

Chapter One

When you push against the world, it pushes back, sometimes in the unlikeliest of ways—a reaction without thought, but with great purpose, a response to a spreading malice.

Evil was afoot in the world, burgeoning in its power and in its cruelty as it moved from place to place, carried by a fleet of black ships that even now was cutting through a dense fog, toward an isolated group of islands deep in the Northern Sea.

Their black sails pulled them silently through the water, only the sound of waves lapping at the hull and the low moans of despair coming from the nearly full holds. Nearly bursting at their seams they were, offering scarce room for but a few more souls.

Time for one more raid before the winter storms would cut off the islands again until spring.

The wounds of their campaigns cut deeply into the fabric of the world around them since everything was connected in some way: water, earth, plants, animals, and all the life in between, all of it connected, all crying out in a single anguished voice against the ravages of the black ships and cruel land that spawned them. Against that threat, the world pushed back.

True heroes would never volunteer.

No, heroes had to be chosen by something much crueler than fate: happenstance. Reaching out into the biome that covered it, the world searched for its champion among the nearly endless varieties of life connected to it. It did not find a mighty warrior to lead vast armies in epic battles. Nor did it find a wise leader to unite the world and bring about peace. To face the evil that rose in the south, it didn't just need a humble, noble hero. It needed two of them. A pair.

It is hard to imagine a humbler hero than the grasshopper that sat serenely on a tiny blade of grass, chewing happily. Large for his kind, his bright green body was marked by an orange stripe that ran from his head to the end of his thorax. The dense midnight fog was all that kept him hidden from preying eyes as he jumped from blade to blade, eating his fill.

He was a simple creature, the grasshopper, never thinking too much, never worrying too much. Life was nothing more than the next blade of grass and the joy of leaping and flying. One so minuscule could find great happiness in the mere simplicity of it all.

But a simple life was not in his future, not for him or for the boy who slept in the valley below.

Hidden in the fog, steep hills descended to a harbor, then veered off to the open sea beyond.

Near the coast, a village lay silently sleeping, the midnight gloom so thick that the tiny lights of their homes disappeared in the fog, dying the mist as the feeble rays tried to pierce the inky

night. The residents slept soundly under warm blankets by glowing embers, these fading slowly through the dark night before eventually petering out in a wisp of smoke.

Most residents slept peacefully, all except one.

The deep magic that ran through his island was restless, upset by the approaching ships and the devastation being wrought in the south. The boy didn't understand why, but he knew he would find no rest tonight. There was something in his soul that was restless already, agitated, aware that something was stirring—something afoot. So, how could he possibly sleep?

His mother had always said that he and his little sister were connected deeply to the magic of the land, more so than others. She felt it, she said, had done so since the day they had been born. They were different, she would tell them, unique, special. Not like the other kids.

It was all perplexing to him, for he had no pronounced abilities or knowledge; quite the opposite it seemed. Was he not the most boring, unremarkable person he knew?

But like the small grasshopper sitting in the hills above him, everything was about to change for Ashar, for tomorrow would be his brother Wattar's Joining.

Someday, Ashar would go through his own Joining, but not today.

No, today was about Wattar and getting everything ready for the ceremony tonight, so that there would be no panic tomorrow, no last-minute fluster, no emergencies.

The whole family was going to be busy all day. But that wasn't what was keeping him awake.

No, it was something else that came stealing its way into his mind, and that 'something else' was a deep sense of dread that seemed to fill him every time he closed his eyes, a shapeless menace that he couldn't focus on, yet that scared him deeply. Whenever he opened his eyes, he was breathing hard with a light sweat on his brow despite the cold.

Ashar, you are just nervous about tomorrow, his small, timid inner voice advised him time and again. You are quite right to be nervous. It is to be Wattar's special day, after all, and it's been a long time coming. That is why you have palpitations.

He was expected to take on more responsibilities now that Wattar had come of age.

But again, even that wasn't what was worrying him. Quite the opposite. He was excited to get out on his own tomorrow and show Father that he could be trusted.

No, there was something else keeping him up.

At his age, Ashar knew little of the magic that ran through the world. He could see the effects of it all around him and in the changed faces of those who'd been Joined. He had no understanding of magic, and few did really. He knew it surrounded him and everything else, that it had purpose sometimes. That it spoke to people in times of great need.

Usually, the only magic any of them ever saw was after a Joining, when a familiar face would come back from the forest, changed. Changed in both appearance and temperament.

This was different, since his unease seemed to be coming from outside of himself, which if he were being honest, was a little weird. It felt like a weight pushing down on him, trying to force its way into him. It was as if he was feeling someone else's worry, someone inside him who was fretting over something he didn't understand.

Whatever it was, they were very upset and agitated about it, bringing a churning in his gut.

It sounded as though there were a thousand voices whispering, too low to understand. It was disturbing, so much so that he had given up on sleep. It was worse than being awake. Throwing a few more logs on the dying fire, he retreated to his warm blankets to await the new dawn.

At some point, he must have dozed off because when he next awoke, voices emanated from below, his father's deep baritone rumbling from the communal room where the family was gathering after their morning meal. It sounded as if Father was already giving Wattar the first of many lectures on the importance of Joining, which meant that Ashar was late.

Father usually liked to save his speeches for the whole family. So, why had he begun so early? Or was it that Ashar was so hideously tardy ...? He hardly dared think about it in case he was in trouble for keeping the whole family waiting.

Running downstairs, he tried to enter the room casually, hoping Father wouldn't interrupt his rambunctious lecture on his account. He was wrong.

Father stopped dead in the middle of his speech, silent, staring.

"Ashar! How nice of you to join us. Were you going to sleep the whole day away and leave your brother without his offerings? Perhaps you thought Master Gerip would use his army of flying delivery geese to bring Wattar his robes while you slept? You were hoping that a mullenberry bush would spring to life right next to the incense cauldron and drop dried burning mullenberries in so you wouldn't have to gather them. Was that it? That's what you were hoping for?"

"Wait, don't tell me you were counting on a giant tsunami to sweep up from the waves and pull us out to sea? Were you hoping that your brother would join with a fish?"

It was the mother who started laughing first, followed quickly by everyone else, including Ashar. The father always had a way of breaking the tension and making them all laugh. Today, they needed it more than ever. Thankfully, Ashar's father was not cross at him. It was a relief.

"Sorry, Father. Although, the flying delivery geese sound as though they would be very useful." Another round of laughter made it around the room, and Father even had a good chuckle at it.

"You are forgiven, Ashar, my second born. I know you will serve your brother well today."

Father settled his lean frame into a large leather chair beside the hearth. With the fading light from the dying fire, Ashar could see the effects of his father's Joining years ago.

The once black hair had turned to three shades of gray that formed stripes in his beard. His nose and mouth extended just a little, giving a slight wolfish look to his profile in the right light.

Even under the beard, you could see the bulge left by the unusually large canine teeth top and bottom. They gave his father's voice a low guttural sound when he spoke and a fearsome aspect when he smiled. His fingers had shrunk and were shorter than most but thick and powerful, with sharp, heavy nails on each one.

Over the years, his ears had grown, tufted tips sticking out under a mass of unruly hair. Above all, his father's eyes showed the true depth of the Joining, sharp and piercing.

There was nothing human about those pale blue eyes.

His father didn't look at things. He looked through them instead, calculating, analyzing, looking for weaknesses, seeking a way to exploit them. It made him a good leader, fearsome to those who would bring harm into his village, greatly respected by those under his protection.

Once, when he'd been younger, a group from another island had come and tried to steal from the stores that would provide for the village through the winter.

They'd been discovered by accident when Elgin Fitz's goat had got loose in the middle of the night, and he'd chased it down to the storehouse.

An alarm was raised, and the men tried to return to the boats carrying whatever they could. They didn't make it before Father had caught up to them.

Chief Manatar was a calm man, serene; he never raised his voice, threatened, or used his physical presence to intimidate anyone. But that night, the village saw what was lurking under that carefully maintained façade. That night, they saw the beast, the wild animal unchecked by human reason or mercy, motivated solely by the need to protect his village and the food they needed to survive until spring.

When he was done, he loaded the broken men, still groaning in pain, into the boat in which they had arrived, dumping each one in unceremoniously, without regard for the shattered limbs, torn flesh, missing eyes, or any other injuries they had suffered.

He had left them with just sufficient working limbs to sail home again. The warning was clear. The next raiders wouldn't make it home alive.

Ashar's mother waved him over and handed him a small bag of coins.

"You make sure to get a good price when you haggle with Master Danket. She is shrewd, and even on a joining day, she will do all she can to make a profit. She is only nice on the outside. Inside, there is little left but greed."

"Atheria! That isn't a nice thing to say about anyone. She is a little headstrong regarding business. We can hardly fault her for that," Father said from his chair.

"How are you enjoying the garden cart?" his mother asked slyly.

Father had purchased a new cart last year from Master Danket, and the craftsmanship had been so poor that it had broken after only a month. Refusing to admit that she had taken advantage of him, Father had repaired and rebuilt the rickety cart all year, making excuses for all the broken axles and snapped handles.

"Well, I hardly see how that ... That cart is fine. Just too many rocks on the land, and it's hard on equipment. Things break when you use them. That's what they are for. If it isn't broken, you aren't using it enough!" A quick survey of the room told him no one was buying it. "Fine, Ashar, listen to your mother, and be careful when dealing with that greedy hag."

"Manatar!" It was his mother's turn to scold her spouse as the room broke out in another round of laughter.

"Don't worry, Mother, I will be careful."

His mother smiled at him with her eyes, saying much without saying anything.

She was a small woman, barely five foot tall, slightly rotund, with long brown hair. Her nose was sharp and pointed above her small mouth. It hardly seemed she could fit enough food into that mouth to stay alive, but she somehow did.

Her eyes were soft and caring, as was her temperament. It seemed she mainly had inherited maternal traits from her Joining and few physical ones. They were there if you looked, such as the soft brown fur that crept around her neck, the enlarged ears always alert for the sound of danger, and her nails were thin and sharp on her long fingers.

"Ashar! Ashar! Take me with you! Pleeease!" Merdia pleaded with him.

"Not today, Sweetpea. I have lots to do and can't be slowed down by those short little stumps you call legs."

"My legs are not stumps! I can be fast. I can help you carry everything. Father, tell him how helpful I am!" She turned to Chief Manatar to make her case.

Ashar waited for his father to patiently tell Merdia that Ashar had vital work to do and that today wasn't a play day. Instead, he decided to say something else. Something Ashar did not appreciate.

"You have a lot to do, Ashar. Maybe you could use some help."

It was subtle, but the humor had left his voice. It wasn't a command, but there wouldn't be a discussion. Ashar stared at his father, dumbstruck, as Merdia bounced in excitement.

"See? Father knows how helpful I am. He appreciates me even if you don't. He knows I'm the smartest one in the family! He knows that I am better than you at haggling. He knows that ..."

"Merdia, you might want to stop before I change my mind," the mighty chief said, smiling at his precocious daughter. Merdia was the smartest one in the family, smart enough to know when it was time to shut up.

Ashar groaned and accepted his fate. "Fine, go get your load belt, and let's get going. Maybe we'll stop at Master Alcott's and see if he has a set of stilts to make up for your stumpy legs."

Merdia was about to respond but thought better of it, running to her room to dress for the day's adventure.

When she had gone, Father spoke in a low voice.

"With your brother Joining, you will have more responsibilities, and Merdia will have to start taking over your duties. She is young, and don't tell her I said this, but she is very smart. She just needs the experience to go along with all those smarts. I can think of no one I trust more or who is better suited to teach her than you."

Ashar marveled at his father's ability to turn something he didn't want to do into something he would do with pride, and something important. It was one of the qualities that made him such an effective leader. When people did something because they must, they would do the bare minimum necessary. When someone did a thing because they were doing it for another person, a person they respected, they would go above and beyond to do a good job, just to avoid disappointing that person. His father didn't just lead his people.

He got them to put their best effort into the small community they shared.

Merdia came running back into the room, carrying an armload of stuff she thought they would need on their adventure. Ashar smiled down at her and said, "Sweetpea, we are supposed to come home carrying a big load, not leave with one."

She looked down at the large bundle in her arms, and her face reddened a bit, realizing she had shown her inexperience instead of impressing her father with her resourcefulness.

"The water was smart, though. We will need that later," continued Ashar.

He pulled the small flask out of her arms and deftly tied it onto one of the loops on her belt.

"Let's leave the rest here for now. You can never be too prepared but can bring too much if you aren't careful. Then, you arrive at the destination, only to determine you have left no room to bring back anything. In fact, you have to leave things in order to pick up some. A foolish move."

Ashar looked over to see his father nod slightly; it showed approval of how Ashar had handled the situation.

Chief Manatar gestured to his daughter, and she ran over to his side.

He said to her, "Remember, today, you are there to learn, not to teach. Listen to your brother. He will guide you if you let him. You are headstrong, and I love you for that, but today, you must be humble and help your brothers."

In a low whisper to her ear, he said, "And besides which, they don't know how much they need you. Be patient with them. They are only boys, after all."

Merdia gave a quick giggle and ran to her brother's side.

"You coming?" she asked playfully.

Ashar shook his head, grabbing the list from his mother's hand on the way out the door, Merdia in tow.

He scanned the list as they headed toward the plaza. Most of what they needed could be found there. Most of the items were pretty mundane and easy to get. A few others would require more creativity, especially if he would get everything with the money he had been given. He picked a few simple items off the list to give Merdia something to do besides talking nonstop.

Ashar said, "Here, I need you to go get fabric for Mother so she can make streamers for the celebration. She likes blue, so make sure to get some if Master Hetran has it. Wattar likes orange."

Merdia scrunched her face up, but Ashar went on, "Right? I think it's weird, too, but it's his Joining day, and if he wants to ruin his own celebration by making it look like the inside of a pumpkin, who are we to argue?"

Merdia took the small handful of coins and put them in her pocket.

"You have enough to buy a bolt of each and one other color that I will let you choose, as long as it isn't pink. Wattar hates pink."

"Wattar is stupid for not liking pink," argued Merdia. "Everyone likes pink."

"Let's not get caught up with what is wrong with Wattar's brain. We will be here all afternoon. Now, run off and show Father that you can be trusted to get what we need for your brother."

She screwed her face up in determination, remembering that her father would be judging her by how well she handled herself. "Got it, blue, orange, not pink. Don't pay more than ..." She quickly pulled the coins out of her pocket and counted them. "Five krona. No problem."

"Great, I will meet you at the fountain when you are done."

Ashar watched her run off, excited to be on her first outing alone in the market.

He turned and headed to the produce stalls to get a few things off the list. During Joining, his brother would present four plates to nature. One would contain grain to represent the gentle creatures of the forest, while another held fruit and berries for the birds, and the third would have nuts that were loved by the small creatures of the forest. Finally, the last would contain meat for the predators. It was the meat that would be the most important.

It was said that one could never predict or control what animal would choose you during your Joining, but it was also understood that the person chose the animal too. Each reached out to the other in an unheard language, calling to one another.

Wattar would be the next chief when his father stepped down. As such, he would likely need the strength and leadership the predators provided, so Ashar needed to find the best meat to attract the strongest animal for his brother.

Merdia was waiting by the fountain when he walked up, three large bundles of fabric in her arms. One blue, one orange, and the pinkest pink he had ever seen.

Before he could say anything, she reached out and put a two-krona coin in his hand.

"Since I got everything for three krona, the last color was free, and since Wattar is stupid, I got a good color."

He looked dumbfounded, eyeing the coins, then looking back at Merdia.

"How did you get all that for three krona?"

Merdia didn't answer but gave him a sly look instead.

"OK, I probably don't want to know. let's move on," he concluded, chuckling.

Ashar checked his list and moved off in search of the next item.

After renting chairs and torches from Master Hillron for the ceremony, they bought four casks of mead to be delivered to the ritual ground later that night. That left only the mullenberries and the meat. Unfortunately, Master Danket was the only one with mullenberries, so Ashar would have to deal with her, but not yet.

First, he headed over to Master Vultari to find suitable meat. Master Vultari's stall was a good distance from the main market, but it was easy to find. You could follow your nose to it, and the smell was so strong. He was sitting calmly as though he had been waiting for them to arrive, so he must have been waiting for some time.

Master Vultari was no fool; he knew it was Wattar's joining day and that the chief's son would want the best meat for his offering tray, but it was expensive.

"Merdia, Master Vultari has something we need, I don't know what it is yet, but he will want more money than we have for it, so we must be smart and careful. Listen and watch, but do not speak. Understood?"

"Got it, let you do the talking, and stay out of the way."

Ashar looked sideways at his little sister. It made him nervous when she agreed with him.

The man sitting in the shade of his small booth was completely bald, with folds of loose skin around his neck and under his chin.

His nose was long and sharp, giving the impression of a beak, and his head was always moving in small, quick jerks and nods as if he were always trying to look everywhere at once. His ears were so small and tucked so tightly against his head that they were barely more than two lumps—like clay, with holes in them. It was a wonder that he could hear anything at all.

"Ashar! Merdia! So good to see you. How is your father holding up today? Big day for the chief. I bet he is worried that something will go wrong."

Such as not having the best cut of meat? Ashar thought.

The game had begun, and Master Vultari had thrown the first punch.

Ashar took it in stride. "Actually, he is quite relaxed today. I wouldn't be surprised if he was still sitting by the fire reading right now."

His father had been a nervous wreck all week, but he wouldn't admit that.

"We do need some meat, though, nothing too fancy, just enough to do the job. I mean, this is the son of the great Manatar. Wattar will attract the right Joining animal no matter what we put out, right?"

"Of course, of course, but let me show you what we have today." He gestured to the glass-top ice box with a small array of meat and fowl. "If you don't think it will matter, you could save money with a duck. I have several that were taken just this morning. They are very fresh."

"I guess you are right. But you see, Wattar is the son of a chief, and I just don't think a duck will do. What else do you have?"

"Some fine venison, goat. I even have a small pork roast left that might serve your needs."

Ashar pretended to consider the merits of each while scratching his chin. "No, no. I just don't think that will work."

"Well, there is one other thing, but I don't think you would be interested. It's a little pricey," he said, a wry grin spreading over his face.

Now, they had come to it.

Reaching into the case, he pulled a bundle out of the bottom and unwrapped it, exposing a large chunk of almost pure black meat.

Ashar recognized it instantly. It was the liver from a tarmark.

Master Vultari was playing a very serious game indeed. Tarmarks were hard to hunt and rarely came close enough to shore for any small fishing boats to reach them, but he had somehow managed to acquire one in the off-season. Ashar knew he was in trouble, and there was no way he could afford something as lavish as tarmark for his brother's Joining.

"How much?" he asked nervously, trying not to look nervous.

"Two hundred krona."

Ashar nearly choked himself, trying not to gasp at the sum.

He barely had thirty krona left and still needed to get the mullenberries from Master Danket, who he knew would not let them go cheaply.

He had fallen into Vultari's trap like a fool. Now, if he tried to negotiate for another cut of meat, Master Vultari would stick him for a high price. Worse, if he didn't buy the tarmark, Master Vultari would tell the whole town that Chief Manatar didn't think his son was worth the best for his Joining. Ashar scratched his chin, trying to buy time.

About then, he noticed that Merdia was no longer standing by his side. Where had she gotten to?

"Merdia?" Ashar called out, using his sister's absence to buy a few more seconds to figure out how he would escape the mess he had gotten himself into. He wasn't even sure if his family would still have two hundred krona after all the expense of preparing for Wattar's Joining.

He was about to call out again when Merdia came skipping around the side of the icehouse and back up to them.

"Tarmark?" Merdia said, looking at the bundle. "Father will be pleased we found such a fine cut of meat for Wattar. How much is it?" Merdia asked innocently, looking up at Master Vultari, who was clearly annoyed at being interrupted when he had Ashar right where he wanted him.

"Two hundred!" Vultari barked at her.

"Two hundred! That is far more than we have. I'm sorry, but we just can't afford that. Ashar, pick out a different cut for Wattar, and let's go get the mullenberries."

A feral grin came over Master Vultari's face. He had always hated Chief Wattar, who had fined Master Vultari several times for hunting animals out of season or hunting protected animals.

He was finally going to be able to get some payback. Shaming the chief would be far more rewarding than the coins he would make from the tarmark.

Ashar just stared dumbfounded at his sister. How could she be so dense? Did she not see the situation they were in? She had ruined everything! Father would be shamed on his eldest son's Joining day!

"MERDIA!" Ashar hissed at her.

"What?" she answered calmly. "We can't afford the tarmark, so let's get what we can and move on. There's still lots to do." She turned her attention to the ice box and seemed to be inspecting the contents. Ashar knew his sister well and had spent countless hours playing games with her. He knew when she was playing a game, but he just couldn't figure out what it was.

"This all does seem a little drab for a Joining, doesn't it? Something with more color, that will attract a good animal for Wattar. How much for an indigo pheasant? That would look nice on his offering tray."

Indigo pheasants were rare and highly protected animals. Hunting them without the council's permission was forbidden. An indigo pheasant would only be taken when something of great importance happened, such as the coronation of a new chief or to celebrate a good harvest. There was a thriving black market for their deep blue plumage, and even a tiny pheasant could fetch a considerable sum if you could find a buyer and not get caught.

"Little miss, I am sure you must know it is illegal to hunt indigo pheasants. I'm afraid I don't have anything like that."

Master Vultari's head jerks became more pronounced, and he seemed suddenly nervous.

Ashar looked over at his sister with a newfound respect. A feral smile spread across his face as he gestured to Master Vultari, prompting his sister to continue.

"Illegal? I really didn't know that." Playing stupid was not Merdia's strong suit, but she pulled it off well. "Then why do you have two of them hanging in your icehouse?"

Master Vultari looked at Merdia with real fear, all the color draining from his face. A moment ago, he'd had the chief's son at his mercy, and now this miniature demon had appeared and ruined everything. Vultari turned to Ashar, his eyes pleading to do something to help.

Ashar didn't say a word but just gestured toward his sister as if to say, 'She is your problem now.'

Vultari turned back to Merdia, who had dropped all pretense of innocence or ignorance. She stood with her back ridged, and her eyes were boring through Master Vultari as though she was focused on something important behind him.

"I would think Father would want to hear about this, don't you, Ashar?"

"Definitely."

"We should get home as soon as we can. Father won't delay getting back here and setting everything right. We should be able to make it in ten minutes if we hurry. Father could be here five minutes after that."

Ashar could see where she was going with this game and played along.

"The hill up to our house is steep, but it might take a few more minutes, with your stumpy legs slowing us down."

"Dang, I had completely forgotten how stumpy my legs are. You're right. It will take a little longer to retrieve Father."

Merdia turned back to Master Vultari and quietly said, "Unfortunately, my legs aren't just stumpy. They are weak, too. I can barely walk at all if I am carrying any weight."

Her gaze shifted, landing intently on the large package of tarmark.

"It's true," Ashar said. "It would take an hour or more to carry anything heavy up that hill. I'd probably have to send Mother halfway back down with the cart to haul you the rest of the way."

Pretending to be sad, she looked up at Ashar. "I'm sorry my legs are stumpy and weak, brother."

"It's all right, Sweetpea. We love you anyway."

Both Ashar and Merdia stared at Master Vultari without saying anything more. It took a moment for the shock of what had just happened to wear off, but when it did, he sighed, slowly wrapped the bundle of meat up, and slid it toward them a symbolic inch.

Ashar pulled a five-krona coin from his pocket and set it on the counter. He snatched up the bundle of meat and walked off with his sister.

They barely made it out of earshot before they both burst into laughter.

"Well done, Merdia, well done indeed. Although we should keep the details vague, I'm unsure if Father would approve of your methods."

"Are we going to tell him about the pheasants?"

Ashar considered it momentarily and then said, "No."

Merdia looked up at him in disbelief. "Why not?"

"Merdia, what is Master Vultari doing right now?"

"Getting rid of all the evidence before Father can get there."

"That's right, he is getting rid of what was probably a costly purchase. He didn't poach those pheasants. He paid someone else to do it or bought them from whoever did. Either way, he is out a lot of money."

"But he should be punished!"

"To someone like Master Vultari, losing money is punishment. There is another reason not to. When Father sees the generous gift Vultari has given our family, he will thank him publicly at the ceremony, thinking Vultari gave it as a peace offering. Vultari won't know that we didn't tell Father, and he will think Father is letting him off this time. He and Father have never gotten along, so maybe a small lie could start to mend their relationship, even if just a little."

"Well, I still think we should let Father know."

"We are both getting older, and it's time we started taking some of the burden of leadership off Father's shoulders. You and I will keep a close eye on Master Vultari and make sure he walks a straight line from now on. I imagine the scare you gave him today will make him think twice before trying something like that again."

"You're probably right. I bet he is crying right now. What are we going to tell Father, though? I don't want to have to lie to him."

"We won't. We will tell him the truth. Master Vultari was so excited about Wattar's Joining day that he acquired the tarmark for the occasion, and we only paid five krona for it. All true. We won't have to lie if Father doesn't push us on it. See, no one gets hurt this way."

"Except for the two pheasants."

"Right. Except for the two pheasants. I don't suppose you have a plan for getting mullenberries out of Master Danket. Do you?"

A smile spread across her face that was so large it looked as though she had saved up three and used them all at once.

"Oh, my dear brother, you have no idea. I have been thinking about her all morning. It's time to get revenge for the cart she sold Father."

"What do you have in mind?"

"You'll see, just play along again."

They headed back into the heart of the market, stopping at the fountain to set down the heavy load they were each carrying for a minute. It was a nice place to sit, and they both enjoyed watching the market bustle and hum with activity.

The fountain was large and had at its center a life-sized statue of a fisherman holding a fish in one hand, and a net in the other. Water flowed from below and cascaded around the fisherman's feet. The fountain teemed with fish, crabs, urchins, eels, and other assorted sea life. It was kept stocked constantly in case people needed it. His people were proud and didn't ask for help easily. The fountain ensured if anyone were hungry, there was food for them that they could gather whenever they needed to at night, when the market was empty.

"How much do we have left?" Merdia asked.

"Only twenty-five krona and a few smaller coins."

"Give it to me."

Ashar thought about arguing or asking her for more detail about what she had planned. But he handed over the money instead.

Hefting their loads again, they started working their way to Master Danket's stall, which was more of a building, in fact.

Merdia stopped at another stall and purchased a sticky stick. Holding it up with the mass of sticky, sweet honey candy on the end, she said, "Now we are ready."

Ashar didn't understand why she needed a sticky stick to deal with Master Danket, but he was curious to see what she had in mind.

"You haggle with her for the mullenberries, and I will close the deal."

Of all the items on their list, the mullenberries were the most important.

Mullenberries only grew on the steep cliffs on the island's northern shore. Gathering them was dangerous, but they had to be harvested there since all attempts to grow them anywhere else always failed. In Ashar's mind, mullenberries were one of the truly magical things in the world.

It was real magic, magic you could see and touch.

Magic that showed on the faces of every inhabitant of his village. Mullenberries were sour and poisonous if eaten in quantity, and the plants on which they grew had razor-sharp thorns that were barbed, so they had to be cut out once stuck in the skin.

They grew in the most inaccessible, inhospitable part of the island, and it took years for a plant to produce even a single berry. Before people discovered the magic hidden in the small berries, Joining had been such a rare thing in the world, something that happened by chance to only a few individuals in each generation when the conditions were just right.

Dried mullenberries produced a strong scent and thick smoke when burned, which acted as a pathway for Joining. When inhaled, the smoke clouded the mind and slowed the heart, putting the person in a trance. It also opened something within the soul that called out, seeking other souls. The Joining could happen easily in this deep trance, with their hearts open and ready to accept another. Without the mullenberries, Wattar would sit alone in the forest all night, surrounded by plates of untouched food. And still, he would never be Joined.

Ashar steadied himself as he approached Master Danket's stall. The quantity and variety of items for sale were impressive. Master Danket was a good businesswoman and had expanded her

inventory to the point that you could find just about anything you needed in amongst the piles and overflowing shelves. You just weren't going to get it cheaply.

She was a ridiculously small woman, nearly as wide as she was tall, and her head was barely visible over the top of the table at which she sat.

Her hair was streaked through with brown, black, and white stripes, and her small nose had turned a dark shade of brown and twitched and moved when she sniffed the air.

She did this constantly as if she could smell profit coming. Soft brown fur rose from the collar of her tunic and covered her neck and ears, which stuck out and up so much the tips were higher than the top of her head. Ashar assumed she could hear profit as well as smell it.

Ashar was trying to figure out a strategy for dealing with her when she unceremoniously pulled a small bag from under the counter and placed it between them.

"Mullenberries. The last in town, trust me, I checked. Sixty krona. No haggling, no discount. Sixty or you can turn and leave without speaking."

Ashar just stared at her, wondering if speaking would cause the price to go up even more. A bag of mullenberries should sell for twenty or thirty krona; Master Danket had the only mullenberries in town, and she knew they couldn't leave without them.

Ashar was starting to wonder when Merdia would enact her brilliant plan to get sixty krona worth of berries for only twenty-five. He didn't have to wait long.

Merdia skipped over, licking her sticky stick and humming something he couldn't quite make out. Her voice was a little higher than normal, her words with the soft lisp of a much younger child. "Awshar, what's taking so long? I want to go home now."

"Master Danket has the mullenberries, but I'm afraid we don't have enough money left."

Merdia's eyes started to water, and her bottom lip quivered. Her voice came out as a wail.

"But, but, without those, Wattar can't Join! He will be shamed and have to leave the island!"

"No, little one, he won't have to leave, but I honestly don't know what will happen."

Her voice went up a notch in intensity and volume.

"The council will vote Father out as chief!! Our whole family will have to leave and live in the woods! Awshar, I don't want to live with all the bugs in the forest!"

Ashar played along.

"We don't have sixty krona, Merdia. Master Danket made it clear she wouldn't sell for less than that. I'm sorry."

Merdia's voice reached a screeching volume that Ashar had never heard from her or anyone else.

"Noooooooooooooooo! Aaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh! Father will beat us! Awshar, we only have ten krona left. what are we going to dooooooooooooo!"

Ashar raised an eyebrow slightly at the ten krona remark, but Merdia obviously had a plan, and he certainly didn't.

Ashar turned to Master Danket, holding up his hands as a peace gesture.

"Is there anything you can do? We really are desperate."

Ashar noticed how uncomfortable Master Danket looked. She had turned away slightly from Merdia's screaming and seemed to want to be anywhere but where she was right now.

"Sixty, that's the price."

Merdia's wailing renewed and peaked as she howled at Master Danket's comment. Louder and louder, she screamed, tears flowing down her cheeks, snot dripping out of her nose.

Merdia was putting on quite the performance. Then she played her end-game move.

The sticky stick fell from her hand and landed in the dirt, leaves, and twigs, instantly attaching to the sticky mess at Merdia's feet.

Total silence.

Ashar just stared at the sticky stick on the ground.

Master Danket stared at the sticky stick on the ground.

Merdia stared in silence at the sticky stick on the ground.

It was then that Merdia made her final move. The silence was suddenly shattered by a sound Ashar had never heard his sister or anyone make. The scream seemed to split the air, impacting the two unfortunate people standing close to her. Ashar covered his ears, convinced others were doing the same to block out the sound halfway around the world.

It didn't stop. How could she keep making that sound without breathing in? But she did.

Ashar looked at Master Danket and saw how Merdia's screams affected her. She had curled into a small ball in the chair she was sitting in, her hands pressed over her ears, eyes shut so tightly that tears ran down her cheek. She was shaking.

"Please, make her stop!" Master Danket screamed through clenched teeth.

Not wanting to take his hands from his ears, Ashar could only shrug.

"Fine! Fine! Ten krona, take them and leave!" Danket screamed.

It was like putting out a candle. The sound just stopped.

Merdia's face had been a mask of agony only seconds before now. She looked serene and calm as she slowly walked up to the counter. Pulling out the money and making sure Master Danket could see all of it, she pulled two five krona coins out of the pile and stuffed the other fifteen back in her pocket. Smiling warmly as she picked up the bag of mullenberries, she looked up at Master Danket and spoke.

"I want you to remember this the next time you decide to take advantage of my family."

Without another word, she turned on her heel and walked off.

Master Danket's face started to turn red with rage. Realizing that he didn't want to be around when her anger peaked, Ashar turned and quickly followed his sister.

"OK, I must admit, you are good, little sister, very good. Remind me to never make you angry at me. How did you know that would work?"

"She hates children, especially loud screaming children. Remember when she moved to another house after her neighbor had their first child? It was because she couldn't stand the crying and screaming. Find the right button to push, and you can make anyone do anything you want. I just found her button is all."

Merdia was positively glowing as she bounced through the market back up the hill to their house.

Chapter Two

The house was a beehive of activity when they got home, breathing hard and sweating from carrying everything up the hill. The neighbors and half the village had turned up to help with the preparations. Their mother caught them as they were walking through the door.

"Where have you two been? You should have been back an hour ago. I need to get started on the streamers, and you need to help your brother, Ashar."

They dumped their load onto the floor and started pulling it off the belts to get it sorted.

Mother raised an eyebrow when she saw the bolt of pink fabric but didn't say anything. The tarmark made her pause and call Father over. They both stared in disbelief at the impossible piece of meat lying in the open wrapper.

"How? How did you get this?" Father asked. Ashar was about to recite the half-truth he had been practicing when Merdia beat him to it.

"Father, Master Vultari acquired it especially for Wattar's Joining, and we only paid five krona.

There was a moment of silence as the parents considered their children. There was more to the story, and they knew it, but they must have decided it was probably better not to know.

Chief Manatar looked down at them both.

"Well done. We are proud of you both. Merdia, take the fabric into Mother's sewing room and help her. Ashar, come help me for a minute in the yard."

Once outside, Chief Manatar turned and faced his son. They stood quietly regarding each other for a moment before he started to speak. "A thousand questions are running through my mind right now that I want to ask you. I think I might not like the answers to some of them, so let me ask you these two. How did Merdia handle herself, and is there anything I should know?"

Ashar considered the two questions carefully. Father wasn't talking to him like a child. He was asking grown-up questions and expected grown-up answers, even if Ashar was only twelve.

"Yes. Tonight, be respectful to Master Vultari. There is an opportunity to mend your relationship with him. As for Merdia, she is one of those questions you don't want to hear the answer to. But Father, if the island is ever invaded by a powerful enemy bent on destroying everything we hold dear and all hope seems lost, just ask Merdia to help you, and it will be fine."

Chief Manatar's laughter seemed to fill the whole valley. After a minute, he regained control of his breathing and turned toward Ashar.

"Excellent. Your sister has grown over the last year beyond my or your mother's control, I fear. She needs guidance and someone she can trust to help her along her path. With your brother and you ahead of her, it is unlikely she will ever become chief, but after I am gone, the people will need her resourcefulness, as will you and your brother. Speaking of your brother, he is upstairs studying his chants for tonight's ritual. Go wake him up."

Ashar laughed and went back into the house, climbing the stairs to the second floor and stopping just outside of Wattar's door. He was tempted to burst through it and surprise his brother while he slept but thought better of it and just knocked hard as Father would.

As it turned out, it was much more fun. Immediately, the sounds of crashing furniture and cursing could be heard as Wattar frantically tried to get to the door, probably thinking Father was coming to check on him. The door swung open, and Ashar nearly died laughing.

Wattar's hair was matted to one side of his head and stuck out at an odd angle, there was still a line of drool coming out of one side of his mouth. Best of all, one of the pages of chants that he was supposed to be studying was stuck to his cheek, cemented there by strands of saliva.

"Ashar! I should give you a thumping for that," Wattar screamed at him.

"You should be grateful that Father sent me to wake you up instead of coming up here himself."

Wattar considered that for a second, shrugged, and walked back into his room, leaving the door open for Ashar. Wattar was fourteen, two years older than Ashar, but easily twice his size already. His broad shoulders and thick arms were topped with a head that seemed to be attached directly to his shoulders. Without a neck, it made him look intimidating to those who didn't know him.

To those who did, matching the hulking youth with the gentle soul held by the massive frame was hard. When the summer theater put on plays, it was always Wattar with tears running down his cheeks when one of the characters died or the hero won in the end, as he always did.

He would turn white and, on a few occasions, had fainted at the sight of blood. Wattar would always come home with a litter of kittens or a small flock of ducklings that desperately needed rescue. At fourteen, he was quiet and shy in groups and was becoming aware of the girls around. He was far too terrified of them to try to talk to one of them.

"How's the practice coming along?" he said as he stepped into the room and shut the door. He could see Wattar's empty morning meal still sitting in his basket.

"I am going to fail, Ashar. I will fail, and Father will be ashamed of me. Nothing will come out of the forest to join with someone as stupid and useless as me!"

Poor Wattar had been shut in his room all day with nothing but his fears to keep him company. It had taken its toll on him emotionally.

"Easy, big guy, easy. Everything is going to be fine." He sat down on the floor with his brother and touched his shoulder. You aren't going to fail, and even if you do, you won't have to worry about it, not even a little bit."

"I won't?"

"Nope, if you screw tonight up, you will make Merdia angry, and then you'll be dead. Dead people don't have to worry much, really."

His brother's massive frame started to shake as the laugh burst out of him.

"I guess you're right. I have been worrying about the wrong thing all morning. If you aren't a little worried about Merdia, you probably deserve whatever she has cooked up for you," he said with a smile.

It was good for Ashar to see his brother lighten up a bit. Sadness didn't suit his perpetually cheerful nature. "Listen, Wattar, you won't believe what we found for your Joining tonight."

"Were you able to get the mullenberries? I have been worried about that."

"Oh, you have no idea. I'll let Merdia tell you that story. She was brilliant. No brother, we found a tarmark liver for your joining plate."

He watched his brother as shock and delight spread over his face. After blinking hard a few times and shaking his head once, he turned to Ashar, barely able to form words.

"How ... How on earth did you manage that? How was Father able to afford that?"

"One word, Merdia."

"Oh no, what did she do?"

Ashar recounted the tale of how Master Vultari had tried to trick Ashar and how Merdia had played him in return, saving the family from a bad situation.

When he had finished, Wattar just sat there, momentarily absorbing the outrageous tale.

"Honestly, sometimes, it is hard to tell if that cute little girl is a blessing or a curse."

"Both. To her family, she is a blessing, and to those who would try to bring harm to her family, a curse worse than death."

"Don't be hard on yourself about getting tricked by Master Vultari. He has had more practice at being deceitful. You handled that well. It wouldn't have occurred to me to try to turn the situation around for Father and Vultari's benefit. I will help you and Merdia keep an eye on him. I doubt this will be the last time he breaks the rules for profit or revenge."

"Listen, you shouldn't worry about tonight. No one cares if you know all the words to all the chants. The ceremony master will do most of the singing. You just have to move your lips and chime in on the parts you know. Do you remember Janick's joining?"

"Do I remember it? How could I possibly forget? I thought he was going to pass out. He was so nervous, he didn't make a sound through all of his chants, just sat there shaking."

"Yes, well, he certainly made a sound when he threw up all over the ceremony master," Ashar reminded him, causing them to laugh at the memory.

"You're right, Ashar. Everything will be fine. I have tarmark for my joining plate, thanks to you and Merdia, although it sounds mostly like it's due to Merdia," he said lightly as he pulled his brother sitting at his side into a one-armed hug.

"I thought about taking more credit for the tarmark, but I'm a little afraid of what Merdia would do if she caught me. Come on, let's go through your chants. Can't have you barfing on anyone."

They would say and practice chants, mostly to provide a distraction and keep Wattar from worrying himself to death. After a few hours, there was a light knock on the door, and their mother entered, holding Wattar's evening meal.

Wattar just shook his head, prompting Mother to set down the bundle containing his ceremonial robes and take the morning basket back to the kitchen, along with his evening meal.

Ashar knew his own meal was waiting for him in his room, and he was famished after the busy day. So, he left Wattar to get dressed on his own and went down the hall to his room to do the same and get a little to eat. There would be some food tonight at the ceremony, but only small, sweet treats that did nothing to fill an empty stomach.

Father and Wattar were already downstairs when he arrived, sitting together and speaking quietly. Father was, no doubt, giving him some last-minute advice before they left for the ceremony grounds where Mother and Merdia would meet them, having spent the day decorating and preparing.

Father noticed him and came over.

"Stay close to your brother tonight. He is very nervous about being in front of everyone. Keep him distracted if you can."

"He'll be fine, Father, I will look after him."

"I know you will. I think sometimes, the only person in this village who doesn't see Wattar's strength is Wattar. Not after tonight, though. Not after tonight."

Ashar looked up at his father with a questioning look, wondering how he could possibly know what would happen. No one could know what would happen during a Joining.

That was what made it so special and so hellishly frightening.

Chief Manatar saw the question in his son's eyes.

"No, I don't know what will happen or how Wattar will be Joined, but I know you receive what you need the most from the Joining. There is a deep magic there that even we who live with it daily do not fully understand, but we trust it. Your brother will find his strength tonight, no matter what form it takes."

"Then you should tell him that. Can't you?"

"I have, many times. Listen, my son, some things cannot be understood until experienced, knowledge that can't be taught by words or pictures. Wisdom cannot be handed down. It must be earned one painful lesson at a time. I could sit with Wattar for weeks and teach him all I know about Joining, and yet, he would be no more prepared for tonight than he is now. We are here to let him know that he isn't alone. Until the end ... when he will be."

Ashar nodded and went over to retrieve his brother, who stared blankly at nothing and seemed lost in his anxiety. Snapping his fingers in front of Wattar's face, Ashar said, "Hello? Anyone home? I was looking for my brother, Wattar, have you seen him? He is hard to miss, really."

Wattar just stared.

So, Ashar continued, determined to elicit at least a small smile. "He is huge, bigger than a bandok tree, but not quite as smart. He is very ugly as well. In fact, he usually has to walk around with a cloth covering his lumpy head, so babies don't cry around him. Normally, he is easy to find by the smell. Just follow the trail of dead birds that flew too close to his butt and perished."

The last comment finally got through to Wattar, and he laughed, pushing his brother away playfully. It caused Ashar to tumble halfway across the room before he came to a sliding stop, laughing with his powerful sibling.

"All right, you two, time to get moving. Everyone will be gathered by now and waiting for us," his father said, walking over to Wattar and putting his hands on his son's shoulders. "Tonight, if you doubt yourself, remember that I do not. I have seen your strength and kindness in equal measure, and no father has ever been prouder of his child than I am tonight."

Ashar could see the words fill his brother and give him courage; he was now standing straight with his head held high. Wattar could only give his father a nod, not trusting his voice.

Chief Manatar nodded back to him, probably not trusting his voice either, and he strode out the door toward the ceremonial grounds.

Their small village was beautiful at night, with tiny lights dotting the valley, streaming from open windows and lanterns past the market and down to the river.

Each house spilled a little light until his village looked like a thousand stars had landed to enjoy the evening. Tonight, there was more to see.

Looking up at the ordinarily dark landscape above his home, Ashar could see a path of torches illuminating the winding path up into the woods where the ceremony would be held, and where his brother would be forever changed. As they walked along the path following the torches' flickering flames, Ashar could see Wattar tensing up as the moment drew closer.

"Don't worry, brother, I heard the biting flies are out early this year. Maybe you will Join one of those. You would look good with wings and antennae."

No one had ever joined with an insect. It wasn't possible. People could only Join with higher life forms, and no one knew why. It's just how it was. Wattar, however, was no longer in the mood for humor or the distraction it provided. Ashar tried a different track.

Reaching over and taking his brother's hand, he said, "I am not good at this, but Father is. Remember what he told you, and you will be fine. I will stay with you as much as possible, and when I can't, I will stand where you can see me. Between Father's wisdom and my face to make you laugh, nothing could go wrong."

Wattar smiled at him, thankful for the support.

They walked in silence the rest of the way, the seriousness of the situation starting to weigh on them. The ceremonial grounds were in a large meadow surrounded by great bandok trees reaching toward the heavens, their tops so high they could barely be seen.

Mother and Merdia had been busy, and the whole meadow was covered in colorful streams of fabric twisting in the light breeze. A small altar had been set up in the middle, surrounded by torches, and Master Portola stood waiting for the ceremony to start.

Not everyone in the village was there, but most were, filling the meadow to near capacity.

It wasn't every day that the chief's son was Joined, and people were curious to see.

Scattered randomly around the grounds were tables that bore drinks and some food.

Usually, people didn't eat when in groups.

It was done privately, but for celebrations and special events, it was considered socially acceptable to consume food that no one would find offensive. No meat or cheese could be served that might disturb the vegetarians, nor eggs or fish. After Joining, people took on the traits of the animal with which they joined, changing the food they ate.

Therefore, out of respect and to maintain social harmony, people with differing dietary needs did not eat in the presence of anyone who might be offended or otherwise disturbed by the particular meal. If someone had Joined with a deer, watching someone eat a plate of venison would be somewhat uncomfortable.

About then, Wattar noticed the pink banners streaming in amongst the other colors. He looked over at Ashar and asked calmly, "Merdia?"

"Yup"

"Figured. Probably should just let that go," he suggested.

