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# Keeper of Darkness

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# KEEPER OF DARKNESS

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2016

# KEEPER OF DARKNESS

by

MEAGAN KINLEY

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
The University of Texas at El Paso  
in Partial Fulfillment  
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for the Degree of  
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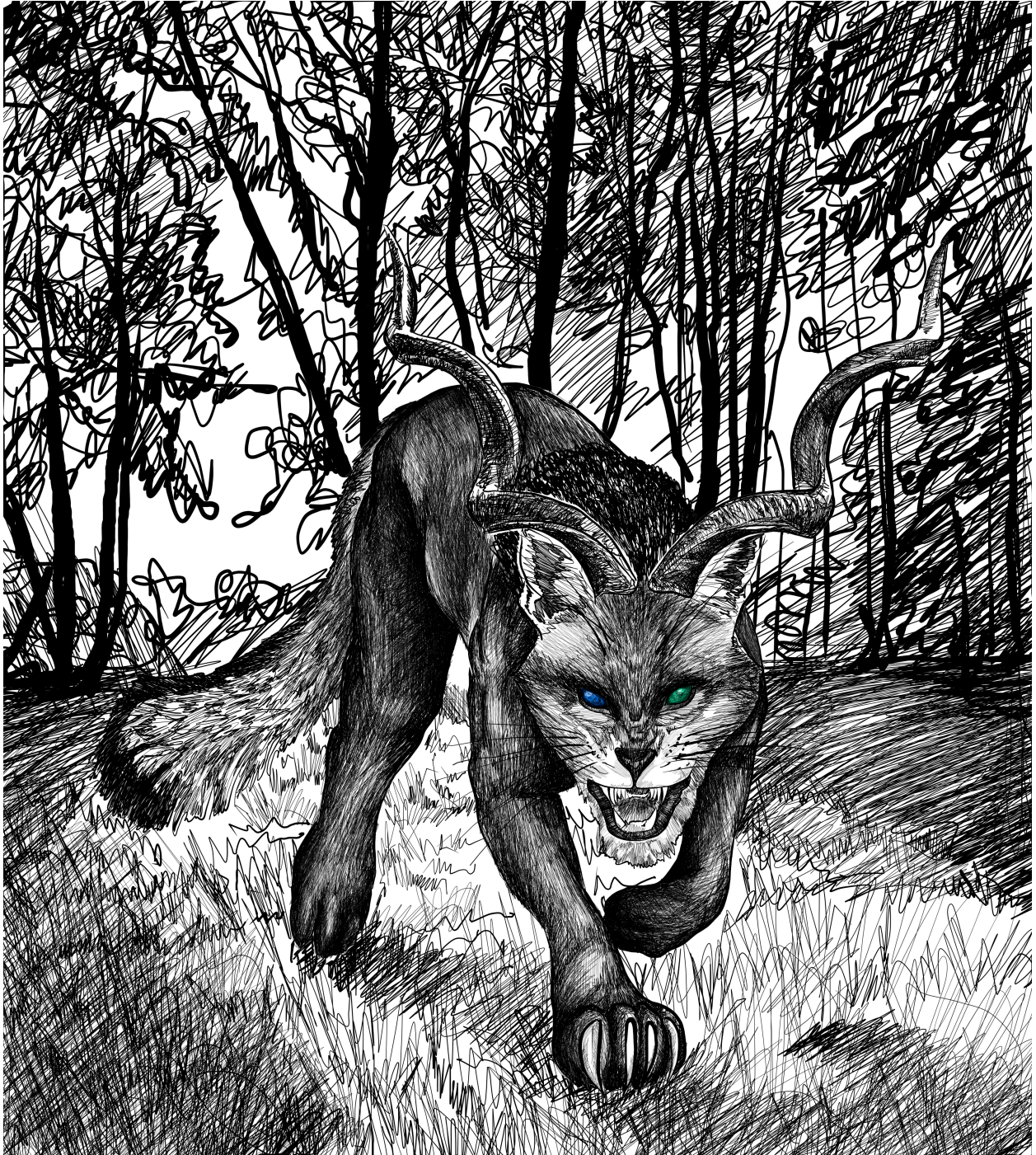
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## Illustration of the Bronte



## Chapter 1

Darkness, a strange creature. It looms, waits and devours. But in a tunnel deep in the ground, a boy with shaggy brown hair by the name of Hal slept. It was the beginning of a new day, but morning was different in the forest of Thule. There was only haze and a yellow, dead light pushing its way through the trees.

Lying awake with his eyes shut, he heard the scrap of a lid against the cast iron pot in the next room. She was already awake. Pulling himself up from the pile of pelts, he stretched his feet out into the dirt; the earth between his toes was cold. Through the deerskin curtain that separated him from the rest of the tunnel, the outline of fire shown through. Light from auburn flames glimmered across the rock walls invading the shadows. Pulling his shirt over his head, he ducked under the curtain and into the glowing room. A small wooden table with four stools was at the center, and in one of the stools chopping rots sat his Aunt Mare. A leather-skinned woman in her late forties, she was Hal's soul provider and the only living member of his direct family.

"Dobray," she said welcoming him in her usual gentle voice. This was one aspect of her that had always surprised Hal. She had such a quiet, kind spirit; but in the woods, she was animal. When she was young she had been one of the fiercest hunters of her age. But as he looked at her now, he tried to ignore the lines of age that had more than made their mark across her weathered brow.

"Dedray," Hal answered with a tired smile, his chestnut hair was tussled and his eyes were still foggy from a night of hazy dreams. She reached over to the iron pot over the fire, opened the lid and spooned several dollops of brassy liquid into a wooden bowl and then returned to her seat, lapping up the last of her own breakfast. Taking a seat and his spoon in hand, he looked down at the meal. The small cut rots stared up at him. It was in that moment that he realized his brother was gone.

“Is Ames already gone?” he asked. While Ames wasn’t technically his true brother, Mare had taken him in after his mother and father had been killed. The three of them had lived together ever since.

“Dobray.” A boy, about the same age as Hal pulled back a curtain from behind him. With blue eyes and auburn hair, the boys looked nothing alike. He shot a sleepy grin at Hal and walked towards the washbasin; with a single pull water began to flow and he dunked his head under the sputtering stream of water. Mare handed Hal a bowl of rota before taking her own bowl to the table and sitting down once again. Hal followed her and together they began slurping the broth.

“Elm has work for both you today,” she said without looking up. Hal rolled his eyes. Ames slammed his body down in a chair at the table.

