accept you into their society. In the desert, the lowest of men can find whatever it is they seek. Be it riches, respect . . . *pleasure*.” A wicked giggle escaped her at that word. “But it will not come to those who are unwilling to take it.”

It would be easy for Jeth to take her up on her offer, even knowing if he helped her today she would betray him tomorrow. Might be less infuriating than being seen as shit under a horse’s hooves or less futile than trying to prove himself worthy in the eyes of Hanalei’s father.

He hissed aloud at the last thought, which sounded too much like the fancies of a young girl. The Saf kept her eyes on his but didn’t say a word.

Voices rang from outside. Faron, Baird, and Tobin left the Mage's pavilion. The major flicked his hand at Tobin, sending the blonde urling up the hill for watch before ducking into Loche's tent with Baird.

Jeth's attention was pulled back to his charge when she put her hand on his knee, her eyes glossy.

"Please," she begged. "Your major won't listen. You have to help me. You will be a wealthy man if you do."

"Hold on." He got up to leave.

"Where are you going?" she asked, grasping his pant leg. He took her wrist and pulled it aside to check her bindings. The peg was secure. He started for the exit again.

"Stop! I want to ask you something."

He groaned. "What?"

"That older swordsman. The one I cut. Haven't seen him up and about. Is he all right?"

"Why do *you* care?" His brow furrowed.

Baird burst out of Loche's tent and proceeded to kick over a carton of rations. He clutched at his head, running his hands over his brown, sweat-slicked hair, breathing hard.

"I'll be right back," Jeth muttered.

After asking Roscoe to keep an eye on the Saf, he approached the frustrated spearman. "What's going on?"

Baird snapped his head around, eyes red with dark circles underneath like the last hour had been more strenuous than every day since the start of their mission combined. He squatted down on his heels and rested his forehead against his thumbs. "Master Loche . . ."

Jeth stared down at him, listening to Baird's heart pump thick blood through his chest, his own growing heavier. "You two have history?"

Baird stood back up and wiped his dry nose. "You can say that. We've been fighting together since this blasted war started. I've seen him cleave through hordes of naja without breaking a sweat. And a little scratch by some bitch's blade does him in? It doesn't make any ash-ray-licking sense." He stood back up and stormed off toward the lake.

Jeth entered Loche's tent to find Faron and Olivier kneeling over the navigator, now sickly white and covered in rivers of sweat. The stench of rot and burnt flesh was overpowering. He scaled back his sense of smell, but the thickness in the air lingered, along with a sharp, foreign odor.

"Cauterize it again," Faron commanded.

"I've done it twice already. It's not working," protested Olivier.

"Then perhaps you are doing it incorrectly."

"With all due respect, Major. I learned how to cauterize a wound before I ever picked up a bow. Some kind of desert pathogen must have infected it."

Loche opened his peeling lips and rasped, "Don't even think about putting

that hot poker on me again. You should all be getting ready to leave this place. Get as far from here as your horses will take you." He leaned his head to the bag of whiskey in the tent's corner. "Leave me a bottle, and you boys take the rest. Have yourselves one good night. I'll be fine here."

Faron slowly rose to his feet and exhaled heavily through his nose. His tired gaze finally fell on Jeth standing there. "Why aren't you guarding the Saf?"

"She's claiming she's not. But a thief posing as her," Jeth replied.

The major rolled his eyes and led Jeth out of the tent. "Do not believe a word that woman says." He pointed at him with a rigid forefinger.

"What if she's telling the truth?" Jeth said. "Don't you find it strange that Nas'Gavarr would send his daughter to meet her betrothed with nothing more than ten of his warriors and two camels? Why wouldn't he escort her himself if this marriage is so important?"

"She has the marking on her back that all of Nas'Gavarr's daughters have. I checked as soon as we secured her. The Meister confirmed her father is on his way. She is without a doubt, the Saf. You will not leave your post again unless it's an emergency. Is that clear?" Faron's voice stiffened even more, his tone low. Jeth began to tremble.

"Aye," he said, so quiet he wasn't sure a sound came out at all. He bowed and started to walk back.

"Wait," Faron said. "She obviously sees you as an easy mark. *I* will watch her."

"Uh . . . alright. What will you have me do instead? Should I help Olivier?"

"Get some sleep. I need you to watch the Meister for one more night. Be prepared to set off at first light."

*Something's wrong here, you know it,* he thought. It felt prudent to press the issue of the Saf's identity. Make Faron listen. He tried to force the words out, but they wouldn't come. "What about Master Loche?" he asked instead.