"Double yup."

They had reached the meadow's center and noticed a sudden silence had fallen over the assembly. Father and Ashar stopped outside the center circle and watched Wattar approach the altar. Ashar moved around the edge until he was opposite his brother and could see him. Catching his eye, he smiled and gave a nod, hoping it would calm Wattar.

The poor boy seemed to be on the verge of fainting.

Wattar did well, all things considered. He remembered most of his chants and could stand and kneel at all the right times as the master conducted him through the ritual. There were boring sermons about responsibility and casting off youthful desires, the nobility of service to the people, and so many other things that Ashar stopped listening to halfway through. Glancing over at Merdia, he could see she had stopped listening as soon as it had started.

Eventually, the master finished and led the congregation in a final prayer before sending Wattar out into the forest to Join. It was customary for someone to carry the offering. Ashar was honored when his brother looked over, gesturing for him to approach.

He had assumed Wattar would choose his father to follow him into the dark woods and was surprised when his brother picked him. Quickly coming to Wattar's side, he hefted the small bundle containing the offering and the precious mullenberries and waited just behind his brother, his head bowed. It was almost as if he could feel Father's gaze upon him and Wattar, sending what strength he could to his two sons, about to step into the unknown together.

After a second, it became clear that Wattar was frozen in place, unable to stand and walk through the assembly to the dark path on the other side of the meadow.

Ashar whispered in a low voice that only Wattar could hear, "Whatever you are afraid of is less frightening than Merdia. Remember to worry only about the things that matter."

It broke the spell, holding Wattar on his knees. Slowly, he rose to his feet and started walking stiffly through the crowd. They watched silently as he passed, with only the occasional whispered prayer heard. Wattar paused when the path reached the dense bank trees, looking through the narrow gap between their trunks, trying to find signs of danger.

Ashar put his hand gently on his back and said, "Courage, brother, I am here and will stand with you as long as possible."

A shudder ran through Wattar and he took a step into the forest, then another, and another after that until his feet started falling one in front of the other, leading him deeper into the forest, his brother close behind.

After twenty minutes of wandering aimlessly through the dense trees, Wattar seemed to find a direction and walked without hesitation to a grove of trees; they formed a depression between them, creating a small clearing. He stood in the middle for a moment, as if trying to decide if he needed to continue walking, eventually sitting down and staring straight ahead.

That was Ashar's cue. Quickly, he opened the bag and pulled out its contents.

First, the four plates were set around Wattar, in front, back, and one to each side.

He put an offering on each plate, taking extra care and presenting the tarmark on the plate directly in front of his brother.

Then he pulled out a small metal bowl and dumped the dried mullenberries into it. A few strikes to his flint and a stream of smoke started rising from the bowl. He gave it a few more strikes to ensure it was going properly, placed it directly in front of Wattar, and stood to leave.

He had inhaled a bit of the smoke when lighting the berries, and it made his head spin a bit, but he shook it off and gathered the empty bag, heading back in what he hoped was the direction of the ceremonial grounds.

After a few minutes, he had to sit down. His head was buzzing, and it was hard to think. Leaning back against a large tree, he breathed deeply, trying to clear the effects of the smoke from his mind. Eventually, it started to decrease, and he could think clearly again. With his senses returning, he noticed a sound coming from his left, soft sounds of small twigs breaking leaves and rustling as something moved through the dense underbrush.

Curiosity got the best of him, and he crept toward the sound, wondering if this was his brother's animal coming to find him and if he might sneak a look.

Closer and closer, he crept until he could make out a shape moving through the thick bush. It was swearing quietly under its breath as the thorns poked and cut.

Merdia.

It was Ashar's turn to curse under his breath as he set out after her before she could ruin Wattar's Joining. When he caught up to her, she was lying on a large rock, peeking over the edge.

"You make more noise than a pack of wild boar. Lie down and keep quiet, Ashar!" she hissed at him as he approached.

It was supposed to be him scolding her, not the other way around.

He lay next to her and leaned into her ear.

"Merdia, this is wrong. We must not interfere with our brother's Joining. We shouldn't be here!"

"But we are, and right now, the only thing interfering with Wattar's Joining is your stupid mouth! Be quiet or leave because I need to see this. Don't tell me you aren't curious as well!"

For the thousandth time, he wondered how a child could talk to him as if he was the child and get away with it. Probably because she was right most of the time.

He had learned long ago that accepting defeat was the best way to deal with his sister, so he sighed and made himself comfortable.

Below them, just a few hundred feet away, they had a clear view of Wattar sitting cross-legged and motionless, the thick smoke from the mullenberries drifting up and swirling around his head.

For a long time, nothing happened, then there was motion from the edge of the small clearing in which he sat. A fox with a large, bushy red tail crept out from the woods and approached Wattar slowly, sniffing the air as it crept up on the meat plate. When it seemed the fox would take the last step and eat from the plate, it suddenly turned, dashing back into the woods.

A minute later, a large raven landed, its head bobbing up and down. It hopped around Wattar, inspecting the food lying all around him. But it, too, lost interest and flew off after a few minutes.

Ashar was starting to get worried. What if the fox and raven had left because they'd felt him and Merdia lurking nearby? Was he fulfilling his worst fear and ruining his beloved brother's Joining? His mind raced faster and faster until he thought he would run screaming back toward the village.

There came a sound.

Then, he realized it wasn't a sound, and that he hadn't heard it. No, he had felt it through his body being pressed to the ground. A second later, he felt it again, stronger this time, as if something heavy had been dropped on the ground near him. Again, closer. Again, closer still. He could see Merdia's eyes widening as the fear also started to sink into her.

Ashar saw it first. Fortunately, he was able to reach around and cover Merdia's mouth with his hand before she saw it. Holding her close, he wrapped his arms around her so she couldn't scream or move.

A second later, the bear appeared. Ashar had never even heard stories about a bear this large. The ground shook with each step as it moved its massive frame through the forest. The head was a mass of scars, and one eye had been ripped out at some point in its life.

Large areas of pink skin showed here and there where the fur must have never grown back after being injured. This bear had spent his life fighting, carrying a lifetime of injuries and pain wherever it went. It walked right up and stared down at them.

Ashar thought they would both be killed right then and there until he saw the bear's eye. It was cloudy as if someone had poured milk into it.

The bear wasn't blind, however; it was deep in a trance. Its cloudy eye could only see Wattar sitting silently in the meadow, deep in the same trance. It sniffed the air around them without seeing them, both lying paralyzed in fear. Slowly, one plodding footstep after another, it continued until it reached Wattar.

Ashar and Merdia watched as the giant bear peacefully approached, beginning to eat the tarmark from the tray. It didn't seem to be in a hurry. Quite the opposite. In fact, the bear was taking its time and enjoying the meal.

Ashar wondered if the bear knew this would be its last meal, and if that was why the nature of the offerings were so important, one final gift before the end.

When it finished, the bear lay down facing Wattar, who hadn't moved or opened his eyes the whole time. They sat with each other for a time before Ashar noticed that the bear was becoming harder to see. It wasn't blurry or concealed behind something.

It was almost as if his eyes couldn't focus correctly on it anymore. Slowly, it became less distinct, nearly transparent, as they watched. Finally, all that could be seen was a vague smudge of light hanging in front of Wattar.

Not daring to breathe, he and his sister watched as the light slowly moved toward Wattar and seemed to merge into his chest.

For a second, nothing happened, then Wattar suddenly opened his eyes wide and stood up quickly, his back arched painfully, mouth open in a silent scream. He stood unmoving for thirty seconds before collapsing back to the ground, panting from exhaustion.

Merdia tapped him on the shoulder and motioned back to where they had come from. The message was clear: it was time to go.

They quietly returned to the main path and ran the rest of the way to the meadow. Not wanting to burst through the trailhead and call attention to themselves, they slowly worked their way around the meadow and snuck back onto the crowd near one of the tables serving drinks, crowded enough for them to slip in without being noticed.

They were noticed by no one except Chief Manatar, who suddenly materialized out of nowhere and blocked their path. The look on his face told them everything they needed to know. They were in trouble, big trouble.

"Merdia! Go find your mother and stay with her until I get there. This time, young lady, there will be a reckoning. Make no mistake!"

Merdia instantly ran off to find Mother before Father decided to kill her right then and there. Grabbing Ashar by the collar, he dragged him off away from the crowds, presumably to kill him without witnesses around.

When Father spun him around, Ashar expected anger, violence, a stern lecture, anything except what he saw when looking at his father's face. He could see tears welling in his eyes, and that he was trying to speak but couldn't quite form the correct words.

The emotion was so strong. Ashar had never seen his mighty father so concerned.

"Tell me." That was all he said.

He realized then that his father wasn't angry with him, that he only wanted to know about Wattar, and that not knowing was killing him. For the second time on the same day, his father had treated him as an adult and not a child. He straightened himself and looked his father in the eyes.

"A bear, Father. A mighty bear, the likes of which have never been seen in this world or written of in legend. A bear worthy of your son."

His father hugged him and held him there until he regained himself. When he spoke, his voice was thick with emotion.

"I knew he would find his strength."

"I'm sorry, Father, I should not have done that."

To his surprise, his father only laughed.

"When I was your age, I followed my cousin into the forest and watched his Joining. There is no shame in it. I wish that Wattar had done it last year when Setario was joined.

"It might have helped with his nerves today. There is nothing more frightening than the unknown. Come, let us rejoin the others and do me a favor. Pretend as if I punished you severely when you were around your sister. I intend to follow through on my promise to her, and it wouldn't do if she knew you got off without being punished."

"Do I not deserve it too?"

"I could hardly punish you for something I did myself at the same age."

They walked back to the meadow to await Wattar's return.

When he stumbled out of the forest thirty minutes later, the whole meadow erupted in celebration as everyone jockeyed to welcome him, slapping his back and shaking his hand. A few girls even ran up and kissed his cheek. The red blush of embarrassment spreading over his face told Ashar that his brother hadn't changed that much, and that was a comforting thought.

He had changed, though. The bulk of his massive frame, which had never seemed to suit him, now fit perfectly, as if he had grown from the inside to fill it. He looked different, somehow, more robust, more assertive, more of a man and far less of a boy.

He was still quiet but didn't seem to be shy anymore.

His voice, too, was still soft but not timid. It was as though Wattar had lived his life up to this point with only half of himself. He seemed complete now, and it was remarkable to see.

When the initial rush of people congratulating Wattar slackened, Ashar and Merdia approached their brother. Merdia leaped into his hold, almost disappearing into the massive arms.

Setting her down, he looked at them and spoke.

"I saw you two hiding atop the rock, watching."

Their eyes went wide in horror and embarrassment, thinking Wattar would be angry. But then they thought ... Surely, he could not possibly have spotted them, could he? How was it even possible? They had been hiding just behind him!

No, there was no way he could have seen them. He'd never even opened his eyes.

He just laughed warmly and smiled at them.

"It's all right, I was glad to have you both there to help me."

"Help you? I don't understand. How did we help you?" Merdia asked him.

Wattar paused momentarily as if trying to figure out how to describe something indescribable. "When I breathed the mullenberry smoke, it changed me somehow. It's hard to put into words, almost as though I wasn't restricted to just my body. I could stretch out more."

Ashar remembered how dizzy and strange the slight whiff of smoke had made him feel. Wattar must have felt something a hundred times more intense.

"I could feel the forest around me and all the animals in it. I felt alone and scared. The more I reached out, the more frightened I became, so I pulled back into myself again and again, even though I knew I needed to reach out, needed to call out. That's when I felt something else, something that wasn't an animal running through the bush, something that wasn't the dark, dangerous forest, something comforting and—"

"That is amazing," Merdia contributed, interrupting.

"I have not finished yet," asserted Wattar, eager to tell absolutely everything. Perhaps for the first time, he was assertive and confident enough to put his own needs first, to quell Merdia's usual exuberance until he had got out everything he needed to say. "I felt you two and knew you were close by. Knowing I wasn't alone gave me courage, so I reached out as far as possible, and the forest answered. Many animals approached. Some even got close to me, but it was almost as if we didn't speak the same language, that we weren't compatible."

"We saw the fox and the raven that came to you!" Merdia said, interrupting him for the second time. She was almost giddy with excitement, as if it were her own tale and not Wattar's.

"Yes," agreed Wattar, reminiscing on the day's events. "The fox was very kind. He was sad we couldn't hear each other better, but the raven ... that bird was just plain rude! I think we were both happy that he wasn't the one for me. Then the bear called back to me, and I could hear him clearly because his voice was so strong.

"The closer he got, the more connected we became, so connected that I could see through his eye, even able to watch things like my troublesome brother and sister lying quietly on a rock as I walked past. Your hand was clasped over Merdia's mouth to keep her from screaming. I'm glad you didn't scream, of course. The bear was frightened enough already, almost as much as I was. It might have spooked us both and sent us running into the trees."

"Scared? How could such a mighty bear be scared?" Merdia asked. "I find that surprising."

"It wasn't that kind of fear. It was more like the fear you feel right before you jump off a high rock into the water. It's something you want to do, but it still scares you. The bear wanted to come to me, but he also feared it. Does that make sense?"

"As much as it can until we do it ourselves, I guess." Ashar noticed a small crowd lingering politely a few feet away, respectfully giving Wattar space to talk with his siblings but obviously wanting to come over.

"Come, Merdia, we have taken too much of Wattar's time. Others wish to speak to him."

"But I want to hear more about the bear!" she nearly shrieked.

Wattar patiently lifted her off his lap as though she weighed nothing and set her down.

"Merdia, we live together, or had you forgotten? There will be plenty of time for you to interrogate me and extract every last detail."

She considered it for a moment, deciding that, for now, that would be good enough. Without another word, she turned and headed back into the middle of the meadow where music had started, and people were dancing in celebration.

Ashar was about to turn and follow her when his brother reached out and took his arm, pulling him close to him. In a hushed whisper, he spoke.

"I don't know how to say this, or if I even should, but there was a moment in the forest, a moment when it seemed as if I could see everything. I didn't understand everything I saw, but I could see it, a moment of clear vision. When I looked at you, there was something else there, something different in you. What it was or what it meant, I had no idea, unsure if it was good or bad. I do know that it frightened me. It frightened the bear."

"What did you see?"

"I can't describe it. It was something I could see without even using my worldly eyes, something I could feel in you, and something powerful, immensely powerful. I do not know if it matters, but it felt as if I wasn't supposed to see it, as if it was wholly private, and I had looked where I shouldn't. Like a spy. Anyway, that's all ... I just thought you should know."

Ashar didn't know what to make of what his brother had just told him, but it somehow weighed heavily on him for the rest of the night. These supposed sleeping hours he spent in profound restlessness, first trying to sleep on his side, then on his back, then on his other side.

Nothing at all worked, and he spent most of his night getting up for water, pacing, lying back down, and grumbling to himself.

Chapter Three

In the months after Wattar's Joining, life returned to its regular routine.

Ashar was given more responsibilities now that Wattar was spending most of his days at his father's side, learning to be a good chief. Ashar, in turn, was teaching Merdia about all the duties she had inherited. In reality, very little teaching was involved.

She would listen patiently as he explained how something worked and then, after a minute of thinking about it, would usually tell him what he had been doing wrong and how she would improve it. She was usually right. He didn't mind in the least; Merdia was—as she all too often reminded him—such a bright spark, always coming up with novel ways around any difficult problem. Sometimes, he wished he had just half of her brain power.

So, he happily listened to her whenever she had something to say, which seemed to be all the time these days.

Having Merdia with him wasn't the chore it had been when she was younger; now, having someone so vibrant and lively to keep him company was proving to be such a pleasant change. Plus, she was nothing if not highly entertaining!

After their success in gathering items for the celebration, it was decided they would oversee all the family shopping, which turned out to be easier than they thought.

Between the rumors about what Merdia had done to masters Vultari and Danket and a few other incidents the whole market got to watch, word quickly spread to not try to take advantage of the innocent-looking demon prowling the stalls.

Wattar was adjusting to being Joined.

Father had warned them that he might, at times, act more like a bear than a man while he was going through the process. In Wattar's case, being more bearish usually meant he would sleep most of the day or come to the kitchen for a second or third meal basket, each of which would need to be stuffed right to the brim.

There were a few occasions when something startled him, or he hurt himself, and the bear would come out for an instant, powerful and aggressive. It was a little frightening to see in their gentle brother. Father had said he and the bear weren't fighting for control; it was more like getting used to each other, finding a balance between them, and learning what strengths and weaknesses each one brought to the union.

It was getting into fall by now, and the village was busy drying the last fish for the year and getting the summer harvest preserved and packed away safely in the storehouses.

Once winter came in full measure, their island would be buried beneath a blanket of dense fog that wouldn't lift for three months. During the summer, fog would only invade late at night after the sun had set and the land had cooled enough to settle in, then it would disappear in the morning when the sun hit it.

But during the night, the dew would water the land, keeping their home lush and green year-round. It also provided an easy source of clean, fresh water. Simple condensers on the roof could collect enough water daily for the whole family.

Ashar was excited about the end of summer. It meant he would get to go and harvest takkifruits from the northern part of the island. It used to be Wattar's job to go out every year and bring back a cart laden with these tart fruits, but that job had fallen to him.

He wasn't sure he could pull as much weight as his mighty brother, but he would make two trips if necessary. They were critical for surviving the chilly winter months when the sun would be hidden from them. The fruits provided nutrition lacking from the dried and preserved stores. Some vitamins could only come from fresh fruits and vegetables, others being produced by the body naturally when exposed to sunlight. Without the takkifruits, people became sick and weak during the dark winter months and were far more susceptible to disease and infection—especially for the Joined, as if they were still eating for two.

Mostly, he was excited about the adventure. Picking takkifruit was arduous work, but he would get to do it alone. Four days of no one telling him what he could and couldn't do, camping on the northern cliffs at the sea's edge, sleeping outside among the wild and dangerous animals calling the rugged, stony area their home, with only a warm fire to protect him.

He couldn't wait. The trip was still two days away, and he already had everything packed, checked, repacked, checked again, and repacked for the last time. He would check it all again tonight to ensure he hadn't forgotten anything.

After the evening meal, his hopes were dashed that night as the family sat around the fire discussing the day's events. As usual, Merdia was the source of his downfall.

"Father. Have you thought about what we talked about anymore? You said you needed to think about it, and you have had time. Plus, if I am to go, I must get packed. I can't just throw a bag together at the last second."

Manatar sighed softly and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He clearly hadn't been looking forward to this moment. "I recall you did most of the talking, but yes, I have considered your request."

Ashar didn't know what was happening, but it was clear that Merdia had wedged Father between a rock and a hard place. Typical Merdia; she was the only one around this place who could make Father unsure if he was coming or going, if he was right or wrong, heading this way or that.

No matter his decision, it would not be good for someone. As it turned out, Ashar was going to be the someone in this case.

"Ashar, your mother and I have decided," he bravely announced at last.

Mother instantly shot Father a hard glare, clearly not wanting to be drawn into whatever was happening. Father continued, "I have pondered on this long and hard, and I have decided it would be good for Merdia to join you on your trip to the north."

He could only stare dumbly into the silence filling the room, the silence that was ultimately broken by Merdia screaming in joy and running upstairs when she realized Father would let her go. Now, it all made sense.

Father could have kept her home, but then she would've made his life a nightmare for days—if not weeks—so he did what anyone who was scared of Merdia did.

He gave her what she wanted. Choice had not really come into the matter.

"I am sorry, Ashar. I know you were looking forward to the trip, but it is time we started letting Merdia ... Well, you know how curious she is, and she is getting old enough now that ..." Father seemed to realize he was making excuses and just accepted he had been out-maneuvered by a cunning nine-year-old who could run rings around him.

"I am sorry, Ashar."

He tried to be angry with his father but couldn't do it. He tried to be angry at Merdia but could not do that either. He had begged his father to let him go with Wattar when he was younger. He could hardly get mad at Merdia for being better at begging than he was and getting her way.

He stood and nodded at his father, accepting his fate, much as his father had done moments before, and headed upstairs to his room to be alone.

Merdia was insufferable the next day in her excitement, bouncing from place to place as they went through the market to gather supplies for the trip. She was skipping and singing constantly, and at times almost bouncing so high off her feet that it looked as though she had springs for legs.

By mid-afternoon, he couldn't keep up his sullen sadness in the face of Merdia's infectious happiness, and he was once again getting excited about the trip. He would never tell her but having help gathering fruit and hauling it back would be nice.

After spending the rest of the day going through their gear and ensuring the pull cart was in good working order, he and Merdia went to bed to lie awake all night in excitement.

They were both up before dawn. Skipping the morning meal, they raced outside the shed carrying bags of food and clothes and dumped them in the cart. It was a simple wooden cart on two large wheels, long handles coming off the front for pulling.

A harness and strap could also be pulled over the shoulders to help with heavier loads. Looking at the cart, he wondered if they had packed too much. The cart was already half full, and except

for the food, they would have to carry it all back, along with several hundred takkifruit. Nothing for it now. It was too late to reorganize the gear and lighten the load.

Ashar pulled the harness on and started plodding up the hill to the north main path. It was just first light. The nightly fog was still thick, holding to the ground as if it didn't want to leave with the morning's dawn. He could barely see ten feet, but it didn't matter.

He knew this part of the journey by heart and could have done it blindfolded. By the time they cleared the last buildings and started up the rough path, the fog was starting to thin as they gained altitude. Eventually, he could make out the hill's crest ahead and knew he had packed too much. The climb out of the small valley holding their village had almost wiped him out.

His breath was coming in huge gulps, and copious salty sweat was cascading down his face; now and then, he had to stop just to wipe away sweaty strands of hair from covering his eyes, and he used the back of his sleeve to wipe over his face and forehead.

It didn't help that his clothes had been soaked by the wretched fog and felt heavy on his shoulders, making him feel as though he carried twice as much weight as at the outset. He didn't want to think, either, about the fact that the first part was supposedly the easy part.

It was going to get harder from here on out, and he was not looking forward to it.

Choosing a decent rock to sit against at the crest, he took the harness off, grabbed a water skin out of the cart, and sat down with a grunt.

"What are you doing? We have barely started, and you are taking a break already?"

"Unless you want to pull the cart up the next hill, we are taking a break so I can catch my breath."

It was a good spot to rest, the entire valley laid out before them, their village still hidden in the fog. But he was starting to make out vague shapes of buildings as they burned off.

The fog was still lying over the sea just beyond the valley, making it look as though their little island was floating on clouds. It was times like this that made him grateful for what they had, a beautiful valley with abundant food from the land and sea, temperate weather for most of the year, and relatively peaceful relations with the other groups living on the other islands nearby.

He had heard tales of what it was like to live on some of the other far-off islands.

They sounded brutish and uncivilized, constantly at war, arguing and threatening one another daily, also starving, invading, taking whatever they wanted, and beyond all this, they were also ruled by cruel men.

He reminded himself that the further a story traveled, the less truth would accompany it.

He could see the distant shoreline now and decided he had sat long enough enjoying the view. But something caught his eye. It wasn't much, just a dark spot below the village, something he didn't recognize. Looking closer, he could see a bunch of dark spots, all in a ragged line together, maybe thirty of these things. Standing up, he went to the cart and pulled out the sighting lens, glad to have carried the extra weight of it now.

Pulling the lens, he extended it until the three sections locked together, forming a long tube with glass lenses on each end. Using the cart's edge to steady his hand, he peered through the sighting lens at the mysterious spots materializing overnight.

At first, he couldn't make out what they were. He could see them clearly enough with the magnification, but he still could not identify them. What on earth were they?

Each one had a wide base of large timbers fitting strongly together, supporting a frame rising twenty feet high. Attached to the top of it was a long timber, twice as long as the frame holding it, laid all the way back so one end touched the ground behind the huge contraption. He was about to call Merdia away from the bed of flowers she was inspecting for butterflies when the machine he was watching suddenly moved.

The giant arm attached to the frame suddenly shot up from the ground, rotating where it met the frame and hurling something immeasurably large toward the village.

He couldn't believe how far it had flown.

It didn't seem possible for anything to stay in the air that long if it wasn't a bird! But this thing soared and traveled, and his eyes went wide with fear when it hit the market.

Whatever had been thrown shattered on impact, and a huge cloud of purple vapor exploded in all directions, drifting down and staying close to the ground as it spread through the streets. An instant later, many more landed in the village as the other machines launched their own gas bombs into the village.

They didn't hit all in the same spot but seemed to be spread across the whole area as if the attackers were trying to cover the whole town in the vile purple smoke. Looking back at the machines, he saw the arms again pulled back down, getting ready to launch another volley.

Voices and alarms started to ring out in the village, and people awoke to the noise and confusion. The residents screamed, coming running out of their houses in a panic, trying to figure out what was happening. They collapsed, no longer moving whenever the gas reached one of them.

Their eyes turned glassy, and they gave a cold stare as if seeing nothing at all.

Ashar's breath came in ragged, panicked pants.

He was shaking violently, watching what was happening below, and low moaning sounds were emanating from him that he wasn't aware he was making.

Merdia noticed something was wrong and rushed to his side. Even without the sighting lens, the chaos in the valley below was obvious.

Another round of projectiles flew toward the village, this time aimed much higher, high enough to reach the upper valley where his family lived. Again, huge plumes of purple smoke exploded in all directions, slowly drifting down the valley, completely covering his village.

"What is happening, Ashar!" Merdia's voice was a barely contained scream as she watched in horror, seeing everything she knew being destroyed before her eyes.

"I don't know." His voice sounded as panicked as hers, just at a lower volume.

He didn't know what to do. But he had to do something. What would his father do?

He would protect his family. He looked again at the scene below him in the valley and wondered what he could do against that if anything. He could try. Yes, he had to try to do something.

Merdia! She might be the only family he had left.

He had to protect her as well. Still unsure of what he would do, he grabbed the cart handles and started pulling it off the trail and into the brush, hiding it as best he could.

Digging through the cart, he frantically searched for something he could use as a weapon, but the only thing he could find was the picking pole, which had a tiny blade at the end that hooked back. The sharp side was to the inside so it could hook and cut the stems, completely useless as a weapon. Looking down at the valley and the organized assault it was suffering, he realized a weapon like this would do him no good at all.

Besides, he hadn't been trained to fight, and whoever attacked their village clearly was.

He wouldn't last two seconds if they found him, weapon or not. Pulling Merdia into the brush with the cart, he turned to her.

"You stay here." He could see the protest forming already and didn't have time to argue with his headstrong sister. Raising his voice, he barked at her in a way he never had. It surprised him as much as her. Possibly more so.

"No! Not this time! This time, you listen and do what you are told!"

The words impacted her into silence, something he had never seen happen to her. He softened his voice and knelt in front of her. "Merdia, I don't know what is happening, but I know it's dangerous. I couldn't bear the thought of something happening to you. Please, forgive my tone and how I yelled at you just now. It is only because I want to keep you safe.

"I need you to stay here so I know you are not in danger, all right? If I am not back in an hour, take what you can carry and continue north. You should be able to find others from our village

picking up on the harvest grounds. You must warn them and get help if you can, but mostly, you must stay safe. Do not come after me, no matter what. Promise me."

Tears were running down her cheeks as she nodded.

"I promise ..." Her voice was weak and shaky, and her lip tremored. "But I'm so scared, Ashar, I don't want to be alone."

"I know. I will return here as soon as possible. First, I must find out what happened and see if I can help Father somehow or help anyone. Find a hiding place away from the cart where you can see the trail, stay low, and stay quiet. Got it?"

She nodded again.

He kissed her on her forehead and turned back down the trail toward the village while he still dared to do it, running hard down the hill. It felt odd to be running toward what he feared rather than away from it, but he knew his father would do the same. He knew Wattar would do the same.

He slowed as he approached the outskirts and listened carefully. It was silent. He had never heard the village so quiet, like a graveyard. He hoped he was wrong about that.

Closer and closer, he crept until his nose caught a whiff of something.

The smell was strong and sharp. It reminded him of something he couldn't quite place until he thought back to his brother's Joining, and he had gotten a face full of mullenberries. It was different, though, much stronger and mixed with other scents. It must have been the gas they used in his village. The gas he had seen made people drop to the ground and lie still.

He wouldn't be useful to anyone if he ran down and became disabled by the gas.

Thinking quickly, he pulled his handkerchief from his back pocket and dipped it in the stream by which he had been crouched. He squeezed some of the water out and tied it tightly around his head, making sure it was snug against his mouth and nose.

He didn't know if it would help, but he couldn't just turn around because of a smell.

Creeping as quietly as he could, he slipped behind one of the large storehouses on the outskirts. It gave him a clear view of his house and the main street running to the market.

People were lying in the street, not moving. He approached the first house and looked out the window. The people inside had never even gotten out the front door. The whole family was lying in the common room, and Master Rikka was still sitting in his chair, looking as though he had drifted off to sleep.

Ashar turned away from the window and started toward his house, panic rising in his chest at what he would likely find there. The front door was wide open, half blocked by his brother's

enormous frame. He stood, unable to move, looking down at him. Tears started to well in his eyes when Wattar moved just a little, his chest slowly going up and down.

He was breathing! Ashar dropped to his side and tried to turn him over but couldn't budge him. He could see another shape on the floor inside. Mother!

Leaping over his brother, he knelt by her side and checked her breathing. It was low but steady. Other than being unconscious, she appeared to be fine. A quick scan of the room showed no sign of Father. He had probably run off to try to stop the attacker and left Wattar to guard Mother. Ashar didn't know what to do. He couldn't move Wattar at all, and even if he could have dragged Mother out of the house, he wouldn't have been able to carry her any distance.

He cursed himself for not being strong like Wattar, who could have hefted the whole family high on his shoulders and run up the hill without so much as breaking a sweat. He didn't know what to do. He could go find his father but was certain he was lying somewhere, just like his mother.

He would never have heard it if the village hadn't been so quiet. It was a soft sound like a voice, but it seemed like hissing rather than speaking. Whatever it was, it was getting closer.

The attackers. It had to be. Nothing else in the village was moving.

Even the farm animals in their pens were lying motionless. Looking around in a panic, he tried to decide what to do. He could do nothing for Mother and Wattar, not without a heavy cart and a beast to pull it. He couldn't fight. After all, he was only twelve, and his only experience with fighting had been when he was seven, and another boy had punched him in the face during an argument over whose turn it was to play on the climbing ropes.

Merdia. He had to get back to her before the invaders found her. The low voices were right outside his house now. Not daring to go out the front door, he quietly crept up the stairs, skillfully avoiding the boards that he knew creaked. Merdia's room was at the back of the house, looking out over the small garden Mother tended in the backyard.

He could hear heavy footsteps as someone entered the house, striding through the living room. Frozen in terror, he crouched down, not daring to make a sound.

Then he heard the squeak. They were coming up the stairs.

Looking out the window to make sure there was no one around who might see him, he quietly climbed out of the window and hung from the sill by his fingertips. He let go and dropped the last few feet into the garden with a thud, losing his footing and landing on his butt.

He quickly crawled behind the small shed and held his breath, peeking around the corner and up at the window from which he had just dropped. He saw two hands grab the sill as someone looked out. He couldn't see their face, but the hands looked strange. Thick fingers ended in long claws, and before they were pulled back, he could have sworn he saw scales on the skin.

He waited until he heard them move on to the next house before leaving his hiding place and heading back toward the path, keeping low and trying not to make a sound.

After walking around his neighbor's house, he found a large open area he would have to cross to get back up the hill to Merdia. He waited there, hiding behind a large shrub, watching the road. He couldn't see anyone but could hear them, their heavy footfalls and hissing speech seeming to come from all around him. Suddenly, one appeared as he came around a house.

Ashar had to cover his mouth; he needed to quiet the scream threatening to leap from his mouth at the sight of him. He was twenty feet away, facing Ashar and looking around, but hadn't noticed him sitting frozen in terror, at least not yet.

There had always been stories about unusual Joinings.

Most were just kids' tales meant to scare or teach, but they were just stories all the same. His favorite had been about a woman who, while in the Joining trance, had experienced a fish falling from a bird's claw and smacking her in the head, which caused them to Join.

In the story, the woman took on many comic attributes of a fish, such as eating flies and sleeping in a tub full of water.

After suffering humiliation at the hands of her fellows for years, one day, a child fell into a raging river and was swept away instantly. Before anyone could react, the woman jumped in after the child, and because she could swim like a fish, she was able to save the child and became hailed as a hero. But it was just a story, wasn't it? People couldn't Join with lower animals like reptiles, fish, and insects. It just didn't happen, ever.

Except that was what had happened to the man standing in the road. He had a hard time thinking of him as a man. Normally, a person would take on some of the physical traits of the animal they Joined with, but it was always little things such as hair growing where it didn't use to grow or ears and nails becoming elongated slightly.

The man looked as if the animal had taken over most of him. He was short, barely taller than Ashar, but thick and powerfully built, corded muscles standing out on his arms.

His broad neck grew wider as it met his shoulders, his head seeming to be perched atop his arms. His mouth and jaw had pushed out, too, forming a distinct snout lined with long teeth extending past his lips, sticking out on the top and bottom. His nose had been lost as his snout had grown, and all that was left were two narrow slits below bright yellow eyes, which looked as though they had been spaced too far apart on his head.

His bald head and every inch of exposed skin were covered in thick overlapping scales, forming protective armor over his whole body. This man hadn't just been Joined with something like an alligator or large lizard. It rather seemed he had been turned into one.

After surveying the area momentarily, he hissed commands at a few companions and headed away toward the market.

Ashar saw his chance and quickly moved across the open space, diving into the bushes on the other side and nervously checking to see if he had been spotted. Staying off the path, he moved as quietly as he could through trees and underbrush lining the path up the valley.

When he reached the storehouses, he could see several wagons and more of the disturbing lizard people loading the wagons. At least now, he knew why the invaders had attacked his peaceful village. They had stolen all the food they had taken such care to gather through the summer.

He didn't know how everyone would survive without the stores they had collected. It would be a hard winter.

He decided he was pushing his luck by lingering near where so many eyes could spot him, so he started moving back up the hill, hoping that raiding the stores would keep them occupied for a while. When he felt it was clear, he moved back onto the path and ran back to Merdia.

When he crested the hill, his chest was on fire, and he was breathing hard.

Surprisingly, his sister had actually done what he had told her to, scurrying out of her hiding place upon noticing him coming up the hill.

"What is happening?" Merdia demanded.

He still couldn't talk yet and felt exposed on the path, so he pulled her back into the brush where the cart was waiting and pulled a water flask out. After drinking most of it, he sat down, leaning against the cart, and recalled what he had seen to her.

"You didn't see Father at all?"

"No, but there were so many of them that I couldn't really look."

"And you are sure Mother and Wattar are fine?"

"As fine as they can be, I guess. I can tell you, I didn't like having to leave them."

"What do we do now?"

He had to think for a minute before answering. Besides seeing them stealing food, he didn't know anything about the invaders or what they could possibly want here.

Most importantly, he didn't know if they would leave after they got whatever it was they wanted.

"We wait. If they are here to steal food, they may leave before everyone wakes up. If they aren't here for the food alone, we wait and see what it is they are after. Follow me."

They had been sitting in the notch in the ridge through which the path cut; leading Merdia up and away from there, he climbed higher into the rocky ridge. After searching, he found a good and flat spot where they could sit, with a clear view of the village.

It was ideal because it could not be seen from the path.

"We should be safe here. I would be surprised if anyone can spot us tucked so far back into these rocks. Just the same, don't move around too much if you can help it."

He pulled out the sighting lens again and trained it on the valley.

It looked as if they were scouring the village for anything of value. Some of the carts seemed to be loaded with items other than food. They raided the stores of dried fish near the river, and Ashar even spotted one of them with a net, scooping fish out of the communal fountain in the plaza. He could see that Merdia's curiosity was killing her, so he handed her the lens so she could look for herself.

"What are those things?" She had spotted one of the lizard men.

"I don't know, but I saw a few close up, and I don't ever want to be that close to one again."

Ashar was wondering what he should do next when Merdia suddenly cried out. He turned to see she was shaking a little bit.

"No, no, no!"

"What is it? What do you see?"

"They're taking them," she said in a soft voice.

He grabbed the lens from her and was shocked by what he saw. The heavy wagons that had been moving food had returned empty, and people were being loaded on them, his people. The lizard men were stacking them up two deep in the carts and returning them to the river.

His mind raced. He couldn't keep a thought in his head because all thoughts came simultaneously, tumbling over one another, creating chaos and panic. His father's voice suddenly came through with one of his nonsensical sayings that he would often give instead of actual information.

"Start with the first thing first, or the second thing will be wrong."

His mind calmed somewhat, focusing on the meaning of that silly saying. What did he need to do first? He shouldn't have been thinking about how to save everyone or what was happening below. He needed to think about what he required first, had to get the order of everything correct, or all his efforts would be in vain! What was the most important thing?

Safety. For his sister.

"Come on, I have an idea. I don't know if those things will start searching beyond the village when they are done down there, but I want to be somewhere else if they do. We need to find out where they are taking them if we are to have any hope of helping."

He grabbed her hand, and they quickly returned to the cart. Pulling out the load belts and a small pack, he started tugging items out of the cart that they would need—just a small tent, as much food as they could carry, and some warmer clothes. Leaving the path, they followed the ridge eastward, moving away from town and toward the delta where the river met the sea.

It was hard going.

There was no real path to follow, and they constantly had to scramble over large boulders or descend to get around something, only to have to climb back up once they were past. It was a case of one step forward, seven back, so exhausting and feeling utterly senseless. By the time they reached the crest of the ridge above the delta, the sun was high in the afternoon sky.

They had been staying on the side of the ridge facing away from the village just in case someone was watching from below. He dropped his heavy load and sat down with a grunt, and Merdia did the same. After catching his breath momentarily, he grabbed the lens and motioned his sister to follow him up to the top of the ridge. From there, he could see the whole delta valley, from where the stream met it, to where it finally kissed and merged with the ocean.

Just as he thought, black ships were sitting in the sand, large ships, larger than anything he had ever seen. They were leaning over at strange angles, their sails hanging loosely, swaying in the breeze. The river was too shallow to allow anything but small boats.

Large ships could come in when the tide was high, but when it went out again, it left them stranded on the sand until the next high tide. That's what these ships were waiting for. They must have sailed in during the night and waited for the tide to recede so they could walk from there to his village. This hadn't been some random raid.

Someone had planned this—and planned it carefully.

Using the lens for a better look at the ships, he could see they had broad hulls and were much longer than any boats his people used for fishing and trading with the other islands nearby. A tall central mast and a shorter one came off the bow, large sails strung between them in a complex web of ropes.

The ship looked as if it could easily sail past the calm waters surrounding the island and withstand the fury of the open sea, something his people never dared.

On the rear of the ship was a flat deck holding the catapults they had used against them. There were men there, reassembling timbers so they could be fired from the ship again.

He saw ramps leading up to the mid-deck where they were quickly loading materials and people.

Five ships were lying in the soft sand. Four were large for carrying cargo and crew, but the fifth was different. It was a little narrower, only about half the length of the other ships at best, giving it a sleek look, a fast, nimble ship able to be used for scouting. On the hull, each ship bore the same mark, a jagged black ring with a slash of red across it.

They spent the rest of the day watching as the invaders scoured the village, loading wagon after wagon. Sometimes, they had people with them, tied together and walking behind the convoy.

He didn't know if the gas had worn off from those or if they had come back and been captured after, but he was relieved to see they were at least alive.

By late afternoon, all the wagons had returned to the ships and were being loaded, along with the humongous beasts pulling them. The last of the lizard men were gathering in the plaza, one blowing a low horn to call the rest back.

Once assembled, they, too, marched off to the boats and climbed aboard. Ashar could see the water in the delta rising already as the tide came back in.

It would only be a few more hours until there was enough water beneath them to sail off.

A few more hours until his people sailed away, until his family sailed away, a few more hours in which he could do nothing at all to help them.

Chapter Four

It was cold when they woke up. There wasn't a proper place to set up the tent on the rocky ridge, so he had draped it over two large rocks and created a small space where they could huddle together through the night. He was waiting for the morning fog to burn off.

They had to know if the ships were still there.

He knew they weren't. He knew his family had sailed away in the night to an unknown fate, but he still had to see it with his own eyes. So did Merdia.

She had spent the night in a state of shock, not saying anything at all, not a solitary murmur, just languishing quietly and crying herself back to sleep; only then, she would wake again and start crying some more. He didn't blame her.

He wanted to cry too, and he had done several times during the chilly night.

The tent filled with light as the fog burned off the high ridge and sunlight came pouring through. He grabbed the blanket in which he had been wrapped and pulled back the tent, motioning for Merdia to grab her blanket and follow. They climbed until they crested the ridge and returned to the spot from which they had watched yesterday.

"It has to be warmer up here in the sun than down in that damp hole we were hiding in, don't you think?" Merdia only nodded and pulled her blanket tighter.

They sat for the next hour, warming themselves in the sun and waiting for the fog to burn off below, not wanting it to, not wanting to see what they knew they would behold when it did.

Eventually, they could see the delta and the river to the sea. There was no sign of the ships. Neither spoke for a time. They just sat holding each other.

It was Merdia who broke the silence.

"What are we going to do about it?" Her voice was near a whisper, but there was a hard edge to it. It wasn't a question. It was a challenge. Ashar smiled to see his sister regain herself.

She had been in shock, scared, and had given up hope. Now, she was angry, and Ashar knew from experience that nothing could survive in the face of Merdia's rage. There would be no more running, no more hiding.

"We get them back," he said simply. He didn't know how they would do that, but he knew there was nothing now but that one goal. Whatever their lives may have been, that future was gone, replaced with hunting those who had snatched their family. But first, he had to find out who was left. There must have been others outside the village when the attack happened.

"Let's get packed and get out of here. We need to get home—right now."

She didn't argue with him, just nodded sternly and turned back to get their gear. She had changed. It was almost as if some part of her childhood had died a death the night before.

He hoped she would get it back one day but knew she wouldn't. He knew he no longer felt like a child either, despite his youthful age. He had been forced to grow, to think of and to see things that only grown-ups ought to see, things he would never manage to put from his mind.

They were able to take an easier, more direct route to the village than they took out to the ridge. They headed for the plaza, hoping others would gather there, but it was deserted when they arrived. Dropping their load against the fountain, Ashar climbed up to the statue to get a better look and called out as loud as he could.

There was no answering call, but he caught motion on the plaza's edge as someone emerged from behind one of the stalls where they had been hiding. It was Master Jorry, the ancient woman who kept the village journal, recording all major events. She shuffled toward him as fast as her old legs would carry her. A voice rang out from the other side of the plaza.

"It's safe. You can come out now. It's Ashar. He has returned for us!"

It seemed a strange comment, but he guessed that, in a way, he had come back for them. One at a time, people started to appear in the plaza until forty people had gathered around Ashar, and he could no longer be seen there, in the middle of the amassed crowd.

They were looking at him strangely.

"Tell me what happened to you? How did you escape the attackers?" Ashar's voice rang out surprisingly clearly across the plaza.

Master Uther stepped forward and faced Ashar. He was a fishing boat captain with broad shoulders and thick arms showing the years spent at sea, pulling lines laden with fish.

"I was out hunting along with my brother and his son," he said, gesturing to two men standing off to one side. "We returned last night and found the village invaded. I am ashamed to say we hid in the rocks and did nothing after seeing one of those things. I'm sorry, Ashar, we should have done more than hide like cowards." Again, Ashar noticed that people were speaking to him differently. He put it out of his mind and turned to Master Uther.

"Do not be so hard on yourself. I watched it all happen from my hiding place in the rocks. there is no shame in it." His words seemed to soothe him, and he continued.

"When we saw them leave, we came into town and found some waking up, confused and scared. We spent the night going house to house looking for people, and those we found are here now. They left most of the older people behind, some of the younger ones you see here got knocked out somewhere those creatures didn't find them. The rest they took."

Ashar told them of his journey, from witnessing the attack begin to seeing the ships depart with their loved ones. When he was done, the crowd just sat looking at him as if waiting for him to tell them what to do. As usual, Merdia saw the obvious before he did. She grabbed his hand and pulled him down to her.

"Ashar, you are the chief now!" she hissed in his ear.

He just stood dumbfounded as the reality of that sank in. His father was gone, as was Mattar, that left him. It hadn't occurred to him that he was the next chief. Why would anyone follow him? He hadn't fought when the village was attacked. He didn't save anyone but himself and Merdia. He was just a child who had no idea what he was doing.

He looked out at the small group of people, desperately trying to think of something to do and say, while they stared back at him, waiting expectantly.

He felt like a child who had been pronounced king at an early age, stunned and panicked, unsure what to do. He was being cast into a world of adults, ones who stared fixatedly at him in such anticipation, while he stared back, clueless and lost.

What was he supposed to say to them all?

It was ultimately Merdia who broke the silence, saving him. Merdia, the brave one, the fearless one, the one who was forthright and always sure of herself!

Perhaps she should be chief, Ashar thought for the briefest of moments before she said, "Master Uther, surely there are others beyond the village, in the harvest grounds or hiding, unsure if it is safe to return here?"