“Looks like you’re coming with me.” Ames said biting into a rot. Hal ignored him and continued eating. He knew what this meant. They were running low on resources. It wasn’t unusual for Mare to send Ames to the village. It had been the dying wish of his mother for him to become a *davidae*, a sacred warrior of the forest. To do that, one had to work for the village before an appointment into the group could be made. Ames spent his days serving—but when Mare needed the help, he worked for Elm. To get by, the three of them did odd jobs to trade with the other villagers. Elm managed the Tarrent—the large cavern that served as the village’s water supply. Throughout the day the people of the village collected nearby at the col, selling various goods, and in the case of Hal and Mare, the game they hunted and the plants they grew. And that wasn’t much. They were barely making ends meet. He, Mare and Ames had a delicate schedule. Every fourth day they would go to their secret patch in the forest and nurse their pitiful farm. Every other day they would hunt, and every sixth day they would rest, regroup,

mend, and fix any broken weapons or other tools. It was a simple and delicate plan that ensured their survival. But when times were dire, Mare would have one or both of the boys work for Elm or one of the other Abyai men of the village to get the tools or food they needed. Having finished his rota, Hal stood from the table. He wouldn't need his spear today. He wouldn't need anything but his hands. Working for Elm meant hard labor.

Mare stood up and took his bowl from him. He could sense she felt bad asking him to go work in the village.

"Here," she said holding out a leather pouch. Hal grabbed it from her. He could smell the dried meat inside.

"Tatow." Hal smiled weakly. She handed another pouch to Ames.

"Ready?" Ames asked, standing and going to the wall of growing reems. He picked three of the fleshy plump plants from their roots and placed them in his pouch. Hal nodded and followed after Ames who had opened the door to the burrow. Walking out into the dark tunnel, the air was filled with the familiar fresh earthy smell. The tunneliers were digging. Something must have happened—but before he could finish his thought, Ames took off running.

"Last one trades for deuv," He yelled back through the dark tunnel. Hal took off down the dusty pathway. With no torch, the boys ran in complete darkness. Their feet echoed off the ground as the dirt paths of the Fahri slowly became the rock floors of the Medai.

Hal was catching Ames. Dodging the torches of other villagers as they passed in their heated contest. They ran deeper into the tunnels of Thule until they reached the entrance to the col. Ames had beat Hal. He turned around, his face red, his breathing heavy.

"You did have a head start," Hal said as he struggled to regain his breath. Ames smiled.

"Come on, to the buckets." Before them was the col, a large trading post for the villagers

of Thule. It was the place they went to sell their rots, reems, dried meat and any other plants they could grow. When he was younger and his uncle was still alive, Hal remembered them having a large cart of plants that they would wheel down to the col to trade—but that was a long time ago.

Hal and Ames walked across the narrow rock bridge that lead into the col. Below them, water cascaded into unseen caverns. Through the maze of black, crags and stalagmites, Hal nodded to the familiar faces, each lit by torchlight. Nen was at her usual post selling her white reins out of a basket she had fashioned from twigs. She must have traded for them. The basket was new.

“Dobray, Hal.” Hal turned, looking for the source of the voice.

“Dedray, Trei,” Hal said to an aged man with short, white hair that greeted him.

“Working for Elm today?” Trei asked.

“Yes—me and Ames.” Hal looked around for his brother but he was already at the buckets, standing in line to pull water next to the falls.

“Take this,” Trei said holding out a small green fren.

“I can’t—” but Trai waved his protest away.

“Mare fixed Hily’s arm.”

“Tatow,” Hal said as he took the fren from the man and went to join Ames at the buckets. When Hal reached him, they were next in line. Close to the falls, mist covered his hair in thin dew.

“Go ahead.” Ames said to Hal as the person in front of them vacated the buckets. Hal stepped forward and pulled the long thick rope. From the other side of the system, the bucket appeared with sloshing water. Hal stopped pulling, walked over and cupped his hands as he threw water over his brow. After drinking a handful, Ames took his turn and then walked over to

the cavern wall where Hal waited for him.

Hal watched as the five members of the *davidae* entered the col. He nudged Ames.

“Look.”

The boys watched together as the *davidae* men stood in line for the buckets. The crowds around them dwindled as people avoided them; the line in front of them disappeared. They wore dark coats with black fur, their necks adorned with the claws of those they had killed. Each of them covered in scars, and their skin thick with ware. They were the hunters.

“Sarv has more fur than the last time I saw him,” Hal whispered to Ames. A brown haired man took his turn at the buckets.

“Still not as many as Fil,” Ames. They eyed Fil. Taller than the rest, he had a dark black beard that reached his chest. “I wonder when they are going out again.”

“It looks like it will be soon,” Hal said, eyeing their spears slung over their backs on thin leather straps. “Don’t worry,” he patted Ames’ shoulder. “You’ll be one of them soon—and when you are, just remember to bring me some of that fur.”

“One day.” Ames took them in one last time. “Just you don’t forget you’re trading for *deuv* after we’re done,” Ames said with a smirk.

“Let’s get going—you know how Elm gets when he waits.”

The boys walked through the col. There were hardly any villagers at this end of the cavern. Reaching what appeared to be a dead end, Ames started climbing up the mass of rock, disappearing over the top. Hal followed and they each descended down a ladder cut into the rock. One foot after another, their breathing caught rhythm as they climbed down to the tarrent. The rhythm stopped as Ames jumped off the ladder and onto solid ground. Hal followed.

“You’re late.” A gruff voice bellowed from behind them.

“We’re here now.” Hal stepped in front of Ames. He didn’t want Ames to get in trouble with Elm. It was better for Elm to think Hal was at fault.

“You two are down in the ores. You know what to do.” Hal and Ames nodded and took off down the tunnels that descending deeper with each step. The passageway led to the water’s edge, accessible only by climbing down the high wide stairs. Hal took to jumping as the stairs were quite high and wore on his knees if he took steps on each foot like Ames liked to do. After the hike, the boys finally arrived at the water’s edge.

“It’s going to be cold.” Ames said.

“It always is.” Hal jumped down off the last large step and into the crisp blue water. Ames followed and the brothers waded through the chilly cavern, making their way to the ores.

The brother’s spent the rest of the day moving rocks and mending the pulley system. When they were finished, they walked back up to the col and Hal traded with a villager named Rik. He gave him some of his meat earnings for the debt he owed Ames. The brother’s put the red plants in their pouches and returned to their burrow and Mare. Once they had eaten, they each retired to bed, preparing for another day of work.

\* \* \*

The next day Hal awoke, dressed, pulled back the curtain to find Mare stoking the fire.

“Ames left early this morning to sell some of the rot crop. He woke up early and dug them all up, best not to wait too long with those,” she said scrapping the last bite of her rota from the bowl. Steam rose from the surface of the brown liquid. “He’ll be serving today.”

“So he’s not coming with us?”

“He mentioned something about spending the day with Deir—” she said before standing and taking her bowl to a large basin and scrubbing it clean.



“Today I think we will take the Tiburti,” she said. Hal turned to her. His heart sank.

“But we’ve have taken that road,” he said. “There’s nothing out there. The animals know not to go there.” The Tiburti path was the closest area to their village. It was easy to run through the trees and wander along one of the various creeks that meandered through—but it was too easy and the villagers had run all the animals out of it. The other parts of the forest were much more treacherous, some leading to the mountains to the northeast, others to the thick perilous woods of the Okpa. But in those woods—Hal was sure there was game big enough to feed him, Ames and Mare as well as enough to sell for other valuable tools they needed.