Faron's jaw tightened, and his hard, blue gaze broke before replying, "He will not be returning with us."

The major, in his purposeful, stiff fashion, walked toward the Saf's tent.



Every inch of earth under Jeth's bed roll was an obstruction to his sleep. He tossed himself over and over in the sweltering tent and eventually gave up on the idea of resting before his duties with the Mage. He couldn't stop thinking about the Saf and how convincing she was, how close he had come to considering her offer, even knowing it was all deception. *Maybe the major's right not to trust you.*

The sun set on the Sunil Tribe Lands once again. Groggy and overheated, Jeth lugged himself to the fire pit and dished up on some fresh stew. Drunken laughter from Baird, Tobin, and Roscoe made his head pound as he ate his meal in silence. Apparently, Olivier, not in the mood to drink, had gone on watch, leaving Jeth with no one to talk to yet again.

The sound of Major Faron sharpening his sword in the Saf's tent rang through the camp. Her promises of 'riches, respect, and pleasure' still fresh in his mind. And that laugh of hers. *Lies. . . It has to be.*

Done eating, he went to Melikheil's tent. This time the Mage didn't say a word and set to preparing his spirit mediations straight away. He appeared calm for someone nearing an epic battle to the assured death of one or both parties. But something in the silence made the air heavy.

The night drew on, and the discomfort in Jeth's gut only grew, thinking about the Saf's story and Loche's condition. He could still smell the stench of decay in his wound while stringing his bow. He wanted to confide in Olivier and offer assistance. He wanted to do something for the old navigator who came to his defense at the campfire. Loche was one of the few urlings who didn't treat him like dirt, and now he was going to be left alone to die in the desert. The whole situation made him sick to his stomach.

*A desert pathogen should require a desert cure,* he thought. In Fae'ren, before the Del'Cabrians came, every ailment, or close to it, could be remedied with herbs found in the forest itself. Why not in the desert? *The Saf must know*

*something. Why else ask how Loche was faring?* He cursed himself for not pressing her when he had the chance. Perhaps he should bring it up with Faron, but he didn't want to be reprimanded for leaving his post again, especially if his hunch turned out to be nothing.

When the moons were high and full in the night sky, Faron retired for the evening, leaving a semi-drunk Roscoe to guard the Saf. Roscoe sat down in front of the tent rather than inside it. As soon as Faron was out of sight, he pulled a bottle out from behind him and continued to nurse it, gazing out into the star-speckled sky.

The camp remained quiet for nearly an hour—even the mutterings of Baird and Tobin had drifted off. Then came a carrying on from the Saf's tent. Jeth peeked his head out to investigate. Roscoe was inside now, and Jeth honed his hearing to listen closer.

"Come on, girl, do you want to go or not?" Roscoe said, voice rough from drink.

"Not with you. I want the younger one with the matted hair."

"He's busy. You got me for the night, now let's go."

"Don't touch me!" she hissed.

"Then you can wet yourself for all I care," Roscoe griped.

Jeth glanced over to Melikheil, completely vacant in the middle of the tent. *He'll be fine for a minute or two. This might be your only chance to talk to the Saf before it's too late.*

With his bow and quiver strapped to his back, he ducked out of the Mage's tent and jogged all the way across camp. Baird and Tobin were preoccupied with humiliating the camel puller to pay Jeth any mind. He shook his head at Tobin wearing the man's headscarf and butchering his Herrani dialect.

"You're just going to stand there and watch me wet my pants?" the Saf screeched as Jeth strode in.

"Roscoe, I can take her if you guard the Meister for me."

The horse master looked between the Saf and Jeth and grumbled, "Oh, all right. Get me when she's done."

Once Roscoe was gone, Jeth went to untie her rope from the peg.

"Thank you," she whispered with relief.

"Don't try anything, alright?" He took her under her arm and helped her to her feet.

"I'll be good," she cooed with a small sideways grin, making his skin flush.

There was just enough slack in the rope around the Saf's ankles for her to shuffle along while Jeth held the lead behind her. They circled her tent and gradually made way toward a roughly dug latrine past the camels and horses.

When they reached their destination the Saf asked, "Before I squat down and relieve myself with you standing there, might I at least know your name?"

Scratching at his beard in hesitation, he relented, "Jeth." *Doesn't matter now.*

". . . Jeth?" she looked back to him, her face scrunched.

“Short for Jethril,” he blurted, then instantly cursed himself for revealing his full name. He never told it to anyone out of fear of people using it. It was not common practice for Fae’ren to refer to themselves or others in their full name.