"Yes, there have to be a few more. That is good thinking. We will look," Ashar voiced with great certainty as if it had been his very own idea.

Merdia elbowed Ashar and gestured to the pile of supplies they had dropped next to the fountain. Ashar didn't understand what she wanted him to do.

His mind was still in shock, and he couldn't think clearly.

Merdia rolled her eyes at him and opened one of the bags.

"Here, we brought a little food with us. take this with you."

Master Uther accepted the bag and nodded politely to Merdia.

Of course, Ashar thought, I should have been the one to think of that.

He was their leader and was supposed to lead. What would Father do? He would protect his people. Merdia giving food out reminded him most of the food in the village was gone, and they needed to find whatever was left. He looked at the crowd and found four young men standing together. Screwing up his courage, he tried to make his voice sound strong.

He almost did.

"Martol ..." he squeaked. Clearing his throat, he tried again. "Martol, there is a cart hidden in the brush just off the trail where the path crosses the notch. Some food is left in it. Will you be kind enough to bring it back, please?"

Martol looked at him and paused before giving him a quick nod and heading toward the path.

"Satia, Bargon, and Jesk," he said, addressing the other three who had been standing with Martol. "We need to go through every house in the village and find every scrap of food left behind, gather it up, and bring it back here."

He looked over at Merdia, hoping she might know what to do next. He was still panicking inside, terrified he was going to do something wrong and make it worse.

She saw the fear in his eyes and spoke before anyone else could see it.

Merdia turned to the crowd. "Master Jorry, it would be best if everyone stayed together rather than spread all over town in our homes. Would you organize a few people and start getting people settled in the homes around the plaza?"

Master Jorry did everything slowly but in a highly organized way.

She issued slow commands to be carried out as quickly as possible, and a few minutes later, a small desk appeared with writing parchment and quill where she could properly take command of the elderly troops at her disposal. Soon, there was an army of slow-moving elders trudging through town, completing whatever task Master Jorry had assigned to them.

Twenty minutes later, Ashar found he was alone with Merdia. The way she glared at him wasn't good. She had her hands on her hips, and that was always bad news as well.

He sucked in a deep breath, getting ready for the storm that was to come. No, not the storm—the tempest. Sure enough, it did not take long.

"What is wrong with you?" she demanded. "These people need you, and you stare at them with your mouth hanging open as if you are terrified?"

"I am terrified! I'm not even supposed to be in charge!" His voice was a low shriek. "Father is the chief, not me. Why would they think I could lead like he did? I can't! Don't they see it? They would be better off following someone else, anyone else! You are better at it than I am. Yes, they should follow you."

Tears streamed down his face as he spoke, and his nose was still burbling snot when he finished.

It made an even wetter sound when Merdia slapped him.

Ashar just stared at his sister in disbelief. It took him a second to realize the slap had cleared his head. He had been panicking and probably wasn't setting a good example on his first day as the chief. Merdia stared back at him with steel in her eye, but he could also see the corner of her mouth twisting into a small smile she was trying not to show.

"You have been waiting a long time to do that, haven't you?"

"No, only since you were five."

"I'm not going to thank you for slapping me."

"You don't have to. The satisfaction of doing it is all the reward I need." She was smiling broadly now, enjoying the moment. "Maybe we should come up with a signal when you need to be slapped to be a more effective leader. I could be master of the Ministry of Civic Slapping! Stand by you at important functions and wallop you when you say something stupid. Every morning, wake you up with a nice big whack around the ears, just so you start your day off right."

They both laughed for a minute. It seemed as if it had been forever since he had last laughed. The last twenty-four hours had seemed like eternity.

One day, and everything in his life had changed. How often he laughed had changed.

By evening, Master Jorry had everyone assigned to a house on the plaza, and they had found enough food to provide a decent meal. Slowly, the groups milling around broke up as people retreated to bed, weary from everything that had happened. Ashar took his meal to his assigned room and was surprised by how ravenous he was. He couldn't remember what had been in the basket, maybe some berries? He ate all of it without looking up.

Leaning back against a cushion, he felt he could sleep right there, sitting on the floor, and be fine until morning. He heard a small knock, and his door opened. Merdia crept in and sat beside him.

"I'm scared. What happens now, Ashar?"

"I don't know."

"You don't get to say that anymore. You are the chief now."

"I don't want to be."

"You are."

"You saw me out there today. I have no idea what I'm doing. You were the one who thought of looking for more people, not me. Father would have thought of that first. Wattar would have. But I didn't. I thought of the cart and gathering food because you pointed to a bag of it." He started shaking his head. "No, tomorrow I will talk to everyone, and we will choose someone to lead us, someone who knows what they are doing. Most definitely not me."

He looked down at his feet, then said, "There. You wanted me to be more decisive, and that is what I have just done. I have decided."

"Too bad. They already chose you."

"What are you talking about? What did I do that made them think I was their chief?"

"I love you, brother, but you really are dense. What happened in the last day?" she asked him.

He somehow knew that any answer he gave would be wrong. It seemed that just about everything had happened yesterday, and he was sure to pick the wrong thing in his response. So, he just shrugged and asked, "What? Which thing do you mean?"

"Some of those people saw their village raided just like we did. They saw the creatures that did it. Others woke up confused and frightened, only to find everyone was gone, and they were alone. Those people spent the night in fear, not knowing if those beasts would return and take them, too. When we showed up, they were still hiding, cowering at every noise."

"I know that, but what did I do? Nothing, that's what I did."

"Do you know what they saw when we walked in? They saw the son of Manatar striding into the plaza without fear and stand calling out to them from the fountain when they were too scared to make the smallest sound. You brought food and a full account of what had happened, letting

them know the danger had passed and they were safe again. You did exactly what any good leader would do. Right up to the point you figured out you were in charge and locked up."

"I didn't lock up."

"You so did!"

"Did not!"

Just for the briefest of moments, Ashar and Merdia sounded like real kids, until Merdia said, "You were like one of Master Spurris' goats. When they get scared and faint, they go along full speed and then suddenly faceplant."

"No, I'm not a goat."

"I know, I never said you were. Goats smell better."

"Thanks."

"Ashar, tomorrow they will have questions. You have to have answers," she said, becoming serious again.

"I don't know if I can do it though. I know you mean well, and it's helping a bit but—"

A huge sigh escaped his chest, as if he had been holding his breath for the whole village.

"If you don't figure it out by morning, everyone will die from starvation this winter. Let that be on your conscience."

With those stern words, she had clearly decided to leave him alone to think.

She stood up and returned to her room without saying another word, leaving him with his thoughts. He tried to stay up and think of what he would do in the morning, but he was tired, and sleep was clouding his thoughts.

Finally, he crawled into bed, putting off his problems until morning.

In the dream, he was in a dark land filled with dust and fumes that choked and burned his eyes. He could see people in wheeled cages rolling past, shackled and miserable.

He saw his family as they cried out for him, reaching through the bars and begging for help. He could do nothing. The dream shifted, and he found himself on the ridge above his village, watching the raiders ransack it, helpless to intervene as the flames rose higher and higher.

He saw Merdia being dragged away by one of the lizard men, screaming and thrashing.

He couldn't stop it, but in the dream, it was his fault. He had caused this somehow.

He awoke so violently that he landed on the floor, tangled in blankets. Standing up and shaking them off, he could still feel the dream wrapped around him, smothering him.

The room was too small. The house was too small.

He ran out the front door before he knew what he was doing, some part of him aware that he didn't have shoes on or any warm clothes, and he should have been cold but wasn't. He ran without thinking, past the houses on the western side, past the fields planted there, past the dense brush at the edge of the meadow, and into the forest he ran.

At some point, he became aware he was watching himself running as if outside of himself, as if having some sort of out-of-body experience. He could see his arms swinging, his legs pumping, his chest heaving with each breath.

He could see his cloudy, sightless eyes staring straight ahead, the same eyes he had seen in Wattar's bear as it walked by in a trance. He saw himself slow and then stop in a small grassy meadow, kneeling in the greenery. As his breath calmed, he felt himself pulled back into his body again, aware of the grass under him, life moving around him.

It was as if he were connected to himself but also to his surroundings, sights and sounds coming in from all sides, which was a confusing chorus of voices and feelings.

He started to hear more clearly amidst all the noise. Some voices were louder to him than others, and he called out to them in his mind. Some answered, and some retreated, shrinking away.

One voice became clear and strong. He couldn't understand it, but it was close and he could feel it was drawn to him, reaching out, trying to understand him.

When the huge stag appeared in the meadow, it approached Ashar and bent its head as if regarding him with the same milky blind eyes as his, its enormous antlers towering over him. They stayed like that for some time, but something wasn't right.

They could hear but not understand one another.

Ashar heard another voice, not from anywhere but from everywhere, powerful and frightening. The stag jumped back and disappeared into the forest, running hard.

Everything living turned and started running away from the meadow, leaving him alone with the powerful presence. Before, he had heard the voices of the forest not in words but in emotions and feelings. This voice rang out clearly in his head. It spoke to him.

It wasn't one voice. It was many. Was it talking to him or arguing among all the different voices that made it up?

This, this one cannot be ... cannot.

Too weak, too frail, will fail.

Yes fail, fail.

Will fail.

NO! We saw his strength, his brother's bear showed us before he left!

False, false, we do not know what we saw!

We saw it, the deep power, he is the one ...

Will fail, fail, not worthy.

We must try I will go!

No, no, no, no, no, others can go.

I will go.

You die, die, die!

Maybe ...

He rejects us already cannot, you will die, he will fail, he must be shown!

You will die, I will show him. He must see!

Ashar had been listening without understanding what they were talking about, when his mind was suddenly removed, ripped from his control.

Instantly, he went from sitting in a quiet meadow to experiencing the entire island in a single moment, a breath suddenly passing through him, bringing with it nothing, yet everything.

He could see every leaf on every tree, hear every sound, feel the dampness and how it changed as the fog moved in for the night. He could see every bird, see everyone in the village as they slept. For two seconds, he could see all that simultaneously.

His mind was not prepared to process that much at once. It was as if he had become the entire island for a few seconds, feeling and hearing everything it did. It left him stunned and confused. He couldn't think or remember who he was or what was happening.

The only thing he could feel was his mind fracturing, breaking into pieces.

See, see! Broken fail, fail ...

Wait.

No... We killed him, killed him, killed dead, dead, dead.

Another ... another we find.

Wait, wait, wait!

He felt as though he was falling from a great height through darkness, spinning through the air helplessly, parts of himself floating just out of reach. He plummeted, falling until it seemed he

could see the bottom rushing up to end it. As he got closer, it resolved into a small bright light hovering before him. He wasn't falling anymore, just floating along with the light.

All the pieces of himself started returning, making him feel almost whole again except for that little ball of light. It had been in him his whole life, buried deep, undiscovered until Wattar's bear saw it, something different, something powerful. It had come out somehow, when he was being ripped apart, but he knew he needed it, even if he didn't understand why.

Reaching out in the darkness, he touched it, and for a moment, his mind blazed again as it had before. But differently. This time, it didn't overwhelm him immediately.

He reached out again. Again, his mind exploded, but he held on as the pain washed over him.

He found he could pull back and control it a little, just enough so it wasn't overwhelming.

He pulled back until he could feel himself again, still feel the world around him until he could think again. When he was ready, he turned his focus to the light and found it held the memory of that moment when he connected to the island. He could view it again without losing himself, to see what had happened.

At first, he thought he had joined with the island itself.

He could feel it so powerfully, but now could see that wasn't the case. It had been overwhelming because it wasn't a single, powerful voice. He had heard millions of small voices and had seen through millions of eyes. He hadn't seen the island. He had seen what the insects on the island saw and heard, all of them, all at once, millions and millions of them.

An insect! Horror rose in him. No one had ever joined with an insect. It wasn't even something mentioned in their myths and stories. It was taboo. Ashar wanted to run, to get away from voices coming from every direction, but he couldn't move. His body sat peacefully in the meadow, and his mind was trapped in the dark abyss, fighting against the entity holding him captive.

He fights us, rejected, rejected, leave, leave him.

Others.... Find others more, not this one.

Wait.

No.

No more.

We leave.

Wait, he can save them, save them all.

No fail, fail, leave, leave now.

Wait, let him decide.

He has decided already he rejects us he rejects us!

Wait.

Ashar's mind was racing.

He wanted to run, to punch a wall, to kick, scream, or do anything, but he was still trapped. The only thing he had was the ball of light. It calmed him and distracted him from what the other one was saying. He realized how strange it was, knowing he was dealing with a single being.

He could feel it, but it comprised millions of smaller beings, some with voices, others silent, but all connected. Within that collection, something had grown, a mind, another being living by spreading itself across millions and millions of small creatures.

He focused on the light again, allowed himself to feel it again.

This time, he was able to block out the multitudes and hear one spot on the island, a solitary rock sitting near the shoreline, the waves crashing below. He could feel the spray as the wind carried it up and onto the rocks and trees, feeling all the small creatures that scurried and crawled, going on about their business without noticing he was borrowing their eyes and ears.

He could simply feel how calm they were.

They weren't worried about what would happen or saddened by what had happened before. No, they simply moved in peace, completely at one with the present. The calm spread from them, on and into him, warming him, giving him comfort. The voices were still talking, arguing. They seemed surprised when he interrupted them, almost as if he shouldn't have been able to do that.

"Why?" his mind asked into the void. "Why do you need me?"

The voices became raised simultaneously, talking over each other until the noise became deafening. Then one voice spoke. It wasn't loud, but it was clear.

Wait

All the voices stopped.

I will speak for us.

Ashar expected another argument, but there was only silence.

We need you, evil in the east.

You have seen them they came here.

They took your people, many people, many places ...

Take, take, take, take ...

We are many, we are one, we are powerful!

We are helpless, cannot stop the take take take ... they take! Help us!

We cannot Join. People die when we do, cannot Join!

You are different, we live in you already hidden.

You can join, you are like us, just like us already! Join, join, join!

Wattar had seen it during his Joining.

The bear had shown him the unusual power resting in Ashar, asleep, waiting. It was why he couldn't understand the stag, why he could speak with them now, why he might be able to save his family. In the void, he pulled the light into him until it burned away the darkness, and he felt himself once again in his own body. The damp grass was under him, the mist swirling around him, his breathing, and the forest around him.

The presence was still there, waiting patiently. The decision must be his.

He must take the first step.

"Yes." His voice was a ghostly whisper in the fog.

He could hear another great argument among the voices, too fast to follow, louder it grew until one voice rose above all the others and quieted them.

NO!

It will be me must be me.

He recognized the voice because it had spoken in his favor before.

Silence fell over the grove as Ashar felt them moving toward him from the brush.

It was all of them, but only one of them was approaching.

Again, he watched everything from the outside as the mist around him suddenly cleared, the moonlight illuminating the meadow. He could see the creature approaching him, bright green with long hind legs and a vivid orange stripe running all the way down its body.

A grasshopper.

The creature crept up and stopped just in front of him. He watched as the grasshopper faded and blurred as it slowly slipped out of the physical world, until only the very faintest smudge of light was left hanging in front of Ashar. As the light entered him, he felt himself being pulled back into his body and into the vastness that the small grasshopper had brought with him.

Normally, a Joining was a merging of two lives resulting in one life, but this particular Joining was very different. The grasshopper had given his life to create a bridge between Ashar and all

living insects, connecting him to a living, active organism, not just to its memories and experiences. He would never be alone again. He would always be a voice in the multitude.

At first, it felt like the first time again.

His mind recoiled in horror at the vastness of his new companion. In time, he was able to slowly pull himself together again, to learn to separate his mind from the million other minds that he could now hear. They became a constant noise at the edge of his mind, so if he concentrated, he could focus on one thing or another for just a few seconds at a time.

He was seeing so much so fast that he couldn't make sense of most of it, but at least it was getting easier. Of all the voices he heard, there was one missing. He had felt another mind present before, something living in the network of connections between the insects.

It was gone now. He could no longer feel it, as if it had built some kind of a wall between him and it. They were connected to the same teeming mass of life but not to each other.

He sat for hours, learning how to reach out and touch the life around him, and how to narrow his focus so he could see and hear clearly anything that happened within earshot of his bugs. He learned he could reach out to just a few at a time and control them a little, nothing big, but enough to make them change direction or stop in their tracks.

He extended his view down the town and the plaza and was surprised to see Merdia speaking from the fountain to a large group. The sun was high in the sky. He had lost track of time by now, and it was midday. Master Uther had returned with another twenty or so people he had found at the harvest grounds or along the way. There seemed to be some kind of an argument going on. Merdia was trying to get them to calm down. But some people were clearly in a panic.

"He will be back! Don't worry ... No, I don't know where he is ... Yes, I'm quite sure there is a good reason for him to have left."

Merdia was trying to answer all the questions when she had no answers.

He had lingered too long, exploring his newfound gifts.

He started to pull his vision back into himself. He had been testing how far he could reach out and see at once before it just didn't make sense anymore.

Just as he was about to stand and leave, something caught his attention. It was the memory of something, something he had seen when his mind had been stretched a great distance. He hadn't noticed it before because he hadn't been focused on that area, but he had seen it, for sure.

He reached out now with all his might, focusing on a spot on the shoreline just outside the delta, a small group of rocks covered with seaweed, barnacles, crabs, and one other thing.

Instantly, he was on his feet, running hard for the plaza.

Chapter Five

The forest flew by in a blur. Ashar had never run so fast in his life.

He remembered his feet being cut and bleeding from running through the forest the night before without shoes, but there was no trace of injury now.

His feet were tougher and harder than before as they pounded the ground.

He vaulted the downed trees and dense underbrush without thinking about it, jumping six feet in the air at a full run, landing without breaking stride. It felt so natural.

His legs acted as though they had giant springs wound into them, launching him from one footfall to the next, covering ten feet with each stride.

He had spent the whole night exploring what he could do connected to the island's insects.

It hadn't occurred to him that the tiny grasshopper had given him something physical as well, but he could feel that gift now as he shot silently through the forest.

He didn't slow when he reached the buildings at the village edge. The memory of what he had seen lying on the rocks was still strong, so he had to hurry.

He also didn't slow when he broke into the plaza and ran toward the large crowd of people all screaming their lungs out at poor Merdia.

He didn't slow down when he reached the crowd either, his legs seeming unable to stop, as if they drove the rest of him to wherever they chose. Instead, he planted his right foot hard and launched himself fifteen feet in the air. His momentum carried him for another thirty over the heads of those assembled, where he landed on the rim of the fountain—right next to Merdia.

Everyone stared in shocked silence, even Merdia.

As he rose from the crouched position in which he had landed and stood slowly, the people closest to the fountain took a few steps back as if in fear. He saw that same white cold fear in everyone's eyes except Merdia's, since she was looking at him with wonder. Meanwhile, he was so confused. Why would people be afraid of him?

He glanced at Merdia, looking for answers in her, hoping to at least hear some sort of explanation even if it wouldn't make much sense.

"Ashar, your eyes," she whispered quietly. Her own bored into him, searching, assessing.

He turned and knelt by the still water of the fountain and gazed as best he could at his reflection, fearing he would see long antennae protruding from his forehead or large multifaceted bug eyes popping out. His face was, thankfully, untouched, yet all was not quite the same as it had been.

His eyes were no longer his.

His once hazel eyes had turned bright green, but not just green. Light was issuing out of them, as though a green flame was burning in each one, rendering them not only more vibrant but also radiant. As he stared at his reflection, he could see the light flickering, changing in intensity, almost as if emitting some sort of pulsating rhythm.

He suddenly remembered why he had run so quickly back to the plaza. In his reflection, his eyes suddenly burned brightly with green fire, flaring up with the rush of emotion, and it was frightening, shocking. He didn't have time or energy to deal with these peculiar new eyes.

Standing, he turned and faced the crowd, his voice resonant and strong when he spoke.

"Much has happened, but right now, there is no time, for a life hangs in the balance! I will explain everything later."

He pointed to Master Uther with a tremor-free hand. Ashar was no longer that timorous young boy who had spoken not so long ago about Merdia being the one better suited to take the lead. No, he heard confidence coming from deep within himself, also decisiveness.

"Pick three strong men and follow me with the heavy cart!"

In fact, it was obvious that Master Uther didn't actually have to pick anyone. Three men immediately stepped out of the crowd and walked over to the cart.

They set off quickly toward the delta before the tides could roll in, and it was too late.

It was maddening how slowly they moved with the cart. Ashar could have run there and back again by now, but he resisted the urge, staying with the men helping him. It was hard work getting the cart across the soft sand and over the rocky bar at the mouth of the delta.

Eventually, they rounded a small point, and he saw the rocks he had seen earlier. This time, he couldn't wait and leaped away toward them. The men behind him gasped when he suddenly shot fifteen feet in the air and started bounding down the beach in giant leaps, each one at least twenty times what any young boy could usually do. Their eyes almost popped out upon seeing him.

Things were exactly as he had witnessed in his mind.

Yesterday, he hadn't had the strength to move him, but today, he easily reached under his brother and turned Wattar onto his back. Tears streamed freely down Ashar's face now, forced to watch his brother's huge chest rising and falling with each breath as he gently brushed the seaweed and sand off Wattar's poor face.

He is still alive!

Wattar's poor face was as pallid as death itself, while Ashar's had paled from the shock, the grief, the fact that he'd feared a loss. No one could ever have felt this sad before, seeing his beloved brother in such a perilous state. But he was happy too; Wattar wasn't dead, not yet.

The men arrived with the trundling wooden cart a few moments later, and together, they lifted Wattar as if he were a heavy sack of rice, loading him solemnly onto the cart bed in silence.

Master Uther turned to Ashar. It seemed as if no one had a single word to say, but eventually, Master Uther wanted to know just one thing. He stared at the boy named Ashar.

"How?" Master Uther asked simply.

"Well, Wattar is big and strong, as you see. Not even I would want to try to keep him captive. My guess is he proved to be quite a bit more than they could handle once he woke up."

"No, not that. What I mean is how could you know he was here? Did the fire in your eyes show this to you? It showed you this scene or told you the way ... What?"

There was awe in his voice when he asked. His eyes were wide, showing more of the whites than the irises. He stared intently at Ashar, waiting. It seemed as though he would wait all day.

Ashar was still hesitant to talk about what precisely had happened to him. For one thing, he wasn't sure how much he should tell them, how much they would understand, and how much would only result in scaring them even more. He couldn't hide some things, obvious changes such as his vivid emerald eyes and how fast he could run and leap.

He needed to talk to Merdia. She always knew what to do. She was the only one who always seemed to know the right answer to just about any problem, no matter how awkward it was.

For now though, he decided to give an honest but vague response.

"Yes, I could see my brother from a great distance, I will explain all about it when we get back. Come, the tide isn't going to wait for us to finish before it rolls in again. Let's get going."

The journey back took hours, with Wattar's bulk constantly causing the cart to sink into the soft sand and mud. It was tough work pushing him up the steep banks, but it gave Ashar time to think before he returned and would have to start seriously explaining what was going on.

But how could he even begin to detail a thing he also wasn't sure of? It was impossible! It would make him sound like an absolute idiot! Or at least that he was making excuses for not opening up and telling the truth. Anyway, when they reached the plaza, he called out to Merdia before he could even contemplate doing anything else.

He hadn't said anything to her before they'd left in case the worst had happened to Wattar.

She came running up, bounding right into the cart as soon as she saw who they were carrying, hugging her unconscious brother so hard that Ashar feared she would break his mighty ribs by expressing her relief. By now, a large crowd had gathered around Wattar, their excited voices calling out in joy at the sight of him.

Ashar caught a glimpse of Master Jorry and motioned her over.

"We need a bed for him, and please gather whatever medicine we have left." He was trying to think of what else his brother might need when the old woman held up her hand to stop him.

"I've been doing this longer than you."

She started giving commands and pointing to people seemingly at random. Those to whom she pointed always looked slightly surprised but quickly scurried off to do whatever task they had been given. It was clear that Master Jorry had imposed an order while he'd been gone.

"You." He selected the first victim. "The house across the way with the double doors has a bed downstairs. Move it into the gathering room and clear a path for the cart."

"You three." Victims two, three, and four. "Gather water, soap, and towels, and bathe him."

"You, you, and you." She selected three who were trying not to make eye contact, looking down and staring at their feet as though examining the polish of their shoes. She did not care; she would select them anyway. "Go and fetch Master Harraby and tell him he has a patient. Move his things to the house with Wattar. After that, you will stay and help him until Wattar is recovered."

"You." The poor kid nearly jumped out of his shoes. "Go to Wattar's house and bring some of his clothes. I doubt we have any that would fit him here."

"I ... I ... I'm not sure which room, um, I mean ..."

Jorry's hand shot out, and she leveled a bony finger at Ashar.

"Room?"

"Upstairs, last room on the right."

It was time to leave before Master Jorry gave him a task with her scary bony finger.

He followed the cart over to the house and helped unload Wattar.

Once bathed, they moved him to the bed, waiting for Master Harraby.

The man looked older than Master Jorry, which didn't seem possible until he shuffled slowly into the room, flanked by his newly assigned helpers.

He had large eyes set a little far apart on his head, giving him a wide field of vision; well, he would have had if one of his eyes hadn't been cloudy and blind. His shoulders were hunched,

causing his neck and head to stick out in front of him when he walked. The small feathers surrounding his face had long since lost their color and were now drab gray.

He was ancient, but he was the best healer in the village. He looked around the room and went to work. "Everyone out! Except you three," he said, pointing to his assistants.

Ashar and Merdia left with the men who had helped bring Wattar into the house, while Master Harraby shouted orders and made demands.

Soon, they found they were back in the plaza where all the excitement of finding Wattar had died off, and now everyone was back to staring at Ashar, looking for answers.

He tried to think of what to say, what he should say, what he shouldn't say. It was all so delicate, and everyone's eyes were on him, expectant.

Uther was the first to speak.

"On the beach, you said you could see your brother from far away, that your eyes gave you sight?"

"How did your eyes get like that?" someone asked.

"How are you able to jump so far?" another voice cried out from the crowd.

Ashar was feeling overwhelmed. He just didn't know what to say. Primarily, he was afraid people would fear and reject him if they found out he had Joined with an insect. Looking around, he was hoping Merdia would step in and save him, but he found himself alone.

It was Master Jorry who saved him.

"Silence." Her voice was little more than a whisper, but the crowd instantly became quiet.

"I know what happened to young Ashar." Even Ashar turned and looked at her, wondering if she might really know something about what was going on. He certainly didn't.

"I have spent my life reading the chronicles left by those before me and chronicling my own time. We all know that in the deep past, people and animals didn't Join very often. It was rare and only happened to a handful every few generations. It makes good heroes for our myths, those special ones who always save the day with the help of their animal spirit ..."

" ... "

Everyone waited.

Everyone stared.

And then they waited some more.

She paused so long that Ashar thought she might need checking to see if she had died. But eventually, she sucked in a giant breath and continued.

"There is a darker side to those tales. Yes, the people would celebrate when a Joining happened, but it was also an omen, a portent of evil. Joining used to happen during times of great conflict.

"It was believed that the magic of this world would Join two who could help fight whatever evil the people faced. A hero for a dark time. I believe Ashar is that person in our time, and we are facing great evil, a force greater than we know, I fear. Ashar is here. The forest has changed him, changed him for a reason, and sent him back to us. I cannot tell his fate or ours, but they are tied together now. I know this boy, and I knew his father and grandfather. None of them has ever failed us, nor will he. What we need to know, he will tell us when we need to know it."

Everyone turned and looked at him, a boy of twelve with burning green eyes and mysterious powers. Jorry continued, "Now go! All of you, before I think of more things that need doing!"

That got their attention, and the crowd quickly dispersed back to the safety of their rooms, murmuring in surprise among themselves.

"Thank you, Master Jorry. I am still not sure what to do about all this."

"I know enough to pity you, boy. The road ahead for you will be extremely hard. It is rare for the forest to choose a champion, and the threat must be grave. I fear you will face great darkness before your journey is done. Did it speak to you?"

"Yes."

"Tell me."

"No."

Master Jorry looked up at him and laughed hard enough that Merdia and he both wondered if it would actually kill her. Her whole frame shook and wobbled. She looked as though she might topple over at any moment, and come crashing down, breathless.

"Fair enough, young master, fair enough!" With that, she carried on chuckling, whispering to herself as she hobbled back toward her room, "Goodness me, that boy ..."

Now, she had left Merdia and him alone.

It occurred to him that he hadn't eaten since the day before and was famished.

"Come on, Merdia, let's find some food before I keel over. I haven't eaten in ages."

The gathered food had been laid out in the common room of one of the houses on the plaza. He and Merdia quickly filled a basket, each with as much food as they thought it would be polite to take given the circumstances. They headed for their rooms.

Within minutes, he heard Merdia's soft knock on his door. She had eaten faster than he had, which was impressive, but no doubt she had given to her meal as much excitement and exuberance as she applied to anything else.

He washed down the last bite of his meal, hoping to swallow it and take a drink before Merdia could begin with her usual barrage of impertinent questions.

"Come in, sister." She darted in and pulled the door behind her.

She sat before him and stared at him, not saying anything or moving. Was she even still blinking?

But the look on her face said she would tolerate nothing less than the full truth. He had been giving vague answers all day, and she knew it. And the worst part of it was that he knew it too.

Oh well. Best get it over with.

Then he began to think of the positive side of it.

He sighed, relieved that at least there would be one person he didn't have to hide from. He recounted his story as best he could. So much of what had happened had taken place in his mind and was difficult to express in words. He left out the part about being able to feel another mind living in the insect network, even though he didn't understand that yet.

He told her how he could see Wattar and how he was still learning to control the power and how to use it. He told her he had been chosen because he might be able to save their family.

Merdia sat quietly, absorbing every word of what he said. She had seen some of what he could do now, and there was no ignoring his eyes, so it seemed he was telling the truth to her.

Something was quite different about her brother.

She didn't fully understand everything he had said, but she decided it could be blamed on Ashar being mostly stupid. There were more important things right now.

"Insect, huh? Did they all have to crawl up your nose at once, or did they take turns?"

Even after everything he had been through, he knew his sister wouldn't be able to resist making a little fun of him. There was nothing she enjoyed more than to rile him up a bit.

"No, it was just the one, a grasshopper."

"Is that why you can jump so high now?"

"I guess so."

"So, what else can you do? Or is that your only party trick?"

"I don't know yet. I am still getting used to it."

"Can you make a web? Does it come out of your butt? Do you have buttwebs?"

"NO!"

"You do! You have buttwebs, and you are shy about it!"

"NO!"

"You aren't shy about it? Good, because that sounds like it could be quite useful. If I get cold, you can spin me a buttweb jacket. Oh! If we are sleeping outside, you could make a whole tent out of buttwebs or maybe a nice buttweb hammock for me to sleep in. And a sleeping bag."

"I can't make buttwebs! I am not some kind of spider!"

"Well, other creatures make webs too." She mused on it for a moment. "Are you at least going to make a cocoon tonight and turn into something beautiful with colorful wings? Because if I wake up and you are still this ugly, I don't know what I am going to do."

"Ha ha, very funny." Although he had to admit he needed to laugh a little right now. He tried hard to hold it in, but it escaped in a snort. "Oh, shut up. You are making me laugh now, and I so want to be annoyed at you. Has anyone told you how irritating you are?"

"No," she said. "Not since you told me the last time."

"So, you can shut up and—" he said.

But no, she could not shut up. Not yet! There were so many more questions to ask!

"Can you really see through their eyes? Right now, are you watching everyone while they sleep? Cause that's kinda weird if you are."

"No, it doesn't work like that. I can feel them, but it takes a lot of concentration to connect to them deeply enough to see and hear what they are experiencing, and if I tune into too many at once, it can be painful. Pulling myself back out is painful if I let the other voices get too loud. It's like I get lost but just in my own mind. Does that make sense?"

"Um, no, not really, and sort of. It's confusing. Sounds like it's confusing for you as well."

"Yes, it's a lot to take in at once."

"When Master Jorry asked you what you heard, you said no. Why?" she wanted to know.

"Because I'm afraid to say it, afraid they were wrong about me," Ashar replied.

"What? Why? What did they say to you?"

"They said I could save them, Merdia. They said I could save them all."

She thought about it for a minute before responding. She understood why he hadn't said anything before. Giving people that kind of hope could be dangerous. Then she asked, "So, how are we

supposed to save them? They are gone, taken by hideous lizard people across the sea to who knows where. How would we get there? What would we even do when we arrived?"

"Merdia, there is no we," he responded. "This is my burden, my path. It's not your burden to carry. Whatever happens next, I will have to face it alone."

"That's stupid, but most of the things you say are stupid, so I'll ignore you like always. Anyhow, I'm tired, so I will see you in the morning." She crinkled her nose as if there was a bad smell.

It was a sign that she made whenever someone gave her a pointless answer.

Then she stood and walked to the door, turning back just before she stomped out. "You really should consider the cocoon, you know. Your face could really be helped by, you know, metamorphosing into something else overnight."

She got the door closed before the pillow he threw could whack her on the side of her head.

He retrieved the pillow and collapsed into bed. His day had been exhausting, his body starting to hurt all over. He wasn't sure if it was from the Joining or from all the running and jumping, but it felt as though someone extremely mean had been punching him all over.

Sleep came quickly.

In the dream, he was sitting atop the highest mountain on the island, gazing out over the green sea. Crystal clear air allowed him to see all the way to the other three islands sharing the North Sea with Manatar, his home. Closest to him was Sikkroc's Island, while farther out and to the east was Hulumen's, and the last and smallest lay to the south. That one was Gratok's.

His people didn't name islands the usual way; they found it rather weird.

Instead, they referred to them by the name of the chief who protected them. He wondered if his home was now Ashar's Island? He watched a great bear climb out of the sea and lay its massive hulk down on the land. It was so huge it seemed to cover half the island's surface.

It wrapped itself around the central mountain, then curled up to sleep.

Soon, its snoring shook the ground, and its breath covered the island in deep fog as it fell deeper into slumber. Before long, he couldn't see his island anymore, or the two north of him as the fog spread from the great bear. Only Gratok's island remained clear.

In the dream, he traveled to Gratok's Island, floating above it and looking down on the small harbor holding their tiny fishing fleet.

The harbor and sea beyond it were covered in black ships bearing the black ring with a red slash. Some of the ships had beached themselves, and he could see the gruesome lizard people herding the towns' inhabitants into the vessels waiting on the sand.

There were far more of them than had attacked his island. Most were anchored a little offshore, waiting for the ones in the harbor to finish their work. He drifted by the anchored ships, seeing that they already contained the people from Sikkroc and Hulumen. Once Gratok was loaded, their conquest of the Northern Islands was complete.

One ship drew his attention in the dream as he drifted closer to it, able to see that a large hole had been ripped out of the side, then hastily repaired with whatever timber could be found to cover it up. He drifted through one of the large holes and went inside the hold.

He saw people lying asleep on the floor, huddling together for warmth.

In the corner, his father was sitting awake, holding his mother, keeping a watchful eye on those sleeping around him, still trying to keep them safe.

Ashar drifted close to his father's face. There was some bruising around his eyes, so he had obviously put up a fight at some point. His father turned and stared directly at Ashar, his head tilting slightly as if he was trying to figure out what he was seeing. He had the quizzical gaze and head tilt of a loyal dog trying to understand what his master was saying to him.

He reached out his hand and gently picked Ashar up, watching him sitting in his palm.

Ashar could feel the small dragonfly body resting there in his father's hand, the stick-like thin and fragile legs clinging with sticky pads to one of Father's meaty fingers.

So, it was clear this wasn't a dream anymore, that he really was sitting in his father's hand, a tiny dragonfly connected to him across many miles. He wished he could talk and communicate, but the tiny dragonfly could only sit there and stare back. Desperate to make contact before losing the connection, he tried to think of a way to let his father know that he was the one, the insect.

The meeting call! Whenever an important meeting required everyone to attend, they would ring the plaza bell. Four quick rings followed by three long ones repeated every thirty seconds.

He concentrated as hard as he could on the dragonfly until he could feel his body, his wings, his tiny thread-like legs. Carefully, he dipped the dragonfly's abdomen until it touched his father's palm: one, two, three, four. Then, one ... two ... three. Again, he dipped the abdomen four quick times and three slow. Again, four, then three. Again. Again. Again.

Suddenly, his father's eyes went wide in surprise. His fingers took on a fine tremble.

He shook Atheria, waking her up.

"Atheria, watch."

Once again, Ashar dipped the dragonfly four and then three.

"I don't understand, Manatar; I mean yes, it's a dragonfly."

"Yes, but it's a dragonfly that has been tapping out the meeting call to me. You just saw it."

"What does it mean?"

"It means there is hope. Someone back home is telling us we are not alone. We will not be forgotten."

"Who though?" his mother asked.

The strain was too great, and Ashar lost the connection, snapping back to his body lying prostrate in bed. A body screaming in pain. The few hours of sleep had been enough for his body to start healing everything from the previous day, and now everything was hurting.

More than that, he could feel other changes deep down that weren't related to pulled muscles or sore ligaments. His bones were changing, his legs already a little longer than they had been, mostly from the knee down. And his upper legs hadn't gotten longer but were far more heavily muscled, giving his legs a slightly uneven look. He could feel his arms move a little differently, as if the muscles had shifted around a bit to allow for more flexibility.

He went to the mirror, thankful he hadn't grown the antennae or bug eyes while sleeping.

He was hungry though, far hungrier than he had ever been.

Sneaking outside, he made his way over to the food and started looking through it for something to eat. There was a wide variety of items, but he didn't want to eat any of them.

Wandering aimlessly, his nose caught the scent of something delicious. He followed it until he was standing behind one of the houses at the edge of town.

The smell was very strong, but he couldn't find its source.

Until he looked down.

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me!"

He was standing in a field of grass. Everyone knew people's diets changed after Joining, sometimes in interesting ways. It was one of the reasons they always ate alone, to spare people the embarrassment of an unusual food craving.

This was too much. Grass? People can't even digest grass. How am I supposed to live off something I can't digest?

Reaching down, he pulled a handful of the green blades and smelled them.

It was the most wonderful aroma he had ever experienced.

Stuffing the handful of grass into his mouth ended everything pleasurable about eating this stuff. It tasted terrible. He had to spit it out after only a few chews, the green liquid running down his chin, and the unimaginably disgusting pulp stuck in his teeth. Even worse, no matter how hard

and how many times he tried, it was impossible to spit that revolting stuff back out, as though it had glued itself to his teeth and tongue.

Ugh. That's vile! I suppose I never did like eating vegetables, but then ... Why did it smell so delicious like that? So irresistible?

The answer came. Because of the grasshopper.

Coughing and sputtering, he wiped his mouth the best he could and looked around.

The smell was still in his nose, and it was still drawing him in.

Obviously, eating it was the wrong thing to do.

He remembered talking to his mother when he'd been very young, discussing the magic in the world, the magic they could see—like Joining—and magic they could use, such as the unique magic contained in mullenberries that made Joining possible.

She had said magic flowed through the land and through creatures as if it were water. In some places, it was only a trickle, and in others, a wide, deep river. She had told him that if he were in tune with the forest and moved through it naturally, he'd see all the magic in the flowers blooming and the bees buzzing around. There was magic in the water and in what they ate.

The food fed the body, and the magic fed the soul.

Sitting calmly on the grass, he could feel fear. That wasn't unusual, but this felt a little different. This felt like the fear he had known when he'd been young and had gotten lost. He felt alone. It wasn't a memory, though. It was something different.

The grasshopper.

It was afraid that in the multitude of voices Ashar could now hear, he had forgotten one, the small little voice that had spoken up for him, that had believed in him, that had given itself up for him. The little grasshopper inside him was scared. Everything was unfamiliar, strange, and disturbing. He was calling for the comfort of the grass, the reassurance of something familiar.

Ashar pulled up two huge grassy handfuls and held them under his nose, breathing deeply. The scent washed over him, and he could feel his new companion calming in the memory of the smell, the reminiscence of what it was accustomed to.

It felt safe again. And his new home felt safe too.

He lay there for some time until his clothes started to get wet from the nightly fog settling on him as if he were a part of the land. Before he got up, he reached out and connected to the insects around him. It was getting easier, but it was still very difficult to control for any length of time.

Finally, he found a beetle on the headboard of Wattar's bed, scurrying from one place to another. It took a lot of effort, but he got the beetle to stop and look at his brother, who was still sleeping soundly, one of Master Harraby's assistants also dozing in a chair beside the bed.

He shook off the trance-like state he entered when connecting and started back for the plaza before Merdia could notice he was gone. He didn't want to think about her catching him coming home with grass stains all over his mouth. He would never hear the end of it.

There was a candle burning downstairs when he approached the house. It could be anybody, but the hair standing up on the back of his neck told him quite clearly that it was Merdia.

Slipping around the back of the house, he went to the garden his room overlooked. Looking down at his strange new legs, a wry smile crossed his face as he easily jumped from the garden twenty feet up, straight into the open window of his room.

There were still a few hours to pass until dawn, and he was feeling fatigued, so he washed up and lay back down, immediately drifting away into a dreamless, fractious sleep.

Chapter Six

When he awoke, the sun was too bright, at least for the morning.

Ashar was lying in bed, painfully stretching his new muscles, some of which had never been moved. Aside from the sore muscles, he was feeling great.

A good night's rest had done wonders for him. His body had needed to heal and adjust after all the physical changes he had undergone in the last day.

Looking over at the window, he was shocked to see the sun already so high in the sky.

He must have slept through the morning and into the afternoon!

He climbed out of bed and dressed, stretching one last time before going downstairs. Voices were coming from down there, quite a few from the sound of it, but one stood out among them.

Wattar! He must have woken in the middle of the night!

His heart leaped. Rushing downstairs to greet his brother, he found himself the focus of attention.

Before Ashar could say a word, Merdia sprang out of nowhere, wrapping him in a fierce hug. The others in the room moved to surround him, asking questions so fast he couldn't understand.

Wattar's voice rang out, quieting the crowd.

"Enough, everyone out," mandated Wattar.

Everyone got out except Merdia, who was almost completely immune to orders of any kind.

Wattar tried again. "Merdia, you must please release Ashar so I can hug my brother."

Merdia reluctantly complied, but only because of these exceptional circumstances.

Ashar presumed it was because Wattar was back, Wattar was recovering, and because she believed her annoying brother Ashar was responsible for all of it.

As soon as she let go, Ashar found himself crushed in another hug, Wattar's huge arms engulfing him, threatening to squeeze the air right out of his lungs.

"Now, let's look and see what our whole town is going on about. They were worried you weren't ever going to wake up, that we'd lost you forever."

Huh? What? What is he talking about? Must be delirious! Ashar decided.

It was surely obvious that Wattar was the one everyone had been worried about! Wasn't he?

But Wattar held him at arm's length and looked him up and down as though Ashar were something he was considering buying at the market.

"They weren't kidding. Your eyes are something else, aren't they?"

"Wake up?" Ashar was confused. "I only slept for a bit. Why would people be worried?"

Merdia answered.

"Ashar, you have been asleep for five days! No one could wake you. Trust me, I tried. You always say I have a voice like a foghorn."

"We had to make her stop before she hurt your eardrums," Wattar chimed in.

"But now you are awake and can tell us what happened." She stared at him expectantly.

"I ... I don't know what happened! The last thing I remember was you making jokes about my fantastic butt-webbing abilities. My body needed some time to adjust to everything that had gone on. I feel great though, hungry, but good."

"Merdia, I need to speak with Ashar alone."

Wattar's voice grew suddenly serious.

Ashar could see an argument forming on her lips, but she thought better of it and walked out, closing the door behind her. Once she had left, Wattar turned to him.

"I have much to thank you for, not least of which was saving my life. Thank you for that. Father will be proud when he hears how you handled yourself. You gave our people hope and purpose in a terrible time, and that isn't easy to do for any chief."

"What happened to you? I think I saw the hole you made in that ship when you escaped."

Wattar raised an eyebrow at the odd statement and spoke.

"About that, I have been hearing a lot of strange things about you. Some of them are so far-fetched as to be absurd, but Merdia tells me you are indeed a changed man. Tell me about that."

Ashar explained what he had been through and what had changed about him, or at least, what changes he knew about. Wattar listened quietly. He would understand that some parts that had been hard to explain to Merdia.

"I felt it too, during my Joining," Wattar said. "When my bear showed me the dark light hidden in you, the whole forest saw it, including something else, something I couldn't comprehend. It was powerful and frightening, and it was everywhere all at once. I think it was then that it found you. I got the sense it had been searching for you for some time."

Ashar continued his tale, telling his brother about seeing their father and mother aboard the ship, silently communicating with them, and his horrible experience trying to eat grass.

"You eat grass now?" Merdia screamed from the second floor where she'd been hiding, eavesdropping on their conversation, unable to contain herself anymore.

Ashar laid his head in his hands and moaned. He would never hear the end of the grass jokes.

Wattar raised his voice to her.

"If you are still up there in ten seconds, I will tell Master Jorry you are bored and need something to do."