“Yes, but it’s safe. You forget, you’re still learning,” she sighed. “And well, I’m not as young as I used to be,” the last part of that she said under her breath. Her hazel eyes glinted as she continued stirring the taro with a long spoon.

“What is safety if we don’t catch anything?” Hal asked, frustration began brewing in his stomach as he took the final bites of taro. “Why not the Opka?”

There was a thud as Mare dropped the lid back on the pot. Her smile and all the kindness that had previously warmed it were gone. Her eyes shot across the table.

“You know exactly why.”

And he did. There were many hunting trails in the forest but none were as dangerous as those found along the Opka. They had taken root in those trees and it was from there that they attacked. But, even with the mounting deaths, there were also stories of innumerable game waiting—a cornucopia of wealth to be gained by the champion who dared to venture into the depths of that untapped unknown. They had had this discussion many times before, each time yielding more angst and less grace.

“You’re right,” he said and turned to find his pack. But in his heart he knew she wasn’t.

They were going to starve if they kept on like this.

All of a sudden there was a loud pounding at the door. Mare crossed the room and opened the door. A small boy rushed in. His face was pale and the way he ran into the tunnel made the hairs on Hal's neck stand on end.

"Well it's a bit early in the day to be seeing you, isn't it Lev?" Mare asked masking her concern. Lev seemed out of breath from the journey through the tunnels. He looked up at Mare, intimidated and tired.

"Piq was attacked—he's at Bau's place. They need you to stitch him up fast. They got him. It's his leg," he said.

"When did it happen?" Mare's tone was stern.

"Last night—it was a blackwalk." Mare was grave. Blackwalks were what the Thulians called the nightmarish lure of the beasts. The bronte used their powers to enter the minds of the sleeping villagers. And while they slept the bronte created false visions, pulling the vulnerable out of the tunnels into the darkness to meet their deaths.

Lev was hunched over now, his breathing slowed. Hal looked at the boy. Through the holes in his thin shirt he could see his ribs. Even by Thulian standards Piq was small.

"Where's Fril?" she asked as she stood up and began gathering supplies from an ornate, hand carved cupboard to the left of the fire. Fril was the only Thulian left in the upper tunnels of the Fahri who had the skill to heal. The Festens who lived in the Medai and the Abyai who could help them wouldn't come up to the higher tunnels and risk their lives.

"We tried to get him first, Mare. But he's still helping Juud from yesterday. They say he probably won't make it. It got his throat and all the blood . . ."

As Hal listened, anger brewed. The davidae were the only defense the villagers had

against the bronte. It if it wasn't for their constant presence in the tunnels and out in the forest, Hal and the rest of them would have been hunted long ago. Ames had always wanted to become a member of the dauidae, but their constant race to survive had impeded him from training.

"Hal, I'm going to leave you today," Mare said, putting the tools into her pack.

"What?" Hal asked unsure.

"You heard me, I'm headed to Bau's—Piq needs help and since Fril is still dealing with last night's attack, I've got to go." She threw her pack around her arm and started putting water into a canteen as she stared meaning into his eyes. "But you're ready to go alone," Mare said. Hal couldn't believe it.

"Alone?" he said dumbfounded. It was tradition for Thulian parents to allow their offspring to begin going into the forest by themselves at an early age, but Aunt Mare had been unyielding and with the large amount of death in their family she had every right to be. While she had allowed Ames and Hal to go out together without her, Hal had never been allowed to go out by himself. Being alone in the wood was a sacred practice. Hal had yearned for this for so long. But there was a trade-off, for the added quiet in being by oneself, there was added risk. If you were attacked, there would be no one to drag you back to the village.

"But listen to me, you are to go on the Tiburti—don't go anywhere else," she said. A smile graced his lips.

"Thank you," was all he could mouth. He turned and began packing his tools. He looked for his spear. It was leaning on the wall closest to the door. Seeing the weapon filled his heart with pride. The spear had been his fathers, and his father's father before him. The staff itself was ornately carved with numerous leafed tree branches that reached and arched for the tip. It was the only item of meaning he owned.

After she had filled her canteen she looked at Hal one last time as she held the knob to the tunnel door in her hand.

“The Tiburti—stick to the trees and don’t stay anywhere too long. If the leaves start to fall, run.” She opened the door to the tunnel and disappeared through the winding dirt-paved darkness.

“Come on Lev,” she called. The pale boy gave one final look at Hal and followed her out into the tunnels.

Hal bolted the door behind him. He had waited years for this day to come. With the weight of the task before him, he weaved through the tunnel to the closest ladder. It was muscle memory to be in here, but once outside he would be by himself. He and Ames had snuck out many times before on various occasions when Aunt Mare had been called away or busy healing the villagers, but this was the first time he was allowed to be here. He knew the woods and he knew his craft. He was ready. As he finished climbing the ladder before him, he pushed open the trap door and stepped up into the musty, eternal gray twilight.

Like many of the Fahri, Hal was good at seeing in the bleak light. His eyes adjusted quickly to the outlines and figures of the trees before him. The characteristic that defined a good hunter in these woods was his ability to hear threats coming before they arrived. This was where Mare was talented. Her greatest hunting skill was her ability to detect friend or foe from yards away. She heard these hidden sounds in enough time to hide both herself, Hal and Ames when the bronte or other foes drew too close.

Hal held his spear in his right hand and sulked low to the ground, keeping the trees at his back the way Mare taught him. Taking slow breaths, he walked lightly over the crusty grass and fallen leaves, trying with all his might to not make a sound. It was decision time. Hal wanted

nothing more than to come back with a hefty piece of game; he imagined himself showing up to the village, a small deer or even a fox proudly slung over his shoulders.

. . . He also knew his chances of coming back with any animal were far less if he stuck to the Tiburti. . . but if Mare found out he strayed, would she ever trust him again?

As he cautiously followed the path to the crossroads, he looked around. The trees slouched over him, their watchful gaze an eerie reminder of what waited beyond. Looking east he could almost see the deer that waited. But his heart wavered. He couldn't jeopardize the trust of his only living relative, the person who continuously risked her life to provide for him. The Tiburti wood it was.

Hal walked on. As he did, he tried to picture the people of his village below him. He imagined children, women, and men, each beginning their day. Some, like him, beginning their own ascent into the dangerous forest to begin their own struggle to survive. Others he imagined cooking, sewing, wandering through the tunnels to go to the cavern. He imagined the fires in their burrows.

Burning day and night—he wished he could see the smoke clouds above him—the chimneys that ran through hollowed trees in and around the village. He remembered that Mare had once told him that the chimneys had to be moved to the trees because of the bronte. If they caught the scent of an underground chimney, they would not hesitate to dig it up and wreak havoc over countless tunnel passages, killing whatever crossed their paths.

Hal continued his pursuit on the trail listening for noises around him. The only sound, the siren-like wind that continuously beckoned leaves to abandon their limbs and fall slowly and calmly to the forest floor. It was the strangest part of the forest—the leaves never fully bloomed, just half-blossomed and fell in despair as if unable to fully live, broken and twisted.