She seemed to relax upon hearing its long version, though. “Have you given any more thought to my offer, Jethril?”

He was compelled to correct her, but something about the way the ‘r’ rolled off her tongue was pleasing, so he let it go. “You’re mad if you think I’m going to free you. Now, get on.”

She groaned and shambled to the ditch, and he kept his back turned. He scaled back his hearing a bit so not to listen to her urine soaking into the sand. After a minute or two, a foul smell wafted through the air. “Hey! Are you *shitting?*”

“I might as well while I’m out here . . .” she said between grunts.

He groaned.

“I hate to break it to you, but women do occasionally defecate. Plug your nose or something.”

He did just that and brought his hearing down to near nothing.

The Saf finally emerged, smoothing the sash she wore over her sheer pants. As she moved past Jeth, he pivoted, grabbed her shoulder, and stood in her way.

“Wait,” he said. Her body tensed, so he continued with haste. “To answer your question about our navigator earlier, he’s probably not going to make it. Do you know why his wound won’t heal? Any desert remedy you can think of?”

After a long silence, the Saf’s eyes drifted to the ground. “My blade is laced with a small amount of naja saliva. Ancient Herrani warriors used to apply it to their weapons, but the practice was stopped when the naja first went extinct . . . before the Overlord brought them back.”

“Sweet Mother Oak!” He let go of her shoulder and pushed back his hair. Looking up at the sky, his hands slid down the mats as he gave a silent prayer.

The Saf lifted her eyes to meet his. “When a naja bites you and by some miracle you survive, the saliva will cause the wound to fester and death is a guarantee.”

“Were you ever going to let us know?”

“If I told any of the others, what do you think they would have done to me?” she posed.

“But you’re telling me . . .”

“I have the antidote made from naja blood. It will neutralize the poison, and your navigator should recover.”

“Where? In your things?” He looked back to the mounts and the pilfered items from the Saf’s palanquin. “Help me find it.”

He began to pull her along, but she rooted. “Only if you promise me

something first.”

“I can’t help you escape!” he exclaimed. “But, Loche is a good man. He doesn’t deserve to die!”

Scuffing footsteps came from behind. He had forgotten to bring his senses back fully and hadn’t noticed the liquor infused scent of Baird and Tobin permeating the air around them.

“What is this we’re hearing?” Baird said before taking a swig from his near empty whiskey bottle. “You have a cure for our good Master Loche?”

Jeth immediately stepped up to the two stumbling spearmen, keeping the Saf behind him. “She was just about to tell me. Let me handle this.”

“I’m your superior officer now, and you will defer this matter to me,” Baird replied. “Now hand her over.”

“You’re both drunk. We should inform the major first.” He stood cocked, but his pulse raced out of control.

Baird tossed his whiskey bottle over his shoulder with an echoing clink. “You dare disobey my order, Fae?” Baird’s nostrils flared, and his protruding jaw steeled. Jeth gulped and balled his fists.

“Out of the way!” Baird grabbed him by the coat collar and shoved him to the ground. The Saf on his lead went with him.

“Don’t!” he yelped.

Tobin snatched the rope out of his hand. Then Baird kicked him in the head. Jeth tried to shake off the blow, but Baird grabbed him by the hair and snarled in his ear. “Was I interrupting something between you two? Did you take her out here to piss or to get a taste of that reptilian cunt?”

“By the Unnamed Deities, man, what did your mother do to you?” Jeth rasped. *Wrong thing to say.*

Baird smashed his face into the dusty earth. Once. Twice. Sharp grains shot up his nostrils and filled his mouth. Another bracing kick to the back of the head left him seeing white. He wiped the blood dripping from his nose and choked out gobs of coarse, black dirt. Through his disoriented haze, he watched Baird lumber to the Saf, propelled only by rage and drunken, drifting inertia.

“Rope. Give it.” Baird yanked it from Tobin’s hand before he could reply. “Tell us where this antidote is, desert bitch!” he snarled into her face.

She tried to scream, but Tobin muffled the noise with his meaty palm. “That’s not a good enough answer,” the blonde spearmen said.

“Maybe she needs a little more convincing.” Baird flipped the rope around her neck and yanked her onto her back. He wrapped the slack around his hand and trod toward the horses. The Saf gasped, kicking furiously with her bound legs creating billows of dust as she skidded behind her tormenter.

“Stop!” Jeth croaked. The moons and stars spun in circles above the tilting horizon. He tried to find his feet, but he lost his balance, and fell hard on one elbow.