They could hear her footsteps race down the hall as she vaulted out of the window onto the trellis she had climbed to get in. Once he was sure she had left, Wattar turned back to Ashar.

"Astonishing! Really Ashar, that is amazing."

"OK, your turn. How did you get off that ship? I mean, I saw the hole, so I was able to piece some of it together."

"We were already on the ship when we woke up. The gas they had used on us left us confused and weak for a while. It was mullenberry extract, but different and much more powerful. After it wore off, we could feel the tide coming in under the boat, and then we sailed away. It was Master Horris who found a way out."

Master Horris was the town's master of carpentry and building. He knew wood and how to put it together like no one else.

"He noticed the bars across the port hole were attached from outside rather than sunk into the thicker timber of the hull; he said they would break free if enough force could be applied. He was right. I could reach through and twist the bars out of the mounts. Once I had two steel bars to

work with, it didn't take long to break a hole through the hull one board at a time. I'd intended for Father to escape. He was the most likely to be able to help us, but the guards came when I was breaking timbers, and he forced me to jump while he fought the guards to buy time. You said he was bruised, but otherwise all right?"

Ashar nodded. Yes, Father seemed more or less fine.

"You know, I was worried he had given his life for me to escape. The sun was setting when I hit the water, so I got a basic idea of direction. Fortunately, the wind was blowing hard the way I needed to go. I could only think the sea wanted me to get back home again."

Ashar nodded.

Wattar went on, "I don't know how long I was in the water, but at some point, I passed out. I don't know how I didn't drown. I vaguely remember tumbling in the surf, hitting the rocks hard. After that, it was all blank until I woke up three days ago to find what was left of my village, that they would not shut up about Ashar. Would. Not. Shut. Up! Seriously, for the last three days, all I've been hearing is about all the amazing things you've done and how you singlehandedly saved every one of them."

"I haven't done much besides finding you and falling asleep."

"So, you didn't jump from the plaza to the top of the mountain in a single leap?"

"What is that, like ten miles? Someone said that?" Ashar asked in disbelief.

"You wouldn't believe some of the stuff I've heard. Oh, that reminds me, if you try to take control of my mind using your eye flame magic, I will crush you," Wattar said with a smile.

"Seriously? Mind control? I wish! It would make dealing with Merdia so much easier."

"I wouldn't go there, brother. I'd be afraid of what I'd find in her whacky head."

"Good point, I will stick to bugs for mind control," agreed Ashar.

"What happens now, chief?" Wattar asked him.

"Oh no! I'm not the chief. You are now. You're the eldest."

"Merdia is right. You really are dense sometimes. Being chief is about more than fathers and sons. Being older or younger, no matter what your lineage, you must earn the right to be chief. You don't get to choose whether you are it or not, as if playing a game of tag. The people of this village get to decide that, not you, not me. The people know who their chief is. It's you, Ashar."

Ashar sighed and started pacing the room, an old habit when he was nervous or thinking deeply about something. He turned to Wattar.

"But I can't be chief!" He held up his hand to stop his brother's protest. He almost looked anguished. "I can't be chief because I'm supposed to do something else! Mother always talked about the magic in everything. I never took her seriously, but I'm starting to think she may have been right. My Joining was for a reason: I was created to fight whatever evil took our family. They told me, Wattar, they told me I could save them all."

Wattar sighed loudly as if exasperated.

Ashar continued, "You were washed up on your home island because the people here need a chief who will see them through the hard winter to come, someone wise and strong. We both know that's you, not me. You were brought back so I could be free to leave. I've got to go, Wattar, I have to go!"

"Go where?"

"I don't know, after them. I know roughly where they are and in which direction they're sailing. I can't imagine they'll be hard to follow. They tend to leave burning towns behind them everywhere they travel."

"What can you do against those monsters, against a nation of those beasts?" Wattar demanded.

"Well, what would our father do?" Ashar stood tall, with his shoulders back.

Wattar thought about it briefly and then admitted, "He would protect his people."

"Exactly! And you said they had chosen me as their chief? Then maybe I should start acting like it and go after my people!"

By the time Ashar had finished speaking, his eyes were burning so brightly that small licks of flame were dancing out of the corners of them, drifting off to dissolve into the air like smoke.

His brother regarded him for a moment, watching the eye flames retreat.

Wattar said, "All right. Well, I think you might be right about Mother. I thought most of her stories were just that, stories. Recent events have made me question that. Seeing you has made me question that. There is a higher purpose at work here and it's hard to see it any other way. I don't know anything about magic. No one does. We just live with it, never noticing it, and we take it for granted. But there is magic at work here. It's no coincidence that when our people's need was the greatest, not one, but two sons of Manatar were called."

"I must leave before winter makes the crossing impossible. I will start with Gartok; it's the southernmost port and has the most contact with vessels capable of crossing the open ocean. From there, I don't know, but it's where I will start."

Wattar stood and moved to the open window.

The plaza was a beehive of activity as people scoured the village for anything of use. Food, clothes, tools, and anything needed for the winter was collected and stored in the plaza.

He could see Master Uther's ship docking on the high tide, bringing in a much-needed supply of fish. He and his men would fish until the last day it was safe to go out and then probably three days after that. It would be hard to get through the winter without any of their stores. Hopefully, the sea and a few late-season crops that hadn't been harvested yet would see them through.

"You know, the one thing you did as chief that was utterly and amazingly brilliant was putting Master Jorry in charge of everything. Seriously, she should have been chief all this time. Those who make it through until spring will have her to thank for their lives." He stuck his head out the window and yelled at someone passing by. "Master Hibbert, a moment if you will."

The elderly man was tiny. It tended to happen to those joined with smaller animals, and as they aged, they tended to shrink. His nose was elongated slightly, and his eyes were tiny black dots on his face. His thin mustache grew straight out on each side, greatly resembling whiskers.

"Will you be so kind as to ask Master Jorry to find a copy of the Mariners' Code from her library and bring it here, please?"

The small man shuffled off to find Master Jorry, and Wattar turned to face him again.

"I don't like it. Part of me feels I should go with you, that I could help. You're fast now, but you might need my strength."

"No doubt I will, but you know this is right. It feels right. You need to stay here and save what we have left. I need to go and return what we've lost. As you said, the sons of Manatar have been called."

"I don't envy you. I can only imagine what lies ahead for you," Mattar said, shaking his head.

"No, brother, it is you who deserves my pity. I'm leaving you with Merdia, the true and rightful ruler of these lands, and her wrath will be ferocious when she finds out I've left her behind."

"No! You can't! Ashar, really—you just can't. You know what she will do to me!"

"What happened to the brave bear, my oversized brother?" Ashar asked, chuckling.

"Even bears are afraid of something. Only stupid animals aren't afraid of our sister."

There was a soft knock on the door, and Master Hibbert entered, carrying a large volume.

"Set it here on the table, thank you." Wattar started flipping through the book until he found the page he was looking for. "Ashar, come here, I want you to see this."

Ashar walked over and saw a page with symbols and words printed next to each one.

"What is this?" he asked.

"It's the Mariners' Code. It's simple, but with only a few different colored flags and a code book, they can convey a lot of information between ships at a distance. Usually, distance and location to good fishing, weather warnings, things like that. I want you to memorize it."

"What for?"

I got the idea when you talked about controlling the dragonfly. If you could do that but have it walk around on this page and use the code, we could talk when you are away. You would be able to hear me, and I could translate your messages."

"Hm. I'm not sure I could do it from that distance."

"Not yet, but you're still learning to use your gifts. I'll keep the book here and check it nightly at sunset. Learn the code. I learned it from Father, so maybe you can use it when you find him?"

"I will. I promise. Now, I need to figure out how to get off this island. Master Uther should be done unloading by now. I think I will pay him a visit."

Wattar leveled his gaze on Ashar.

"It's odd, I have known you your whole life, but we've never spoken to each other like we have today. I don't feel like I'm fourteen, Ashar, and you don't act like you're twelve. I guess we must be growing up a bit faster than we planned."

It made Ashar slightly sad to think some part of his life had been taken from him, a piece of his childhood stolen, innocence interrupted. He went down to the docks and there, he discovered Master Uther securing the last few lines on his boat before leaving it to the tide overnight.

"Ashar! I had heard you were awake. How are you?"

People had accepted the changes he had undergone and were more comfortable around him. However, his eyes still kept many from making eye contact.

"I am well, thank you. I need to speak with you." He looked around the crowded dock, still busy with people hauling fish up to the drying house. "Privately."

Uther led him into a small storage shed for nets and rope.

"What do you need?"

"A boat big enough to get me over to Gartok."

Alarm spread over Uther's face at the thought of Ashar leaving. "Why would you go there? You are needed here."

"No, Wattar is needed here. I am going after them, those we lost."

Uther took a moment to consider what he had said.

"Yes, Master Jorry said you had a different calling, and we should trust you. I would rather you stay, but if there is any chance of saving our people, we must try. Yes?"

"I wish there were another way," agreed Ashar, "but I can't see it if there is."

"When do you need to leave?"

"No more than a week, maybe only a few days, I'm not sure. I'll tell you when I can."

"You are going alone?" Master Uther inquired.

"Yes."

"You can sail to Gartok in the heavy seas of fall? That is no easy feat." Master Uther was skeptical. "I don't think you should do that; it is very risky."

"I was taught by the best, by you."

"Hm, not sure about that! I remember you staring at the ocean a lot and not paying attention."

"I will be fine. Honestly, I don't have a choice. I wish I did."

"When you are ready, I will have a boat waiting for you," Master Uther said.

"Thank you."

Ashar pushed open the shed door and headed back up toward his room. He still hadn't eaten and was starting to feel fatigued from the gnawing hunger in his gut. He raided the food cart and returned to his room to eat, grabbing the book off the table on his way up.

The code was simple.

There were colored flags that could be raised in different patterns, swinging them from left to right or up and down. There were a lot of combinations, though, and he found after a few hours that he had several pages covered with notes of what he thought he would need.

Most of the code wouldn't be of much use to him, however.

He probably wouldn't have to report what type of fish he'd just caught or what bait he was using, but a lot of it had to do with direction and distance, and this he could use.

There was a small knock on his door followed by footsteps running down the hallway: Merdia. He opened his door and found a meal basket covered over with a checkered towel.

The handwritten note said, 'I thought you might still be hungry.' Knowing what he would find in it, he pulled the cover off, revealing a large basket of freshly cut grass.

It had begun. He could now look forward to a long, painful life of grass-filled jokes.

He sighed, brought the basket to the window, and set it there. Despite her intentions, the grass was a welcome addition to the room. As the breeze came in, it brought in the scent of the fresh cut grass, filling the room with it, which Ashar found oddly relaxing.

It was getting toward evening by now, and Ashar was sitting downstairs going over a large map Master Jorry had sent. It was old, its brown edges rather frayed.

The people of the Northern Islands had never been known for exploring or trading.

They preferred to stay on their small islands and let the rest of the world go on without them. As a result, their maps of the seas and the other lands to the south were limited.

The Northern Islands were extremely remote, while to the north and west was only an open ocean without end, storms claiming all who dared sail through.

The two main continents lay to the south and east, all the maps depicting them as lumpy blobs with hundreds of small islands dotting the seas around. In between the Northern Islands and the continents lay the North Sea where merciless currents from the open ocean were funneled down by the continent's land mass, forming a dangerous and unpredictable strait.

The winds and waves could rise quickly and without warning, battering all but the biggest ships, sending them to the bottom.

During the winter months, no ships could withstand that power.

That dangerous strait was why his little islands were so isolated from the mainland. Few dared to cross.

The largest land mass would be Parthsia. Just to the south, the smaller continent of Cartine lay on the other side of a narrow sea separating the two main land masses. Northern Parthsia was like his own home, a mountainous, rugged land, hard to farm and bitterly cold in winter.

The lower part of Parthsia gave way to open plains and a more temperate climate where farms and ranches flourished. The main city of Sarthia was located on the southern shore next to a large harbor. Farther south, Cartine was hot and humid, and the central area was dominated by a dormant volcano surrounded by lush rainforests. Little was known of the people inhabiting the jungle, and there were only stories of war between Parthsia and Cartine.

Wattar came in and sat down beside Ashar, who looked exhausted.

"Being chief sucks!" he exclaimed. "Everyone wants something from me, and those who don't just want to argue with everyone else. I honestly don't know how Father did it."

"I think he mostly ignored them and did what he knew was right," said Ashar. "You're chief, so what does it even matter? They can complain and make all the demands they want. At the end of the day, it's your decision, and they have to go along with it."

“How are your preparations going?” Wattar asked.

Ashar said, "Well. I made some notes that I left with the Mariners' Code. It might help if I can reach you. These are just some phrases and words I might need. Uther is arranging a boat for me. I will leave on tomorrow's tide if everything goes to plan."

"Have you told Merdia that you are leaving?"

"No, I haven't seen her all day," said Ashar. "That alone should make me nervous. I will tell her when I see her next."

"Here, I want you to take this," Wattar offered, extending a hand with a bag of coins. "I don't think our local krona will be useful as money where you are going, so I had some of the trading money rounded up for you."

The small bag of coins landed on the table with a solid thump. Ashar picked it up and opened it. He had never seen so much wealth in such a small space. Their local money was small silver coins without any decoration. The traders crossing the sea wouldn't accept them.

They used gold coins that were larger and stamped with a face on one side and a tree on the other. The village had an extremely limited supply of these coins, which they used to buy essentials they couldn't produce themselves, such as steel and glass.

"I can't take this. you will need it for the village," Ashar said.

"I held some back, don't worry."

"I'm scared, Wattar," said Ashar. "I don't know what I am supposed to do or how I will do it."

"You should start with the first thing so the second thing isn't wrong," Wattar said, pulling out Father's favorite nonsense saying. "That's what I would do."

They both laughed momentarily before becoming serious again, silently staring at the fire burning in the hearth. On some level, they both knew this was probably the last time they would ever sit quietly together, neither wanting it to end.

It did end—when Merdia burst into the room.

"There you are. Where have you been?" she asked Ashar.

"Merdia, come sit, I need to talk to you." She sat down, glaring at him through narrowed eyes. "I have to leave and go after our people."

"I know, I have been getting ready."

"Merdia, you are not coming. You must stay here. I was chosen for this, not you. It will be dangerous, and I can't do this if I am trying to protect you."

"You? Protect me?" She looked over at Wattar.

"He is a little dense. I know you could help Ashar, but he isn't wrong, Merdia. This is too dangerous for you. You must stay here with me."

"I must? Have I been given an order, Your Holy Highness?"

Wattar sighed, knowing he shouldn't have made it sound like an order. "No, Merdia, I am not commanding you as the chief, nor is Ashar. We are saying this because we are your brothers, and Father would want us to keep you safe, which means you staying here."

Her eyes narrowed, and she glared at them, trying to find an argument to win them over.

"Merdia," Ashar said. "If Father were here and Wattar and I had been taken, would Father consider letting you go with him to find us?"

"No," she admitted.

"Please, stay here, we need you," Wattar said. "We would never forgive ourselves if you went and something terrible were to happen to you. Plus, Master Jorry is so old she will probably die in the next few minutes, then you can take over, telling everyone what to do all the time. You will love it. It's the perfect job for you."

Merdia was unmoved by Wattar's attempt at a joke. She glared at them some more and stood up, then took herself off to her room without saying a word.

"I think that went well," Ashar said, causing them to both break out laughing. "Or as well as we could have expected!"

"You know she will make us pay for that, right?" Wattar said, wiping tears from his eyes.

"Yes, but hopefully, I will be halfway around the world when she thinks of something horrible to do to me. You, on the other hand, can't escape her. Sorry about that."

"She will be all right, eventually. Our situation here will give her something else to think about in a few weeks," Wattar said with a heavy voice.

"How bad is it?" Ashar asked, afraid to hear the answer.

"Bad. There are three weeks of food left from scavenging the village. We are finding some late-harvest fruit and nuts in the orchards, but not many. The only good news is that Master Uther and his men found a migration of Turins and have been filling their nets with every cast, bringing in loads of fish we can dry. Eating fish the whole winter will get old, especially for the vegetarians. Still, we should have enough if the weather holds, and he can keep taking the boats out."

Ashar listened, wishing there were something he could do. He suddenly wondered ... Hmm, maybe there is!

Jackthorns.

He jumped to his feet and turned to his brother. "There is something I have to check on. I will see you in the morning." Rushing up to his room, he pulled the pillow off the bed and made a comfortable place to sit.

Jackthorn bushes were all over the island.

Thick branches and long thorns made them a nuisance plant usually needing to be cleared using fire when they got too thick. The tip of each stalk had a small ball that was mostly thorns sticking out in all directions, but right in the center was a large seed. The sweet nut inside was a rare delicacy, mostly because it was so hard to harvest them. The tough plants had to be hacked away to reach the center where the nuts were produced, and even then, there'd only be a few at a time.

But Ashar had an idea. When he had taken control of the dragonfly to communicate with his father, the strain had been almost unbearable, largely due to the distance. His connection was stretched, limiting his control. But what if he tried with something closer, a lot of something?

Sitting on the cushion, he calmed his breathing and tried to get his heart rate to drop. Reaching out was always a strange experience, feeling like stepping outside himself. He was aware of his body but didn't feel very connected to it. His body was an anchor point, a place to hold onto while connected, a place to come back to.

He reached out as far as he could without focusing on any of the thousands of voices he heard all around. If he stopped and listened to them, they would pull him into the void where he could lose himself. One of the things he had learned in the last few days was that the insects didn't really think, not like a person. They didn't ask questions or wonder about the future.

They didn't know why they were doing anything most of the time.

They just did it out of instinct. It made controlling them individually exceedingly difficult.

Ashar couldn't tell them what to do because they wouldn't understand him, and the trick was making them believe they were supposed to be doing something else. So, instead of trying to find insects he could use and control, he focused on what he needed to do, allowing the fabric of insect life in the forest to move where he needed to and do what he required.

After a few minutes of concentrating on a jackthorn nut and imagining it being carried to the plaza, he felt movement from the forest. Digging their way up from inside rotting trees and leaves, thousands of bark beetles started crawling toward the nearest jackthorn plant.

They were large insects three inches long, with large mandibles on either side of their mouths meant for chewing through the tough wood of trees and roots. He could feel them moving all over the island, each one being urged along by a force it could not ignore.

They worked their way up the stalks, chewing through each thorn as it blocked their path until the prize at the top was cleared of them. Cutting the stem, the nut fell to the ground, and it was immediately picked up by another bark beetle who started making the long trek to the plaza

carrying its load. There were thousands of them. Ashar had to stay connected and focused on the jackthorn nuts, or the beetles would soon lose interest and return to digging in the earth.

Ashar stayed in a trance all night, silently directing his army of helpers. When he couldn't take the strain anymore and broke the connection, the morning sun found him lying on his side, sweating and shaking.

He could hear a commotion outside and the sound of heavy feet running up the stairs.

He wasn't sure if Wattar just meant to knock on the door or bulldoze the door clean off its hinges. From where he was lying, he watched the heavy door break free and fall to the floor.

Wattar was at his side in an instant, scooping him up as if he weighed nothing and carrying him downstairs, where a sizable crowd had gathered.

"Merdia! Go fetch Master Harraby, now!"

For once, Merdia didn't question being ordered around and ran from the house, seeking the elderly healer. Wattar laid his brother down on the couch and knelt at his side.

"Ashar, can you hear me?"

He tried to answer but could only manage a soft moan.

His eyes wouldn't focus, and the few things he could see he didn't understand. His mind had become confused and lost after being connected for such a long time. Part of him was gone, lost in the void, dragging the rest of him along with it. He tried to fight it, but there was so little left of him to battle with, and the void was strong.

"Ashar, you have saved us," Wattar whispered in his ear. "There is a pile of jackthorn nuts taller than me and ten times as wide in the plaza. We all saw your beetles gathering food for us, thousands of them carrying enough jackthorn nuts to see us all the way through the winter. Thank you, brother. Now, none of us need to worry about starving."

He saw Master Harraby's cloudy blind eye examining him, feeling him prodding and poking, pulling his eyelid open, and holding a candle flame up to his eye. He could hear the muted conversation even if he couldn't understand most of it.

"I don't know, Wattar," announced Master Harraby. "He is unusual. I don't know anything about his Joining. Is there anything you can tell me?"

Wattar's hard gaze told him the subject was off limits.

"Then I don't know. If this were a regular Joining, I would say he has lost connection to his joined animal, but that is extremely rare. Did you see his eyes? The fire is gone from them, and only a hint of green can be seen. I don't know what has happened to him or what can be done to help him. He is dying."

"I know what he did," came the small voice of Merdia, a soft whisper in the crowded room, but everyone heard her clearly in the silence. "He is the chief. He protected his people, no matter the cost. That is what he did."

Tears were streaming down her face as she knelt by her brother's side. She wasn't the only one who cried looking down at Ashar's nearly lifeless body. His skin was a pale gray, and his breathing was shallow.

Wattar grabbed Merdia's shoulder and spun her around.

"Grass." He waited for the word to sink in. The agonized grief on her face gave way to hope as she realized what he was saying. Ashar had told them that smelling grass had helped soothe the grasshopper when it had been distressed. Maybe it could bring life back to Ashar now.

"Yes!" Merdia pointed to two young men standing by the doorway. "You two. Go down to the meadow as quickly as you can with scythes and baskets. Cut as much grass as you can carry and bring it back here with all haste."

The two youths looked at each other in confusion.

"What? Why would we cut grass? What do you need that for? Why ..."

He was interrupted by Wattar standing to his full height, towering over the two teens.

"Do! What! She! Told you! Now!"

No one had ever heard Wattar use the full force of his voice, the fury and power of the bear, a threat not from the man but from the beast. Everyone in the room took an involuntary step back from him, one of the poor youths falling over from the impact of his command.

"Go help them," he said quietly, but with the same force to everyone else standing in the room. An instant later, the two young men were tripping over themselves and the rest of the crowd as they all tried to escape using the same door at the same time.

As soon as they were gone, Wattar lifted Ashar up and carried him back to the small garden there. He was crying openly when they got around the back.

"He is so light, Merdia, I can feel his life slipping away. Every breath draws him closer to the end. Clear a spot for him there."

He pointed to a flower bed with low ground-hugging foliage and a few white flowers left.

She quickly brushed aside the dead leaves and branches that had fallen as Wattar gently laid Ashar down amongst the flowers.

Merdia heard people returning to the house and ran around the front to direct them to the garden. One by one, they came, each holding a bundle of grass, some small, only a handful clutched in a frail elderly fist, others so large that they used both arms to carry it all. Merdia took the bundles,

profusely thanking each person and then tucking the grass around Ashar. In a few minutes, he was covered completely, only his face showing.

The entire town stood in the garden or on the street next to it. No one spoke, only standing there, watching and waiting. There was nowhere else anyone needed to be, nothing more important they could do than this. Their chief lay on his deathbed, having sacrificed himself for them.

Wattar saw it first. "Merdia, look."

A faint vapor rose from the corners of Ashar's eyes, smoke from a growing fire. As they watched in stunned silence, the smoke erupted into two spouts of flame, Ashar's wide-open eyes sending out jets of fire.

He sat upright suddenly and drew in a huge breath.

Looking over at Wattar, he said, "I heard you. I heard you in the dark, but I couldn't find you. He led me back, the little one. He found your grass trail, and we followed it back to me. Thank you." He looked over at Merdia. "I heard you too, thank you."

Ashar looked around at the crowd, seeing relief and joy on their faces.

"I'm starving. Did anyone manage to find any food while I was out?" Ashar asked. "I heard you had a few jackthorn nuts to spare."

Only Wattar and Merdia could laugh at his terrible joke.

Chapter Seven

The next few days passed in a blur for Ashar as he alternated between eating and napping, trying to replenish all the strength he had lost. It took longer for him to recover than he had expected.

It was a valuable lesson about the cost of using his new abilities.

Wattar and Merdia kept everyone busy as he lay recuperating.

There were furious preparations getting loads of fish into the smokers, jacknuts packed into dry barrels, along with whatever meager supplies they had stored for winter.

Other than food, they had too much of everything else.

With ninety percent of the village now gone, there was no shortage of cut wood, clothing, equipment, lamp oil, and everything else left behind by those who had been taken.

Ashar was spending much of his time exploring his new abilities. Connecting with the beetles had been exhausting, partly because he hadn't known how to do it well.

He found if he calmed his mind, it smoothed the connection, whereas straining and pushing too hard made the creatures he was accessing push back a little.

He had been afraid of it, and they could sense that, so they resisted something foreign.

If he could only relax, he could drift through the connection without disturbing anything and see clearly without it injuring him. Taking control of things still required a great deal of concentration, but that, too, was getting easier.

Sitting in his bed, he could see the island buzzing with activity, but he could also see the fear. People were serious. There was no laughter, nor any friendly conversations, and every action and deed had to be dedicated to getting ready. Once the fog and cold set in, most of the elderly couldn't do much other than sit by a fire. Most of the people left were elderly, so there was a real need to get as much done as possible before winter. There would be a scarce few left who'd be young and strong enough to work through the bleak, dark months to follow.

He had also formed a deeper connection to the tiny grasshopper with which he had joined.

At first, its voice had been lost in the chorus of larger, louder voices, but after it had led him away from the beetles and back to himself again, he could hear it more distinctly and recognize it among the others, even though it was so small and quiet.

It felt more like an emotion to him now, and perhaps each time he was led away and back to himself, it could grow even stronger. It was something to look forward to.

It was connected to him more deeply than the other voices, also connected in such a way that he could feel it more than hear it, a resonance humming through every sinew and vein.

It didn't have needs or desires, but it could sense whatever he needed at the precise second when he needed it. It was instinct, and one that he was learning to trust. Somehow, it felt right too.

Merdia had been acting strangely of late, an issue probably far more concerning than their food situation.

Ashar wasn't sure what had changed, but she had been reserved and quiet, which neither he nor Wattar had ever seen in their precocious sister.

He thought maybe his near-death experience had affected her badly; surely, it had, but it couldn't have left her so flat, so devoid of her usually vibrant and stubborn nature, could it? It didn't explain why she wasn't making fun of him or demanding Wattar do this or that.

She was obeying. Obeying.

The thought of something so strange sent a very real chill down Ashar's spine.

Well, for now at least, he would put Merdia out of his mind. She was going to be Wattar's problem very soon, and right now, the quiet little voice inside him was telling him he had healed his body and mind over the last few days, but he had neglected his spirit.

Standing and stretching deeply, he worked the kinks out of his legs and back, which he had acquired from too much napping, too much lying down and letting his muscles waste away.

He took one small step toward the window and then launched himself up and out the gap at the top, sailing over the garden and hitting the top of the stone wall surrounding it, pushing himself up again to land on the next house's roof.

Once out in the open, he could really let go and stretch his legs, taking huge bounds as he ran from rooftop to rooftop, leaping between them with ease. There seemed to be no surface he couldn't reach, no height or distance he could not clear in one single bound. It almost seemed as if he could fly and soar, perhaps even able to reach the top of the watch tower if he tried.

Of course, he was not deluding himself, aware that such feats were only in his mind. But even so, to leap high and far like a grasshopper was the most exhilarating thing!

Soon, he reached the last house and hit the open ground beyond, streaking through the forest silently. He could feel the small one inside rejoicing, making his blood pump fast and his heart thrum hard. Even when the small one had been a part of the forest, it had never moved with such power, never felt the freedom found only in pure speed.

He ran until his lungs burned and his legs were beginning to feel quite rubbery. Looking up, he saw he had run the ridgeline all the way down to the coast, where his boat was waiting.

Master Uther had it tied up next to the shore just above the high tide line, where it could be easily pushed into the water whenever it should be needed.

It was unusually clear, and from this vantage point, he could see the tip of the Gartok Island low on the horizon. It would be a hard journey, and he had never sailed on the open water or anywhere, for that matter. Like everyone, he had taken sailing classes as part of his education.

When you lived on an island getting much of its food from the sea, you had to know how to sail. So, he knew the basics of how it all worked, but usually, someone else would be telling him which lines to pull and how to steer the boat. If he could just get to Gartok, he should be able to catch an oiler ship going to the mainland, returning from the fishing grounds at this time of year.

Turning toward the village, he was overcome with sadness, thinking how he might never see it again, how this moment could offer the very final glimpse. He wanted to stare, to take a snapshot in his mind, to capture everything just as things were now and hold it right there in his mind's eye. Terrible thoughts thundered through his head, thoughts of never getting to see Merdia grow up or Wattar becoming a mighty chief.

It also made him sad that so many were now gone, that his people had been taken from him. There could be no joy in this place without them and no rest until he found them.

His sadness turned to a burning anger as he remembered the lizard men loading people up as though they were cords of wood, hauling them off like cargo. He would either return here with everyone ... or never return at all.

The water started rolling back from its high point. At least he would have enough tide to sail tomorrow morning.

For now, Ashar returned to the village, taking the long switchback trail from the ridge down. So many things could go wrong once he left. His quest was a fool's errand, and he knew it.

Just do the first thing first, he reminded himself, then do the next thing and don't worry about anything except the task at hand. If he could do enough small things, the tiny things that could still make a difference, then perhaps he might be able to save them, although he still had no idea how. In truth, he didn't even know what it was that he was saving them from.

Merdia was waiting for him when he returned, sitting at the table and reviewing the map.

"How will you get to the mainland once you reach Gartok?" she asked.

"Oilers."

Not many dared cross the strait to visit their little islands, but the oilers did. They had no choice. The fields of jellyfish they harvested lay to the north of his home.

It was still open sea and treacherous, but their ships were large, fishing vessels and processing plants in one. They would spend months spreading their nets and hauling in tons of jellyfish at a time. And it wasn't to eat them.

The jellyfish were poisonous, so poisonous that a sailor who suffered even a small cut while working on deck would likely be dead before they knew they had cut themselves. The real prize was a large sac of oil the jellyfish produced to keep them floating on the surface while their long tentacles drifted under them, searching for something to eat.

The oil was almost perfectly clear, and when used in lamps, it produced no scent or smoke, making it highly sought after. The oilers would use the islands to resupply and ride out storms during the fishing season and then would stop to sell some of the oil on the way back.

"Wattar gave me some coin. I will buy passage on one of their ships," Ashar announced.

"What if there are no ships?" Merdia asked.

"Then I will have to swim, I guess. I don't know, Merdia. I don't know how any of this will happen. I must try, though. I will get to the mainland somehow and then take the next step. There is no point in asking all these questions about how and why ... It just has to be done."

"You know I could help you though. Why insist on making it so difficult?"

"Please, Merdia, we have been through this. You have to stay, and yes, I know you could help. Theoretically, I mean. Because you just cannot come and I wish you'd let the matter drop."

Ashar was surprised when she dropped the subject without further arguing and returned to studying the map. He stood next to her and leaned over it, inspecting everything as if she were about to take an examination on it.

He had memorized it himself already, from all the hours he had spent studying it.

"I don't think this map is very accurate," Merdia said.

"You're right, it isn't," Ashar said. "On the east side of both big land masses, there are no details. It doesn't even show any islands in that area, as if whoever drew this map didn't know what was there. It is the same thing as you go south: the farther away you get from our home, the less detail there is. Cartine shows nothing other than the volcano and some islands on the western shore. I think the map was made from scraps of other maps and drunken stories told by oilers."

"Yes, I noticed that," agreed Merdia. "But not only that! The scale seems wrong. If Cartine is as hot and humid as the stories say it is, it should be much farther south than what this map shows. Remember Master Kepler's class?"

It was a trick question. There had been a lot of information in that class, but since he honestly couldn't remember any of it, Ashar said, "No."

Merdia rolled her eyes and continued, "When he was talking about the planets and stars, how far away some were and how big others were?"

"Sort of ..." he lied.

"I can't believe we are trusting an idiot to save everyone. Oh no, don't send the smart girl who has a plan. No, no, let's send the simpleton with glowing eyes. What could go wrong?" Merdia said in her most sarcastic voice.

"Merdia, please, what did Master Kepler say I missed?" Ashar begged.

"First of all, the answer to that is 'everything'. But for now, the important part you missed was when he was talking about how big our planet is."

"So, it might be farther than this map shows?" he asked, hoping it was the right answer.

"No, you dolt! It's a lot bigger than this map shows. It could take years to get to them depending on how far they sailed. If they are going to Cartine, then it's a very long way."

"It doesn't change anything," said Ashar. "Our home is gone and it can't be rebuilt here. It sailed away on black ships. If I don't bring them back, then it's the end of our people. It won't matter if you survive winter because by the next one, many of the elderly will have died, and there will be

few who can work the fields and fish the sea. It will take a few seasons, but everything here will die if I don't get them back. It's not just our island, Merdia. It's all four of them. There just aren't going to be enough people left to maintain the balance."

"What are you talking about? What balance? I don't know what you're talking about."

"It's hard to explain. Everyone, whether Joined or not, is a part of it, part of the river of magic running through our world. It doesn't just flow around life. It is created by life and creates life. When I Joined, I didn't Join with a single animal, I Joined with part of the life of this world.

She stared.

He carried on, saying, "They chose me because they can sense what is happening, and they are afraid the river of magic is being interrupted, fractured, and broken by these invaders. It has already died in many places, lifeless areas, barren and desolate. It will happen here. Don't you see? I can feel it starting already. Crops will begin to fail, and there will be fewer fish and a lot less meat from hunting. In time, Joining will become harder, and as the magic fades, everything will fade. The only way to stop it is to return people here so this place can live again."

"What if you fail?"

"I cannot, I will not. I am just learning what I can do now," said Ashar, slightly irritable at all the questioning when he'd only just said that questions were pointless. "Maybe, in time, I will be able to do enough to help. It starts with Gartok, with the oilers."

He pointed to the map again just south of Gartok.

Then he resumed speaking.

"The map is accurate for the areas close to here; it looks like there are several ports right on the other side of the straits on the mainland that I can use. From there, I will figure out who took our people and where they are going. Just keep following them until I find them."

"And how exactly are you going to find them? No one will tell a twelve-year-old anything, especially one with green fire coming out of his eyes. Yeah, you are going to blend right in."

"Ah, but you forget I have the greatest army of spies in the history of spying. I can listen to any conversation anywhere near me as long as there are a few insects around, and there are always at least a few about the place."

Master Jorry hobbled through the door and regarded Merdia.

"I thought I told you to go and inventory the jackthorn barrels?"

Merdia's eyes widened as she realized she had completely forgotten about her assigned task. Now, Master Jorry had caught her slacking.

Once Merdia had gone, the old woman made her way to the table and sat down next to Ashar.

"You'll forgive an old woman for sitting, but I have been meaning to talk to you, and from the looks of things, you are heading out on the next tide?"

Ashar was surprised she knew. He had thought he was keeping his departure a secret.

"How did you know?" he asked her.

"I have my fingers in everything, young master; nothing escapes me. As a historian, I have records not just of our people but also of many cultures that have lived through the ages, and I am old enough to have read most of them. This is not the first time this world has seen evil take hold, and it will not be the last either. The ancient stories tell us that champions are called forth to stand against evil when it arises. I believe you are one of those chosen in this age. One of many. I know you have Joined with something ancient and powerful, something that might help us in this fight. You do not stand alone, Ashar. There are other powers in this world aside from the one that found you. Other champions will raise, some to fight with you, others against you."

"How do you know there will be others?" he asked her. Now, he realized he was beginning to sound like his sister with all his questioning.

"I told you. I have my fingers in everything, including the magic running through these lands. I do more than chronicle the comings and goings of the people who live here, you know!"

She eyed him, probably deciding if he believed her.

He shrewdly nodded.

Then she continued, "I, and those who came before me, learn what we can about magic and pass it down, how it works, where it is strongest, how to use it."

It took him a moment to grasp what she was saying.

They all knew there was magic around. During Joining, they got to touch that magic briefly, but there was no control. No one could harness the energy and use it. Could they?

"What do you mean when you say you can use it?"

She smiled and started rubbing her thumb and forefinger together over the table. Fine dust came from her fingers, and she made a small pile on the arm of the chair.

As she waved her hand over the pile several times, Ashar watched in amazement as a small plant grew to a few inches tall and opened a tiny white flower.

"Sadly, it will not live long, but you will find that the prettiest things in life don't. I cannot create true life. It will return to the dust from which it came in a few minutes. I can do other things, though, such as sense things far away. I cannot see and hear like you can, but I do sense feelings and emotions. I know there is something dark in the South, and I thought our isolated islands would be safe, but I was wrong. I didn't know what was coming for us, only able to feel its anger

and the sorrow it left behind. I can also feel those who are rising against it, the others like you, who will fight. Here, you will need this."

She reached into her robe, pulled out a small, tightly sealed vial of smoked glass, and handed it to him. Even through the dark glass, he could see a light inside, a small flickering green flame.

"Another of my tricks. What you are holding, young master, is a piece of magic. It is small, not very powerful, but it is from your home. It is a small piece of the magic flowing in you. You will instinctively know when to use it. Guard it carefully. It could be used against you if it fell into the hands of someone like me who knew exactly what to do with it, so be cautious."

Ashar put the precious vial into a small pocket where it would be safe.

"Thank you, Master Jorry. Is there anything else you can tell me about what is happening in the South? About who the lizard men are, and where?"

"I can't, I'm sorry. Well, I can tell you they are not natural, that they are being created by force. I don't know how, but someone is making those things."

She got up painfully, taking her time to stretch before heading toward the door.

"Enjoy the flower while it lasts. Even a short life is something to marvel at. Don't you think?" She left without waiting for his answer, leaving him alone with the small flower.

As he watched, he could already see it wilting and drooping, finally collapsing into dust.

His meeting with Master Jorry had shaken him, and he spent the rest of the day wandering aimlessly around the village. His preparations for the trip were complete. All he had to do now was wait for the morning tide to carry him out to sea.

It was odd walking around now.

For one thing, people were looking at him differently. It wasn't that they feared him, but he supposed he made them a little uncomfortable as if they didn't know how to act around him anymore. He exchanged polite greetings with people but never stopped to talk to anyone. Whenever he crossed the street to talk to someone he knew, they would scuttle away.

That evening, Ashar sat downstairs with Merdia and Wattar after their meals. The three of them tried not to be somber, but it was hard. Obviously, they knew this might be their last time together. Merdia was strangely quiet and sat staring into the fire.

"I am not going to say goodbye," Wattar announced unexpectedly. "This isn't goodbye. We will see each other again."

"I promise I will return," Ashar said, though not believing it himself.

"Please try to be careful. You are unusually stupid, and you tend to forget when I'm not around to remind you," Merdia said to him.

"I will."

They sat for a while in silence, not knowing what to say, not sure if anything needed to be said. Merdia got up first, walked over, kissed Ashar on his forehead, and then went up the stairs to bed. Wattar followed a minute later.

"I won't say goodbye, won't tell you that Father would be proud of you. I won't tell you I'm going to miss my brother, and won't tell you I believe in you. I won't say any of that," Wattar said.

"I won't say those things either then," Ashar said.

The stairs creaked as Wattar climbed up and thumped off to his room for the night.

For a short time after, Ashar sat watching the fire, wondering about tomorrow, the day after that, and the one after that. Then he forced himself to focus on tomorrow.

It would take most of the day to sail to Gartok or someone who knew what they were doing most of the day, in his case, longer. This time of year, the winds would be coming up from the South, and he would have to sail against them. He knew how it worked in theory: just sail in a zig-zag pattern. He had never done it himself, but it'd looked easy when his instructor had done it.

He wasn't sure when he had drifted off to sleep, but the fire had burned down to embers, and the air was chill. It was still dark out and the fog lay thick when he grabbed his pack and headed toward the boat. He was in no hurry this time and slowly strolled through the misty morning. It hadn't felt real until now. Now, real was the only thing it felt: stark and cold, filled with the unknown, and with a high state of anxiousness and dread.

He was completely alone now with no one to help him anymore.

Fear made him want to turn around, but he kept going, knowing there was no way out but forward for him. Fortunately, he soon found the boat was just where it was supposed to be. It was a small boat, only twenty feet long and barely six wide. The front was just touching the water's edge and was laden with supplies covered over by a strong, taut green sail canvas.

The vessel had a small mast with a single triangular sail attached to a boom arm that could swing to change the sail's direction. Then there was a second sail, able to be rigged in front of the mast. Several piles of rope coiled up connected to different parts of the boom arm and the mast.

It looked confusing, but he only needed the two controlling the boom, and those were easy to spot. The aft section had a three-sided U-shaped bench to sit on when controlling the rudder, which also had what appeared to be too many ropes attached to it. The sun was high enough to start burning off the fog, and he could see the tide was flowing out. It was time.

Tossing his pack into the back, he pushed the boat's bow into the water and jumped in as the stern entered. He lowered the rudder and locked it into place with a heavy brass pin.

There was no wind, so he pulled hard on the ropes until he got the boom arm over to one side, ready to catch the wind when it came. The outgoing tide was pulling him out, free of the wide mouth of the delta and toward the open sea, where the water started to get rougher.

Soon, his sail was full of wind. The boat was moving quite fast, but just not in the direction he needed. The wind was pushing him north, and he needed to head south.

There was no point in fighting the tide, so he would wait until he was in the channel to make his turn. But he was finding the rudder much harder to handle than he had expected. Pushing too hard in either direction made the small boat lean at frightening angles, threatening to capsize.

As the wind picked up, the boat got even harder to control, something he wouldn't have thought was possible because the whole trip had been a dreadful struggle so far. How difficult might things get? The rudder fought him, and everything he did made it worse.

He could see he was well clear of the coast and into the channel, and it was time to turn south. Bracing his feet, he pulled the rudder hard toward him. The small boat turned into the wind and started to flounder. The boom arm was in the wrong position, and he remembered he needed to switch sides every time he turned in the wind.

He tried to pull the rope to swing it around, but the rope on the other side held it in place.

He loosened it, and immediately, the boom started swinging back and forth as the boat pitched chaotically. He hadn't secured the rudder, and now he was being blown in circles as the unsecured sail flipped back and forth, to and fro, following the pilotless rudder also being moved by the wind and current randomly.

Ashar found himself being flung violently around the small deck as he tried to find the right one to pull in the tangle of ropes now entirely covering it.

He crawled over to the bench and grabbed the rudder, heaving it back to center. The sail was still whipping around on the loose boom arm, but at least the boat was going in a straight line.

There was an almighty danger to his life now too; he knew pathetically little about sailing, but the one thing he had heard in plenty of sea stories was how a loose boom arm could quickly take out a sailor who didn't have his wits about him.

Many men were thrown overboard by the boom, others finding themselves pinned and their limbs crushed. He would have to have one eye on the wild sea, one on the flapping sail and the treacherous boom that could head any which way at a split-second's notice.

He moved forward and tried again to find the right line to lock the arm down. The wind pushed it all the way to his right, and he wanted to keep it there. He finally found the right rope and was about to start pulling it when the wind shifted and came from the other direction.

Ashar looked up in time to see the boom arm coming at his face, but not soon enough to dodge it. The last thing he remembered was the sickening thud of the heavy timber hitting him on the forehead.

Darkness.

The ocean spray lashed across his face, while the relentless waves came slapping against the side of the boat. Looking up, he could see the sail, full of wind, as it pulled the boat forward. Turning his head, he could hear Merdia. He believed he imagined it but then, he saw her feet by his ear.

"One hour! You didn't even make it one hour on your own! Let's recap your heroic journey so far. Let's see, oh yeah, you jumped into a boat without knowing how to sail, got into a fight with it, and not only did you lose the fight, but the boat knocked you out! Does that about cover it, or were there some other heroic actions I missed?"

"My head hurts. It hurts so much."

"Good, it should hurt. Being stupid is supposed to be painful. What did I tell you? 'Remember, you are stupid.' Pretty simple advice, but could you follow it for even one second? No!"

"Merdia, we need to get you back home, you can't be here."

"If I wasn't here, you wouldn't be here either. You would be dead. Me hiding under your supplies in the bow saved your life, so just say thank you!"

Ashar managed to get himself up to a sitting position, but his head spun so much that he didn't dare stand or move in the rocking boat. In the far distance, he could see Gartok Mountain.

Merdia had the boat running on the right course. They were pitched over at a concerning angle, but he remembered that had happened when tacking against a strong wind.

She didn't have the rudder secured and was deftly making small adjustments as they cut through the waves, keeping the boat steady. Ashar didn't want to admit it, but she was much better at sailing than he was. She was a lot better at a lot of things, but it didn't change anything.

"First of all, thank you for saving my life, but I'm serious, Merdia, you have to—"

Merdia cut him off before he could say anymore.

"What? What is it I 'have' to do? Let go of this rudder and allow the boat to capsize while you headbutt the boom some more? Go back to pretending you and Wattar know better because you are older than me? Sit at home knowing my brother is dead, and I could have saved him?"

"Well," said Ashar, running a shivering hand over his sore head.

"No, I wasn't going to do that!" Merdia yelled against the wind. "So, for your information, I don't 'have' to do any of those things. It's my family that's out there, too, and I have as much right as you to help them. I know you were chosen—blah, blah, blah yackity-schmackity—but I also know you are helpless without me. I know you can't do this alone, and since you can't sail back home without my help, you can't do anything about it. We are going to Gartok."