A twig broke under his bare foot, the crisp sound broke through the wood. Hal rebounded against a tree and felt held his heart swallow itself. He closed his eyes and tried to clear his head and empty every thought into the fog of his mind. He tried to put an image of the forest into the frame of his thoughts. He and the other hunters never knew if this skill worked, but it was all they had in defense of the mind-hunting creatures. He continued to listen, trying hard to not think about the noise, but to simply be another part of the forest, another branch, another piece of bark until they finally passed.

There was only silence. Maybe the sound had been something else. A squirrel, a raccoon—there were many possibilities. The longer he waited, the more confident he felt he was truly alone. After what seemed like days, he picked up his spear from the dirt crested grass and resumed his hike.

*That was my chance.*

An owl hooted from an unseen post. He was passing unnoticed. To the left, Hal heard water. He followed the sound and after scanning the ground and surrounding trees, he knew he was at the hunting ground. At ease, he crouched down and cupped water in his hands taking full gulps. The forest was such a cold place. His hands ached with numbness as he pulled them out of the stream and wiped them on his shirt. Hal stood up again and relaxed his spear at his side as he looked around for a good hiding spot. His eyes moved upward and he spotted it. High above the creek was an arm-like limb, the perfect place to wait for the right moment. Below him, his leather soles crunched what sounded like acorns. Perhaps a herd of deer would pass and find them.

Climbing the tree, he ran his hardened hands over the calloused skin of the aged trunk. For a long stretch of time, the quiet chatter of the running water was all could hear. The water

was both a blessing and a curse. While it muted his movements and lured animals, it also made it difficult for him to hear them coming. Ready for the long game to begin, he leaned back into the tree and gave into the wait. The slow murmur of the water whispered a masked lullaby and his eyes began to grow heavy.

Time passed and Hal slept. Around him the forest stirred, entranced by its inhabitant. A slow cold gust whirled through the limbs of his tree, feeling the new outsider. To the east, they felt it. A low rumble echoed across the rocks and earth of the floor in slow circles of reverberation. The shudder and sound grew louder and louder until it reached Hal's tree. His eyes opened wide. How long had he been out, he did not know.

*I'm a fool.*

He looked around and saw the horrible leaves falling around him. They were coming. His thoughts raced. Silently he grabbed for the higher branches and did his best to climb the tree, higher and higher hoping to disappear above the range of their ears. Fear panged through his heart. He couldn't quiet his thoughts. They were coming right at him; closer and closer they ran in their great hoard. Who knew how many of them there were. There was no chance that many bronte would miss hearing his beating heart, miss hearing his rapid thoughts. From behind the branch, Hal peered through the curtain of black and saw the green, florescent firelights of the bronte below him. He had only seen those mysterious, eerie eyes alive a few times before, but never this close. They were not ugly and monstrous as the stories told—but bewitching. As they drew close to the stream, their stampede slowed and each stopped, crouching low, their hell bent backs arching to drink the water below him. They couldn't speak they didn't have to. This had only been confirmed too many times as they had used their power to lure the villagers out of their beds at night. They could hear each other's thoughts just like they heard the villager's

thoughts. And they could make you see what you wanted. It was their most lethal tool. They knew your next move before you had even taken it. The bronte continued to file in around him. Desperate to stay hidden, he clutched the trunk of the tree and put all of his effort into imagining himself as a lump in its massive form. The hoard was just ahead of him and miraculously showed no sign that they knew he was there.

He opened his eyes again and saw the small lanterns in the distance. There were too many of them to count. He pictured himself as a green limb—he breathed in the sound of the stream, allowing the fluid ripples to wash over his thoughts.

Down below the ghostly beacons continued to drink, meandering around the stream. They were unnatural creatures. As big as the largest buffalo, but slender and agile as the shrewdest wolf. And each of them had two twisting antlers that winded into the air in rapacious spirals. From the dying light, Hal could barely make out their colors. Each appeared to have its own hue, some were chestnut, others brown, and the darkest, a deadly black. This beast had crossed the stream and had his antlers and emerald green eyes pointed at the hoard.

A throat-ripping howl rang out. Hal awoke from his meditative concentration sure they had discovered him. But as he reached up to climb higher, he saw the unexpected. The green lights were fighting and clawing one another. The entire horde was attacking one a red bronte. Shades of flesh were flying through the air and the bronte fell to the ground and continued taking blow after blow. When he was finally still, the rest of the pack began to run away—the ground rumbled and quaked with the sound of their gigantic paws. He watched them as they raced south. But the one they attacked lay still. An eternity passed as one by one they ran into the distance, the sound of the earth-splintering horde faded and then silence returned yet again.

Hal looked to the place where the attack had occurred. He could faintly make out the



outline of one small lantern-like eye. It wavered unsteadily. It must be dead.

*Please be dead. Please be dead.* He waited. But the creature was still. The water in the stream continued to gurgle. Around him the leaves drifted slowly to the ground. It was late. He had to go.

He jumped down from the tree; the thud rang out through the forest. The creature was still lifeless. Hal could not walk around the creature entirely. He would have to walk past it in order to get back to the village. Slowly and carefully he moved his feet over the dirt. He didn't take his eyes from the beast. Hal had only seen the carcass of a dead bronte once. Some years before, a hunter had found one dead, but the one before him now was significantly smaller—perhaps a runt or a younger member of the pack?

With every step he could see more of the damage, there was missing chunks of meat, a big gash on his neck and another right beside his left antler. He was bleeding badly and the ground was littered with tufts of his fur.

He stood directly across the stream from the bronte. Only a few more paces until he could take off through the trees back towards the village. But as he took another step closer to freedom, Hal heard a low, menacing growl. A moment later the bronte had redoubled and stood shakily on its four hefty paws. Hal saw the beast bound toward him in slow motion. Teeth ripping and claws outstretched the bronte seemed to float through the air. Hal whipped his spear around but he didn't have time to aim. The bronte saw the spear and tried to duck out of the blow but it was too late. Hal watched in astonishment as the tip of the spear sunk into the beast's right eye. The bronte wheeled back in terror and shrieked before taking off into shadows of the nearby trees.

Adrenaline pulsed through him. His thoughts were clear as he turned to run back to the village. But then another idea—what if he brought the bronte back? He could see the looks on

the faces of the other villagers. The way Mare would light up with pride. How he would be remembered as the boy who brought back a bronte on his first solo hunt. Hal turned back around to face the grove of trees. The beast was already wounded, and probably blind. Hal gripped his spear tightly and walked, pushing back the underbrush. Through the trees he could see the green glow of one singular eye. The bronte was on the ground, heaving. He growled as Hal jumped forward and pointed the tip of his spear at the throat of the beast. He didn't struggle; he simply stared at Hal. Their eyes locked.

Despite the growl, the magnificent animal did not look like a member of monstrous band of killers. He had a soul and it was flickering out. For an instant the beast saw Hal and Hal saw him. They knew the danger of the other and neither moved. Exhausted and clearly near his end, the bronte fell limp. Hal held the spear, but even his hands prepared to strike, he couldn't deliver the blow. Hal looked at the grove around him. The leaves hadn't stopped falling. The sky above was darkening; the sick yellow glow was all but gone, fading behind the shadows of the tall muscle-less trees. He could feel the danger regrouping, the unseen eyes of a thousand dangers whispered in the wind.