“Tobin, go find that tulwar!” Baird barked. Tobin ran past his accomplice. Reaching the bag, he searched by throwing items haphazardly until he located the curved blade.

Snatching it from Tobin’s hand, Baird loosened the rope around the Saf’s neck and put the tulwar to her raw, red throat. She gasped for air. “If I were to cut you with this, would you be able to cure it?”

Her eyes scorched. “Cut me and my father will annihilate all of you!”

“We will be miles away before your father gets here, and our Mage will see to his end. We don’t care what happens to you thereafter,” Baird hissed.

He took hold of her arm and put the tulwar against it as Tobin clasped his hand over her mouth from behind once again. The wrath within her ice blue eyes turned to terror.

“You have one last chance. Where’s the antidote?”

The Saf tried to speak through Tobin’s hand. He released her, and she gasped. “It’s in my hair piece.”

“What?”

“Let go of my arm, and I will give it to you.”

Baird did so and put the blade to her bare stomach instead. The Saf pushed out one of the garnets from the band holding her hair up. It wasn’t a gem at all, but a tiny vial filled with a brown liquid. The urling wrenched her wrist and forced the vial from her slack grip.

“Now, leave me be.”

Baird tossed aside the tulwar and placed the vial in his pocket. He didn’t move.

“Let’s get that to Master Loche,” said Tobin.

“Not yet,” said Baird with a dark sneer. “This desert whore tried to kill one of ours. She needs to pay.”

“Hurt her, and I’ll report you to the major,” Jeth warned, standing up on tottering legs.

The two spearmen guffawed. “Go wake him up then if you’re so inclined and leave the *real* men to their business.”

Baird clutched the Saf’s face in his one hand and shoved her to the dirt. His other hand tautened the rope around her neck, making her gulp for air that would not come. He smacked her across the face with the back of his hand.

Jeth’s ears popped. Every grain of sand sang below his feet. The breeze scraped against his dry skin. Aromas separated, distinct and vibrant as color. Something visceral ignited deep in his belly as his eagle vision focused on the men in the dark. All his fears and self-doubt extinguished.

He grabbed the first blunt object he could find—the bottle of whiskey—and raced to Baird. The bottle cracked over the back of his skull.

The glass shattered, its remnants slicing Baird’s nape while the strong-smelling liquor splashed into the fresh cut.

Baird growled, "You son of a boar!"

He lunged forward, grabbed the broken bottle in Jeth's hand, and attempted to wrench it from his grip. Jeth was flung to the ground and rolled into a resting camel. It gave a pitched groan, almost pulling its stake out of the earth as it recoiled.

Still on the ground, Jeth kicked Baird's legs out and threw himself on top of him. Tobin was busy keeping the Saf from wriggling away, allowing Jeth to focus his entire wrath on Baird alone. Not recalling where the broken bottle had gone, Jeth punched him in the face, then again. Again, and again. Each strike satisfied a long overdue need to cause him pain. Before he could land another fist, Baird shoved him over.

Both men shot up, and Baird tackled Jeth back down. But in his intoxication, he tripped up and fell with him. *When did Baird find the bottle?* It didn't matter. He was intent on driving it down into Jeth's face. Jeth grabbed Baird's arm, struggling to keep the jagged glass away, but the urling's strength was overpowering his. Both men's teeth gnashed at the effort.

Jeth let go and rolled to the side before the bottle became embedded in the sand inches from his left ear, more glass pieces breaking off.

Whether it was the adrenaline pumping through his veins or the drink still affecting Baird's reflexes that made Jeth so swift, he didn't know. But he soon found his own hands around the bottle and was walloping Baird in the face. The urling staggered, eyes dashing about, trying to focus on his assailant. The bottle smashed to pieces on the third strike, bits of glass biting into Jeth's right hand. Now he only had his fists. Upon a strike to his midsection, Baird doubled over, but Jeth wasn't finished. He struck Baird with an uppercut so hard the urling fell straight on his back. Then a sickening crack. Blood splattered across the sand. The back of Baird's skull had landed squarely on the camel peg sticking a little too far out of the ground. His mouth twitched for a few agonizing moments before locking in place.

Jeth stood paralyzed over him, watching the blood gush from the back of his head, forming dark puddles in the sand. Panic jolted through him like a lightning strike grounded at his sternum.

"B-Baird?" Tobin sputtered. His bloodshot eyes were fixed on his friend. One hand still over the Saf's mouth and the other clutching her arm in a white-knuckled grip.

Jeth could only stare blankly at Baird's unmoving husk, mouth agape, color draining from his face as quickly as the blood from his skull.