Ashar tried to think of some argument that would sway her but kept returning to the fact she was right. He would have been dead right now if it wasn't for her, and although he and Wattar would never admit it, she was a good deal smarter than either of them.

"Fine, Gartok, it is," he said, admitting defeat.

"Thank you. Look on the bright side. You learned why they call it the boom today!"

"How long have you been waiting to make that terrible joke?"

"Ever since it hit you in the face; that was hysterical."

"It's a terrible joke. You had plenty of time to think of a better one," he shot back.

"If you want to hit yourself in the face again, I promise to come up with a good joke for the occasion while you are drooling on yourself. But I'm not altogether sure you would survive a second bout with that thing. Have you looked at yourself?"

It was supposed to be a rhetorical question.

But he said, "Do you have a mirror to hand?"

"Oh, Lord," she said. "You really are stupid. Like I carry a vanity purse with me on a boat!"

"Good point."

His head started to clear, so he rooted through the supplies until he found one of the water skins. Draining half of it in one pull, he handed the rest to Merdia.

Gartok was getting larger. They couldn't see the main island approaching over the horizon yet, but more of the central mountain was showing as they got closer.

They would have to reverse their tack every thirty minutes and go in the other direction, zig-zagging upwind with each turn. On the first turn, Merdia had him lay flat and out of the way so he wouldn't have another encounter with the boom arm.

"God help us both if you forget and get up to look for a mirror again," she said wryly. "If you think I can stop steering just to come and look after you, then you're wrong. So, lie down, stay there, and shut up so I can concentrate," she had said.

Once it had swung to the other side, she barked instructions to get him to his feet again, then hollered about which ropes to pull to lock the arm down. After a few turns, he managed to get the hang of it. Things often made more sense when they were being screamed at him by Merdia.

The sun was getting low in the sky when they rounded the southern tip of Gartok and swung toward the bay on the south side. They could smell it long before they saw the town, the scent of burned wood carrying far out over the water.

The bay was empty when entered. The town beyond was now just a pile of ash in the general shape of the buildings, and only a few half-burned structures still stood.

The lizard men had assaulted Gartok with much more violence.

When they'd attacked his village, they hadn't been interested in destruction, just in the town stores and people. This time, they had taken their time and made sure there'd be nothing left.

As they sailed closer, Ashar spotted something in the water, a mast just breaking the surface. He could see the ship under it as they sailed past. It was like one of the smaller scout ships that had been with the fleet attacking his home.

"Merdia, look. Gartok sank at least one of their ships. They must have fought back against the black ones," he said, looking at the destruction left behind, wondering how many had died in the fighting, and if his own people had been strangely lucky to be taken without a fight. From the looks of it, the lizard men hadn't shown mercy on those who'd opposed them.

"Get ready on the bow line," Merdia said.

Ashar could see the dock coming up. The lizard men had left that in place so they could load whatever and whoever was left when the fighting ended. He crawled up the bow and tried to figure out which of the lines was the bow line.

Merdia had no patience for him.

"No, not that one. It's the one tied to the bow! No! Does that look like the bow? The bow is the pointy thing at the front of the boat. No! That line makes the anchor drop, and then we stop moving. It's the other line, the one on your right. No! Your other right. Yes! That one. When we get to the flat thing made of wood sticking out of the water, that's called a dock. You will want to tie the thing in your hand—that's a rope—to the wooden thing that's the dock. Do you remember what a rope and a dock are, or do I need to explain that again?"

Ashar managed to tie them up, and they walked down the dock toward what was left of the village. There wasn't much to see. The remaining structures had been partially burned and ruined, and the rest was just ash and charcoal.

"Did they leave anyone at all?" Merdia asked.

"I remember Father saying there were several small outposts on the northern shores of Gartok. Whoever was left after the attack must've gone there for winter. There isn't anything left here."

"What now?"

"Now we check." Ashar walked past the burned-out buildings and to the edge of town, where the destruction ended, and the forest again took over.

He found a flat clearing where they could see the harbor.

"This will work, Merdia. Go down to the boat and grab the tent and the bedding."

"Why do I have to get the tent? What are you going to do?"

"I told you. I'm going to check."

He sat cross-legged against a tree, closed his eyes, and controlled his breathing, calming himself. He could hear Merdia linger for a moment before she decided nothing interesting would happen, and she had better get the tent before it grew dark.

Once her footsteps had faded, he concentrated on the quietness all around, listening for the tiny voices in between, hearing them rise up and become louder until they filled the silence.

Gently, he reached out with his mind and touched them, just enough to feel them, to see and hear what they were. He had to be careful. Letting in too much at once would overwhelm him.

Slowly, a picture of the island began forming in his head.

He could feel the pounding of the surf on the north shore as the massive waves crashed into the rocks. The wind flowing through the trees sang to him as it passed over the island, the rich smell of the earth and the slow decay within it. He felt heat, too.

Small fires dotted a small meadow on the north-west side of the island. He could see several structures, simple cabins meant to sleep ten or more people surrounded by tents and campfires. It was a hunting camp now serving as a haven for those who had escaped the attack on the village.

He pulled himself back from the connection and slowly recovered himself. It was strange to become part of something made of millions of small individuals, then return to the state of a singular being. Shaking off the cobwebs, he opened his eyes, very surprised to see Merdia sitting in front of a campfire under a night sky.

"How long was I out?"

"About two hours. I was starting to get worried. Is that normal?" she asked.

"Normal? Nothing about this is normal, so I don't know."

"Well, it's going to be a problem if you're out of it for long periods every time you connect to them. I tried to wake you up and couldn't. I even slapped you just to see if it would help, but it didn't. Then I slapped you again, harder ..."

He really didn't want to hear any more. But he had been wondering why both his cheeks were tingling. "And you slapped me a second time on the other cheek because ...?" he asked skeptically.

"Because I forgot to slap you enough for trying to leave me home. The boom got to it before I could, so I forgot, but then I remembered," she said defiantly.

"Right." It was Merdia's usual logic, and he had long since given up trying to work it out. He sighed and took a couple of deep breaths before continuing, "I found the people. They're all at a hunting camp a few miles north of here. We'll hike out tomorrow and see what we can find out."

"What then?"

"We do what Father taught us to do, the first thing first and then the next thing next. The next thing is to find out what we are facing. The people here trade with more ships than we do, and they might know who took our people and theirs."

Chapter Eight

They set out in the morning before the fog lifted, following the main path through town and into the forest.

Ashar had been thinking about what had happened the night before when he'd passed into a deep trance. Merdia was right; that could be dangerous for them both if he happened to be out cold and unresponsive at a critical moment.

He could reach out to what was close to him without much effort as they walked.

The connection was light, but it gave him an overall sense of what was around. He tried connecting deeper and found he started to trip and stumble when he did.

The more of himself he put into the connection, the less there was of him remaining; he would have to be careful when using his gifts.

It was a little like trying to pour an exact half of a glass of ale into someone else's glass; one or the other drinker always had less than they should, feeling sorely depleted.

For now though, he practiced his skills in reaching out. It was a useful trick to sense his surroundings in the dense fog as they walked.

"How do you know where we are going? I can't see anything," Merdia asked.

"I am still learning to use my new abilities. Last night, I connected to everything on the island all at once; that takes a lot of concentration, so much so that I forgot to leave a little something of myself behind. I won't do that again and I am sorry if I had you worried; it only felt like a few minutes. Right now, I am using the insects close to us to give me an idea of what is around us; I can feel where the path goes by listening to them. We are getting close though. I can feel something up ahead. It might even be the camp, but I won't know until we get closer."

"So, could you connect to the whole world and find everyone if you went deep enough?"

"No. First, that would kill me. Second, there is something about distance that affects me. If all the insects are close together, like on this island, they form connections between themselves, and I can access those connections. But they are only connected to each other, not to everything else on the planet, or even to the life on the next island. Last night, I tried to look at the other islands to see if there were other survivors, but I couldn't see past the water separating us."

"That's too bad. It would have saved us a lot of searching around."

"Once we get to the mainland, I might be able to see better; there will be more insects covering a larger area of land. I might also melt my brain trying to connect to something that large."

"Well, at least you won't lose anything important or useful," Merdia quipped.

"Thanks. We should stop here and wait for a bit," he told her.

"Wait for what?"

"Wait for the fog to clear up. The camp is just ahead; we don't want to frighten them."

"Ashar, we're just kids, why would they be afraid of us?"

"Because the last people they didn't recognize destroyed their home and drove them into the hills. Because they are scared already, and having someone with glowing green eyes wandering out of the mist like a demon from myth might, just might, freak them out."

"OK, that's a good point," she admitted.

It made him nervous having Merdia agree with him for some reason.

He told her, "I remember Father telling me a story about long ago when the people of the island first started trading with each other. They were superstitious back then, believing evil spirits lived around them. So, when a boat would come to the shores of another island, they would anchor up close to shore and sit on the boat's bow where they could easily be seen. If the people decided they were real and not a spirit sent to hurt them, they would invite them in. This seems like a similar situation, so we'll sit here until they decide we're real and not a threat to them."

"What did they do if they thought the person was an evil spirit?"

"I don't know. Let's say our father was a little sparse on the details. I guess they would just throw rocks at them or something. Pelt them until they decided it was a bad idea to get too close."

"What if they start throwing rocks at us?" she asked, always the one to see things from a different angle.

"Duck."

"Ha ha, very funny."

He cut her off with a quick motion of his hand. "Shh. I think we are about to find out."

He motioned toward the rapidly clearing mist to a figure standing fifty feet away.

They couldn't see the face yet, but the person was clearly looking directly at them. They sat very still and waited as the mist cleared. It revealed a young girl about Merdia's age, staring at them; there was panic in her eyes.

Ashar slowly raised one hand in what he hoped was a universal sign for 'I'm not a threat.'

The motion broke the girl's spell, and she turned and ran off, crying for help. A few seconds later, thirty armed men were facing them. One of them stepped forward from the others and called out.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" he challenged.

He was tall and thin, but there was no mistaking the tightly corded muscles on his exposed arms. There was something canine about his features and mannerisms; he was young and hadn't been joined long enough for physical features to manifest.

Ashar stood up slowly and faced him.

"I am Ashar, and this is my sister Merdia; we are the children of Manatar."

He paused for a moment to let that sink in; they would know the chief's name on the next island, just the same as he knew their chief's name.

"My people have been taken, like yours; we are going after them. I have come to find out what you know about the invaders," Ashar ventured next.

"What are two children going to do against those creatures? I fought them; they are a hard enemy; I don't think you two are much of a threat to them. How old are you two?"

Merdia was eager to answer; she was red-faced, blotchy with annoyance, itching to retort something like, 'What does that have to do with anything?'

But for once, she knew to stay quiet.

Ashar was getting impatient; he looked over at Merdia, who said, "Show them."

He crouched down, feeling his legs compress like coiled springs. When he launched, he flew twenty feet in the air and covered the thirty feet separating him from the other man in one jump, landing in a crouch and bringing himself up to eye level just a foot from the man.

The man gasped and stepped backward, away from Ashar's eyes, which were now burning brightly. They all did the same.

"I am not your enemy. The enemy has already come and gone, I am here to help," Ashar said with as much authority as he could muster.

The man took a moment to decide, then turned and walked back toward the camp.

"I'm Rybaan. Follow me then."

He led them to the camp center where everyone was milling around, waiting to see what the commotion was about. People stepped back with fear and wonder when they saw his glowing eyes. He tried to slow his breathing; the fire in his eyes tended to dim when he was relaxed.

The man stopped and held up his hands, quieting the crowd.

"These are the children of Manatar. Their people were taken the same as ours; they are questing to find them and have asked for our help."

"What help can we give? There is nothing left to give," came a voice from the crowd.

Several voices joined in agreement. Rybaan turned to Ashar, waiting for him to answer.

Ashar started to speak but realized he hadn't thought of what he would ask them. Fortunately, Merdia had been thinking about it plenty for them both.

She said assertively, "We need to know who or what they are, where they came from, and where they are taking our people. Also, how many ships do they have, how many soldiers do they command? Who is their leader, and where can we find them?"

Merdia scanned the crowd impatiently, waiting for answers to her questions.

A wheezing old man hobbled forward, bent over his cane. His tufted pointy ears had gotten so long they drooped over, sticking out a good six inches on either side of his head. His large eyes were surrounded by a mask of thick fur only allowing his mouth and nose through.

His fingers were unnaturally long and tipped with long, sharp nails. As he got closer, Ashar realized he wasn't wheezing but rather laughing—which admittedly did sound exactly like someone wheezing.

"I can see why you brought her along. Sharp that one," the old man said.

Merdia looked at Ashar with a look of vindication; Ashar just rolled his eyes. He was tired of hearing it from just about everyone, though secretly, he was proud of her.

"This is Master Marnelle; he is our eldest record keeper. If anyone knows the answers to your questions, it will be him," Rybaan said, introducing them.

Master Marnelle offered, "The morning is still cold, and I had just gotten my chair where I wanted it by the fire when you two came barging in! So, anyway, I'm too old to stand in a field like a cow chewing grass. Come on."

He turned and started hobbling away.

"Ashar, I bet if you asked nicely, he would let you chew some of his grass," said Merdia, enthused, nudging her brother in the ribs with a bony elbow.

"Shut it, Merdia!"

He hadn't meant to, but the flash of anger and embarrassment caused his eyes to briefly flare up, making several people nearby gasp.

It only made it funnier for Merdia, who was trying to stifle a laugh.

"Come on, before the tastiest blades are gone," Merdia taunted him as she followed Master Marnelle toward one of the cabins.

Ashar took a second for his eyes to die down before following her; he would have to learn to control that at some point.

Master Marnelle led them to a small stove in the corner of the cabin and took up his seat again; he motioned for them to pull up chairs as well.

"Can't be yelling at you two young 'uns from across the room; get over here so I can talk at you."

They pulled up two chairs, and the small room quickly filled up as what was left of the town's leadership crowded in to hear what the old master had to say.

Once everyone had quieted down, he continued.

"Now to the first of your questions, which was actually two separate questions, although you didn't know that when you asked it ... Understandable really; one would think that who and what something is would be the same something, not different somethings. Hm, but not here. The who, I can speak to, but the what, well, I have never seen the what before. Unknown in all the chronicles going back to the earliest ones, put down near—ah, hum, how long ago was that? Now let me see, before the enlightening for sure, or it could be earlier than that ..."

None of these murmurings made the slightest bit of sense.

Rybaan stepped in. "Master, you were saying you knew who the attackers were?" Turning to Ashar, he said, "He gets a little off subject sometimes, and you have to nudge him back from time to time. Like steering a bull back in a straight line when tilling the land."

"Ah! Yes, yes. That's right, I don't know the clan sign, the black ring with the red slash, but I know the ships well enough. If you're asking me, the clan must be new. There were always tales of constant unrest there, and that's why no one trades with them, and we know so little about them. Fighting, fighting, fighting! One clan comes only to be toppled by the next."

"I'm sure you are right because—" started Ashar, only to determine he couldn't get a word in edgeways.

Master Marnell went on, "It's all they do if the chronicles are to be believed, and I, for one, do believe them; others in my line might say some of the stories are exaggerated. I remember my old master once told me a story about his master's take on the authenticity of the chronicles."

"Master Marnelle, please, who are you talking about?" Ashar cut in before the old man could get rolling with the story about his master's master, and no doubt on to his master's master's master.

"Cartine, of course! I said that right at the start. Were you not listening, young man? Do you not wash out your ears? But ... hmm maybe I just thought about it and didn't say it. But yes, yes, yes, Cartine is where those ships were made, and you can tell by the shape of the sails and how narrow they are at midships! You see, our boats have broad bottoms to handle the heavy seas for fishing, whereas theirs are sleeker, built for speed and attack. Although I have never heard of them coming this far north, unusual really, but I guess nothing in the last few weeks has been usual. Although if this continues, then I guess the unusual will become the usual, and we will have to wait for something new to happen!"

Master Marnelle was quite pleased with his joke and took a moment to wheeze-laugh at it, but nobody else laughed purely because it took them several minutes to work out what on earth it was he'd just said. By which time, the right moment for laughing would be long gone.

Eventually, Master Marnelle recovered himself and continued, "Where was I? Ah yes, boats, and the men on them, or the creatures on them, should I say, to finally get to the second half of young Murpia's first question, last. Yes, yes, yes, the things on the boat, creatures or whatnot, whatever they may be. I don't know where they came from or how they were made, but I know they are unnatural. The chronicles tell us many stories of those who tried to subvert the magic of the land and bend it into something dreadfully dark; in one such tale, a priest was corrupted by greed ... What was his name now? Oh, his name escapes me, but I believe he was from the line of ... Oh, which family was it now? I suppose it hardly matters for the tale, but details matter as my old master used to say. A wise man he was."

"Wait, you said they were made? How would you make something like that?" Ashar jumped in and in a most timely fashion, prodded Master Marnelle back on course.

He was getting the hang of it.

"The magic coursing through this world doesn't have a will of its own; it doesn't resist changes in its flow, isn't aware of itself, or how it's used. The energy contains not just life, but death as

well. It contains all parts of this world in equal measure, and it can be manipulated by those with the right knowledge and skill. Someone like that could unbalance the flow of magic and filter some parts out, in a way, and others, well, those can be amplified. Very nasty business, nasty indeed, dirty business! Those in the south don't honor and care for the magic of this world like we in the north do, just another resource to be used, wasted, and then thrown away. Yes! Thrown away!" he bellowed, making Ashar jump and almost squeal.

Master Marnelle picked up where he'd left off after giving Ashar a long stare. "There was a time when those in the south Joined freely, much like we do, but that time ended long ago. So, now they restrict its use, try to control it, nasty, nasty indeed. Some do it anyway, in some places openly, and in others, secretly. But it's natural, natural! Natural, I say!"

Ashar jumped again. With the grasshopper in him, it was hard not to leap sky high.

Meanwhile, the elderly man went on, "And it is man's infernal folly to think he can control it, to own, to claim rights over that which was gifted to all! Man may as well try to gain control of the moon and all the stars in the sky! Futile! But still, it's nasty. Nasty, nasty, nasty!"

Rybaan put his hand on the old man's shoulder. "Easy, master, you know how riled up you get sometimes, and it doesn't do your problems any good." He turned to Ashar and Merdia. "Give him a second to recoup himself, and I'm sure ..."

Master Marnelle pushed Rybaan's hand right off his shoulder as if he was shooing off an irritating persistent fly. "Get away with you! I'm not some child who needs to nap, you know. I'll tell you when I'm done here. I'm old, I'm more experienced than the lot of you put together and if I want to get riled up and die right here on this very spot, I will. Now let's see, where was I?"

"The creatures, the soldiers they use," Ashar prompted him, hoping the yelling was not about to go up yet another notch because he wasn't sure he could take it.

"Yes, yes, yes! Now I remember. The creatures—beasts they were—ransacked my house, knocked me out of my chair while they emptied the pantry. Too old for them, I guess; didn't pay me any mind at all, just went about their gruesome business. What struck me was how many there were and how similar in appearance. In all my readings, something like this is supposed to be very hard to do to one person, but someone has figured out how to do it easily. There is no telling how large an army could be raised in such a way, a terrible, terrible, terrible thing. Though it hardly matters to you."

"I think how many of them there are matters greatly," Ashar replied.

"If there were only fifty of them, you would still be hopelessly outnumbered already! So why should it matter if there are a thousand or ten thousand? You weren't planning on just going out there and singlehandedly defeating their army, were you? You will need to use guile, boy, subterfuge, cunning! You will need to be smart, sneaky, devious. Honestly, I assumed that's why you brought young Murpia along."

A triumphant smile spread across Merdia's face despite the old man forgetting her name.

"That's exactly why he brought me along. I have a funny story about his sailing skills ..."

"Enough, Merdia. What else can you tell us?" Ashar asked.

"I'm afraid, not much, not much at all. I apologize for not having much to say."

Ashar's face twitched, desperately trying not to burst out laughing. Not much to say? I would hate to hear him when he's wound up about something ...

"Maps. What about maps? Do you have any of those? The one we studied was limited, to say the least," Merdia asked him.

"Yes, yes, yes, I might be able to help you. Perhaps, perhaps, there is a chance, not a good one, but a chance, maybe, if we are lucky, lucky indeed ..."

Ashar felt like giving up. "What are you talking about?" he asked him.

"Well, the archive, of course. Weren't you paying attention? I just mentioned it a moment ago."

Ashar looked at Merdia with a confused expression, which she answered with a shrug. There wasn't much to be done when the old man's mind wanted to wander.

"Where was I?"

"Archives," Ashar and Merdia said at the same time.

"Right, right, right, the town was burned, but most of the records were kept underground in a tunnel where the temperature and humidity are stable, good for the books. There was a wooden shed around the door, and the door was made of wood, so it would have burned as well. Like, wood burns, you know, not sure if you do know how fast wood burns but most people would not use a wooden door for record keeping, and in fact, I told Gartok we needed a metal door for archives, but did a penny ever fall out of his pocket for a better door? I remember once I asked him for something so simple and he ..."

He was rambling on and on, in a dull monologue that seemed as though it could run forever. Ashar and Merdia feared he might next go on to talk about which wood burns faster and all the scientific reasons why.

"Master! The archive?" Merdia said, bringing him back to the point.

"Yes, yes, yes, the door would have burned, but the shelves are farther back in the tunnel, unless they went in and destroyed everything in there, which is quite a possibility because as I say, wood burns very fast and if you have wood shelves as well as a wood door, then ... Well, that would be utterly ridiculous. Utterly flawed from end to end, literally! And because it was a tunnel, it could suck the fire from one end to the other quick as a flash. Quick as a flash, I say!"

Merdia was giving the elderly man one of her death stares. "The archive, master! Can you tell me, is any of it still intact at all?"

He stared back as if she was asking a question out of the blue. "Oh yes, the archive! That is what you young 'uns want to know about. I quite forgot. Well, you know, I suppose there is a chance at least some of it was spared from the fire. You might find something of use in there."

Ashar looked over to Rybaan. "Can someone show us where it is?"

"Yes, I can take you," Rybaan replied.

"Thank you so much. Master Marnelle, you have given me much to think about," Ashar said to him.

"One last thing, everyone out, even you Murpia," insisted Master Marnelle. "I need to speak to young master Ashar for a moment. Alone. One to one. Just us, and in solitude."

He sat patiently as everyone filed out, and Rybaan latched the door.

He leaned over to look closely at Ashar.

"Earlier, I said the magic of this world didn't interfere with our affairs, that it had no will of its own. Well, that wasn't entirely true. Within the magic, there are other forms of life not fully present in our world, yet close enough to be affected by changes in it. These other life forms live within the energy, so they can control it in ways we cannot, should not, but they can.

"I see," said Ashar. "So that means—" He had no chance to finish.

Master Marnelle wasn't done yet. He always had so much more to say and would interrupt anyone just to say it, almost as though the length of a sentence gave its content far greater importance. The longer the sentence, the more weight to it.

He prattled on, "When something affects the world of these other life forms, they will choose a few representatives to challenge whatever evil has arisen. You are one of these, I presume?"

"Yes. Master Jorry explained all she knew about what had happened to me."

"Then I assume she must have also warned you?" Master Marnelle asked.

"She said there would be others, some that would fight against me."

"A partial truth. It's not as clear cut as being on one side or the other. I mean what about the middle, the in-betweens?"

Ashar's jaw flapped as though it wasn't quite attached to his face. What was he to say to this?

"The in-betweens? Please ... tell me more," Ashar said in the end.

"I will! These things that live in the in-between have their own needs and desires, so the outcome you are looking for may not be the same as theirs. So you need to be cautious, even with the ones helping you. They are much more powerful than you and have a direct connection to you through your Joining. That can be used against you. Sadly, young master, the chronicles tell us that very few like you survive, that even in victory there is a price to be paid, and the ones living in the in-between are not willing to pay that price themselves."

"Do you know what they are, where they came from?"

"No, no, no, we only have fragments here and there, accounts of some like you who survived. But as you are probably finding out, they reveal little of themselves to those they choose as their champions."

"Yes, it has been frustrating. When I first joined, I could feel one of the beings you describe. It seemed trustworthy for some reason, but after Joining, cut itself off. I don't know whether that was intentional or a part of the process, whether malice or fear made it pull away from me. I can't help but think I might have a better chance if I understood the gifts bestowed upon me."

"Hm, hm," said Master Marnelle, his head tilted, listening and pondering.

"Everything is trial and error, and some are quite dangerous," Ashar continued. "For example, what you don't know is I nearly died trying to control too much at once. Now, I don't mean to anger you again, far from it. But earlier, didn't you say something about people in the south not being free to Join?"

"Yes, yes, yes, sorry about that," countered Master Marnelle. "But it does get my blood up when I think about it. We are fortunate that our islands are isolated, not just from the dangers of the mainland but its culture as well. Those who live in the remote and wild parts of the land live much like we do, or at least the way our ancestors used to live. Not everyone is joined like here, but many are; their process is different, and we don't know much about how they facilitate Joining, but it doesn't work for a lot, so fewer are Joined. On the coast where the ports and cities lie, it's a different story, Joining is tightly controlled by a priesthood and is reserved for the elite as a signet of power and authority. Despicable, nasty—did I also say despicable—those priests are and those who control them, whereas here, we quest for knowledge to enrich everyone, not to seek power or wealth! A man is only as rich as his last hot meal, I say! Vanity, I call it, vanity! And ... And did I mention despicable? Oh, I forget what I was saying. About hot meals ..."

"Master," Ashar said gently. "I was inquiring about the dangers of Joining and about those in the south not being—"

Nicely prompted, Master Marnelle's thoughts started racing again.

It was akin to listening to a runaway train, and every now and then, someone had to throw themselves in the way of it as it trundled this way and that, off course and out of control.

"Yes, yes, yes, sorry about that," Master Marnelle responded. "It does get my blood up, as I have probably mentioned, yes, yes, yes, where was I? Ah yes, yes, there are some in the cities who still do it in secret, sometimes by design, but often just through a natural process. It just happens when two souls line up with one another and seek one another out. For those, they must live in secret, most leaving for the wildlands where they will be accepted. You see, our rituals do not join two together; our rituals enable one to call out farther so the right two can find each other, but it can't be forced ... Well, I guess I should say we don't force it but after seeing those creatures, it's obvious not everyone shares my passion on this. You follow what I'm saying?"

His head cocked again on one side, the kind of tilt of a dog listening to its master. Only he didn't give very long to pay attention to anyone else, unlike a faithful hound.

So, without waiting for an answer, Master Marnelle slowly turned and checked the door to make sure they were alone.

Ashar also scanned the room to make sure Merdia hadn't snuck back in.

"This Master Jolly you spoke of ..." Master Marnelle inquired.

"Jorry! Trust me, she is the least jolly person in our village."

"Yes, yes, yes, I apologize ... Jorry, did she show you how to use the magic?"

Suddenly, the elderly man looked less frail and old, his eyes sharp and alert.

"She showed me a small bit of magic she could do; she made a small flower that lived for a short time. It was the most amazing thing I had ever seen," Ashar said.

"Oh, my dear boy, then you will love this. Show me the fire again."

Ashar hadn't paid much attention to the emerald fire coming from his eyes. Other than making people uncomfortable, it didn't seem to have any use at all; he had spent most of his time trying to make it less noticeable.

He usually calmed his mind and breathing to reduce it, but now he did the opposite.

He allowed all the rage and fury he felt to rise to the surface. His hatred of the lizard people that had carried his mother away, and all the painful memories he had kept locked down, they all came flooding back in a rush. His breathing came in short quick gasps as his heart rate climbed.

He opened his eyes when he thought he might burst from all the rage.

"Oh my," was all Master Marnelle could say.

Ashar's face had transformed from the innocent face of a boy to something much darker; his lips pulled back, showing his teeth as his nostrils flared with each breath, and his eyes had been completely replaced by two balls of emerald fire, pouring out flames that licked around his temples and eyebrows.

Small balls broke off and floated away, still burning for a few seconds.

"Now watch what you can do ..." He gently reached out and, with two fingers, pulled some of the fire from his eyes, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger.

He placed his hand over the arm of his chair and started rubbing his finger, much as Master Jorry had done. The fire dripped from his fingers and formed a small pool starting to take shape, the unmistakable form of a small grasshopper.

When he was done, a perfect grasshopper sat there regarding them, bright green, with an orange stripe down its back; it was identical to the one Ashar had Joined with.

"A grasshopper! Now that I would not have expected! Unheard of, this is, never mentioned once in the chronicles, Joining with an insect! Wondrous, most wondrous, my boy!"

Ashar watched the grasshopper crawl around Master Marnelle's chair, saddened that it would only get to live for a few minutes.

"Ah, yes, yes, yes, you have seen this trick before I think?" asked Master Marnelle. "No, not yet you haven't. Master Jorry must have tricked the magic into thinking there was a flower where there wasn't one; you see, there was never a flower, so there was nothing to hold the magic to it. There was no life, but this little one here will live, and that is the difference between her and you, that you are connected to life, not to the memory of it. It flows in you, and that's what the fire is, it is all the life you now share yourself with. A burden, yes, yes, but also a great gift since it is here that your true power lies."

"Ah, I see," said Ashar, though he wasn't sure he had caught all of it or grasped more than a few words of the master's lengthy spiel.

Ashar reached out to the small green insect, surprised when it recoiled from him. Marnelle snapped his fingers twice and the grasshopper jumped up and landed on his shoulder.

"No, no, no, young master, you did not make this one; I did, and I have already named him, so he is mine. Sir Kingston Dragonslayer! I always enjoyed giving small things grand names, it fits him, don't you think?" Master Marnelle enthused.

"It is a good name. He is small, but mighty." Ashar smiled when the grasshopper dipped his head in a small bow.

"You have much to learn and I can only show you tricks and give you rumors to go on. There is much I do not know, much only you can know, and even more that no one can know, eh? Be careful and keep young Murpia close, you need each other more than you know. Be good a lad and put some wood on the fire, would you."

It was a mandate, not a question, and the master continued, "I fear that Rybaan may have been right, I might need a nap after getting worked up. Have him bring me another blanket and some

warm tea—if he can find any, of course. Most uncivilized, running out of tea, if you ask me. Now, off with you, I'm tired and you have a world to save, so we both better get to it."

"Thank you," was all Ashar could think to say. Listening to the master, despite how wise he undoubtedly was, always proved exhausting. He felt as though he could sleep for at least a week. He stood and went outside to stand in the morning sun for a moment, hoping that it could infuse some of its energy into him as though he was solar powered.

Sadly, he discovered that he was not. He was feeling decidedly drained.

Merdia came to his side and took his hand.

"Are you okay?"

"I think. What was it Master Marnelle said about the unusual becoming the usual? I think I am getting used to being shocked. It's not as shocking as it used to be. I will tell you everything later, but for now, we need to get moving."

Looking around, he found Rybaan standing close by.

"Rybaan, you were right about the nap," Ashar ventured. "The master would like another blanket and some tea if possible. If there is any tea in the house, that is. It is quite uncivilized to run out of tea, so I hope there is some."

Rybaan pointed to a young man beside him who left without a word to find a blanket and some tea.

"You are ready then?" Rybaan asked Ashar.

Merdia nodded at him—though she had not even been asked—and returned to the trail enthusiastically, Ashar and Rybaan in tow.

They walked in silence back to the town; it felt disrespectful to be chattering away after what had happened to this place. Soon, the smell of burnt wood reached them and the town appeared not far ahead, still burned, still desolate, a graveyard.

Rybaan led them to the east side of the village, to a small hill where they found Master Marnelle's doorway; its door had been burned away, leaving a black arch in its place.

Ashar dropped the pack and lit a candle with a few flint strikes.

"Let's see what's left."

He raised the candle above his head and walked through the doorway, Merdia hot on his heels. Normally, when walking into a completely dark room, it would take Ashar's eyes at least a few seconds to adjust before he could see anything, but not anymore. He found he could see clearly by the small light of the candle flame.

Another gift from his friend.

The place was a mess. Shelves had been pulled down, books and parchment scattered over the floor, but most of it was still there. Once the ransackers had found out there was nothing of value hidden in the cave, they had moved on.

"Careful where you step; the floor is covered in stuff that Master Marnelle doesn't want our footprints on."

"How can we help it? I can't see a thing," Merdia answered.

He handed her the candle. "Here, I don't need it."

He pulled a shelving rack back up, then cleaned up the floor and got things back on the shelf. After a minute, Merdia sat the candle on a shelf and started helping him.

It only took them a few minutes to get everything off the floor together.

Finding anything of use would take a lot longer. From what he could see, lizard people throwing everything to the ground had been an improvement to Master Marnelle's conventional method.

Nothing was grouped together in any meaningful way, so they had to open each book and scroll to see what it contained, most contained nothing: old stories; records of wheat harvests; number of fish caught ... It went on and on, even the writing rambling in Master Marnelle's habitual manner. The candle was burned almost all the way down when Merdia finally found the map scrolls bundled in with a bunch of what appeared to be quite random birth records.

Rybaan had left them to search the archive and had gone back to camp hours before Ashar and Merdia could. Now, the sun was starting to get low in the sky when they finally set off walking back to their little camp and got a fire going.

Merdia spread the maps out and they hunched over them, trying to make out detail using a small candle for their light.

Ashar could see the map well enough; his new improved night vision was helping, but even with that, the smaller details were hard to see.

It was gradual at first, but the map got progressively easier to read as it lit up.

"Ashar, I assume it is you doing that?"

He looked up in confusion to see thousands of fireflies swirling over them. They covered the bushes around them, the branches above, all of them shining a tiny amount of light onto the map.

"I guess it is," Ashar said. "I wasn't aware I was even doing it. I think they just responded to me needing more light." He turned back to the map. "I don't even see Cartine on this map. How bad were the ones we had back home? Don't tell me they got an entire continent wrong?"

"Oh, it's worse than that. Remember when I said that I thought Cartine might be a lot farther away than our map showed?" Merdia's eyes were screwed up as she scrunched her face, squinting from all the difficult map-reading efforts.

"Yes," he replied nervously. "I do remember that."

"It's not on this map because it's so far away they had to put it on another map!" she said.

She pulled another sheet out from under the first and laid it down. Indeed, she was right; this one showed Cartine but not in detail either, proving to be little better than their map for inland features or ports. But it did have the scale correct and its relationship to Parthsia.

There wasn't a strait or channel separating the two land masses; there was a vast ocean between them, and Cartine lay almost all the way to the equator.

If that was where his family was being taken, it would be an almighty long journey.

Ashar lay back and wondered at the scope of what he was attempting; naturally, he had always known there was a much larger world beyond his home, but he had never had to confront it, to travel its unimaginable distances. He was feeling very small in the light of this new discovery.

Merdia, of course, seemed to take it more in her stride than he did. A cold fear ran through his body, and it took an inordinate amount of energy not to begin trembling. He also wondered for a brief moment, perhaps the grasshopper in me, being so awfully tiny, also feels the distance more. He pondered on it. But then again, it can jump farther than I can, covering ground really fast, so maybe it's not like that at all. Or maybe ... I mean it's entirely possible that—"

"Oh, stop it," he said to himself under his breath.

He'd stopped himself dead in the middle of all these musings, fearful of having picked up the habit of pointless rambling from Master Marnelle.

"Brother, I'm not sure if we have more problems or fewer," Merdia voiced, pointing toward the harbor. "See over there?" She jabbed her finger at the far distance.

Ashar could see a single light glowing out in the harbor, the mast light for an anchoring ship.

Oilers.

Chapter Nine

They broke camp before sunrise, setting off to make their way to the dock.

Ashar had no doubt that once the sun rose on the village and the oilers saw the ruin there, they would just up anchor and leave.

He intended to be out on the water to greet them and hopefully, to barter for their passage.

Merdia jumped in and grabbed the tiller as he untied them and pushed them off the dock.

After getting them untangled from the various lines and ropes on the deck, Ashar took the mid seat and rowed them out to the ship.

"Ashar, did you notice how people back there reacted to you?" Merdia asked.

"You mean the fear? Yes, I noticed that, but it was fine once they got to know me," Ashar said.

"It was amazing how quickly they overcame their nervousness of me being so friendly to them."

He smiled, nodding to himself. But if there was one thing certain in this life, it was that his dear sister would put him right whenever he was mistaken. And this was one of these times.

"No, it wasn't like that," argued Merdia. "I don't know how to put this, but you are very different now, obviously. When people see your eyes and watch you jump twenty feet with ease, they don't know what to think, so yes, they are scared. I mean they find it terrifying and peculiar, strange and otherworldly, all in one. Even when they get over their fear, they treat you differently."

"Yes," he butted in. "They like me!" He almost looked proud and pleased with himself.

"No!" she contested loudly, almost making him leap those aforementioned twenty feet since her piercing voice hurt his now so-sensitive ears. "It wasn't respect as such, Ashar. Nor the fact they like you. You are far too ugly and stupid for that. It was more like they revered you."

"So, you are saying I should start to recruit followers, be some sort of wizard or priest?" Ashar asked. "A guru?"

Merdia groaned and pinched the bridge of her nose for a second before responding.

"Okay, first, you are unbelievably stupid," she said. "Second, no! I don't want you to recruit followers, I want you to do the exact opposite of that. I want you to not stand out. Get it?"

"I see, blend in," mused Ashar, pensive.

"Wow, did you hurt yourself thinking big thoughts? I think I see a little smoke coming out of your ears. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Enough, I hear you," Ashar spat back. "As it turns out, I was thinking along similar lines last night and have been working on my eyes. Watch this."

Ashar looked directly at Merdia and concentrated on his eyes.

He had gotten the idea from the fireflies appearing spontaneously the night before when he'd needed light. He didn't have to control every little thing around him; the magic in him would react naturally to his needs, so he just needed to spend some time learning how to do that.

He thought about needing his eyes to look normal, so he made himself feel a little worried. Slowly, the light in his eyes died down to nothing.

He still had unnaturally green eyes, but they no longer looked otherworldly.

"Okay, that wasn't bad, but you're still stupid for wanting followers. How long can you keep that up?" she asked him.

"Not sure, still learning how to do it, but it doesn't take any concentration to hold it. So, I imagine it will stay until something breaks my calm."

"And no more jumping unless you are doing something for me, or I tell you to, got it?"

He felt like arguing the point but decided it was easier to let it go.

"Fine, no more jum—" he started to say.

"Ashar!" Merdia was pointing directly ahead. The morning fog was still lying on the water, but the dawning light was pushing it away, revealing the oiler ship ahead.

It was massive, over three hundred feet long and forty wide at midships.

The sharp bow curled twenty feet higher than the deck, creating an edged bow to cut into heavy seas, while the stern was low and sloped toward the water so the cumbersome nets could be pulled on board and the jellyfish processed.

The mid-section held a huge wheelhouse.

It also served as quarters for the crew when they weren't working the nets or stoking the fires of the below-deck refineries, the ones that purified the precious oil.

Ashar pulled in the oars and let the boat drift. The other ship was still a few hundred feet off, and they probably hadn't spotted their tiny boat in the mist yet.

"Merdia, we need to pack everything we need; we will leave this boat if they agree to take us to Parthsia."

She looked a little shocked that he had thought of something before she did but quickly went through the pile, grabbing essential items.

A minute later, they each had a small pack, one bundle with blankets, and a few other items.

Then they waited. And waited. And waited.

The sun had burned off all the fog and continued to rise for another hour before anyone on the ship bothered to look at the water around them. Unfortunately, the man who saw them was halfway through peeing over the railing when he did, nearly plunging into the water after becoming tangled in his pants as he tried to run off and sound the alarm.

Another man appeared and extended a sighting lens to get a better look at them and the town beyond. There was a brief conference among the men standing on the rail until the taller one with the lens looked back at them, waving them toward his ship.

He took up the oars again and pulled until they were within twenty feet of the vessel.

"That's far enough!" a voice cried out.

Ashar reversed his stroke and stopped the boat.

"What happened here?" It was the tall man who had waved them over.

"We do not know who they are, but their ships are marked with a black ring with a red slash. They destroyed the village and took many captives, both here and in my home of Manatar," Ashar said.

There was another hushed conference between several men and the tall one Ashar assumed was the captain.

"What do you want from us?" the captain asked.

"Any information you'd like to give us on who they are, and we need passage to the mainland. We have coin to offer you," Merdia answered.

Ashar wanted to say something to convince them to take them, but he had the feeling Merdia was handling it for them; he thought it best to stay quiet and let her work.

"How much coin do you have?" the captain asked.

"Only a great fool would answer that. You'll have to find out the old-fashioned way how much you can fleece me for," Merdia replied.

The captain laughed and elbowed the man next to him.

"I like her!" he exclaimed. "A feisty one!"

Turning back to Merdia, he said, "All right then. You said you want to buy two things, information, and transportation; we should haggle separately for them, I think?"

"No, just for the trip over. I did say whatever information you choose to give us, not sell to us. I can get plenty of information for free once on the mainland, so the only thing I need to pay for is the trip there. Once that's done, maybe we can talk about what your information is worth if anything at all." Merdia had her hands on her hips, sizing the man up.

Ashar looked at Merdia to remind himself she was nine; she didn't sound as if she was.

The captain regarded her for a moment.

"Two coins each, not negotiable, and you sleep below decks. It's hot, loud, and smells bad. I won't kick two of my men out of their bunks so you can stay comfortable. No food either; you eat what you brought. Deal?"

"And the information if I want that too?"

"I'll give you that for free. And if it's of value to you, drop another coin in my hand; if not, nothing is lost on either side."

"Deal," Merdia said.

They anchored the boat so the people of Gartok could retrieve it later and climbed aboard.

The back half of the ship was an open deck with the stern open to the sea, nets tied and stored against the wheelhouse. Forward of the wheelhouse was another large deck with three large cargo hatches giving access to the lower decks. Once on board, the captain addressed them.

"My name is Ishmael. What I say goes on this ship. Do you understand?"

They nodded in unison.

"Good. That end of the ship is poisonous." He pointed to the stern and all the nets. "If you fall and skin your knee back there, you will be dead before we can get to you, not that we would even try. Take a good look at the wheelhouse and the foredeck; you won't see them again until we reach port. Come on."

He turned and walked onto the foredeck, opened a small hatch, and climbed down the ladder, motioning for them to follow. It was dark, but Ashar's eyes adjusted quickly, and he could see the cargo hold clearly. Hundreds of barrels stood stacked floor to ceiling, filling the hold; only a narrow corridor had been left between the barrels.

At the front of the hold, Ishmael opened a heavy door with iron hinges and a latch leading them inside. One wall was lined with heavy shelves half filled with food stores, and the other held empty cages and one large pen.

It was about five feet high, ten feet long, and five wide, with a heavy door on one side and walled with heavy timber spaced a bit apart.

Ishmael motioned to the pen.

"We ate all the animals, so this space is clear now," he said. "We cleaned the hay off the floor, but I'm afraid the smell does linger. You stay here, and don't touch the food. There is a waste port over there that you can use to dump your bucket when necessary. Someone will bring you fresh water every day. As for those who attacked you, we know very little."

"Right," said Ashar, listening closely.

"They started raiding in the south about five years ago, striking from the sea and escaping. We know they are from Cartine and use dark creatures as shock troops, but you probably already know all this if you have faced them yourselves. They usually don't come this far north, so only in the last year have we heard reports of raids on the northern coast."

"Yes, you are right. We do know this already," Merdia said, implying the information wasn't worth another coin.

"But here is something you don't know, something only a few possibly can. These raids are different from those that have happened in the past. Those were breakaway clans from Cartine trying to find riches raiding in the north. They never lasted long; either they would return to Cartine with their wealth or stay long enough to be destroyed. But this isn't a breakaway clan; there are no more of those. Someone in the south has taken control over the whole of Cartine and brought all the clans under one banner, the black ring. These raids aren't going to stop; they are going to get worse. Cartine has its sights set on Parthasia. They are probing, looking for weak points, and soon, they will come with an army."

"What happens to you when that army comes?" Merdia asked.

"I get rich selling oil to an army at twice the normal price, that's what."

"What about those people? What are they doing with them?"

"I have heard rumors they are being used as slave labor, but those are only rumors. Nothing comes out of Cartine, so no one really knows," Ishmael replied.

Merdia held his gaze for a moment to see if anything more was coming. When he remained silent, she pulled five coins out of the bag and laid them in his hand.

"Thank you, that is something we didn't know," she said. "And very useful."

He turned and latched the heavy door behind him, locking them in the storage room.

"That went well," Merdia announced.

"You sure? Seems like we just got locked in a cage they use for the animals they eat; I'm not exactly getting a great feeling about this."

"Don't be dramatic. We got exactly what we needed, passage to the mainland. If they were going to kill us and take our money, why wait? They could have done that by now."

"The plan must have worked because we aren't dead right now isn't the greatest strategy. I'm just saying be careful, you were having fun, it was a game to you. These guys are playing for keeps, and you shouldn't be so quick to trust him just because he treated you like an adult."

"Okay, you're right, it was a game, and I'm sorry. But it does seem to have worked out, don't you think?"