He couldn't give the bronte to the daivadae, but he couldn't leave him here to die either. He grabbed the legs of the large animal, pulled him onto a dead branch and clumsily pulled the animal behind him through the spreading darkness.

## Chapter 2

*He would be there by nightfall—or so he hoped. It had been days since he had seen another person. He had taken the road just as he had been told. Dim stars dangled like ornaments above two grim mountains. He couldn't see them; he saw only the outline of darkness on the horizon, a shape that protruded through the sky. He tried not to think about how the mountains looked like teeth and how he felt that the light they extinguished was all that was left before the large canines closed in around him.*

\* \* \*

They had made it to the trapdoor. Looking around Hal scanned and listened half expecting the other bronte to run out from behind a gathering of trees and kill them both, but that fear of the unknown forest was beginning to shrink and fresh anxiety began to grow.

*If someone sees us. . .*

He also had no idea how he was going to get the bronte down through the pass without further injuring him. Doubt darkened his thoughts. Yes, he had saved the beast, suffered the burden on both his blistering hands and bent back of pulling him through the forest, but why? Something inside him pushed him on.

Carefully opening the trapdoor, he peered down into the stairwell. He could see the bronte would fit through the opening—but there was still the issue of getting the beast down. The creature was both bigger than Hal in weight and length. He obviously couldn't carry him. He had hardly been able to pull him through the forest, even with the help of the branch. There was only one option. Hal looked around one last time. Even through the chill, his brow was heavy with sweat. He could feel the eyes of the forest bearing down on him. If he waited any longer to get underground, they would find him. There was no more time. With a deep breath, he began to

push. Digging his feet deep into the dirt he drove the bronte forward with all his might and watched the beast disappear. The creature was magnificent, noiseless as he fell through the air and was swallowed by the darkness. Moments later, the sound of the crash reverberated up the hole.

Hal climbed onto the ladder, closed the trapdoor and raced down, one hand and foot after the other. The climb seemed much longer than normal and his arms shook. When he reached the dirt floor, he found the bronte. Pulling himself to the beast's breast, he listened for a heartbeat. The sound was faint, but despite all odds the creature was somehow alive. Without wasting another moment, he grabbed the bronte's forearms and pulled the beast behind him. His back writhed with pain as he bent back into the position he had assumed in the forest. He missed the branch. He had no idea how they were going to drag the bronte all the way through the tunnel.

But that wasn't his only worry. He knew what the consequences would be if anyone from the village saw what he pulled. For as long as the civilization had existed, the spear was used to kill prey, destroy enemies . . . and vanquish traitors. A shudder ran through his body as he pushed the thought away. Hal could feel an unfamiliar numbness in his fingertips as the truth surfaced inside him. Death was ahead. Either by the teeth of the terrible beast or the spear of his people—there was no way out. Shaking the feeling away, Hal focused on the pain in his back and the blisters on his hands and pulled. For the first time, the darkness of the winding tunnel was his friend.

The walk was long and the burden of the creature was slow.

*Please don't be home. Please don't be home.*

Disclosing the news of the hunt to Mare and Ames was unavoidable. But her initial absence would leave him the opportunity to smooth over the surprise of their new guest. Hal also hoped

that it wasn't too late, that there was still time to help the creature before his injuries overtook him. Just as his anxiety began to lift, he heard the reverberation of voices traveling down the long, dirt-walled tunnel. Two men illuminated by the glow of a torch were fast approaching. Their shadows hung like puppets on the rocky wall beside them as they walked towards him. Hal looked around desperately. There were no turns or hiding spots, and more unfortunately, he was still a good quarter mile away from his Aunt's door. He had to lie.

"I climbed a tree—that's where the brutes can't smell ya." Hal recognized the voice.

"They might not be able to smell ya, but they can see ya. Wolves can see in the dark," the second responded. Hal knew the voices well. Like Hal and Ames, and many of the other children in the forest whose parents had fallen to the bronte, Darian and Wilvie Fea had been raised by a distant relative. The brothers hadn't been as lucky as Hal and Ames and had passed to one of their second cousins, Raf. A rough, unfriendly middle-aged man who preferred to be alone. The boys had taken the worst of his personality and even less of his intelligence. For many years he and the Raf twins had not gotten along. For as long as Hal could remember they had bullied and abused any and everyone who had been unfortunate enough to cross their path. Hal quickly took off his leather shirt and threw it over the head of the bronte, hoping that the boy's stupidity would will out. They were a few feet in front of him now. As they drew closer, Hal could see their scarred faces.

"Well, look who it is." Darian held the torch out in front of him illuminating Hal.

"And with sport," Wilvie responded, his spear in hand. "Where's that auntie of yours?" Darian asked. The light flickered off Darian's face. He had deep brown hair that hung just below his ears and a wide mouth that seemed to sit in an ever-present smirk. Hal ignored their jeers and tried to drag the animal around them. But the boys wouldn't budge.

Their bodies and Darian's extended spear stood unmoving.

"Get out of my way," Hal warned. The boys were older than Hal by two hunting seasons and stood a whole head taller than him.

"We want to see what you caught," Darian said.

"Get out of my way."

"Well, somebody certainly has grown up, haven't they Wilvie?"

"Last I checked," Wilvie said, "Little Hally Wally was still running around with his auntie."

"Tell us Hally, are you still afraid of the dark?" The twins laughed together as they scowled down on Hal. Hal glowered back at the boys.

"Get out of my way now," Hal raised his spear to Darian's.

The boys laughed together, the noise filled the tunnel. "Show us your catch and we'll let you pass."

"I don't owe you anything."

"What are you getting at, Hal?"

"Move." If Hal were an animal he would be growling. Hate beamed from his eyes as he stared Darian down. Hal lanced his spear closer to Darian's face as a final warning. Wilvie's laugh faded leaving bloodlust smeared across his face.

"Show us your catch, Hal," Darian crashed his spear against Hal's, the tip pointed straight to Hal's throat. Hal knew his odds of fighting them weren't good. But allowing the boys to see the bronte would be disastrous. They would take the beast from him and parade him around the village—turning him into the village leaders as a traitor.

But just as Darian was about to strike, Hal saw a torch illuminate the corner behind them.

“Darian, Wilvie,” a raspy voice called echoed. The boys turned to face the man behind them. It was their uncle, Raf Fea.

“What are you doing with that boy?” They lowered their spears.

“Hal’s threaten’ us, Raf,” Darian bellowed, as he turned slightly to throw Hal a look of loathing.

“Go home,” the voice boomed. “You fish maggots don’t have time to play with girls.” Darian and Wilvie shared a look of agitation. Darian turned back to Hal.

“You’re lucky, Hal. You better be happy Raf owes your aunt for sewing up his arm last month.” He turned and started towards Raf.