"I'll let you know in the morning after I'm not murdered in my sleep." Looking down at the stained floor of the pen, he added, "Honestly, they would be doing me a favor killing me before I have to sleep on that."

"Don't worry, it won't be so bad," Merdia said cheerfully. She could always see a bright side to any situation, no matter how stinky.

She was so wrong, so very wrong.

The ship pulled anchor and left as soon as they had come on board, spending the morning and afternoon sailing the relatively calm waters between the islands. As evening approached, they left the safe waters around their home islands and entered the straits where twenty-foot waves greeted them. Being in the bow, the up and down motion of the ship was the greatest.

Ashar and Merdia were tossed mercilessly around in the small pen, alternating between being smashed into the ceiling and then the floor.

Eventually, they crawled across the room and wedged themselves under one of the lower shelves where they could hold on enough to ride out the huge swells. With no portal to see the horizon and the ship's pitching, Ashar started to feel sick. Really abysmally sick.

The only thing that helped was Merdia throwing up first. He was about to say something snarky to her when he was interrupted by vomiting himself.

The next week was marked only by the daily delivery of water, which would spill out of the bucket seconds after being set down if not snatched up quickly enough. Sometimes, the swells calmed some, and they could sleep for an hour or so; other times, it seemed the wild sea would cleave the ship in two with its fury.

Ashar had not completely wasted the time when he wasn't throwing up; he had been in contact with insect life that traveled along with the ship.

The captain had been right about the stern of the ship being poisonous; he couldn't find a single living thing back there, but the wheelhouse and the rest of the ship had plenty, mostly cockroaches, but they were fast and could go anywhere.

He had been listening in on the captain when he could, hoping to learn more about his intent. All he ever heard was captain stuff, orders for navigation, sail rigging, reports about leaks, nothing of interest. That was until they reached calmer waters on the eighth day.

It was the morning, and the captain spoke to one of the other men about making port later that day. Ashar had several roaches hiding in the room, which allowed him to see and hear what was happening.

"Have you decided what to do with those two below yet?" the gruff man asked.

"The girl has more coin, a lot more, I'd wager, and the boy doesn't look like he could put up much of a fight; we will take what they have left and then sell them to Kirroh when we reach port," the captain answered.

"Kirroh? He's a slaver who sells to Cartine. You sure we want to be seen doing business with him?"

"We'll be quiet about it, take them to his ship after nightfall."

"Want me to get on with it?" the man asked.

"No, they are locked in right now; we will wait until we reach port. They will be more relaxed then and won't see it coming."

Ashar pulled himself back, but it always took him a minute to regain himself after being connected. When he was ready, he looked up at Merdia.

"I was right. He is going to betray us. First, he is going to rob us, then sell us into slavery."

"No! When? Right now?"

"No, tonight, after we reach port. We still have time to get ready."

"Ready to do what? We can't fight them, especially locked in this room!"

"Don't panic, Merdia, it's not as bad as that," he said, somehow managing to be the one who saw something positive for a change. "In addition to all these lovely roaches, this ship is also home to marine termites that love to chew on timbers. For the last five days, I have had them chewing on the wood around the hinges, and I'm a little surprised the door hasn't fallen off yet. We can leave whenever we want, but what are we going to do then? Going into the water and swimming for shore seems like our only option, but they can run us down if they can get a boat out fast enough or call one of the other oiler ships to grab us. Do you have any ideas?"

"What else did you learn from the captain?" she asked him.

"Not much," Ashar responded. "They mostly talked about selling the oil and what price they might get for it. Several members of the crew are prisoners, being rented out for work on the oiler ship to reduce their sentences. The captain said he would signal for the prison ship to come and collect their men and the barrels of oil owed for their work as soon as he got into port. He wants them off the ship as soon as he can."

"So, as soon as we get into port, the deck is going to be covered with men unloading barrels and captives being transported, and that will make it hard to get out unnoticed. We will have to wait until nightfall to make our attempt." She looked downbeat.

Ashar said, "But if we wait too long, they will come for us, and I don't like our chances in these confined spaces."

"Agreed. Can you spy on them to see when the deck is clear?"

"Yes, I can do that."

Merdia managed a small smile. "Then we hope we aren't too far from shore and can swim there without being discovered. Okay, I'll admit, Plan A isn't that great, but it's better than Plan B."

"What's Plan B?" he asked.

"You really don't want to know. Let's hope we don't have to use Plan B."

They spent the next few hours nervously packing and repacking their belongings, deciding what to take and what to leave behind.

Unfortunately, the bed roll was too bulky to take on the swim, and some of their food wouldn't survive getting wet, so it stayed behind as well. Soon, the ship stopped, and they heard the anchor dropping along with busy footfalls coming from the deck.

Ashar leaned back and reached out to connect to the tiny insects on the ship that could lend him their eyes and ears. He could see men on the deck working on one of the cargo hatches, removing the lashings holding the heavy cover in place.

Other men were still coiling and storing the lines and sails they had just pulled from the rigging. They swung the crane arm over the hold, and men jumped down and started hooking up barrels to be hoisted on deck.

In just a few minutes, there were ten barrels of oil lined up next to the railing.

Soon, a ship approached and pulled alongside. It was far smaller than the giant oiler ship, built to sail coastal waters, not the open sea. Orders were barked, and five men stepped forward and formed a line. Another deckhand bound their legs and hands, each man then being hooked by the ankles and lowered upside down onto the waiting ship.

The oil was loaded once the prisoners were secure below decks, and ten barrels were carefully lashed to the deck. Their business concluded, the other ship pushed off and moved away using long oars coming off the main deck.

More orders were shouted into the air, and the deck was cleared of lines and made safe.

Ashar noticed they hadn't replaced the massive cargo hold cover, leaving a giant hole in the middle of the deck.

For the next hour, men came and went on various tasks, seemingly at random, but by sunset, the deck was clear, and it was all looking quiet.

"We are pushing it, Ashar. It's getting dark, and they could come for us anytime now!" Merdia said impatiently.

Ashar could hear her, but she sounded far away. He was learning to keep part of himself behind whenever he was connected. He shook his head to clear away the voices and looked at Merdia.

"You're right, we need to go. Hey, want to see a neat trick?"

He tossed her a pack and donned his own as he approached the heavy stockroom door. Leaning back slightly, he gave it a sharp kick on the hinge side, satisfied to feel the door break loose of the frame and clatter to the floor. He walked into the dark corridor with Merdia close on his heels as they made their way aft toward the hatch next to the rail.

With luck, they could be out and into the water before anyone could know they were gone. But unfortunately, luck wasn't with them that night.

They reached the midpoint of the cargo hold, where the hatch had been removed, allowing moonlight to stream into the dark hold. Ashar was momentarily distracted by looking up through the open hatch, so he didn't see the man stepping out between stacked barrels.

The man didn't see them at first either.

They saw each other at the same time, surprise appearing on the other man's face. Ashar lost his calm state, which had been keeping his eyes looking normal, and his face had transformed into a demon's mask with glowing green eyes in the dark. Fear broke the other man's shock, and he reached into his coat and pulled out something metallic. Ashar thought it was a weapon at first, but it turned out to be something much more dangerous.

A whistle.

The piercing screech seemed as though it was cutting through his head. He cupped his hands over his ears, and the whistle sounded repeatedly.

Ashar reached down and grabbed Merdia by the waist.

Bending low with both legs, he pushed off hard and jumped the twelve feet through the open hatch high onto the deck, landing softly and setting Merdia down perfectly on her feet. Looking around, fear gripped him. Deep fear, primal. He was cornered.

The whistle had done its job, causing the entire crew to stream onto the deck.

They were all lined up against the wheelhouse looking at them, most holding some type of weapon. The fear he felt had saved their lives, but when the rush of terror hit him, there was something else: a frisson of what felt like power, a reaction to severe danger.

When he turned and saw the men taking their first steps toward him and his sister, the fear and power caused his eyes to flare up intensely enough that all the men paused at the sight of him.

It was all the time Merdia needed.

"Plan B." That was all she said.

Before he could stop her, she snatched a lamp off the mast. Swinging her arm, she threw the lantern on a graceful arc high into the air.

Time stopped for Ashar, seeing the lantern slowly tumbling as it continued to fly upwards. He could feel the ball of his right foot starting to dig into the deck as he turned toward Merdia, still standing with one arm raised, watching the lantern leave her hand.

He pushed off hard toward her.

The first step he kept his body low, aiming for a spot just under Merdia's ribcage. The lantern had reached the top of its arc and seemed to be floating weightlessly as it hung in the air, waiting for gravity to take hold of it again. His left foot contacted the deck; it seemed to take forever before he could push off again.

He took the second step, pushing hard and building momentum through the altered slow time in which he found himself. The lantern was starting its return journey, spinning its way toward the deck, but everyone knew it wouldn't hit it.

Merdia was just starting to turn, panic setting in as she realized what she had done.

Ashar's right foot came down again as his right shoulder impacted Merdia just under the ribcage, his right arm wrapping tightly around her. He pushed off again, his sister firmly in his grasp.

He took the third step. Now, Merdia was over his shoulder, and he could see the railing just a few feet away, but it was taking so long to reach it. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw what he knew would happen. The lantern finished its flight and reached the deck, but it didn't stop. It continued down into the hold through the open hatch out of which they'd just come.

His left foot came down hard with the extra weight of Merdia. He pushed hard.

He took the fourth step, a column of fire erupting out of the open hatch as the lantern ignited the first barrels below, heat scorching his face on one side. Plumes of fire poured out in slow motion before him. He had built some momentum when his right foot landed, but he knew he wouldn't get another step, so pushed off with all his strength.

His fifth step launched him and Merdia fifteen feet into the air and over the railing. Just as they reached the top of the arc and started toward the water, the fire ignited the rest of the oil in the hold, the ship exploding. The shockwave hit Ashar like a hammer and sent them both flying as the massive fireball engulfed them briefly, then they hit the water, extinguished.

The oiler ship completely disappeared instantly, replaced by an expanding ball of fire rising into the sky and sending flaming chunks of debris flying off in all directions.

The oiler ship wasn't the only thing destined for destruction that night. The entire harbor was about to learn a valuable lesson in the price of crossing Merdia.

When the ship exploded, much of the heavy equipment below deck used to refine oil was thrown out and away from the vessel at great velocity. Several of those pieces found ships anchored nearby and sent huge chunks of flaming metal through the hulls, igniting the oil onboard.

Ashar watched in horror as the chain reaction spread to five other ships, each exploding more spectacularly than the last, but it still wasn't over.

The main mast had been directly over the hold when it had exploded and had been shot up like an arrow by the blast. Ashar watched as the flaming projectile came back down and impacted one of the holding tanks on the shore beside the docks. Immediately, the tank exploded, causing the three next to it to do the same, sending out a blanket of flaming liquid covering everything for hundreds of feet.

Ashar looked around desperately for anything not on fire.

The entire harbor was ablaze as the oil spread over the water's surface. He spotted some rocks forming a breakwater for the harbor and started swimming.

Merdia was breathing, but the impact of the explosion had knocked her out cold, and he had to keep her above water while trying to do the same for himself. The impact had been hard; he had felt the wind get knocked out of his lungs, also the burning fire as it engulfed them.

However, the power within had given him strength when he needed it, just a little, but just enough. The rocks seemed to get a little farther away with every stroke, but he kept swimming until his hand finally landed on the slimy rocks. He was exhausted, arms and legs jittering as he dragged Merdia out of the water and up the rocks. He found a relatively flat place and laid her down while he tried to get his bearings and figure out what they should do next.

There was chaos everywhere he looked.

Six ships had become nothing more than burning pools of oil, marking where they had sunk after exploding. The harbor was on fire as the oil spread. Raised voices could be heard barking orders from the undamaged ships as they tried to set sail and get to safety.

The onshore storage tanks had ruptured, burning oil flowing out of them, engulfing the main pier and many of the buildings near the waterfront. He saw men running and screaming on the shore as they tried to combat the fire quickly spreading to every nearby structure.

Merdia groaned and sat up, holding her head as she looked around at the destruction she had caused.

"I said you wouldn't like plan B."

Chapter Ten

Ashar and Merdia worked their way along the jetty toward the shore, trying to stay out of sight by scrambling along the rocks near the waterline.

At first, the cries from the shore were random and panicked, but they soon fell into two categories: orders being shouted to fight the fire, and orders to find the two seen jumping off the ship right before it exploded. They were being hunted.

Merdia grabbed him and pointed to the top of the jetty a few feet away.

"We need to get to the other side where it's dark; the fires are lighting up this side of the jetty."

He nodded, following her up over the other side, staying low until they reached the water there. This side of the jetty was much rougher, open to the sea, the waves breaking along its length as they swept up toward the shore a few hundred feet away.

He pointed straight out into the breaking waves.

"We can't stay here. Eventually, they will send men down this jetty to look for us, and that will be it. We need to get out there. If we swim quickly, we should be able to get far enough out for the waves to carry us to shore and not back into the jetty."

Merdia looked out at the angry sea, whitecaps churning into larger waves as they approached the break. For all her bravery, she was still only nine and not the strongest swimmer.

Ashar could see the fear in her eyes, so rare.

"Look, last time you were passed out, so it made it hard for me to swim and keep you from drowning, but if you're awake, you can hold onto me, and I will swim us both out beyond the break." Ashar tried to sound confident that he could indeed make the swim, but he wasn't sure.

He was also certain Merdia couldn't; there was so much she could do, so much in which her prowess frequently put him to shame, but fighting a roiling sea was beyond the skill of most nine-year-olds, even fearsome ones as she was.

He was sure they'd be caught if they didn't move and move quickly.

He patted the straps for his pack.

"Hang on here! You can ride on me like riding a shell on a turtle. Kick your legs to help if you can, but mostly, just hang on tight and don't let go. Are you ready?"

She took a second and then he heard a tiny voice, confirming, "I think so." She grabbed the straps, wrapping her legs around his waist. He crouched down and launched them both as far as possible on a low arc to stay out of sight. The sensation would have been so freeing and

exhilarating if not for the tension, the stress of it all. Gliding through the air was sensationally good, and he thought, this is how the birds must feel, soaring on high, above everything.

Once they hit the water, he checked to make sure Merdia was still attached and started kicking away from the jetty, staying parallel to the shore; after a few seconds, he felt his sister kicking to help. Every few breaths, he would sneak a look to get his bearings again. There was no doubt the shore was getting closer, and the jetty was falling farther behind them. Each time he took in the shift and their progress, it would give him a much-needed boost of energy and adrenaline.

He kept swimming as hard as he could through the swells and whitecaps; as they approached the shore, the whitecaps then turned to waves, then the smaller waves into bigger ones with rougher swell and he had to turn and swim with each new wave, no matter what the sea threw at him. After being rolled by two huge waves, he felt Merdia lose her grip and tumble away in the surf.

A final wave lifted him and smashed him hard into the beach, rolling him up the sand and pulling him back into the water. By the third wave, he was able to get his feet under him and pull himself up the bank while coughing water out of his lungs.

He spotted Merdia down the beach, rolling like a ragdoll in the surf; was she at risk of drowning? His heart was in his throat, overcome by cold terror. Merdia, I'm coming, keep breathing!

Still coughing violently, he ran down the beach and scooped her up.

Keep breathing, Merdia! Please, breathe!

There was diluted blood running down the side of her face, and she certainly wasn't breathing, her chest still, and her body bitterly cold and becoming blue on her lips and fingers.

Tears began escaping his eyes, adding more salt to his already wet face.

He held her upside down by her ankles, waited until the water stopped coming out of her nose and mouth, then laid her gently down. She still wasn't breathing. Now, there was yet more blood, lots of it, running copiously from a deep gash on the side of her head.

She must have hit a rock.

He put his ear to her chest, listening for a heartbeat, and hearing nothing. Ashar didn't know what to do. He wasn't a healer; he tried shaking her, screaming at her, he even slapped her once, but nothing. For reasons he couldn't begin to understand, he suddenly had a memory of talking with Master Marnelle and the tiny grasshopper he had created. Hadn't Master Marnelle said it would live because Ashar had the magic of life flowing through him? He could create life.

Ashar wiped the tears from his eyes and concentrated.

He didn't reach out this time but reached inwards instead, opening himself to whatever magic was flowing within him, letting it fill him to the point he thought he would burst.

When he opened his eyes, raw emerald fire poured out, swirling around his head. He held his hand over Merdia's face and slowly started rubbing his thumb and forefinger together, just as he had seen Master Marnelle doing.

He focused all his energy on his fingers and pushed as hard as he could with his mind.

A tiny ball of green light appeared between his fingertips, barely visible at first, but it grew stronger and stronger, larger and larger, until it had formed a small ball of green fire glowing brightly. He opened his fingers and let the ball of fire fall onto Merdia, hitting her nose and running like liquid into her mouth and down her throat.

Ashar waited, not daring to breathe. A minute passed, then another, his sister lying lifeless in his arms as tears of fire ran down his cheeks. "Merdia, come on!" he screamed into the silent air, only the crashing of the waves to drown out his anguish.

Suddenly, Merdia sucked in a huge breath and began dry retching, coughing water and silt out of her lungs. "Thank God!" Ashar cried, deeply distressed though relieved at the same time.

He rolled her to her side and held her until the coughing subsided and she could sit up again. He was shocked when she looked at him.

"Merdia, your eyes."

"What?" she managed to say between coughs. She couldn't really speak, her throat closing up, setting off the most wretched coughing bout again.

"Your eyes are green now. Not burning like mine, but green."

"What did you do to me? Am I going to talk to bugs and eat grass now? I swear, if you somehow made me stupid like you, you're dead!" She could barely speak and was clearly in pain, but it made Ashar smile to know she was well enough to insult him.

"I don't eat grass, it's disgusting. No, I don't think you will have to talk to bugs, and although I have plenty to spare, I didn't give up any of my precious stupidity; you should be as annoying as ever. I did, on the other hand, bring you back to life. You died, Merdia, for real, dead, all the way. I thought I had lost you. I gave you a little magic, just enough to bring you back."

For once, Merdia was stunned into silence as she contemplated what he had just told her. Tears were running down her face when she wrapped him in a hug and held him tightly.

"Thank you, brother."

"Anytime, little sister. It wasn't all bad; I got to slap you. Payback. It was sweet."

He felt her laugh, but she didn't let go. He held on a little longer, not wanting the moment to end, but it had to. "Merdia, we are still in trouble. We made it to shore, but now men are looking for

us, and I have no idea which direction we should go. I need to find out where we are and what's happening. Keep an eye out and shake me awake if someone comes near."

Merdia stood up and wiped the tears off her face, deadly serious again.

Ashar closed his eyes and reached out around him. There were lots of little critters on the beach and the dunes beyond, giving him a good look at what was happening around them.

Most of the men were still fighting the fire continuing to engulf buildings as it spread. Several groups were searching for them, but someone thought they spotted something in the water on the other side of the harbor, and the men were moving away from them to investigate.

There was someone else, though, someone very close by.

He pulled his vision in and focused on the dune directly behind them.

Someone was lying at the crest of the dune, looking down at them. Ashar felt a spike of panic, thinking they had been discovered, but the man wasn't moving or crying out to the others.

He was just watching them. He wasn't an oiler; his dress was completely different from the heavy black clothes the oilers wore. He had on a light tan tunic, and at first, Ashar thought it was a young boy, but the face was that of a man, a very short man, but an adult nevertheless.

His nose was long and thin, his face covered in a soft beard, leaving only the eyes and nose exposed with long, heavy, whisker-like hairs growing from his upper lip and extending to the edge of his face. His ears were long and pointed. The way they folded back tightly against his head suggested they could be articulated to point in any direction.

This was clearly someone who had been Joined, something Ashar had been told was rare and dangerous in this place.

He took a moment to shake himself loose of the connection and looked up at Merdia, still standing watch.

"Well, do you know which way to go?" she asked.

"No, but I found someone who does know, I think."

"Who? What are you talking about?" she asked impatiently.

"That guy behind us, hiding on top of the dune," Ashar said, turning and pointing directly to where the man was hiding. "Don't worry, we aren't going to hurt you, and I figure if you were with the oilers, you would have run off and told them where we are by now. So, come on down and talk to us because you'll get more answers than spying from up there. You and I are the same. We are Joined, so don't worry; I won't give up your secret."

There was silence for a moment, and then he spoke softly in his high-pitched voice.

"I saw what you did to her, saw the fire in your eyes, and see it still. I don't think we are the same."

"Perhaps not. I am a little different, even for my own people. I am Ashar, and this is my sister, Merdia; we need your help. We are not your enemy. I think you were hiding in the dunes before we showed up, hiding from them, just as we are now. Please, help us."

There was another moment of silence while their mystery man thought it over.

"I am Garbee. Follow me and stay low. Also, be quiet; I heard you thrashing around the beach from beyond the dunes; you two make a lot of noise."

Ashar and Merdia climbed the dune and down the other side to find Garbee waiting. In their culture, when one Joined with an animal, traits of that animal would manifest subtly.

Over time, as people aged, their features started to resemble, in some small way, the animals they carried with them. This man, however, was completely different.

He was young, too young for the physical changes Ashar was seeing.

He could clearly see the distinctive fur and markings of a raccoon, but the ears looked more like those of a deer, much too large for his head. Ashar would have to learn more about how the people of this land Joined. It seemed to affect people differently than those in his land.

Garbee said gruffly, "Seriously? Is there anything you can do about your eyes, a blindfold or something? They will spot us from a mile away, and those things will light up the night. What are you, anyway? I've never seen someone like you. Don't get me wrong, I'm not impressed, and I don't like you. Either of you."

"Sorry about that. Hang on," said Ashar.

He closed his eyes and thought about what he needed, immediately feeling a slight shift in the energy inside him. When he opened his eyes again, they were bright green but normal otherwise, a perfect match to Merdia's new eyes.

Garbee looked between them, satisfied that no one's eyes would give them away. He pointed to Merdia.

"What about you? You got weird eyes like him. You gonna do any weird stuff?"

"No, I'm just annoying. He's the brainless freak," Merdia said.

"You're both annoying and weird. Come on then if you're coming."

Garbee was surprisingly fast as he darted through the dunes, zigzagging to stay in the low troughs and out of sight. They kept up as best as possible, but Ashar could tell that Merdia was hurting more than she was letting on, stumbling and falling behind.

Ashar slung her arm around his shoulder and helped her along while Garbee hissed at them to keep up and stay quiet. Eventually, they broke out of the dunes and into the low hills beyond.

At first, it was mostly low scrub brush and other hardy plants that could withstand the salty air and water, but it soon gave way to oak trees as Garbee deftly maneuvered them along a trail barely visible at times. The low hills started to become steeper as they continued until Merdia could barely keep her feet under her, and Ashar was all but carrying her.

"Garbee, we must stop! Merdia needs to rest." So did he, but he didn't want to appear weak in front of the gruff man leading them.

"This is not a good spot to stop. Another hour and we will be up and over the ridge, and the port people rarely go that far inland," Garbee said.

"We can't go any farther until she is stronger. If you need to continue, then you should. Thank you for getting us away from the harbor. We are grateful. But I have to put Merdia first. She is only nine years old after all."

And built with the constitution of an ox was something he was thinking but would not say.

Garbee was quick to argue, "Your sister is right. You are brainless. The port people hunt in these hills and gather food when it's in season. They will find us if we stay too long. We are next to one of their trails; the search party will eventually realize you two aren't in the harbor and start looking up here. They probably are doing so already. But, yes, let's just sit here and take a beauty nap while the murderous villains looking for you come up here and kill us! Yes, let's do that. Great plan!"

Garbee was agitated and shaking all over by the time he finished speaking. It was more than just fear in his voice when he was speaking of the port people. There was rage.

"Garbee, please, I understand. You should go and you have already risked much by helping us. But Merdia is hurt badly and has lost a lot of blood, so if we continue, I fear it will kill her. You need not put yourself in peril for us. I will find a hiding place nearby and wait them out. You go."

Garbee became agitated again and started walking in tight circles, muttering.

Ashar couldn't understand what he was saying, but the words he caught were cursing their existence and Garbee's misfortune to have encountered them.

Occasionally, he would stop and pick his head up, sniffing the air, his ears coming forward and turning this way and that, listening to the forest before they lay back down again.

"She said she was the annoying one, but she was definitely right about you being stupid. You are an idiot, but I guess that makes me an idiot, too, for not leaving you to die. Can you carry her?" Garbee asked

"Yes, although not for an hour up a steep trail. I can't make the ridge you talked about." Ashar replied.

"Not that far. Pick her up and follow me."

Garbee went to the right between two trees and started through the brush. Ashar couldn't see the trail at first, but then he realized there was none. They were just cutting through the brush.

He turned Merdia's head with her face against his chest, preventing her getting cut by branches as they went.

Garbee was short and seemed to move just under and around most of the foliage, but carrying Merdia, Ashar could not even think about attempting the same.

He could only push through and avoid the worst when he could.

His arms were aching so badly from holding Merdia when Garbee stopped and pointed down the hill. It was steep but mostly clear of the bushes and brambles they had been fighting.

Garbee started down the hill, picking his footing carefully as he descended.

Ashar followed but slipped and fell on his butt repeatedly. It was like having to heave a lumpy sack of potatoes on his shoulder while navigating uneven terrain on a downward slope. Now and then, his knees or an ankle would give way too.

Garbee was waiting for him at the bottom.

"Is everyone from your home this loud?" Garbee asked.

He turned and ducked under an outcropping of rock, disappearing.

Ashar followed, finding a small opening between the rocks just large enough for him to get through, holding Merdia if he crouched a bit. A short passage covered with rough, broken rocks opened into a small cave beyond. The floor had been leveled, and several small shelves chipped into the stone held jars of food and hanging water skins in various places.

The center of the room held a small firepit with three flat pieces of wood around it for sitting, as well as some straw spread out along the walls for sleeping.

Garbee set the candle down and motioned to the straw mat.

There, Ashar laid Merdia down ever so gently, although after carrying her weight across such a stretch, he almost dropped her, hard. His arms jittered from the sheer exhaustion of it all.

He pulled her pack off and his own, also dropping them hard against the wall.

Next, thinking that Merdia could get a nasty infection in her wound, he set about looking for something to use to clean her up.

He grabbed one of the water skins and used his clean handkerchief to start washing the wound on her head. A clean handkerchief was a precious thing to have on one's person, but he did not hesitate to use it on Merdia; he just wanted her to be all right again. How would he ever live with himself if he failed to clean her up and she fell grievously sick from blood poisoning?

Luckily, her injury looked far worse than it was, and once he got the caked blood off and cleaned up, it was only a few inches long, just above and behind her temple.

It had started bleeding again, and he held the cloth on it to stop it, looking around for something to use as a proper bandage. Garbee was sitting beside him, holding a small, folded bit of fabric the right size for the wound, and a bowl with something green crushed in it.

"The paste will stop infection and help with the bleeding. Pack the wound with it, then wrap the bandage tightly."

He handed Ashar the bandage, bowl, and a long strip of fabric to hold the dressing in place. Ashar spread the foul green paste into the wound, securing the bandage by wrapping the cloth around her head several times before tying it off.

Exhausted, he sat back against the wall and regarded Garbee.

He couldn't figure out the man; he was gruff and insulting and obviously didn't want to help them, yet he was at great risk to himself.

"Master Garbee, can I ask you something?"

"Master." Garbee turned his head back and forth theatrically. "No masters here, boy."

Ashar said, "I'm sorry, it's a term of respect among my people. What I wanted to ask you is, why are you helping us? You don't know anything about us, where we are from, why we are here, and yet you help us, why?"

Ashar watched the man carefully, wishing Merdia were awake. She was better at reading people.

Garbee started twitching and fidgeting a bit before answering.

Garbee let out a deep sigh and said, "You were right about me hiding from the port people. They would have killed me if they'd found me, or any of my kind. We live this far north because no one bothers us up here. The city people in the south are just as happy to be rid of us as we are of them. There's always been an understanding that we leave each other alone for the most part, but now, these men with their stinking ships full of poison take over the harbor, all the fish and seals die wherever they anchor their ships, and the oil gets into the water and kills the birds. They pushed us back beyond the ridge and took over this area, insisting on working with beasts that have been taking my people."

That caught Ashar's attention.

"The beasts? Do their ships have a black ring with a red line through it?"

"Yes! You know them, I see. Before the oil ships came, the others were here. They took many of our people and sailed away, and then to add insult to injury, these oil men came and took over. They set up camps and started capturing our people, selling them to the black ships coming through. We have been watching them, trying to learn what we can, disrupting their operations when we can." He looked at Ashar seriously. "You ask me why I am helping you? Tonight, I saw two children do more damage to the oil fleet in five minutes than we had seen in the two years since they arrived. You're right. I don't know anything about you two, save that you are exceptionally good at destruction. I guess that's enough for me."

Garbee was content to leave it at that and started looking around the cave for some food, selecting several jars appearing to have dried fruit of some kind in them. He then sat down and started eating.

Ashar had given up eating alone some time ago; it wasn't practical when traveling, but it still made him a little uncomfortable whenever everyone else was tucking into something tasty.

He pulled out his pack and found the food bag. He still didn't have much appetite, but his body was telling him he needed to have something. He grabbed a bag of jackthorn nuts and started crunching them one after another, not noticing that Garbee was staring at him in disbelief.

"Are those Gunga nuts?" Garbee asked him.

"No, jackthorn nuts. They grow on my island, very hard to harvest."

"Yes, I have heard them called that before. I have only seen one once and have never seen anyone eat one of those things! Are you some sort of king where you come from?"

"Would you like some?" Ashar held out the bag to him.

Garbee hesitated, then reached out and pulled a small handful of nuts. Slowly, he put one in his mouth and chewed it very carefully, then another, and another until they were all gone.

"They taste like nuts, like ordinary nuts from any tree, I thought they must be delicious to be so valuable, but they aren't," Garbee said, his screwed-up face reflecting the ever-so-slight bitter taste.

"I'm confused. Don't you have jackthorn plants here?" asked Ashar.

"No," said Garbee, "and that bag of nuts you're holding is enough to buy a modest house or feed a village for a year around these parts! That's how rare and prized they are. The rich flaunt their wealth by serving Gunga nut dishes to their guests as a display of opulence. I guess the rich are just as stupid and useless as everyone else, paying so much for a regular nut just because it's hard to get."

"Can I ask you something? It's personal, so I will understand if you don't want to answer," Ashar asked him.

"I choose whether or not to answer every time you or anyone asks me anything. It doesn't matter if it's personal. Just ask freely."

And I won't answer if what you say is as insulting as I expect, thought Garbee.

"You look and act as though your Joining was somehow more of an equal melding of the two. In my land, people mostly look the way they did before Joining, only showing physical traits later in life and never to the degree I see in you. I don't mean to offend."

"You are from the Northern Islands, are you not?" Ashar nodded, and Garbee continued, "I know a little of your people. They say you force the forest to send forth a sacrifice and take its life for your own, that the animals are at the mercy of your dark magic. From what I have seen of you, it's true."

Ashar rubbed the bridge of his nose in annoyance, a habit he had picked up from Merdia.

Ashar said, "Everything you said after 'Northern Islands' was completely wrong. We don't use dark magic, and the animals come to us of their own free will to be Joined. They want to be Joined as much as the person does. We use powerful herbs to call out to the forest, to be heard, and if there is an animal able to understand your call, it will come. But it comes of its own free will."

Garbee looked as if he either didn't understand or wasn't buying it.

Ashar went on, "It is true they leave their physical forms behind, but their spirits live on. I am unusual. My Joining was different than others, very different from yours it would seem."

Ashar hoped to divert the conversation from his strange gifts and back to Garbee.

The small man considered what he had said and responded, "It is different for us. We don't call out to the world and ask for this; the world calls out to us; we are the ones who are compelled to follow its lure and give ourselves up to the wild. We don't understand why some are chosen and others not, or why it can be a single Joining or multiple, like me. When the Joining happens, both the person and the animal lose some of their physical form. When they merge and become one, the physical traits of both present themselves when the Joining is complete."

"What about in the south? Is it restricted there?" Ashar inquired.

Garbee rubbed his chin, then responded, "It's different there, they use magic herbs to force a Joining, not unlike the way your people do it, although it sounds as though it is more natural and respectful. It appears you and I are both a little different than our fellows, even in this place Joining with more than one animal is rare indeed. I sense you don't want to speak of your unusual circumstances, and I will honor that. Clearly, you are something entirely different."

"What is this place? It's well provisioned," Ashar asked, finally aiming to change the topic.

Garbee said, "After the black ships took our people and the oil men took our harbor, we created spaces like this all over the hills around the harbor. They are useful if you need a place to hide or for spying on the oil men; we do both frequently."

"Is it like this everywhere in Parthasia?" Ashar asked. "People hiding in holes to stay safe from raiders?"

Garbee responded, "No, normally, the black ships raid and then leave once they have taken what they need. The oilmen took advantage of the chaos following the raid to occupy the harbor. After that, they started sending armed parties out to clear us out of the area while they cut down the trees to build those ugly buildings and pier. Farther south, King Horus commands an army, but the coast is long, and his troops are limited. The black ships still strike wherever they can, but they can't hold any ground for long before the army comes to chase them back to their ships. I have heard that in the southern regions, the king has pulled his troops back and given up land to a large force coming up from Cartine. Not raiders, but proper, well-armed and trained troops. It is there they have set up bases; it is there that we believe our people were taken."

"That might be where my people were taken as well," Ashar said sleepily.

He hadn't realized how tired he was from the day's excitement—and how sore. Everything hurt, either from the explosion's impact, being tumbled in the surf, or the hike up to the cave. He lay down next to Merdia to keep her warm and was asleep in moments on the hard floor of the cave.

He awoke to the crackling of burning wood and the warm glow of a small fire Garbee had built in the fire ring. The smoke rose to the ceiling and then disappeared through a small hole appearing to have been carved out of the rock, creating a working chimney.

A small pot hung above the fire and was steaming and bubbling.

"Aren't you worried about someone seeing the smoke?" Ashar asked as he brushed bits of hay off himself.

Merdia was still sleeping, but her face had color again, and her breathing was smooth.

"It's not yet dawn, too dark to see the smoke, that and the fog rolled in last night. It usually burns off by mid-morning, and until then, we can enjoy a little warmth," said Garbee.

Garbee pulled the pot away from the fire and set it down to cool.

Rooting around in the jars, he selected several pinches of different herbs and sprinkled them in the pot, muttering softly. Satisfied it was ready, he grabbed three small bowls off the shelf and divided the thin soup between them.

"You should wake her if you can. There is medicine she needs in the broth. You both need it. You got pretty beat up last night, and your face and arm look like you lost a fight," Garbee said.

Ashar looked down at his left arm to see a mass of bruises and abrasions; the left side of his face felt tender and was probably looking the same.

When the ship had gone up, he had turned just before the explosion to shield Merdia from the blast, absorbing it along his left side. He still hurt all over, even on the right.

"You might be right about that," Ashar agreed.

He winced, kneeling beside Merdia, lightly shaking her on the shoulder. Her eyes fluttered as she woke up, finally focusing on Ashar's face above hers.

"You got uglier. That shouldn't be possible, but you found a way. What did you do to your face?" she asked groggily.

"You shouldn't talk," asserted Ashar, concerned, but glad she was awake. "Half your head is wrapped in a bloody bandage; it's not as if the boys are lining up this morning, hoping to sneak a look at your radiant beauty. Here, eat this."

She scrunched up her face, trying to get a look at whatever he was offering her, insisting she eat it.

"Don't look at it so skeptically," said Ashar, edging it closer. "Garbee said it's a magic potion that makes those around you seem less stupid and ugly; you will need it."

He handed her the steaming bowl of broth, sat down with his own next to her, and started eating. She sniffed her bowl and wrinkled her nose again at the smell.

"What is this?" she asked skeptically, yet again. "It stinks. I mean, it wouldn't be the thing I'd pick out on a menu if I had any choice ..."

"Please, be quiet, and stop complaining," Garbee admonished her. "In case it has slipped your impertinent notice, it's a hot meal that was carefully made for you while you were passed out from food you also didn't gather. It has herbs that will help you heal, but apparently, not ones that make you polite or grateful."

"Sorry," she said, a shiver running down her body at being so told off. She appeared embarrassed. "Thank you. I do appreciate it. Really, I do," she replied and started slurping her soup, slowly at first, then more ravenously as she realized how hungry she was.

Garbee paid no attention to her, obviously still deeply annoyed by her appalling lack of gratitude.

Whatever was in the soup did help her feel better; the pain in her head wasn't as bad, but she still got dizzy if she moved it around too fast.

"What's the plan?" Merdia asked Ashar.

"Not sure. Garbee says once we clear the ridge, we should be safe and can travel freely from there, but you are in no condition to go climbing mountains right now. So, we stay here and out of sight until you are healed up a bit more. After that, I don't know. We'll do the next thing first, as Father would say."

"Next, you go to my camp. The elders there will want to speak with you," Garbee interjected. "You will need to go that far inland anyway to reach the main road leading south, so it won't take any extra time."

"Why do we need to go there, and why do the elders need to speak to us?" Merdia asked.

Garbee huffed loudly and almost jumped up with irritation.

His expression seemed to say, are you never done with the asking, the questioning, the endless complaining? I don't know why I bother with you, you ingrate!

"Because I saved your life!" he spat out, visibly agitated now. "So, how about you bite your insolent tongue and show a little gratitude for what I have done for you, and stop questioning everything! I ask little of you, but you treat me with suspicion I have done nothing to deserve."

Garbee had become twitchy and aggravated again; there was something about Merdia that seemed to upset him; there were probably several things, in fact.

Even Ashar had to admit she had been lacking a little appreciation lately.

"Forgive my sister, Garbee, please. She is used to having to compensate for my unbearable stupidity, so she tends to ask the questions I am not smart enough to figure out on my own."

The joke was bad, but it was enough to get Garbee and Merdia away from each other's throats.

"I think my sister, who lacks all diplomacy, was merely curious as to what information we might provide to your elders or what they might provide to us. We are strangers in a strange land, and it is prudent to be, well, prudent."

Garbee became even more agitated and had to pace the room momentarily before answering.

Ashar was at a loss. So, for good measure, he added, "And besides, remember she has taken a knock to the head. She is not her usual self. This is not Merdia's normal behav—"

Garbee cut him off abruptly, mid-flow. He had no patience, no tolerance for hearing yet more about this Merdia and her rude ways! She was nothing but an insolent little girl!

"Because it is my job to bring information to the elders, I am quick and hard to spot. It makes me a good spy, in and out before anyone can determine I was even there! Quiet too, not like you two! You sound like a herd of wounded animals crashing through the brush, you do!"

He stared at Merdia again, narrowing his eyes. "And you!" he cried out. "You never shut up!"

"Garbee, calm down, we didn't mean to upset you," Merdia pleaded. "Well, let me say I didn't mean to, for it's me you are angry at."

"No! It's not! I am annoyed at both of you!" he retorted, spittle flying from his foaming mouth. His pacing slowed, and he eventually sat down and faced them.

There was silence for a few moments. Merdia looked oddly timid, and Ashar only wanted to keep the peace, somehow, though it did not come easily.

At last, Garbee had calmed. He offered, "I am sorry, it is in my nature to flee when stressed, and it makes me hard to be around sometimes, I know."

Merdia moved over and sat down next to him, holding his hand.

"It's okay, I'm annoying too," she answered. "I mean, you already told me that several times. But do you know what I do when I feel like I'm being especially annoying and aggravating?"

Garbee just shook his head.

"I remind myself that other people are intolerably stupid and incapable of appreciating my genius. That always cheers me right up."

Garbee seemed unsure if he should be insulted because after all, he was the one who had expressed that he found her profoundly irksome.

But this time, he managed a laugh and patted Merdia's hand.

"Honestly, I don't know what the elders might want from you or what they might tell you, but it is my job to gather information and bring it back; you two, you're something different, and I am going to bring you back. As you said earlier, we are not enemies. I will not lead you to harm."

"Thank you, Garbee, thank you for helping us, and of course we will go with you," Merdia said, apparently having acquired a little diplomacy during that very abrupt lesson from Garbee.

There was a sound outside the cave; an enormous rock came tumbling down the slope and crashed into the ground near the entrance to their hiding place.

Garbee instantly froze with fear, his eyes wide.

Merdia looked at Ashar.

"What is it?" she asked. It wasn't a question; it was an order to provide the right answer.

He closed his eyes and reached out around the cave, finding many eyes and ears to look and hear through.

Two oil men, black coats and heavy hats, crashed through the underbrush, cursing to themselves as the thorns caught and pulled at their clothes and skin. They were still a few hundred feet up the hill but working their way down toward them.

"There are two of them coming this way," Ashar said in a distant voice, since it was hard to talk and stay connected to life around the two men. He unfocused a little and felt all the life crawling and flying around until he found what he needed.

"I'm going to try something. Be ready to leave if it doesn't work," Ashar whispered.

Merdia was still weak and unsteady, but she started putting items into her pack and motioned Garbee to do the same quietly.

"What is going on? How does he know these things? Why is he like that? Why is he speaking like that?" Garbee asked as quietly as he could.

"Not now!" Merdia hissed at him. "Just get ready."

Ashar could hear them arguing but tuned them out. The next part was going to require even greater concentration. He could sense a frenetic colony underground in the path of the two men, but there were millions of them, and he wasn't sure he could control that many without hurting himself. Thinking back to how he was able to make his eyes stop glowing, he started contemplating what he needed, thinking about how important it was.

He directed his need toward the colony lying in wait along the two men's path. At first, nothing happened, the two men continuing apace their slow descent toward the ravine floor.

They stopped walking when the first fire ant bit down.

Before they knew what was happening, the ground under their feet transformed into a moving mass of red ants as they boiled up from underground and started attacking the two men. They turned and tried to run up the hill, but one slipped and fell into the other, sending them both rolling down the steep incline through the mass of angry, biting ants. When they finally regained their feet and started running back up, they were both covered in those tiny red poisonous biters, screaming in agony.

The three sat and listened to the men running back down the hill toward the harbor. They never stopped screaming all the way down, just yodeled a little as they leapt over obstacles and banged into things, swatting all the time at their fiery skin.

They just got far enough away that they couldn't be heard anymore.

Once he was sure it was safe, Garbee looked at Ashar and Merdia suspiciously.

"Well, that was fun!" Merdia said brightly.

Garbee stared perplexed at them both, then evidently decided this had to be the boy's doing.

"What are you? What did you just do?" Garbee asked Ashar with much fear in his voice.

Ashar wasn't sure what to tell him. The fewer people who knew what he could do and why he could do it, the safer he and Merdia would be. Even half dead, Merdia knew how to save him.

"What? Look, like I told you before, he is stupid. Weren't you paying attention? I thought I covered Ashar's boundless stupidity in some detail earlier. As for what he did, what he just did was save your life, so how about you show a little gratitude for that instead of treating us with suspicion!" Merdia leveled a hard gaze at Garbee as if daring him to challenge her.

She had just used his own insult back at him, and with immense and impressive skill.

Garbee stared back at her and thought better of getting into another fight with Merdia.

"Fine, the elders will want to know what you are, though. You don't have to tell me, but if you want their help, then you will have to tell them."

"I guess we will see what the help of the elders is worth. If anything," Merdia snapped.

Ashar held up his hands, urging them to stop.

"We will be stuck in the hole together for at least another day before Merdia can travel. Will you two at least pretend to be civil toward each other?" Ashar pleaded. "I can't listen to much more of this.

"No promises," Merdia whispered.

"If your sister behaves, then I will too." But Garbee looked grouchy.

Ashar rubbed the bridge of his nose in frustration.

"Yeah, the next few days should be fun."

"Won't they just!" exclaimed Merdia, as if the days to come were something she was excited about.

Chapter Eleven

The next two days were especially hard on Ashar; constantly playing referee and negotiator between Merdia and Garbee was exhausting. It seemed that finding new ways to start an argument had become something of a game or an art form between them, the winner of the contest being the one who could annoy and rile up Ashar the most.

He endured it, and by the time they were finally ready to leave, Merdia and Garbee had found some sort of peace between them. They still argued about everything, but it was starting to feel good-natured in a strange way—more like the banter of two small kids who were best friends really, whenever they weren't busy insulting one another.

On the evening of the third day, as they prepared to leave, Ashar leaned back against the cave wall, closed his eyes, and reached out to check the surroundings before they headed out. Twice in

the last few days, men had passed close to the cave, still searching for those responsible for the destruction of the port.

Looking through a million eyes, Ashar could see how the fire had succeeded in spreading from one building to the next until everything, including the pier, had burned, leaving only charred posts sticking out of the water in a line. The burning oil floating on the water's surface had spread, claiming more ships as they tried to get out of the bay.

A few wrecks had gone down in the mouth of the bay, and many other ships had become trapped. It looked as though most of the anchored fleet had been destroyed.

Ashar counted the tips of at least twenty masts dotting the harbor's water.

It was no wonder they were still searching for them.

Merdia had ruined their fleet and trapped the survivors on land without ships. Ashar was really going to have to talk to Merdia about her methods.