“This ain’t over,” Wilvie said following him. When Wilvie and Darian turned the corner, Hal took a deep breath of relief and bent over once again to begin hauling the bronte the rest of the way. Pulling his secret close behind him, he shuddered as he heard the bronte’s antlers scrap across the jagged dirt and stone floor.

After more backbreaking work, Hal finally found himself in front of the familiar square door. Pushing it open, he stopped to look to see if the room was vacant. No one had been home since he left. The room was dull with inactivity and the fire and the light it bore had faded to a dull ginger color.

He heaved the bronte inside, ran to move the furniture and then pulled the beast next to the fire. Throwing himself down, he sighed. He was soaked in sweat and dirt. But even as he began to relax, his anxiety returned. Mare and Ames would be back soon. He had to prepare. Hal turned and began looking in the cupboard for tools to help the bronte.

*Grite*, she had taken everything. He went to the clay washbasin and began pumping the handle. After a few seconds water began to pour out and Hal filled a wooden bowl with water.

Just as he had grabbed a rag and turned around to begin washing the bronte's wounds, he heard the sound of door handle moving and a moment later it was pulled ajar revealing Ames. He smiled, seeing Hal.

"Close the door!" Hal said. Ames was shocked by the severity of Hal's command but obeyed, then looked around and spotted the beast.

"What did you get?" Ames' eyes lit up with pride as he looked at the heap of flesh. He clearly thought this was just some animal—some dead animal.

"You've got to understand—"

"Is that—what I think?"

"No—" but Ames was already pulling the shirt back from the bronte.

"You killed a bronte?" Shock, horror and admiration were all over Ames as Hal jumped in between his brother and beast.

"Can I see?" Ames asked taken aback. The shirt fell back onto the bronte, hiding the antlers.

"He's not exactly—dead." And as the word fell into Ames' ears everything seemed to hang in slow motion. Hal watched Ames' eyes as they fell on the exposed antlers and the truth ran through him. "But you've got to listen to me it isn't what you think." But Ames had already jumped back.

"This is madness."

In that moment, the door handle turned and Hal's heart fell as Mare and Lev stepped through the doorway.

"Well, look whose back safe and sound," Mare bellowed smiling warmly at Hal and Ames as she placed her leather pack on the hook by the door. She approached Ames first, placed



her hands on each of his cheeks, and kissed his forehead. She began to move towards Hal to give him the same greeting but found his worried eye line. He looked at her as she saw the heap of fur on the floor.

“And he brings home dinner to boot!” She turned to investigate the carcass.

“Wow, Hal. That’s really something.” Lev looked up at him with a smile of admiration.

“What is it?” His eyes beamed at the large size of the catch. Hal grinned nervously at the boy, and jumped desperately in between the bronte and his aunt.

Yes, he had to tell her the truth, but Lev definitely didn’t need to be present. His reputation preceded him as the town blabbermouth. Confused, Mare gave him a baffled smirk and tried to side step around him. Hal looked to Ames with a pleading gaze.

“Let me see what you brought home,” she said. Ames jumped in front of her and grabbed her by the shoulders.

“That’s okay, he was in the middle of cleaning it,” Hal interjected. “It was a gory kill. Blood everywhere. I wouldn’t want to upset your stomach.” Her smile cooled, she looked from Hal to Ames with stern consternation and removed his hands from her shoulders.

“Boys, how long have I been hunting?”

“Gosh Mare, you know I can’t count that high,” Ames said, looking to Hal, a twinkle in his eye. And in that moment Hal appreciated his brother all the more. Through everything, Ames had always been there for him. His loyalty and trust true to the end.

“Very funny. I’ll have you know, Lev. I’m the one who taught these whipper-willows how to hunt.” She had finally pushed her way around him. She stepped the remaining two deadly steps and with her waking eyes saw the truth before her. Hal watched her face change as she placed the shirt back over the bronte. Her face was flushed with fear as she stood to her feet.

“Lev, you better get back home,” Mare said.

“But Mare, you said you were going to make me bandages for Piq?”

“I’ll bring them to your home in an hour or so,” she said, pushing him out the door.

“But Mare!” he stammered as she closed the door in his face. She held the knob in her hand as she listened for him to walk away, her eyes resting on her dagger, dangling by a leather string on the hook by the door with the rest of their weapons.

“Mare, please, you have to let me explain,” Hal pleaded. She walked over to the dagger, held it in her palm, unsheathed the blade and began walking toward the beast, her eyes glued to the danger before her.

“Mare please, you don’t understand. Something happened out there!” He stepped in front of her. She looked up at him, her eyes full of tears

“How could you bring this creature here?” She pushed forward. Hal moved in front of her again, trying in vain to block her advance. Ames stepped in to help.

“Not you too. I brought you here out of the kindness of my heart and you are not going to help him.” Ames stepped back and Mare turned her attention back to Hal.

“One of them killed your mom and dad, your uncle, your grandpa, countless others, and you bring that here. Have I taught you nothing?”

“You’ve taught me everything, Mare. But you have to listen to me. This one is different. He was attacked by the others they left him for dead and when I walked over to it something happened. I attacked him and then I looked into his eyes and he had every chance in the world to kill me and he didn’t. And now he’s going to die if we don’t help him—please, Mare I can’t do this alone.”

“So what’s your plan now? Heal the beast and then when it wakes up, let it kill me,

Ames, the rest of our village?”

“He won’t.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know.” His eyes were clear and rich with truth. She stared at him for some time before turning around, walking to the thick wooden table and placing her dagger on the slab. The stone clomped on the wood. The silence that followed was even louder.

“You’re risking all of our lives,” she said. Hal walked towards his Aunt and put his arm on her shoulder.

“I can’t explain it, but I have to save him.”

She turned around and looked up at him, her eyes still hollow. Hal knew how rare she was, how lucky he was to have someone to care for him who actually loved him like his parents would have.

“Thank you.”

“Get that tub of water ready,” she said to Ames.

“And you—” she turned to Hal “—get my pack!” Hal grabbed the pack and returned to his aunt’s side where she was already busy cleaning the beasts many cuts and gashes.

\* \* \*

The creature had not stirred from its slumber for the first two nights. The first night, they had spent hours helping the beast. Cleaning all his wounds only to discover the depth of each to be deeper and worse than the one before it. They stitched and bandaged the best they could and left him alone next to the fire. Each hour since had been a daunting wait. They had decided that Hal and Ames should keep watch. Mare had taken to her place behind her partition while the boys remained waiting for the bronte to wake. Hal’s only hope was that the beast would

remember him and choose not to kill and destroy them all.

As he and Ames settled in for another sleepless night, he felt the all-to-familiar pang of fatigue bear down on his eyes. He looked over at the mass of fur and claws. What if their connection was all in his head? He sat down with the table between them and Mare's room at his back. He listened. There were no sounds but the noise of his own tired breathing, and the slow purr-like heaving of the beast before him. Tightening his grip on his spear he wondered how much longer it would be till the creature woke up. Trying to block the doubt, he stared at the coals in the fire. He looked to Ames, but his brother had drifted off to sleep. So much depended on him now. But as he sat in the uncomfortable quiet, he wondered if he could kill the brute if things turned ugly. If the bronte woke up and decided to attack, it would be his job to end it. He had known this was the risk from the beginning. Between the feet of the chairs and table legs he could see the huge paws of the bronte illuminated by the copper glow of the fire. He continued to watch, his mind desperately trying to retain consciousness, determined to stay away from falling into the sound of an endless stampede of footfalls.

For hours, the room was dark as the fire continued to dim. Mare would be waking up soon to go out and hunt. He knew this couldn't go on much longer. Without his help, it seemed like she was coming back with less meat as the days wore on. He could feel the tug of sleep pulling his eyes closed. How much longer could the creature lie there unconscious?

Desperate for change of any kind, Hal stood up. Spear still in hand, he advanced wearily towards the water basin for a drink. As he reached for his wooden bowl, he blinked. But when he opened his eyes again, the color of the room had changed. In place of the amber glow, a familiar green light emanated onto the rock walls around him. Hal turned to face the bronte, tightening his grip on the spear. The beast was two spear lengths away from him.

Adrenaline pulsed through his veins as the fire behind the beast flicked out with one final hiss. Minutes passed and nothing—just the faint flickering of the blinking eye staring up at him. Hal extended the spear in warning. The bronte growled.

“I know you can hear me,” Hal thought, pointing to his head with his free hand. Hal knew the bronte could read his thoughts, but he wanted the beast to hear him too. The bronte blinked and for an instant the room was covered in darkness, another second and the room was filled with green again. Hal took another step toward the beast, his spear pointed to kill. The bronte’s growl filled the room again, this time louder, his eye still on Hal.

Everything in the room seemed to stop. Hal felt a strange sensation. There was a disruption in his mind. For a moment he saw the wooden bowl in his hand fall to the ground and break into pieces. But a moment later the feeling passed and the bowl was still in his hands. Hal clenched his eyes tight remastering his thoughts. The bronte backed into the corner, its muscular legs recoiling, preparing to pounce.

“If you come at me, I will kill you.” The beast flashed his sharp, deadly teeth.

“I will spare you, if you spare me.” The bronte’s eye narrowed. Hal’s heart pulsed with confused fear. The creature clearly knew his intentions, but Hal had no way to judge those of the brontes. Hal suddenly felt the weight of the moment. It wasn’t just his life at stake here. Ames was still asleep on the floor just a spear-length away, Mare was in the next room and through the tunnels, countless others. They were all counting on him.

Darkness crept back into the room as the bronte blinked again. There was no sense waiting. He walked towards the beast, his spear at his side. The beast burst forward in a fierce, claw-filled leap, catapulting itself in a motion that was both beautiful and terrible. The motion knocked Hal completely on his back, the beast pinned him down, positioned to rip out his throat.

As he stared into the eye of the creature that would take his life, his memories—the brief moments of a past with his parents, the exciting hunts with his aunt and Ames, the everyday interactions with the villagers, all of it—flashed and reverberated through him. The bronte roared again. The beast’s singular eye flared with anger but he did not strike. Heaving, the bronte seemed to be waging an inner war with itself until finally at long last, the beast took one long look at Hal. His anger had faded, only a plaintive stare remained. With a roar of anguish, the bronte released Hal and leaped to the door and began digging under the wall.

Hal watched in disbelief and terror. Ames was awake now too spear in hand he joined Hal as they watched. In one move, the beast plunged through the hole and took off down the tunnel. Hal’s heart raced. He ran out the door and began chasing after him, but the bronte was too fast. Even in his weakened state, the creature bounded yards ahead of him. The chase continued until at long last, Hal watched as the bronte, still far ahead of him, stopped and smelled the air.

He’s found someone. Fear overtook him and Hal yelled after it.

“WAIT!”

The bronte turned around.

“STOP!” The bronte looked puzzled, but turned its attention to the air. With a large leap greater than Hal had ever seen before, the beast lunged for the ceiling, dug its hind claws into the earth and with its front claws began digging its way through the tunnel. Hal watched the creature disappear into the cavernous ceiling. He looked around; there was a ladder around the next corner. Desperate, he sprinted to it and began climbing. When he reached the trapdoor, he opened it to discover that there was a faint glow in the sky. The day had begun; the half-dead sun was beginning to emit its placid white and gray rays.

Hal peered into the darkness around him. Through the mire of trees and wild shrubs, he saw one glowing green eye looking back at him. Hal ran towards the eye, but just as he took his first step towards the beast, he saw the glow disappear in one huge bound. He could barely make out the tail as it disappeared into the murk. Hal stopped, still heaving from the sprint.

*He's gone.* He knew there was no catching the beast now. The walk back home was long. When he took his last step off the ladder into the tunnel, he found himself in the middle of a full-on investigation. The villagers had discovered the holes. Men and a few women congregated in the tunnel, fear streaked looks across their faces. As Hal walked into the congregation, there was a mass of exclamations.

“Hal!”

“He’s back!”

“He’s alive!” There were at least twenty villagers present, with more pouring out of the labyrinth of tunnels every second, all of them with their eyes on Hal.

“But,” the man paused as he took in Hal’s bloodless body.

“How did you survive?” Hal turned to the voice. It was Bagar, a tunnelier, one of the men instrumental in building and maintaining Thule’s intricate network of shafts. He was a short, burly man with broad shoulders and a bald head. His wide eyes were filled with disbelief. The rabble and whispering around them quieted as Hal gasped for an answer.

“I uh—I ran,” was the only thing he could say. The room filled with chatter again as women and men began arguing back and forth. Hal bent low, slinking to escape the growing crowd. The tunneliers began pointing and shouting at each other as they contested how they would rebuild the giant hole in the roof. These repairs had to be done quickly since the hole made the entire village vulnerable to another attack. Hal guessed that they would make him and

his aunt move to another burrow too—this wouldn't be the first time.

Hal made his way through the last few people and passed unnoticed behind a corner. He ran back down the tunnel to his aunt's door only to find yet another smaller congregation of villagers. As Hal drew closer, the mass of tunneliers approached him bombarding him with more questions.

“How did you survive?”

“What happened?”

“How did the beast get in?”

“How did you escape?”

Hal was relieved that they assumed he had been captured by the beast, instead of the ugly truth. Hal saw Mare and Ames inside sitting at the kitchen table.

“Hal, you're okay!” Tears were in her eyes. Mare was a tough woman; he could see now how much he had hurt her. How could he ever forgive himself for doing this to the only living person in his life that he loved? Ames stood up as he walked into the tunnel.

“How on earth did you escape the bronte?” asked a tall, thin man with dark graying hair sitting in one of the stools at the table. Hal turned to face the questioner and realized he was talking to the head councilor. His name was Limand and he worked for Linzal Mace, the village's leader. Mace and his ancestors had run the village for as long as any one could remember.