He could see there were still search parties out, but they were all headed back toward their camp by the burned-out port as night fell. None of them wanted to get lost in the fog after dark and spend the night at the mercy of whatever savages were lurking in the dense forest.

After what had happened to their port, they were angry but also frightened. Ashar shook himself out of the trance and nodded to Merdia.

"It's clear. They are all heading back in for the night. We should have no problems making the ridge," he said.

Garbee gave him a look; over the last few days, Ashar had routinely reached out to see what was happening around them, watching for search parties. At first, Garbee had wanted to know what Ashar was doing, but since that always led to an argument or to a game of 'thirty questions' with Merdia, he'd soon stopped asking.

Now, he just accepted it. It made him uncomfortable in ways he couldn't quite describe, but whatever trick Ashar had used had saved their lives.

It was almost dark when they emerged from their hiding spot and started working their way up the hill. They went slowly and quietly even though they knew no one was around to hear them. Making noise of any kind just seemed wrong.

By the time they made it back to the ridge trail, it was dark; the moon had not yet risen, and the fog was starting to creep in. Garbee walked past the mouth of the trail in the dark and missed it.

"Garbee, the trail, you just passed it on your right," Ashar whispered to him.

"No, I didn't. It's right up ahead. How would you know if I passed it? You have never been here before." Ashar didn't want to tell him he had been looking at this area in detail for the last few days through the eyes of insects crawling around, so he knew every inch of it by heart.

He didn't want to tell him he was connected right now and using those same eyes to see through the darkness around them.

"Garbee, this way; my brother is stupid but very useful sometimes; if he says we missed the trail, then we did," Merdia said with a hint of challenge in her voice.

"Fine! You lead if you think you know where we are going! Not sure why you need me at all!"

"We need your cheerful disposition to keep our spirits up," Merdia said sarcastically.

"You two, knock it off. This way." Ashar took the lead and guided them back twenty feet to the trail. They started walking up the hill with Merdia behind him and Garbee bringing up the rear.

"Ashar, slow down, you are the only one who can see anything!" Merdia chided him.

He paused momentarily and concentrated on his eyes, the power flowing just behind them. When he opened his eyes once more, they lit up the night like two beacons.

Turning to Merdia and Garbee, he said, "How's this? Think you can follow now?" Merdia and Garbee just nodded. In the dark, his glowing eyes gave Ashar a sinister look that was disturbing.

"Weird, but effective, thanks," Merdia said.

They continued for most of the night.

His eyes lit up the misting fog around him, making him an easy target for the others to follow. Near the top of the ridge, the terrain became rocky and uneven.

Garbee stopped and pulled several candles out of his pack, lighting them with a few quick strokes of his flint.

"Here, we are far enough up now that we can't be seen. This section is dangerous, be careful," Garbee said as he handed Merdia a candle and took the lead again, scrambling up and over the large rocks leading over the ridge.

Ashar resisted the urge to take the giant leaps from one boulder to another. Instead, he stayed close to Merdia and helped her overcome some of the larger obstacles.

As soon as they crossed the ridge and started down, the fog cleared, trapped by the mountains, unable to make it over the top and continue down into the next valley. The moon had risen while they'd been climbing, and now, a bright full moon lit the night. Garbee put out his candle once they found the trail on the other side of the ridge and pointed to Ashar's eyes.

"You can turn those things off now, half the valley has probably seen us by now!" Garbee snapped.

Ashar put a hand on Merdia's arm to keep her from starting another fight with Garbee and closed his eyes. After only a few seconds, the fire in his eyes died and returned to normal.

It was getting easier to control. In fact, everything was getting easier.

"How's that?" he asked. Merdia looked disappointed.

"Oh. I thought you were going to fix the whole, you know, ugly thing you have going on," she said, waving her hand in front of her face to indicate the areas he needed to work on.

"Ha ha, you are hysterical, now let's get moving."

It was nearly dawn when they came into Garbee's camp.

There were tents set up in a wide meadow and some more permanent structures made from timber near the center of the camp. Garbee led them through the maze until he reached a large tent next to one of the buildings. He pulled back the flap and looked inside.

"Here, there are a couple of empty racks you can use in this one. We keep these tents for people like you who are just passing through and need a bed; you'll find blankets against the wall. Try to get some sleep. I will talk to the elders in the morning and come for you when they're ready."

Garbee turned and walked off, clearly glad to be free of them.

They entered the tent quietly as seven or eight other people were sleeping inside, and Ashar found the blankets and two empty cots. He slid their packs under his cot and handed Merdia a blanket, surprised at how exhausted he was when he lay down.

"Ashar, I'm getting weird a feeling about this place. Do you trust Garbee, these people?" Merdia whispered, leaning close to his cot.

"Not entirely, but I also think you don't trust Garbee because you don't like him. That's a good enough reason not to trust someone, I guess, but I don't think he means any harm to us. I am being cautious, though, and you should, too. Listen to what they have to say tomorrow and try not to burn the whole forest down if you disagree with them. Now, get some sleep. I don't imagine we will get more than a few hours anyway."

Sleep came quickly, and he dreamed of a harbor. Not the one they had just left, but another, little more than a spit of land jutting into the sea to create a breakwater with calm waters and a small harbor where a beach could hide.

There were steep mountains behind the small bay and high cliffs for miles on either side, isolating it from the land. He could see ships anchored in the bay, the black ring and red slash

painted across their hulls. Crude buildings dotted the landscape, next to large holding pens ringed with high fences. Men patrolled the perimeter. No, not men.

Lizard men.

He could see their snouts moving back and forth, long forked tongues whipping out and back in as they tasted the air. The pens had about a hundred people in them.

Some looked as if they'd been Joined, while others just looked like normal people, and all huddled together for warmth against the damp coastal air. There were five large pens, but only one was full, three were empty, and the last was being filled by a long line of people being led up from the ships into one of the pens. He could see the lizard men's arms as they came down repeatedly, whips cracking to keep the crowd moving.

Ashar wanted to scream, thrash, and do something, but he was helpless in the dream. All he could do was watch as the helpless souls marched into the pen.

He heard screaming from somewhere distant. He couldn't place where it was coming from, but it was getting closer, louder. It continued to grow until it filled his ears and threatened to split his head open. He was still screaming when he woke up to Merdia shaking him, his eyes burning brightly as the hellish shrieking died in his throat. It was followed almost instantly by every other person screaming and running out of the tent, away from the howling demon with glowing eyes that had just appeared while they'd been at rest.

Garbee stuck his head in as the last person cleared the tent flap.

"Making friends already? I see I'm not the only one who finds you both instantly annoying." Garbee waved them forward with his hand and walked away toward the largest building in the camp. The sun was just coming up.

Apparently, Garbee had gotten an early start, telling the elders about them.

He led them inside a well-lit room with cushions set along three walls. The elders sat along the back wall. Three were normal-looking people, and one appeared to be Joined, but the physical change was mild, nothing like as severe as Garbee.

The fourth elder was something entirely different.

It was a bear, the largest he or Merdia had ever seen.

The great furry hulk dwarfed the one that had found Wattar—but this one wasn't a bear, since there were traces of a man hidden in the bear's face.

The eyes were set like a man's, yet the snout was short, and the ears were large but also shaped like a man's. The beast sat curled up behind the others. One might have assumed he was napping, but for the sharp eyes watching carefully. Lying down did little to hide his true size or the corded muscles just under his thick fur, ready in an instant to unleash destruction and death.

Ashar and Merdia sat on the cushions Garbee indicated in front of the elders while he retreated to the back of the room and waited.

The woman on the right spoke first. She had gray streaks running through her dark hair and a thick body that told of a lifetime of working fields or other physical tasks.

"Garbee tells us you are a dangerous wizard, and we shouldn't trust you."

"Me or him? Because technically, I would be a witch," Merdia said. "And as for him, I'm afraid he is a poor excuse for a wizard, pretty harmless without his pointy hat and book of spells."

"Do you mock us, girl?" said the man on the left. He appeared to have some deer or woodland creature in him. His ears were elongated and constantly swiveled around nervously.

"If you brought us here to talk about wizards, then yes, I am mocking you," Merdia said defiantly.

"I told you she was difficult." Garbee's voice came from the back of the room. Ashar held up his hand to stave off Merdia's response.

"Please, I can assure you that neither my sister nor I are dangerous," Ashar said.

"The men who survived the harbor you destroyed might disagree with you," the woman with the dark hair said.

"Well, yes, I guess they did learn the hard way not to cross my sister. Her enthusiasm sometimes gets the better of her, I admit. Those men tried to bind us into slavery, but we would have slipped away quietly without incident if we had been able. We wished no harm on them."

"I did," Merdia interjected.

The man with the deer ears spoke again.

"Don't mistake what Endura means. We are grateful for you destroying the oil men's ships and buildings, and the pier, and well, pretty much everything they had. We have barely managed to make a nuisance of ourselves, simply sabotaging here and there, stealing vital parts and equipment for years, but you two showed up and finished the whole job in one night. We are thankful."

"Good, and you should be thankful! And since we did all the hard work for you, we should be talking about what you are going to do for us to say thanks," Merdia said.

"Show respect!" Garbee hissed from the back of the room.

"Are you talking to me or them?" Merdia responded, pointing her thumb over her shoulder toward the elders.

"Impossible girl!" Garbee was pacing in an agitated circle in the back of the room, fists clenched, muttering to himself.

Sitting quietly on the center cushion in front of the massive bear man, the old man spoke quietly.

"Garbee said you stayed hidden in a small cave for three days while your sister recovered. You must be brave indeed to survive being locked up with those two in such tight quarters."

"It was challenging," Ashar admitted.

"I can only imagine. Garbee, thank you. If you would be so kind as to wait outside, we will call you if needed," the old man said, saving Garbee from the uncomfortable situation.

"Yeeeeesssss, goooooo noooow befoore weeee taaake oooooveerrr yooouuurrr mmmmind!" Merdia said to Garbee, waving her fingers at him as though casting a spell.

"Enough, you have had your fun. Remember what I told you: listen more, speak less," Ashar scolded her.

"Your brother gives good advice; you should take it," the old man said, leveling his gaze on Merdia. For someone who looked so frail, his eyes still held fire in them, and he spoke with authority. Merdia thought better of making a wisecrack and stayed silent for a change. "I don't think you traveled all the way from the Northern Islands just to attack an oiler outpost. Garbee said your people were taken, like ours. What is it you intend to do?"

"Get them back," Ashar said simply.

That got the bear's attention. He shifted so that he was facing Ashar and Merdia directly. The bear moving got everyone else's attention. The three elders looked back to see what the bear would do next. When he just sat quietly, Endura, the woman with the dark hair, spoke.

"What can you do? You are children. From what Garbee told us, you can't swim to shore without one of you dying. What hope do you have against the black ships?"

Merdia was about to cut in when the bear moved again.

Whatever she was about to say died on her lips as the bear rose up on all fours. Ashar had been wrong. Lying down curled up had done a lot to hide the bear's true size.

His shoulders were higher than Ashar's head when he stood, and the cabin shook with every step as the brute approached them. Looking down at Ashar, he regarded him closely, looking this way and that at him as if changing his perspective would reveal something he hadn't ever seen before. When he spoke, he didn't yell. He spoke calmly and peacefully, yet the force of his voice shook the room. Looking back over his shoulder toward the elders, he said, "Get out!"

They got out. Ashar had never seen old people move that fast.

"My name is Bayer," he boomed out, then paused, expecting a laugh. Merdia gave him one.

"Merdia!" Ashar punched her in the arm lightly.

"Seriously? Bayer the bear? Are you kidding me?" she said in her defense.

"It's all right, I was expecting it from you. Most people are too afraid to laugh. You are fearless. I like you." He pointed one of his massive claws at Ashar.

"You. Show. Me."

Everything he said resonated as if he were speaking into a vast depth, his voice resounding off every wall, amplifying it. Well, he was a bear, so what else would he expect?

Ashar thought about it for a minute and looked around the room until he found what he needed growing on the windowsill. He pulled off a piece of green moss and sat down in front of Bayer. Focusing all his attention on his fingertips, he started rubbing them together.

His eye flared, and green fire lifted and curled around his temples. Slowly, a ball of emerald light took form between his fingers, growing as he rubbed them.

Taking a piece of the moss, he worked it into the ball of light and started molding it into shape. When he set it down in front of Bayer, a large grasshopper with a bright orange stripe down its back shook its wings loose and stretched its legs for the first time before hopping up and landing on Bayer's shoulder.

Bayer looked at the grasshopper and then at Merdia's eyes, shimmering in the same shade of green as the newly born insect on his shoulder. He sat down, shaking the cabin again.

"When Garbee told us what he saw on the beach, the others did not believe him. I dared not believe him, but I see we were wrong. You hold the power of life in you, young Ashar; do you know how rare that is?"

"I think I am beginning to, yes."

"The people of the Northern Islands have a very gentle connection to the magic of the world, but here, it is different. Joining is more primal when it is allowed to happen naturally, people like Garbee and myself. We are more animal than man in many ways but connected to the world around us on a much deeper level than most. It's why he brought you back. He knew he needed to without knowing why that was. I think you are like me, Ashar. Your connection is more primal, more direct, more powerful. you as well now," he said, pointing to Merdia.

"Me? I am not Joined or connected or whatever you want to call it," she said defensively.

"Have you seen your eyes recently? Your brother gave you more on that beach than you know."

Merdia turned and looked at him as though he had sneezed on her when he had a cold.

"What did you do?" she demanded.

"Nothing! I revived you. That's it, as far as I know. I mean, I guess I have no idea what I did to you. I just got on and did it. You're alive. Quit complaining! Seems to be all you ever do!"

Bayer asked Ashar, "Garbee said you could see outside the cave, that you knew what was happening around you. How do you do that if you don't mind me asking?"

"It takes a great deal of concentration, depending on what I am trying to do, but I can ..." Ashar hesitated, not sure how much to tell Bayer and how much he should trust the hulking giant. He didn't know why, but his heart was saying to trust him. "I can tap into the insect life around me, use their eyes, their ears, control them."

"Fascinating. I am in tune with the forest and life around me. I can feel it. It speaks to me sometimes. But you, you can join with it, use its energy, control it, bend it to your will. Impressive. Do you get visions?" Bayer asked him. "Not of the future, but of the present?"

"Yes," he said quietly.

Merdia looked over at him, surprised.

"Tell me," Bayer said.

"My dreams. Sometimes, they are different. I know I am dreaming, but it doesn't feel like a dream; it feels more that I am being shown something by someone else, like I'm not in control."

Bayer offered, "Yes, for those like us, the energy of the world is close. When we dream, that barrier gets thinner, so information bleeds through. It can be chaotic and hard to understand. Usually, it's just meaningless chatter."

"I don't think it's meaningless chatter," argued Ashar. "There's a purpose behind me being shown this."

He wasn't sure why he trusted Bayer; he was easily the most intimidating person Ashar had ever met, but he had decided he'd trust him, and he saw no sense in going back on that.

He continued, "As you said, I am unusual for my people. When I Joined, there was another presence there, a being, but not like you or me, something else. Master Jorry told me there are things that live in this world, within the energy of the world itself. Afterward, I could no longer sense the other being. It helped me Join but then removed itself. Master Jorry warned me to be cautious, that there would be some who helped and others who might try to hinder me. I believe the dreams are being sent to me by one of these; I don't know if it is the one I felt when I Joined or not, but I am being shown this for a reason."

"Tell me," Bayer said again, always urging Ashar to reveal a bit more.

Ashar recounted his dream, describing the jetty, the small harbor, and the rugged mountains behind it. He told of the people he had seen there and how they were being treated. He could see Bayer getting angry at his description of the pens.

Bayer held up one paw to stop him, looking over at Merdia. "My dear, would you be so kind as to step out and ask Garbee to return? Thank you."

Merdia, who never did anything without an argument, stood up and walked to the door almost obediently, returning a minute later with Garbee in tow.

"Thank you, sweet child." Ashar wasn't sure what was happening, but Bayer took a real liking to Merdia, and she to him. "Ashar, repeat what you told me about what you saw."

Bayer's voice rumbled through the room.

Ashar did as he was asked and recounted every detail he could remember.

When Ashar had finished, Bayer turned to Garbee and asked, "You know this place, yes?"

"Yes," Garbee said hesitantly.

"So, tell me."

"It's about a hundred miles south," ventured Garbee. "The land on the coast is mountainous, and there are no roads. The main trade road runs inland for a few hundred miles to bypass the region. There are trails and some hardy folk who live there, mostly just wanting to be left alone. It is a hard place to get to from the land."

"Makes a good site for a base if you have ships," Merdia observed. "From what Garbee said of the mountains and the trails, I imagine a few men could hold back an army in those passes if they had the high ground."

"Yes, little one, it would make sense as a base, for sure. You are being pulled toward that place. Ashar, so what will you do?"

"We will go there. For good or ill, we will go," responded Ashar.

Bayer said, "Garbee, we will require a guide to get us through the mountains unseen."

"We?" Merdia asked.

Bayer said in his resonant voice, "I'm tired of sitting here, doing nothing. I created this camp to help those displaced by the turmoil around us. It will continue to do that after I am gone. So, I was thinking, perhaps I can be of more value helping you. That and I am terribly bored."

"Thank you, Bayer. We are in your debt," Ashar said.

Garbee had been standing motionless since Bayer had addressed him, but the shock finally wore off, and he now realized what Bayer had said.

"What! Guide? Her?" He was walking in a circle again. "No, not her! Not again! No! No! No!"

"We leave within the hour, so go get provisioned, now."

The little man was already gone before Ashar could turn his head to see Garbee's reaction.

"You too," he said to Ashar and Merdia.

There was something about Bayer's voice that made a person instantly go do whatever he told them to. They were out of the building and halfway back to the sleeping tent where they had left all the stuff before realizing they were even doing it.

"I will have Bayer teach me to do that thing with his voice. That could be useful," Merdia said.

"Honestly, you having the power to make people obey you without question scares me. Maybe it's for the best that you can't do that," Ashar commented.

"What do you think he meant when he said you gave me something on the beach? Something more than my new eyes ...?"

"I don't know; I'm sorry, but I just don't. It took me some time to learn what I could do, and I am still learning, but it takes time; I know that much. Whatever 'gift' you received will reveal itself eventually. Personally, I'm hoping for something cool, like a third arm or some extra ears. Maybe you just got enough to enjoy the taste of grass. Mmmmmmmm, yummy yummy grass, you lllloooooove it," he said, pretending to eat huge handfuls of the stuff.

"Shut up."

They reached the tent and quickly packed their stuff.

Ashar made two bed rolls for them before they left; he didn't think anyone would mind them taking the blankets. He and Merdia got some strange looks from people.

Obviously, the story about Ashar driving everyone out of the tent had gotten around, and now everyone wanted to come and see the emerald-eyed siblings causing such an uproar.

Bayer was waiting for them, standing next to a visibly agitated Garbee.

"I suppose this was your doing?" Garbee said, pointing a finger at Merdia as they approached.

"Don't look at me, talk to the big guy. If I had my way, we would leave you behind," Merdia said.

"Thank you, Garbee. And Bayer wouldn't ask this of you if he didn't think it was important," Ashar said to him, getting another gruff look in return.

A crowd was starting to gather, no doubt wondering what was going on.

"I don't like making speeches. Let's go before more show up and start asking questions," Bayer said as quietly as he could, which meant half the camp heard it.

Ashar followed with Merdia and Garbee close behind as Bayer set a grueling pace. Poor Garbee was practically running to keep up. After a few miles, Bayer finally stopped in the shade of a large oak, stretching as if he quite fancied a big sleep like bears often would.

"Sorry about that," he declared. "I wanted to get far enough away that the elders couldn't send a runner to catch up and demand to know what I was doing. I have had enough of their constant talking and discussions."

"I take it they aren't going to like you going missing?" Merdia asked him.

"I set up the camp, but they have been running it for some time. They still look to me as the leader, but that's not what I am; I never was."

"Well, I am happy you decided to come along. It's nice to have someone around that I can talk to, someone who isn't tremendously stupid," Merdia said, giving Ashar a sly look. "Or annoying." She looked over to Garbee.

"Why did you set up the camp then?" Ashar asked.

"As I said, the magic of the world sometimes speaks to me. My dreams showed me suffering, people displaced, many of them in danger. So, I created a place they would be safe. Because I had to, the same way I knew I had to come with you."

"You saw me in your dreams?" Ashar asked.

"No, I saw her," Bayer said, pointing at Merdia.

"Me? Why would you see me?" She feigned that she was thinking about it. "Well, maybe your vision wanted to protect you from Ashar's face since that would be more of a nightmare, I think."

"You joke, but you will play a larger role in what's to come than you know. We should go; I will set a slower pace this time."

Ashar looked over to Merdia. She was pale and sweating a bit too much for the heat.

"We should wait a few more minutes for Merdia to catch her breath," Ashar said.

"I'm fine!" she protested. "I do not need you to do anything special for me!"

She seemed irate at the suggestion.

"Merdia, I saw you dead a few days ago, and you are still recovering. I can see how hard this is on you," Ashar shot back.

"Here little one, I will carry you." Bayer crouched next to her and put his head on the ground so she could climb onto his shoulders.

He gave Garbee and Ashar a look that said, 'Don't even say a word.' No doubt Bayer sensed that Merdia would fight against the suggestion if either of those two spoke up.

They didn't dare to.

With Merdia clinging onto Bayer's back, they set out.

The trail was broad, winding through a long U-shaped valley carved out by glaciers eons ago. Bayer stopped and smelled the air several times, finally leaving the trail to follow his nose. Berries were in season. He had a natural ability to find the richest patches.

Even the gruff Garbee couldn't resist laughing and joking with them as they picked berries and filled their stomachs with them while they rested for the afternoon.

"Okay, time to come clean, I can't take it anymore. How did you end up like this with a name like Bayer?" Merdia asked the hulking bear.

"Merdia! Remember that long word I told you about that starts with 'dip' and ends with 'lomacy'? Don't be a jerk," Ashar scolded her.

Bayer didn't even care. He chuckled.

"My name has always been a joke. Bayer was the name of a character from a story my mother used to read as a child, so she named me after him. But unlike the character in the story, I actually wasn't big like a bear. I was small, smaller than our noble Garbee here. So anyway, children used to call me Bayerly Bear. When I returned from the forest looking like this, the joke reversed itself. As for me, I never liked either version. One is sad, the other frightening."

"I'm not scared of you, Bayer," Merdia said, leaning back against him, nearly disappearing in his fur.

"I'm not sure you are scared of anything, sweet one."

"Oh, but I am. I'm afraid of Ashar's morning breath," Merdia argued. "You will be too by tomorrow."

Bayer laughed deeply, making them all laugh, all except Ashar. Bayer leveled his gaze at him, demanding an explanation.

"It's nothing. We should laugh; we should laugh as much as we can, and for as long as we can," Ashar said ominously.

Chapter Twelve

After the second week, they turned off the main road and started into the mountains, where the trail became steeper and more rugged. Merdia was spending more time riding atop Bayer, who didn't seem to mind one bit, almost as if he didn't even notice her there.

He didn't talk much, which was fine since Merdia talked enough for several people; Bayer was content to amble along with a chattering girl clinging to his broad shoulders, clutching at tufts of his fur each time she nearly fell off.

Bayer was the one who found most of their food, too, since he was hungry all the time.

Whenever his nose found something interesting, they would eat their fill and take as much with them as they could: fruit; berries; nuts; mushrooms; and even a stream full of spawning fish one night for dinner. It was easy to forget the grave nature of their task when they were laughing together with full bellies and sore feet from walking all day.

Even Garbee was enjoying himself.

He pretended not to, but Ashar could see he was much more at ease out here in the wild. People made him nervous. The crowded camp was too noisy and chaotic for him.

He and Merdia had relaxed around each other, and they somehow had gotten past the stage of disagreeing with each other out of habit. They still liked to trade barbs, but it was mostly in jest now ... Mostly.

Garbee led the way, sometimes backtracking to find nearly invisible trails and paths they could use to stay out of sight. It gave him purpose to be leading them, making him less defensive.

For days, they went up ridges and down valleys through a seemingly never-ending series of mountains, each one harder than the last.

On the ninth day, after leaving the main road, they crested a ridge, and for the first time, Ashar didn't just see more mountains they had to cross; although still far out, he could see the thick blanket of fog stretching out from the coast covering the sea. They all stopped for a few minutes to take in the spectacle. It was Garbee who spoke first.

"Still three days out, at least, probably four, since we will need to stay around here for a day."

"Why do we have to stop for a day? Do your little feet hurt?" Merdia asked sarcastically.

"Night," Bayer responded flatly. "We need to start moving at night now."

"That's right. If you had been less worried about my feet, you might have realized we were getting close, close enough that we need to start worrying about getting spotted. Tonight, we camp, then we'll wait out the daylight tomorrow," Garbee said to a glaring Merdia.

Ashar jumped in before Merdia could think of something snarky to say to Garbee.

The sun was low; only a few hours of light were left.

Ashar said, "We are on top of the ridge, so it will be all downhill from here for a while, easy walking. We should head out and walk through the night until we find a good spot. If we are trying not to be seen, then down in the valley would be the best place. We can sleep through the

day; that way, we won't lose much time, and we can start moving again tomorrow night. See, everyone's happy, right?"

He looked between a very unimpressed Merdia and an equally skeptical Garbee, then he added, "Or no one is. Whatever, let's just go."

He turned and walked down the trail, setting a fast pace to put some distance between himself and the others. He needed a little time alone.

He needed to figure out what he was going to do when he got to the coast, he needed for no one to see how scared he was. Sighting the coast had made it real in a way it hadn't been before. The last few weeks had been an adventure with his new friends as they'd crossed the land together. Now, he was leading them into the lion's den, and he had no idea what he was doing.

They walked until the sun was just starting to light the eastern sky. The others sensed Ashar's mood and gave him space, letting him lead them right through the night without stopping.

He finally turned off the trail into a thick grove of oak trees that would conceal them during the day. Everyone sat and started pulling out what food they had for a meal before bed, while Ashar sat down thirty feet away and closed his eyes. He had gotten in the habit of reaching out and seeing what was around whenever they stopped anywhere for any length of time.

At first, he couldn't resolve anything. Much of the insect life in the area was underground or had burrowed into the trees. There were very few insects above ground that he could use.

It took longer than normal, but eventually, he was satisfied that nothing was threatening nearby, so he sat with the others. Merdia handed him a bowl of steaming stew; Bayer had found a patch of mushrooms and wild potatoes earlier, and she had made a thick and hearty concoction.

"Everything okay, Ashar? You took longer than usual," Bayer asked him.

"Yes, everything is fine. It's just harder to see clearly here; there aren't very many insects for some reason, so I can't see as much. We will need to be careful. I may not be able to give us much warning if someone gets near."

"It's the lizards," Garbee said.

"What?" Ashar asked.

"Well, that and the ferrets, but mostly the lizards." Garbee looked around at everyone's blank stares. "The insects. He said there weren't any insects. It's because of the lizards, they eat anything small enough to fit in their mouths, and there are a lot of them here. One of the few species that can survive here is the ferrets, which mostly eat lizards ... and insects when they get sick of eating lizards. Between the two, nothing else can live here without its eggs getting stolen or its young eaten. The plants here are tough and inedible to animals, so nothing lives here."

Garbee didn't talk much, but Ashar was impressed by how much he knew about the land and its creatures. He was starting to see what Bayer had meant about being in tune with the land.

No one had taught Garbee that. He just knew it. He finished his stew and lay down on his blanket, exhausted from a long night of walking and an even longer one worrying about their fate. Sleep came quickly, as did the dream.

He could see the camp again; now, four pens held people, and only one was empty.

The harbor was full of small black scout ships, and he couldn't see any sign of the larger vessels with heavy armaments. They must use the small ships for quick raids and then wait here for the rest of the fleet before heading south again.

A guard pushed a cart around the pens while another threw food over the fence using a shovel. The starved people in the pens pushed and fought for any scrap they could get.

His vision of the camp was much clearer now he was close to it.

A large structure dominated the hill just above the cove, built using tree-sized timbers. There was a tall fence surrounding what looked like a fort, heavy doors, and barred windows facing out while armed men patrolled the rooftop.

The soldiers were all lizard men like those he had seen at his village, dressed in heavy leather tunics and trousers. A wide belt held weapons, including a wickedly curved blade as long as an arm. In his dream, Ashar flew into the fort and through the halls and rooms; guards stood vigil throughout the fort, but most of all in the main hall.

A large desk stood covered with papers and ledgers, and a man sat with his head in his hands, reading through one of them. This was a real man, not a lizard or some combination of a man and something else. No, this was just a man who appeared to oversee the lizard soldiers.

That was very interesting. Ashar had always assumed some lizard king was doing evil lizard king stuff and sending out his minions to terrorize the world.

He hadn't expected a war of men using creatures like the lizard men. In the dream, his perspective shifted. Now, he was high in the air, looking down at the ocean. Below him was a fleet of fifty black ships coming from the north, sailing toward the harbor.

He knew he was seeing through the eyes of a bird, which he was aware he couldn't do.

He had tried. Something else was showing him this vision. Something else was showing him how urgent it was becoming. When those ships arrived, they would load up the people and continue south toward Cartine.

Ashar came out of the dream violently, thrashing and crying out. Whatever had been showing him the dream had released him. He hadn't realized how frightened he was or how hard he had been fighting to escape it until it released him. He looked at Merdia, sleeping peacefully curled up against Bayer, who was staring at him with a questioning look.

Bayer didn't want to speak, knowing it would wake Merdia and anyone else within a hundred feet. He couldn't whisper either since his whisper was akin to a human yelling.

Ashar got up, sat beside him, and spoke softly in his ear.

"Another vision, stronger this time, not coming from me. Something is showing me what's going on at that camp. Bayer, the ships are coming. We only have a few days before they arrive. There will be thousands of soldiers aboard them. I don't know what hope we have now, but I know we have none against those numbers. Even Merdia couldn't wreak that much destruction."

Bayer laughed softly, nodding.

Ashar said, "We need to move faster; can you carry Garbee and Merdia at a full run?"

Bayer thought about it for a second and nodded.

Ashar asked, "In this terrain, I can run hard for an hour before I need to rest. Can you do that?"

Bayer nodded again.

"You two can stop trying to be quiet. You're not." Merdia sat up, looking at them.

Ashar stated, "We need to cover more ground tonight; we are running out of time."

She looked at him as if she would start asking questions, but instead just said, "What do we need to do?"

Bayer rolled out a long laugh and said, "Hang on, that's what you need to do. Your brother seems to think I won't be able to keep up with him while carrying you and Garbee. He is wrong."

Merdia replied, "Normally, I would take this opportunity to make fun of him, but honestly, my brother is pretty fast."

They spent the rest of the afternoon resting and trying to make as little noise as possible.

Ashar tried to read the area ahead but could only see a few miles before the strain started to take a toll in this desolate place. He shook himself out of the trance and rested for a minute until the dizziness went away. When he pushed too hard or for too long, it took a few minutes for him to completely regain himself. It was getting easier, but it still took time.

Merdia was sitting cross-legged a few feet away, staring intently at the ground in front of her.

Ashar couldn't figure out what she was doing until he saw the ants crawling on the ground. She was trying to control them. He watched her for a while, sitting still so she would think he was still tuned out. When she started to get visibly frustrated, he spoke up.

"You're doing that wrong."

"Doing what wrong? What are you talking about? I wasn't doing anything," Merdia said defensively.

"The ants? You are trying to get them to move the crumb you put down, no?" he asked her.

Her face turned bright red as if she had been caught doing something she wasn't supposed to.

When she went from embarrassment to anger, he held up his hands in a peace gesture and sat beside her.

"You're trying to control the ants, right? That's hard to do, even for me. Instead, think about what you want, not what you want the ant to do, but what you want. Don't think about the ants, forget about them. Think about the crumb and how much you need it to be a few inches over. Try it."

Merdia looked skeptical but turned and stared at the ground again.

"Now, here's the tricky part. You must make it important to you. You need a strong emotion to go with it. It can be happy, sad, frightened, angry, it doesn't matter, just think back to something that makes you emotional, and then think about how much you need the breadcrumb to move."

He watched her stare intently at the crumb; her pulse quickened, and her breathing increased. Ashar saw a tear form in the corner of her eye.

Four ants broke away from the line they had been following and went over to the crumb, each grabbing a different corner and dragging it six inches before dropping it and returning to the line.

Merdia gasped and started gulping in air as if she had just run a mile.

Ashar gently rested his hand on her shoulder.

"Very impressive, and it's only the beginning. It will get easier."

"Ashar, do you hear voices when you do this? Voices you can't understand?"

"Yes, it can be deafening if you're not used to it. I'm a little surprised you could hear them," he said.

"That was amazing! I can see why you need to rest after doing that. It's exhausting. I thought my head would explode from all the noise."

"You will learn to tune it out a bit, to focus on one thing. It's hard even for me. Also, I don't think you will have the same abilities as me."

"You're saying you're better than me? That I can't do it?" Merdia said, a little upset.

"No, I don't mean it like that. Obviously, I could tap into the energy of the insects around me because I Joined with one, but you haven't Joined yet. You got a little bit of the magic I can touch. I think that little bit was just enough to tap you into that energy around you, and that was what revived you, gave you your new eyes, gave you something else, too."

"What?" she asked.

"I don't know, and that's the point I'm trying to make. Don't assume it affected you in the same way it did me. That might be why it was so hard to control the ants. You might be reaching outside of what you can do and might have a completely different reaction to being exposed. Find out what you can do rather than trying to do what I can."

Merdia considered his words for a second and then spoke.

"Sometimes, you aren't as stupid as I tell everyone you are. I could almost swear I saw a flash of intelligence in you. Very briefly."

"Thanks, I think."

"No problem. If you tell anyone I said that, I will deny it."

"Naturally. We should start getting packed up. We need to cover a lot of ground tonight, and I want to get going as early as we can."

The four of them rounded up their stuff and had one last meal before setting out.

Ashar stretched his legs and started off in a gentle run, taking long bounds that kept him close to the ground; even at night, someone might notice him jumping above the trees in the moonlight.

Bayer had crossed two heavy leather straps across his chest and back.

Merdia and Garbee were holding on for dear life as Bayer ran. It was impressive to see something that large and cumbersome shift so fast, and even with his great bulk, he hardly made a sound as he ran on his thick-furred paws. He hadn't been kidding about being able to keep up. An hour in and after climbing a steep hill at a run, Ashar needed to stop and catch his breath.

Bayer just sat down with an 'I told you so' look on his face, breathing normally. They had covered a good distance.

Ashar could taste the ocean salt and the moisture in the air.

They ran all night, running until exhaustion, taking a break to eat, rest, and then run some more. Bayer and Ashar kept an impressive pace, and by the time the sun started to rise, they could hear seagulls crying. The coast was close now, only a few hours away if they pushed hard. He mentioned it to Bayer.

"We are close. We can make it if we push on."

"No. We camp here. The risk of being spotted is too great. In case you haven't noticed, I'm pretty hard to miss. We lie low today and make the final run under the cover of darkness. I'm already worried we have been spotted. Also ..." Bayer said, pointing to a large tree at the edge of the small meadow where they had stopped.

It took Ashar a moment; he didn't know what the bear was pointing at until he saw the bee hives dripping honey from the lower branches.

"Running all night takes a toll, even on me. I need to eat and that looks just about right."

Ashar laughed. It was a good enough reason as any to pick a campsite, and Bayer was right about getting spotted in the daytime.

"Okay, I'll find a good spot to camp in those trees, and you can have fun with the honey. Here, I'll help." Ashar closed his eyes and focused on the hives.

After the last few days of being nearly blind, it was nice to have large numbers of insects around again. Garbee said it was because, near the coast, the seagulls ate the lizards that ate the insects. Bayer watched as all the bees flew out of the hives and over to a nearby tree, where they landed and started scurrying around.

"They think that tree is a really big flower. They will give up in an hour or so, but until then, you shouldn't have any trouble eating all the honey you want."

"Thank you."

"No problem." Ashar left Bayer to his meal and started clearing leaves and branches away to make a sleeping area for them in a small grove of cypress trees.

Merdia and Garbee were doing various stretches and trying to work out all the knots and cramps from being bounced all night on Bayer's back. Ashar knew how they felt.

His legs were burning from keeping pace with Bayer all night.

Looking around, he spotted a patch of green next to the small brook at the meadow's edge. Picking up a few handfuls of grass, he put them up to his face and breathed deeply.

The smell turned from a scent into a feeling that then turned into relief. He could feel his muscles relaxing, and the soreness started to fade from his abused joints. Grabbing several more handfuls, he returned to Merdia and held out the bundle of grass.

"You are joking, right?" she asked.

"Nope. Dead serious; this might help with the aches and pains."

She looked at him suspiciously, as if she were about to walk into the punchline for a joke, but she reached out and grabbed the grass regardless. He put his bundle to his nose and breathed deeply to demonstrate. She followed suit and, after a few breaths, started taking in huge gulps of air through the grass until it was wilted and started turning brown.

"That really works, I feel a lot better. What's happened here?" she asked, holding up the brown, wilted grass.

"Most people can only smell the grass. You and I take more from it when we breathe its essence deeply. We take the magic it holds, the tiny bit of life hiding within."

Bayer was coming back toward them, honey dripping off his face, adhered to his fur.

He was holding a gooey mess in one hand and plopped it down into a bowl before walking over to the stream to wash the honey off his face and paws. The others wasted no time breaking off chunks of the sweet honeycomb from the bowl and eating as much as they could. After a hard day, everyone was exhausted and hungry, and the honey tasted like manna from heaven.

They slept in shifts like always, with one always on watch through the afternoon and evening. Ashar hoped he could sleep, dream his own dreams again, and rest rather than fight through the night. He would find no rest in his dreams, though.

The dream came again, sharper, clearer, more powerful, but it was still showing him the same thing. The black fleet was closer but still far out. The pens were nearly full, so he could see the guards walking around. There was something different about them this time.

They were everywhere. Last time, he had only seen the ones moving close to the pens, but now he could see many more in barracks, guard towers, and in patrols ranging out from the camp.

In the forced dream, he felt despair; there were so many of them; how would they fight such numbers? Fear broke him out of his reverie.

When he woke, Garbee was sitting quietly a few feet away, keeping watch. Ashar marveled at how intently he scanned the surroundings. Ashar usually just cheated and used his ability to look at the area around them. Then, he spent the next few hours trying to stay awake.

Garbee's head moved side to side, his ears sometimes turning in the opposite direction of his head to monitor his back while his eyes were scanning for danger. Ashar realized this was his natural state, heightened alertness and fear. It wasn't in Garbee's nature to relax.

Garbee had merged with a few animals that were all prey for something. It was natural for him to assume that every sound was being made by something wanting to devour him.

Ashar had taken the earlier watch and knew Bayer would take the last one before sundown, so he rolled over and went back to sleep. This time, he didn't dream of lizards and suffering but rather

of Wattar. He could see him sitting in a large chair, papers spread out on the table in front of him. He swept some aside, pulled one out, and laid his hand on it as if it were precious.

It was the Mariners' Code that he had made Ashar memorize before he'd left. He still waited with it beside him in case a message came from Ashar. He had tried several times but couldn't reach back to his home islands to send Wattar word that they were still alive.

The dream felt different, not like when he was being shown the harbor, but this didn't feel like a dream either. It felt as though he was seeing his brother just as he was at that moment.

Because he was. Bayer had said the veil between the worlds was thinnest when they were sleeping. Perhaps that was why he could reach so far. He reached out into the dream, feeling for something he could use, finding it hiding under the table.

When the enormous cockroach scurried up on the table, Wattar was about to squash it with his hand when he realized it was shaking its butt and tapping on the Mariners' Code.

He stood up with such force that the chair he was sitting on tumbled across the room, breaking off one of the legs and hitting the wall. Crouching down, he leaned over the bug and started asking it questions.

"Is Merdia with you? Is she safe? Tell her I'm going to kill her when I see her again, right after I hug her for a month. Are you okay? Have you found Mother and Father yet? Did you reach the mainland?" Wattar stopped, waiting for answers from the small bug before asking more questions.

Ashar's control of the cockroach was limited; it was hard to focus when in the dream state, and his connection to the bug was thin and fragile.

Fortunately, he and Wattar had written down some words and phrases that would help. Concentrating, he made the roach crawl over the handwritten section and start tapping.

Merdia yes safe Parthsia. Mother Father no. Searching searching searching.

Wattar's legs gave out a little, and since his chair was on the other side of the room and was broken, he ended up falling on his butt. When he got up, tears ran down his face.

"I have been so worried about you both, especially Merdia. You must keep her safe."

Merdia saved me ...

Wattar laughed loudly, wiping away the tears. "That sounds about right."

You?

"Things are good here. The sea has provided a good catch, and the foraging parties have returned with more than we expected. It will still be a lean winter, but I think we will be fine.

"Master Jorry has everyone buzzing around like bees. Even the elderly wander around pushing carts and doing what they can to help. It's starting to get colder, and the fog takes longer to burn off every day, but we have enough firewood, and they are setting up a central kitchen to prepare food and deliver it to everybody."

Wattar went on and on. It was soothing to listen to his brother talk about the comings and goings of the village. Ashar could hear the happiness in Wattar's voice as he sat and chatted with a cockroach as if his brother were sitting next to him at the table.

Ashar held on to the dream for as long as he could, but he could feel it slipping away. With one last effort, he reached out again and tapped a message to Wattar.

Goodbye

"When will you contact me again?"

???? Hard.

"Be safe, come back to us."

Love you.

"You too, brother, and don't forget to tell Merdia she is dead when I see her, also that I love her, but I am going to kill her."

Ashar came out of the dream exhausted.

It had been days since he had gotten any real sleep, and it was starting to take its toll on him. Garbee and Merdia were already up and stuffing the last of their things into packs. Ashar followed suit and tied up his bedroll. Looking around, he found Bayer at the other end of the meadow, sitting just out of sight under a tree, watching the trail ahead.

The sun had gone behind the hills, but it was still an hour away from darkness.

Ashar walked over to him, trying to stay hidden in the trees as he did.

"I'm scared. We will reach the camp tonight, and I have no idea what to do once we get there," Ashar lamented.

"We will find a way," Bayer said as softly as he could. He generally tried not to speak at all or as little as possible. His voice tended to echo in the narrow canyons.

"I hope you're right." Ashar looked down a few trees and spotted the one with the bee hives. Half were gone, and the bees that had lost their homes to Bayer's claws looked angry as they buzzed around the ruined remains of the hive.

"They look mad. Do you want me to clear them out so you can grab some breakfast?" Ashar asked Bayer, who smiled and nodded his head.

He reached out to feel the swarm of angry bees, redirecting them to an area just around the bend. There was an open area with flowers that looked like a nice place for the bees to stay while Bayer ate the rest of their home. There was something else in the clearing, dark shapes moving around something. He willed the bees to focus on it so he could get a better look.

His heart stopped in his chest. Lizard men, twenty or more, they were all grouped around a smaller version of the catapults he had seen in his village.

They were loading something into the basket on the arm, small wooden casks, four or five of them. One of the lizard men pulled a rope and launched them.

Ashar broke out of his trance in a panic. All he could think of was Merdia.

"Merdia! Run!" he screamed as loudly as he could.

Bayer was on his feet instantly, starting to look up the trail for whatever Ashar had seen there. Ashar crouched down and was about to jump away toward Merdia and Garbee when he saw the first cask coming down in a long, graceful arc toward him, the others right behind.

He would be able to jump clear, and he was sure of it until one of the casks hit a branch above him and sprayed purple fluid everywhere.

He jumped, turning slightly as he did.

He could see Bayer completely engulfed in purple fumes as a cask burst right in front of him. Ashar jumped clear and saw the casks hitting all around as he sailed up and away from the dangerous gas. He felt a slight burning in his nose, something he hadn't smelled since the day of the attack on his home. The gas. He must have gotten some on him as he jumped clear. He didn't think it was enough to ...

Ashar went limp midair as the gas assaulted him.

He managed to stay conscious long enough to feel it when his body slammed painfully into the ground and rolled to a stop. Bayer was down too. He couldn't see Merdia.

His vision went fuzzy and then black.

Chapter Thirteen

Garbee was not brave, or a great warrior, or a scholar.

He was fast; he was comprised of animals that stayed alive, being swift and having quick reactions. He was moving before Ashar had even finished screaming Merdia's name.

Garbee was also strong. People never noticed it because he was small, but Merdia noticed it when he drove his shoulder into her side and ran full speed into the brush, carrying her along with him. Even burdened, the fear and adrenaline drove him hard as he ran full speed through the rugged canyon, trying to stay quiet as he put distance between himself and whatever had scared Ashar so much. He hadn't even looked back to see if Bayer or Ashar was following.

He just ran until his legs started to feel rubbery, and he was breathing fire.

He sat down hard and looked around. He had stayed off any trails and bolted up one side of the canyon, stopping just short of the ridge. A small terrace in the canyon wall held a grove of trees and had water trickling through one side of it.

He crawled over, plunged his face into the small pool, and drank until he started coughing. Merdia was sitting right where he had dropped her, staring at nothing. After catching his breath, he checked his pack to make sure he hadn't lost anything.

Merdia's pack was still hanging on her shoulders. She had just put it on when he hit her. At least they had some supplies between them. She was in shock, and that wasn't good.

Garbee was not the best person for this sort of thing.

He walked over and sat beside her, trying to think of something to say to make her feel better.

"That was no fun. Let's hope we don't have to do that again, right?" He winced; it might have been better if the lizardmen had captured her; they might not have tortured her. Merdia continued to stare straight ahead, ignoring him.

"Do you need water or, um, maybe some food?" Still no response. Garbee left her and walked back to where he could get a look at the valley below.

There was no sign of anyone following them, but he could hear strange voices coming up from the valley floor where they had camped. After thirty minutes, he was convinced no one had tracked them or given up.

Merdia was still sitting where he had left her, but she was no longer staring blankly ahead.

"Thank you, Garbee, you saved my life."

"You would have done the same for me," he said, trying to make her feel better.

"I would now. Is that good enough?" Merdia asked.

"It's never too late to be a friend!"

"Did you see them? The ones that attacked?"

"No, I am ashamed to say I never looked back to see what was happening to the others," Garbee confessed.

"Don't blame yourself. There was nothing either of us could have done if we'd stayed. You were the only one who had the good sense to run. It was the lizard men. I saw Ashar and Bayer both go down from the gas they use," Merdia said with tears in her eyes, remembering her brother hitting the ground hard and not moving.

"They must have spotted us last night. I knew it was dangerous to run like that. We should have taken our time and crept up slowly," Garbee said.

"We had to take the risk. It was our only chance to get there in time to help. I guess we have no chance now." Merdia started to cry, holding her head in her hands.

Garbee awkwardly put his arm around her and tried to comfort her.

When her tears had passed, she sat up and asked, "What are we going to do now?"

"We leave, go back to where it is relatively safe." Garbee stated what he thought was obvious.

"Leave them? Do nothing?" Merdia asked, an edge starting to creep into her voice.

"What else can we do?"

"We can try! We must do something!" She was becoming angry.

"Quiet! Keep your voice down. Those things aren't far away, and they can hear you, even in the dark!"

Merdia leveled her eyes at Garbee, trying to bore a hole through him with a look.

Garbee had saved her life just minutes ago, but now he wanted to leave her brother and Bayer to torture or worse.

Her anger started to rise.

She was furious, mad at herself for not seeing the trap in time, angry at Ashar for pushing them too hard and getting himself caught, angry at Garbee for being a coward, just angry at everything.

Garbee's eyesight was particularly good at night, but he could barely see Merdia in the moonless night. Her face was little more than a shadow. It was probably a good thing because she was so irate.

As he watched her fuming in the dark, two small pinpricks of light appeared, growing larger and brighter in her eyes. It wasn't the same as her brother. Her eyes glowed more than burned.

It was no less disturbing to Garbee. She spoke slowly and without raising her voice, but there was no mistaking the anger lurking under her calm words.

"I am going after them. Run if you need to. This isn't your fight; it's mine."

She stood up, shouldered her pack, and started down the hill, making as little noise as she could, which was a lot. She had been hanging upside down and in shock for most of the trip, but she kept going down and toward the sea, hoping that would eventually lead to where they had taken Ashar. After her anger had subsided and she'd calmed down, she regretted lashing out at Garbee and running off. She needed him even if she didn't want to admit it.

The more she walked, the more frightened she became.

Being alone so far from home was scary, and the dark hills around her radiated danger. She was expecting to run into lizard men at any moment and be captured, but it didn't happen.

Stopping to take a drink of water from a small stream, she heard something behind her, right behind her. She spun around, ready to defend herself from ... Garbee.

"I'm surprised they haven't captured you with all the noise you are making, and good choice on the route. You are lucky the two guards you passed were both asleep, or again with the whole being captured thing. There is an easier, safer way. Follow me," Garbee whispered to her, leaving before she could say anything, which was good since Merdia didn't have a clue what to say.

She was shocked that Garbee had come after her and was beginning to think she may have misjudged him.

They moved through the hills as quietly and quickly as they could.

Occasionally, Garbee would stop and listen intently; usually, it was nothing, and they would move on after just a few minutes. Other times, they could hear the hissing guttural language of the lizard men as they passed close to them, patrolling, hunting for them.

By dawn, they had crested the last ridge and could see the ocean and harbor. Garbee found them a hard-to-reach spot sheltered from the weather, one that overlooked the camp below. The rising sun illuminated the camp and the grim pens full of people.

Guards patrolled everywhere, and they could see several large armed bands getting ready to go out, probably looking for the two that had got away the night before.

Off to one side was a large, sturdy cage made from heavy timbers, lashed together securely with something inside. Merdia strained to see what was in the cage and was rewarded when her vision tunneled, and suddenly, the cage and its occupant were clear.

Whatever Ashar had done to her apparently came with improved vision. Unfortunately, it showed her Bayer in the cage, heavy iron chains pinning him to the floor. Merdia scanned the rest of the camp using her enhanced sight but couldn't find any trace of Ashar anywhere.

Garbee was watching Merdia with some interest. At first, she was just looking down, trying to see what she could see, but then he noticed her become very still and focused.

Still, her head was not moving at all, and then her eyes started glowing, just a little at first but brighter and brighter as she scanned the land below their high perch.

"What is it?" he finally asked, his curiosity getting the better of him. "What are you doing?"

"Trying out a new trick, I find I can see at great distance if I concentrate. Bayer is down there, caged and shackled but alive. I can't find my brother anywhere."

"What do we do next?" he asked.

"We wait, watch, and see if an opportunity presents itself. That was Bayer's plan, and it seems like a good enough one." Merdia tried to sound more optimistic than she would have been feeling.

"Come on brother, give me something, anything I can work with," she whispered to herself.

Everything hurt when Ashar woke up. The left side of his body, where he had landed, was a mass of bruises, and his arm wasn't working too well. Hopefully, it wasn't broken.

His head was pounding, and he couldn't think straight, but that was just from the gas they had used on him. He had cut his head when he'd landed, and there was blood caked into his hair, his face and clothes covered in it too. It looked worse than it was, but the cut was deep and needed proper stitching, but that would have to wait.

He started to take in his surroundings.

He was in a small room with a heavy door with iron hardware and thick bars on the tiny window. There was nothing else besides straw on the floor and a bucket in the corner that he dearly hoped he wouldn't have to use. Looking out the window, he could see the pens below and their miserable contents awaiting their fate. He nearly cried when he spotted Bayer.

The thick chains around his neck had been pulled mercilessly tight to keep him pinned to the floor, his arms and legs lashed with leather straps to the four corners of his cage.

He was awake, and even from a distance, Ashar could feel the rage coming off the great bear.

The lizard men had been smart to keep him restrained. The amount of damage he could do when angered or enraged was almost unimaginable; Bayer was devastation itself, a tornado force contained within that immense furry body.

Ashar was being held in the main building and not in the pens with the others or caged like Bayer. He had been separated, and that couldn't be good either.

He sat down and tried to reach out and connect, but he couldn't.

Whatever was in the gas had lasting effects and made it hard to tune into the life around him; while he could sense it, he could not reach out and touch it, for now, he was blind.

There was a shuffling sound and a loud hissing in the hallway, and his door was thrown open, two lizard men entering. It wasn't the first time he had seen them, but it was the first time he had ever been this close to one. Their bald heads were almost completely covered in scales.

Only a few small patches on their faces and necks showed any skin whatsoever. The scales on the arms were much heavier and thicker, forming a crude armor passing from the hand to the upper arm, each elbow with a wicked spike sticking out in line with the forearm.

The most frightening thing about them was the smell. Ashar nearly threw up when they entered his cell as the scent of rotten eggs and sulfur hit him and set his eyes to profuse watering.

The two guards grabbed him roughly by the arms and pulled him to his feet.

His left arm turned into a lance of searing agony as they yanked him up. Tears streamed down his face from the pain and the smell as he was dragged down the hallway toward a set of large doors. One of the four lizard men guarding the door pulled it open, roughly leading him in.

There was a large table on the far end covered with piles of papers and other random items, to the point it was hard to see the man sitting behind it all. The man from Ashar's dream.

Ashar found himself dumped unceremoniously on the floor right in front of the table.

Ashar would have expected the leader of such a fearsome force of soldiers to be a large, intimidating man, a warrior figure. But the man was none of those things and, in some ways, reminded him of some of the elderly—even frail—masters he'd had in school.

A man of slight build with gray creeping in his hair and beard, he had a sharp nose and a small mouth with thin lips.

Great bushy eyebrows framed hard, cruel eyes staring at Ashar like those of a predator.

"I am Regent Proctor Alliman. My men tell me you are something different. They say they saw you jump twenty feet in the air after taking a face full of daffon gas. There aren't many who can stand for more than a second after getting hit with it, let alone jump that high into the air. They said you are a demon and that your eyes burned with a bright fire before you passed out."

Ashar just stared at him without speaking. "Although my men are excellent fighters, they are also extremely stupid and not the most reliable source of information. Are you something special, boy?"

Ashar wished Merdia were here.

This was a dangerous situation, and his head was still spinning from the gas. She would know what to do, and she would think of something clever.

What would Merdia do? She would go on the offensive and attack from a place of weakness.

"Why have you taken my people? What right do you have to attack me and take me prisoner?"

"Because we can, you stupid child! We can do far more to you if you like. What say you? Would you like something worse? Tell me what you have in mind, and I shall be all too pleased to ensure you get it. My men are bored and haven't had any sport or entertainment for some time. Would you care to perform for them? Or perhaps your large friend out there, do you think he would make good sport?"

"You should set him loose and try seeing for yourself."

"I am not that stupid, boy. I have never seen anything like that despicable great beast in all my years of conquest, but I know danger when I see it, and he is dangerous. No, I'm afraid I have very few options when it comes to your large companion. He can't be allowed to live. I just haven't decided how to see him off. Perhaps toss him in the water and see how long he can swim when tied up? He would make a nice rug afterward. Let my men use him for target practice? Maybe we can see how long it takes him to starve? Might take months with that brute."

Ashar's face became hot with rage. Proctor Alliman was trying to make him angry, and it worked. He had never been quick to anger, never the one to start the fight. But there would always be a first time for everything.

Merdia would provoke people and start trouble just to see where it led, but not Ashar.

He always had to be the peacemaker, the voice of reason, the one who had to swallow his pride. Something had shifted in him, either from the Joining or the journey, but he wasn't going to play peacemaker anymore. He was a warrior on a quest, and his family needed him to be strong and fearless. He wasn't going to back down anymore.

"You are worried about the wrong threat. For all his strength, Bayer is not as dangerous as what is coming for you. Soon, you will know real fear, and soon, you will understand the mistake you have made," Ashar said, trying to sound as intimidating as he could. "You think the great Bayer is the worst you have to fear? Then just wait, and you will see what comes at my behest."

"You? HA! I can have you killed with a wave of my hand. You and your sort are no threat to me. If you were trying to scare me, you didn't.

"No, I don't expect you to be afraid of me. I'm far less of a threat than Bayer. No, no, no, you poor man; who you need to worry about is my little sister. No one crosses Merdia without paying for it, and capturing her brother and new best friend is going to piss her off. You don't want that. Let me and Bayer go, and she might spare you and your men."

Proctor Alliman looked at Ashar, not sure whether he was kidding or not. He had to be kidding; no one was afraid of a child, not when they commanded an army of demonic soldiers, but the boy seemed so sure of himself.

"I look forward to meeting her. I'm sure there is a cage or pit around here somewhere into which we could throw her," Alliman sneered.

"What are you going to do with me, with the people outside?" Ashar demanded.

"We are going to put them on ships and send them south. What happens after that isn't up to me. I haven't decided what to do with you yet. My men seem quite impressed with you, but so far, I'm not seeing anything worth my time. Your eyes are very pretty, but there isn't anything demonic about them. If you could jump like they said, then you would have been out of that window over there the second they dumped you on the floor. Is there anything special about you?"

Ashar couldn't decide if he would be treated better or worse if he was special. Probably worse.

"No, I'm nothing special," he said quietly. "The talk of me leaping like that, it's ridiculous. I almost cripple myself just getting out of bed on a morning."

"Hm. You bore me. Guards, take him back to his cell," Alliman commanded.

"You won't be bored for long, trust me," Ashar said as the guards painfully pulled him out of the room and through the large doors. When they dropped him back onto the hard, cold floor of his cell, everything hurt: breathing hurt, moving hurt, not moving hurt. The cut on his head had opened, and there was blood running down into his eyes; he didn't care.

He had gotten what he wanted.

He wanted to make sure Merdia had escaped, if she hadn't, then the proctor would have surely thrown that in his face, tormented him with her captivity.

Merdia is safe. That's all that matters. Hopefully, she and Garbee are fifty miles away by now.

Was she though? The realization hit him like a punch to the gut. He had been trying to play tough with Alliman, provoking him into giving away information, but now he was wondering if he had been telling the truth without knowing it. Where would Merdia go? Father used to say when they'd made Merdia, they had left out the quit. If she was out there, she was heading right back into the fight and would need his help as much as he needed hers.

All he wanted to do was lie down and pass out, just a few minutes' reprieve from the pain and sorrow, but he couldn't stop now. Merdia wasn't going to stop. Pulling himself up to a sitting position, he leaned back against the cold wall of his cell and closed his eyes.

At first, he couldn't reach out. It was too hard to get past his own damaged body and the pain radiating from his numerous injuries. Slowly, he was able to calm his breathing, push some of the pain off to the side, and see past it. A cloudy image started to take shape and resolve itself in his mind. As it became clearer, he could see himself sitting in his cell.

However, he hardly recognized the battered figure he saw there.

He held on to that small connection, reaching out as far as he could until he connected with insects in the hallway outside, then farther out, onto the grounds beyond the buildings, farther out to the pens, and farther out still, as far as the cage holding Bayer. Ashar focused on his friend, connecting to anything nearby that could help him see. He was unharmed. They must have bound him before he woke up. Ashar could see the anger burning in Bayer's eyes, trapped and helpless.

The effort was taking its toll, and he had to pull back and rest for a few minutes before trying again. The gas was still hanging over his mind like a heavy blanket, and the pain from his left side was a constant distraction; he wasn't going to be able to do much until he healed up a bit.

He stood suddenly and looked out the window until he found what he was looking for. Between the buildings was an area not trampled by thousands of soldiers, a small patch of grass. Ashar sat down and reached out again, this time very close by until he found what he could always find hiding everywhere. Cockroaches.

Slowly, a small army emerged from under the building, scuttling forth en masse, and started cutting grass and bringing it back one blade at a time until a small pile was sitting at Ashar's feet.

He could feel the effects of the gas fading with the first deep breath of the blades held up to his nose. He breathed until nothing was left, then picked up the next handful dutifully left by his army of grassroaches. Sometime later, he could feel a noticeable reduction in pain from his left side; everything was still sore and stiff but functional.

Most of all, his head was clear again, the fire burning behind his eyes, its soft green light reflecting off the walls. He knew he should hide it, but he didn't care anymore. He had been frightened but wasn't now. Now, he was only angry. Now, he was going to fight back.

Ashar sat down and reached out to see what was out there with which he could work. His vision spread out in a familiar pattern as he focused and tuned into the life around him.

Something caught his attention, a bright spark seeming to dance and shift so fast it was hard to follow. He narrowed his vision onto the area around the spark and found Merdia sitting at the center of it. Garbee was behind her, hiding in the rocks.

He had never been able to see anyone else when he reached out, but now Merdia was burning like a beacon to him. It must have been the magic he'd used to revive her. It must have connected them. Somehow, some part of him had stayed with her, and he could even touch it ...

Ashar spasmed and jerked as he came out of his trance. He had never experienced anything like what he felt when attempting to connect to Merdia. Normally, insects didn't have a lot on their minds, not a lot of deep thinking about anything beyond what they could eat and what might eat them, so connecting to simple minds like that was easy.

Connecting to hundreds of them wasn't much of a strain. Nor was connecting to thousands, and of course, when he amassed sufficient numbers, they acted as one, all communicating further to

one another. Even in large groups, not that much thinking was going on. It was the so-called hive mentality. On the other hand, connecting to Merdia had been like grabbing the edge of a storm and being sucked deep inside, to be ensnared in a wild, uncontrollable vortex. It was pure chaos, hundreds of thoughts bombarding him simultaneously, every emotion raging unchecked, fear, anger, sadness, and grief threatening to overwhelm him.

He lay gasping on the floor for a minute to recover himself before trying again. This time, instead of trying to connect fully with Merdia, he simply tried to make contact with her. He imagined moving closer and closer without touching the whirling mass of light, imagining his hand brushing up against the light's outer edge. Even that small touch was almost too much to bear, the flood of chaos coming from her thoughts so hard to endure.

He wondered if her mind was always like this. No wonder she always had something to say. She was thinking of everything all the time. It had to be exhausting.

He tried screaming at her in his mind, waving his hands through the light at the edge to get her attention, but nothing worked; no matter what he did, he couldn't get her to focus on him. He pulled back again to rest. The strain of trying to contact Merdia was far too onerous, too tiring.

Why? Why couldn't she sense him? He could see her clearly; her light was hard to miss. Ashar sat up. That was it. Merdia wasn't as skilled as he was in connecting to other life. She probably couldn't sense him because he had been trying to be small, so he didn't frighten her.

He needed to be so big she couldn't ignore him.

Ashar calmed himself and reached again, but not out; this time, he reached into himself. He had become more familiar with the magic and the power flowing through him, and he was more comfortable wielding it. He had also started to understand it a bit more.

He could draw power from the insects around him and share in their life force, but he also had a reservoir of energy inside of him, into which he could tap. He reached deep into that reservoir and started pulling power up into himself. He could feel it coursing through his veins, building up behind his eyes, filling his heart with strength. He pulled and pulled until emerald fire started dripping from his fingers, splashing on the floor at his feet.

Dropping to his knees, he slammed a fistful of fire into the ground and followed it with his mind screaming in his head. Merdia!

Merdia sat on the edge of the rock, looking down at the harbor. Her enhanced vision had shown her all she could see of the camp. Now, it was just the same rotation of guards over and over again. Garbee would tell her to get back from the ledge in a few minutes.

He had been doing it every thirty minutes since they'd arrived, afraid someone a mile below would spot them among the rocks. Hiding was in his nature, and getting things done was in hers,

but sitting here doing nothing was growing tedious. She tried to practice what Ashar had shown her with the ants. She tried to relax and 'feel' what was around her. She tried and failed.

She tried again and failed.

Her mind always went back to the situation they were in. Plans within plans ran through her head, most of them ending with everyone dying or getting captured.

She was about to give up and go back to hiding in the rocks with Garbee when a loud voice suddenly rang out in her head, causing her to lose her balance.

Garbee caught her an instant later, preventing her from falling off the edge.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"I think Ashar just figured out how to talk to me," Merdia said, still catching her breath.

"You should come back here before your stupid brother makes you fall to your death!" Garbee hissed. He still insisted on speaking quietly even though there wasn't anyone around for a mile.

"You might not be wrong about that," she replied.

After Garbee was satisfied they were hidden well enough, Merdia sat down and tried to listen for Ashar again. At first, there was nothing, just the chaos of her thoughts whirling around, but soon, she thought she could hear something else, something almost too faint to make out.

A voice, Ashar's voice.

Calm, breathing, calm ...

Merdia focused only on her breathing, trying to slow her breath to an even rhythm.

Hear me? Better now? Just talk, I will hear you.

"Ashar! Are you all right? I can't see you. I see poor Bayer, but not you."

Hurt. Getting better. Stronger ... Angry. No time left! Must act! Ships here soon!

"What can we do? There are so many of them."

You are going to like this, little sister!

Twenty minutes later, Merdia turned to Garbee with a feral grin.

"Get ready. It's our turn to have some fun," she said to him.

"What are we going to do?" he asked nervously.

"The lizard men have been naughty, so naughty in fact, we are just going to have to turn Bayer loose on them to teach them some manners," Merdia said matter-of-factly.

"Great." Garbee sighed.

Chapter Fourteen

Dawn was still thirty minutes away, but the sky was lightening, allowing Garbee to see the camp more clearly. He and Merdia had spent most of the night carefully creeping down from the mountain to get into position.

He still couldn't believe he had let her talk him into this; he didn't even like Merdia.

It was madness; the only reasonable thing to do was cut their losses and get away before they were captured. He thought about running, just leaving and saving himself, but the thought of traveling back alone was unthinkable. Only a month ago, he wouldn't have hesitated to save himself, to leave everyone behind to their own fates.

A month ago, he would have run without looking back. But a month ago, he hadn't had any friends. He did now, and they needed him, even the annoying girl.

Garbee had always kept to himself, which seemed to suit him and everyone else just fine.

No one expected anything from him, and he expected them to leave him alone in return. Having friends was new to him. He was wondering if they were going to get him killed. Being a loner might be better, and he would live longer, that was for sure.

He raised his head just a little to get a look around. He was only about twenty feet from the fence protecting the north side of the camp. It was a defensive fence full of sharp sticks pointing out at an angle meant to hinder a large attacking force.

It wasn't designed to stop someone as small and stealthy as Garbee.

Before he lost the cover of darkness completely, he ran for the fence, squeezed between two of the stakes, and crouched on the other side, waiting for an alarm to be raised or a sword to come down and end his life. When nothing happened, he started breathing again and crept up to the closest building, the one Merdia had told him he needed to get into.

'Wait for the signal,' she had said, but she hadn't advised what the signal would be.

He seriously considered trying to get back on the other side of the fence and hide when he noticed the bug in front of him. It was a large insect, a praying mantis, standing on its hind legs and waving its arms back and forth.

"Seriously?" Garbee whispered to himself. Of all the companions he could have fallen in with, he'd ended up with a weird bug sorcerer and his psychotic sister.

They made Bayer seem like a regular guy in comparison. The bug kept repeatedly putting its arms over its mouth as if it was trying to tell him something. The mask! He had completely forgotten to put on the mask he was supposed to wear.

He pulled the long strip of fabric out, soaked it in water, and tied it tightly around his head, making sure it sealed all the way around his mouth and chin.

Looking down, the bug seemed satisfied with the mask and put both arms forward in a halt/stop gesture. Phase two. Merdia had said it might take a minute and to be patient.

He didn't have to wait long before a line of beetles emerged from the grass and went under the corner of the building. Each one had a small smudge of purple on its back, a tiny drop of daffon liquid stuck there. It was not enough to do much on its own, but thousands were carrying a drop each into the building. The stuff evaporated quickly, and the acrid scent filled his nose even through the mask as the beetle crawled past.

Not wanting to take any chances, he backed away from the building to distance himself from the gas-covered beetles, even though it meant he was more exposed. Better than passing out and getting captured, he thought.

His tiny messenger followed him and perched on his knee, still making the halt sign. Garbee waited while the never-ending line of beetles entered the building, expecting to be discovered at any moment. Sitting in the open wasn't good for him.

Panic started to take hold as every fiber of his being wanted to go and hide somewhere safe, but his friends needed him. He heard several thumps from within the barracks.

The bug was waving its arms again, pointing toward the building. It was time. Merdia had given him instructions on what to do, but he was panicked and couldn't remember what she had said even though it had only been an hour ago.

Why doesn't she just come and do this herself? he wondered, already knowing it was because he was much less likely to be caught than she was.

Not being able to remember what he was supposed to do made the panic worse. He started to inch back toward the fence instinctively.

The siblings were strange, stranger than most, and had odd habits and mannerisms.

One of the things he had seen them do that baffled him was to sit still. Completely still, not looking left and right constantly, not listening for sounds of danger as he would, but just sitting and calming themselves. He had seen Ashar do amazing things while in that state. One of those amazing things was jumping up and down on his leg, trying to get him moving.

Garbee decided to try it and closed his eyes, trying to forget where he was and what he was about to do. At first, it only made him more uncomfortable. Every second he wasn't watching out was

another second for an enemy to get closer to him. His breathing reduced a bit, and he could feel the fear slipping back as he calmed down and was able to think.

Breathing! That was it. That was what she had told him. The mask wouldn't stop the gas, just keep it from getting into his nose and mouth; he would need to hold his breath when he went inside. He took five deep breaths, and before he could talk himself out of it, he ran around the front of the building and through the door.

He expected to be greeted by a host of armed lizard men waiting to kill him.

There was a host of them, all right, but they were scattered all over the floor, unconscious. The gas had done its work. Garbee realized he was just standing there staring at the scene, and his lungs were already starting to burn from holding his breath; he needed to move fast.

Merdia had described the one he needed to find, a red sash and fur-lined boots, but it was hard when they were all lying on each other. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of red; he pulled another lizard man off him and flipped the red sash soldier over.

He must have been an officer of some sort. Aside from the sash, his armor was much nicer. The sword at his belt had a jewel inset in its golden handle next to the large ring of keys.

He grabbed the keys and ran out of the door, sucking in a huge breath through the mask. The mask Merdia had told him to take off before breathing again because it would likely have some gas on it. He must have gotten lucky. No gas had reached him.

He rounded the corner back to his hiding place and landed face down. He hadn't gotten lucky, he thought, as the gas knocked him out.

Ashar was exhausted. He had been up all night connected to the life around the camp. He had never done anything like this before. When he had gathered the jackthorn nuts for the village, it had almost killed him. He had more control now than he did then.

It was easier for him to maintain himself amid so many tiny voices. It took less effort to control his army, but it still took a toll. Everything was almost ready, even Merdia's idea coming along nicely. When she asked, he wasn't sure if he could do it, but after some trying, he found the right voices in the chaos and called them to him. Now, they were waiting for him to unleash them.

Regent Proctor Alliman was about to learn why you shouldn't get into a fight with Merdia.

He could see Garbee working his way through the fence behind the barracks.

His army of beetles was already moving with their special cargo. It had taken a while for him to find an insect that was immune to the daffon gas; almost everything just stopped moving when it

got near the barrels of purple liquid, except for the bark beetles that burrowed into the cypress trees around the camp. These seemed unaffected by it, and Ashar made a mental note to ask Garbee what he knew about the beetles later.

Now, there were thousands of them in a line moving past a barrel that was leaking a bit. Each one would rub against the bottom of the barrel as it passed, collecting a small drop on its back. It was a slow process to get enough of them into the barracks, but eventually, he had them lined up along every wall and in the rafters. Simultaneously, each beetle opened its hard shell and started beating its daffon-coated wings, spreading the gas into the air.

He gave Garbee the signal and watched in horror as he froze up. Ashar could see the fear on his face, his eyes darting constantly toward the fence and toward escape.

He didn't know what to do, so he made the mantis jump around to get Garbee's attention, but to no avail. Seeing the nervous little man steady himself and gather his courage surprised him. When he moved, he moved fast. It always amazed Ashar when Garbee ran. It was like watching a rabbit at full speed, body staying low to the ground, legs moving too fast to see clearly.

With keys in hand, Garbee ran from the barracks, rounded the corner, and collapsed unconscious. The plan was ruined before it ever got started. Ashar tried to think of something to salvage this catastrophe. The bees, he would have to be careful, but the bees might be able to help. Ashar had learned that trying to control large swarms directly was dangerous.

Instead, he had to let the swarm know what he needed and let it do it for him, largely without direct control. This would be different; he would have to take control of several bees without the rest following, and there were a lot of bees around the camp right now, phase one, waiting for the signal.

He carefully found a few bees off on their own and moved them over to Garbee, making sure the whole swarm wasn't doing the same.

"Sorry, buddy, this is going to hurt," he whispered to himself. It was likely that Garbee had only gotten a small dose of daffon gas. Any more, and this wouldn't work.

Ashar directed the bees to a patch of exposed skin just above Garbee's collar and told them to start stinging. By the fifth sting, he could see Garbee twitching; by the ninth, he was on his feet swatting bees away. Ashar would have screamed aloud, but Garbee was hard-wired not to be noticed; despite the pain, he danced and swatted in complete silence.

Once Garbee was off and moving again, Ashar turned his attention to Bayer's cage.

The termites had made good progress on the ropes that bound his arms and legs.

Bayer should be able to break them with a strong pull. Once Garbee got the heavy iron collar off, Bayer would be free, and the real fun would begin. He heard heavy footsteps from the hallway

and the guards speaking in hissing voices. They were coming to take him. It didn't matter. He could see that Garbee had made it to Bayer without being seen.

There was nothing they could do to stop what was coming now. The door flew open, and the guards entered, grabbing him roughly under the arms and lifting his limp body off the floor. Before he broke the connection, he sent one last thought out to his collected army.

Attack.

He was laughing when they threw him down on the floor in front of Regent Proctor Alliman.

"Glad to see you are in a good mood this morning. Don't worry; it won't last long," Alliman said to him.

"You're wrong about that. My day is just getting started and is quite pleasant from my perspective! And it only gets better from here," Ashar said as bravely as he could.

In truth, staying connected all night had taken far more out of him than he thought. He couldn't stand, and it was all he could do to sit up enough to see Alliman on the other side of the desk.

"I think that wound on your head is worse than we thought. You seem to be delusional, but I'll play along. What, do tell, is going to happen today that you are so deliriously happy about?"

"Merdia is here," Ashar said, and he let the comment sink in.

"Your little sister? That Merdia? If she is here, we will find her and toss her in the cell next to yours. Why would that make you happy?"

"No, the fleas are going to make me happy. I am just waiting until she gets here. She would be angry if she missed it; it was her idea, after all."

"What are you talking about? Make sense, boy!" Alliman screamed at him.

"I told you, Merdia is coming. If you listen, you can hear her approaching," Ashar said, holding his hand to his ear as if to hear better.

Alliman was about to say something when the first scream rang out. He turned and looked at Ashar, who just smiled back at him.

"What ... What is happening?" Alliman shrieked.

Ashar closed his eyes momentarily and reached into himself and the power he could feel there. He let it fill him and build.

When he opened his eyes again, emerald fire was pouring free, flickering around his temples.

"I told you before that you should let Bayer out. I have done it for you. You should have killed him when you had the chance." Ashar said.

Bayer was tired of the mantis in front of his face, making the wait, wait signs. He was going to eat that bug first when he got free. And he was deeply tired of waiting, frustrated by it. He heard something off to his left and felt a small hand grab one of the fingers on his massive paw.

"I'm here, my friend. Let's get you out of here."

"Garbee. It is good to see you again, old friend."

"Keep it down, you idiot. We aren't out of the woods yet," said Garbee in a small voice.

Garbee squeezed between the timbers of the cage and grabbed the collar, frantically ramming the first key into the lock.

There were about ten keys on the ring, and after eight, none as yet had opened the lock. There was a buzzing sound, and Garbee turned to see a dark mass moving through the air toward them. Time was up. Bayer was supposed to be free before the bees showed up. The last key clicked in and gave a satisfying snap when the lock turned, and the collar sprang open.

"Get clear." Bayer rumbled.

Garbee moved quickly out of the cage and stopped twenty feet away, looking back at Bayer. When he broke free of the bonds, most of the cage seemed to explode as timbers were ripped apart and thrown in all directions, Bayer using all his might to free himself.

The bees ignored Bayer and Garbee, going straight for the lizardmen.

Ashar had convinced them the lizardmen were raiding their hive, and they needed to defend it. It was still early, and only a few guards walking on patrol were up.

Most were still sleeping. At first, the guards cursed and swatted at the bees attacking them. With their thick, scaly hides, the bees had a hard time finding soft tissue where their stingers could pierce. When they found it, the guards went from swatting to screaming and rolling on the ground to get the bees off them. When the bees found the sleeping soldiers, the real noise started.

Hundreds of lizardmen streamed out, covered in bees.

"I think that was my queue to get to work," Bayer said with a smile as he leaped into the middle of the screaming soldiers and gave them something else to shriek about.

With each swipe, he sent another four or five sailing through the air to land painfully on the bees stinging them. Garbee had always had an aversion to violence, but he had to admit, he rather enjoyed watching Bayer work.

Merdia walked up to the front gate and waved at the two lizard men guarding it, which caused them a bit of confusion since people normally ran from them. There was something strange about the girl. There seemed to be a small vortex swirling around her.

When she pointed her finger at them, the vortex of bees suddenly shot out. It surrounded the two guards, attacking them without mercy. Merdia walked by the thrashing lizard men and opened the gate. Ashar had given her a whole hive of bees for herself after he convinced them she was their queen, and they were very protective of her. If she focused, she could point them in a certain direction. It wasn't much control, but it worked well enough.

She walked casually through the camp as if taking a leisurely stroll on a spring day. When she reached the first pen, she opened the door and stepped in.

Everyone recoiled from the strange girl with bright green eyes surrounded by bees.

"Hello, everyone. I am Merdia. That big guy over there is Bayer. Say hi, Bayer."

Merdia waved at Bayer.

Bayer stopped swatting lizard men long enough to stand up and wave back, the soldier he was holding by the leg flopping back and forth comically as he did so.

"Hi, Merdia," he replied.

"I think that one is trying to get away," Merdia said, pointing to a bee-covered soldier running hard away from Bayer. He turned and threw the soldier he was holding a hundred feet and hit the running man square in the back, taking them both to the ground where they stayed.

"Thanks," he said, returning to disabling all the soldiers he could catch.

Merdia turned back to the crowd and addressed them.

"A lot is happening that probably doesn't make much sense right now. I get that, but you have to trust me. Grab what food you can and get to the front gate. Another friend, Garbee, is waiting there for you. He will guide you through the mountains to safety."

Merdia scanned the crowd as she spoke, looking for a familiar face, hoping to see her family. But there were only strangers.

She opened the other pens, each time hoping her family would be there, each time disappointed. She was standing outside the last pen when Bayer came up, having finished with the guards. He could see the pain on her face, the lost hope and defeat written there.

"Come now, Sweetpea, it's not as bad as that. There is much to celebrate today. We will find them; I will find them with you, I promise."

Merdia hugged Bayer and buried her face in his thick fur as she cried.

"You still have people who need you. You know how stupid and helpless Ashar is without you. we should go get him before he does something dumb."

Merdia laughed and wiped away the tears.

"Probably too late. You are right though, Ashar has been left unattended for too long, so who knows what kind of trouble he has gotten himself into without me to remind him of his dimwittedness."

She grabbed a handful of fur and pulled herself onto Bayer's back, grateful to have her friend back.

The sounds of violence from outside Alliman's office continued to rise and get closer.

There were several final screams from the guards outside the door, and everything went quiet. That scared the Regent Proctor more than the sounds of his men screaming and impact sounds that could only be coming from Bayer. Ashar was lying on his side on the floor. He no longer had the strength to keep himself upright but had one last thing to do.

"I warned you. It's too late to stop what's coming. Now you must answer to her. Good luck with that," Ashar said weakly.

The doors into the office creaked slightly, then ripped off the hinges and crashed to the floor as Bayer entered with Merdia sitting on his back.

"Are you all right, brother?"

"I am now."

"You look terrible, and dumber, if that's even possible. What do you think, Bayer?"

"It's good to see you again, Ashar. Now, what are we going to do with this one?" Bayer said as he walked up to Alliman, towering over him.

Marcus Alliman had never been so frightened and confused in his life. Nothing that was happening made any sense. The beast looking down on him was terrifying, but the small girl on his back, who seemed to command her own personal swarm of bees, was far more frightening. She had eyes like her brother's. Eyes boring into him with a fury he found disturbing.

"We are going to have a little chat. If I don't like any of your answers, Bayer will rip off one of your limbs. His choice," Merdia said coldly.

"First question. Where were you taking these people, and what were you going to do to them? Remember, each wrong answer costs you something you don't want to live without."

"South. They are being taken south to Cartine. I don't know what happens to them after that!" Alliman shrieked, his voice filled with fear.

"Nope. Bayer, limb," Merdia said as if she had become bored.

Bayer took a hefty step forward.

"No! Wait. Wait. I will tell you. Some will go to work in the shipyards and the foundries, while others will be selected for the army," Alliman said, hoping his answer would keep Bayer from ripping him apart.

"Almost. You are a sneaky little worm, aren't you? Tell me about the army. I've seen your soldiers; they don't look like the people in those pens. Care to explain that? Or do you need some motivation?" Merdia asked, the bees around her swirling faster in response to her agitation.

"I don't know how they do it, and that's the truth. No one does, but they are created. People are combined with some dark magic that makes them change. It takes time, but after a year, the transformation is complete, and they become the soldiers you see here, ruthless and obedient."

"Next question. There were people taken from the Northern Islands. Did they come through here?" Anger was creeping into Merdia's voice.

"No."

Merdia raised an eyebrow at his incomplete answer.

"I mean, no, they didn't come here. This outpost is to hold those taken from the mainland before transporting them south. There is more than one fleet, so the one that took your people has probably sailed south already, to escape the winter seas."

Alliman had given up trying to hide anything from Merdia.

"The ships that are on the way here, do they carry people?"

"No, most of them are small ships carrying the soldiers on raids. Once a year, they send a large cargo ship up from the south to pick up the prisoners before winter; it is sent up empty so it can return full."

Merdia jumped off Bayer's back and knelt next to Ashar, motioning Bayer down. The giant bear lay down as flat as he could so the weakened Ashar could climb onto his back. Merdia looked up at him and asked, "Are we done here, brother?"

"Not yet," he said softly. Pointing to a cabinet across the room, he said, "That cabinet, there are maps there. We need them. I found them when I was preparing your surprise." Merdia emptied the cabinet's contents into a large leather satchel she slung over her shoulder.

"So, you were able to do it? Really?" Merdia asked hopefully.

"Oh, you have no idea. It took me a while to tune into them, but they were easy to control once I did. That's not the fun part. The fun part is I created a connection between them and our good proctor here, which should continue with their offspring. Each new generation will inherit a strong attraction to him. He will never be free of them."

"I'm sorry. I tell people you are stupid all the time. It's not true, you are only stupid some of the time. This is definitely one of your less stupid moments, brother. Well done."

"Thank you."

"What are you talking about?" Regent Proctor Alliman screamed hysterically.

"Do you remember what I said would make me laugh?" Ashar asked as he closed his eyes and reached out with the last of his strength.

Alliman searched his memory. What had the boy said? He couldn't remember. It was something about, about ...

"Fleas," he whispered in horror. Something moved in the corner of his eye, but when he turned, there was nothing. It seemed as if the furniture around the room was getting dark and blurry.

He could see everything, but nothing focused correctly. Whatever was causing it was moving toward him. He screamed out loud when he realized he was seeing a thick mass of fleas all hopping toward him, each too small to make out. But in numbers, they formed a black veil covering everything as they raced toward him.

Ashar could open his eyes for a moment to see the black cloud enveloping the weaselly little man. He lacked the scales and thick skin of the soldiers to protect him from the millions of fleas biting him. Ashar smiled and then passed out.

Bayer turned and gently walked out of the room, careful not to dislodge his unconscious passenger. Merdia strode next to him, the cries from the office fading as they exited and surveyed the area. There were still a few lizard men running around, but the bees weren't finished with them yet, and most were running for the harbor, hoping to find safety in the water.

There was a crowd at the front gate, but Garbee had already gotten them organized and moving up the trail. There was a crash from behind them as an oil lamp hit the floor and flames spread. There was another thump as a candle fell off its holder, setting a bench on fire. Merdia could see several large cockroaches scurrying away from the holder and realized Ashar was doing it.

"Bayer, I think Ashar took one more shot at them before he passed out, I think he is burning this place to the ground," Merdia said with a bit of wonder in her voice.

"I like this kid. He is really starting to grow on me."

Bayer pointed to the barracks and the smoke pouring out of the windows. Every building was engulfed in flames when they reached the gate. Garbee was leading the people up the trail, so Bayer and Merdia waited until the last of them set out before bringing up the rear.

"What will you do now?" Bayer asked Merdia as they walked.

"Ashar and I will find our family. Nothing has changed. It's only gotten harder, that's all. Ashar knows it. It's why he had me grab the maps. He understands what comes next."

Bayer laughed, which caused the people ahead of them to turn out of fear briefly.

"You are amazing, little Merdia. I have never seen such resolve before and wouldn't expect to find it in such a small package. You and your brother are a force to be reckoned with. I am lucky to have traveled with you. If you don't mind, I think I will travel with you a bit farther. And I would like to meet your family one day."

"I don't know. This is going to be dangerous, isn't it? Are you sure a delicate flower like you is up for that sort of thing? Can't have you breaking down in tears every time a spider runs in front of you," Merdia replied.

"Truthfully? I am afraid of spiders. But I will try to keep the crying to a minimum."

"Fine, you can tag along."

"I get seasick too. It's bad."

"Okay, no ocean travel, got it."

"Deserts too. My coat is thick, so I get hot and itchy."

"Temperate climates, no problem."

"I don't like humid places."

"Are you kidding me? How can someone so ferocious be so delicate? You realize we will probably have to get on a boat and travel to a hot, itchy, humid jungle full of spiders, right?"

"I hadn't really thought of that. Perhaps I should just keep the complaining to a minimum for the rest of the adventure?"

"That sounds like a good idea."

Ashar had never been so tired in his life.

It wasn't a lack of sleep but a deeper exhaustion starting in his bones and spreading everywhere from there. His new gifts came with a price. He could use the life around him, but it also used him, taking a little bit each time. The last day had been hard on him. He had never connected that deep or for that long before, and it felt as if he might not recover from it.

He had used the last of his strength to command the fleas to attack Regent Proctor Alliman. Then he pushed a little harder to set the cockroaches to knock over anything with a flame. He couldn't open his eyes to see, but he could smell the smoke and knew it had worked.

Bayer was the only thing he could feel, nestling in his thick fur.

The brute's heat kept him warm, and his massive heartbeat was a slow drum he could focus on. He knew Merdia was close by, not that he could see or hear her, but he could feel her.

Over the last day, they had become more familiar with their bond, which had grown stronger. He could feel her even when they weren't connected. He could feel the mix of emotions running through her, the joy at having saved him and Bayer, the sadness she felt that their people hadn't been among those they rescued.

He felt something else below it all, past her doubts and fears, something hard and unyielding, a purpose.

Merdia had changed in the last few days. The adventure had stopped being a child's game. Now, it had taken on a more dire aspect. Now, she finally understood what was at stake.

Ashar and Bayer being captured and nearly killed had brought the whole situation into focus for her. The naive child who thought they would just show up and rescue everyone was gone. It made him a little sad to think so much of their childhood had been stripped from them.

They had been forced to leave all that behind and grow up too soon.

It was hard to stay awake, and he drifted in and out of consciousness for the rest of the day as they moved away from the coast and back inland toward the main road.

He became aware of hands gently pulling him off Bayer, laying him in a soft bed of grass and green leaves, where he was covered by warm blankets. He opened his eyes to see Merdia sitting next to him, keeping watch, Bayer and Garbee on the other side, doing the same. He could see hundreds of others sitting facing him, all with their heads bowed, chanting softly.

"Whaaa ...?" was all he managed to say. He felt Merdia's hand on his arm.

"Quiet now, brother. You need to rest; we have been worried about you. We are safe now. There were a few lizard men along the way, but they are only brave in large groups. One look at Bayer was usually enough to make them run off and leave us alone. I'm sorry, but Mother and Father weren't in the pens."

She was nearly crying when she spoke the last.

"I know. It's all right." He had meant to say more but lacked strength.

"You have done well, young master. There are many here who owe their lives to you. They honor you," Bayer's deep voice rumbled.

Ashar looked at the crowd around him, confused. He had thought it was his fault they had gotten into trouble in the first place.

It was his rush to reach the coast despite the danger nearly costing Bayer his life.

"No, you are wrong," Bayer said, reading his face. "I, too, owe you my life, and I am grateful. You may not want to play the hero, but it is too late for that, I'm afraid. You should have thought of it before you did something heroic."

Ashar tried to shake his head but barely managed to move it.

Garbee said. "You could have easily saved yourself and left the others to their fate, but you didn't run. You stayed and fought until everyone was safe. Trust me, I know when it's time to run and hide, you don't, but I do. Bayer is right. You don't get to pretend you aren't the hero today."

"It turns out Garbee is a pretty good storyteller and has been telling everyone what happened, what you did, and what it cost you to do it. That's why all these people are around you now, to thank you and honor you. Obviously, they will stop once you can speak again and resume saying and doing all the stupid things you say and do," Merdia said with a smile.

He tried to laugh but failed.

"We should be back on the main road within a few days, according to Garbee, and then all these people can return to their homes and families. After that, we will have to figure out what we will do," Merdia said.

"South," Ashar managed to croak.

Merdia, Bayer, and Garbee looked at him and nodded, already knowing the fight wasn't over yet. He could see in their faces they had already decided to continue. After what they had seen at the camp, they couldn't just walk away and leave so many to such a fate.

"The way is long," Bayer observed.

"And dangerous," Garbee said.

"The odds are against us, brother," Merdia reminded him.

"You forget ... how good I am ... at doing ... stupid things, sister."

"How can I? You never stop reminding me. Let's go find our people," Merdia replied with tears cascading down her face.