Before the great darkness, the Mace line had been the bravest and noblest of the villagers, but as darkness and death overcame them, their wealth and greed afforded them deeper, safer tunnels. They “commissioned” other villagers to hunt for them, to garden for them, to risk their lives in their place. Deep in their tunnels the Mace family dwindled in number and in fortitude,



overcome not by their beast overlords, but by the simple fear of them. Linzal was no exception. He lived deep down in his lavish burrow. Hal had only seen Limand in person on one occasion, after the death of a whole wing of villagers. A bronte attack worse than any the townspeople had ever encountered. His presence today was not a good sign.

“Excuse me?” Limand said. Hal was pulled out of his daze.

“I don’t know.”

“But you lived—tell me how,” Limand’s brow was furrowed. Mare stood up behind Limand.

“Can’t you see how much he’s been through, Limand?” She gazed down at Hal and shook her head softly. “Can’t we get to the bottom of this another day? Hal is clearly exhausted from the attack. I think it would be best if you came back later.” Limand turned and looked unimpressed by Mare’s suggestion.

“He’s alive and walking, isn’t he? This information could save lives,” Limand puttered, his frustration building. He wasn’t used to waiting to get what he wanted.

“Limand,” a small boy clad in the Mace family green tunic tapped on the leaders shoulder. One of the family’s commissions, the boy was far too thin for his stature and looked sickly. “They want your approval at the hole.”

With a passive sigh, the frustrated man waved the boy in green away.

“I’ll be back at the end of the week, and by that time, you’re going to give me answers.” Hal watched Limand walk through the door and down the passageway. The mass of people filed out behind him. The last tunnelier remained, measuring the hole in the wall with a long tool.

Mare returned to her seat in the wooden chair. With the man still in the room, he knew they couldn’t talk freely about the events that had just occurred, but simply being free of Limand

and the rest of his commissions was enough.

“Brother, you are lucky,” Ames said under his breath to Hal before retreating through the room, back to his bed of pelts in the corner.

“I don’t know how to thank you, Ames.”

“Don’t mention it.” Ames smiled again and disappeared behind his curtain. Exhausted from his own lack of sleep and the adrenaline-filled chase, Hal turned and headed for his place, pulled back the deer-hide curtain and threw himself onto the heap of pelts.

“Mare, will you be okay if I go to sleep?” he called through the tunnel.

“Of course,” she called back. Despite how much he didn’t deserve her kindness, she continued to show it to him. Adjusting the pelts, he finally closed his eyes. It didn’t take long before a long awaited sleep overcame him.

### Chapter 3

Hal remained asleep through the night and dozed well into the following day. With his eyes closed, he listened but there was nothing. Mare and Ames were gone. The tunnel had probably been empty for hours when he finally began to stir. Sitting up, he put his arms behind him to push, but as he did his palms seared in pain. In a flash, his mind raced through yesterday, those memories fused with dreams darkened by whispers, senseless visions from the forest with eyes that watched. But yesterday seemed even more unreal. As he dressed and ducked under the curtain, he couldn't shake the restlessness—or those eyes that had haunted his dreams.

Hal walked through the tunnel to the far wall and opened the cabinet doors. Pulling a box from the shelf, he opened it and pulled out the last piece of dried deer meat. As he bit into it, Hal couldn't shake the foreboding feeling that despite all of their best efforts, they were failing. They were running out of food. Turning back to the dying fire, he caught the distinctive smell of fresh earth, the hole of yesterday's nightmare.

Taking another bite, the doorknob turned and Mare and Ames stepped inside from the passageway. Hal spotted a fresh dusting of dirt on the back of their hands. They had been tending the plot.

Ames set down a large pack and began unloading the brown vegetables into the cupboard on the far wall. Mare set her own tools down, and caught Hal's glance.

"They came this morning. Nobody mentioned anything about relocating us—but I guess we will get the final word after Limand's visit in a few days," she explained as she went to the cupboard next to Ames and pulled the pot from the shelves. Ames had finished putting the vegetables away; the empty pack lay next to his feet. Pulling out a small knife, he and Mare began chopping.

“Wow. I was sure they would move us,” Hal said sleepily, his body was still so weary.

“How long was I out?”

“A day and a half,” she turned carrying the pot to the fire and placing it on the metal hook that hung above the dying flames. “Hal, you let the fire die. And yes, I was too—makes me think they want to keep us here for some other reason.” Mare sat down on the floor and tended to the fire, adding wood from the floor to ceiling pile that lined the entire left wall. Ames pulled out a chair and sat in front of the fire, propping his feet up on the mantle’s large stones.

Hal didn’t like the idea either. The villagers, under the leadership of their apathetic leader, lived for rerouting tunnels and homes, anything to ensure their survival and the betterment of the village. The situation was definitely suspicious.

“Do you think they are waiting to see if Ahlo will return?” he asked. Ames, staring aimlessly into the flames, turned to Hal bewildered.

“Who is Ahlo?” Hal had said the name without realizing it. Who was Ahlo? He scanned his memories to find the source.

“The dream . . .” he said in a daze—the memories of the dream fading fast, he focused on them, grappled with them, the sensation as frustrating as trying to catch air in his palms. Someone had spoken to him, not in words, but in strange sensations. Hal played the name in his head and instantly knew its owner. The bronte’s face floated to the surface of his mind, its eerie green eye illuminated the shadows.

“What dream?” Mare was concerned. Incidences like this had shown the villagers that the bronte had the inexplicable mind powers they used. This was not the first instance when they had used their telepathic influence to wage war and destruction on the people of the village. While these occurrences were rare, it was in the bronte’s power to drive the villagers mad using their

dreams.

“I don’t remember. I think—I was hunting in the woods, and somebody was telling me stories—but not in words—they were almost like pictures, and . . . feelings.” Hal paused, realizing the truth of what had happened.

“Mare, I think that bronte—I think he followed me in my dream and talked to me. His name was Ahlo—he told me so somehow.” Mare didn’t say anything. She just looked at him for a few moments and then returned to stirring. The look of worry did not fade.

“Mare, what’s wrong with me?”

“I don’t know.” It was unlike Mare to not offer some sort of help or explanation. She had spent half her life healing the village, and the other half raising Hal and Ames.

After some time, Mare served dinner and the three of them sat in silence slurping taro. When they were finished, Mare stood up and began prepping her tools for the following day’s hunt.

“Where are we going tomorrow?” Hal asked, finally breaking the silence.

“You aren’t coming.”

“I feel great. After a few more hours of sleep I’ll be fine, I promise.”

“No, we can’t risk that creature finding you again. I’m sorry, but for now this is it has to be.”

“You can’t do this—”

“Hal, your parents put me in charge of your life and as long as I hold that seat, you will do as I ask.”

“We don’t even know that the creature is trying to hurt me—or if that dream was even real. What if it was just stress from all that’s happened?”

“Until we know for sure you’re going to stay here.”

“How will we ever know for sure?”

“I don’t know.”

“So you’re locking me up for the foreseeable future?”

“If that’s how you want to see it. I’m sorry, but I don’t see another way. At least down here you’re safe. For now that’s all we can do.”

“If he wanted to kill me, he could just dig his way back down here.”

“You don’t know that.”

“We don’t know anything. The only way we’ll know for sure is if I go out there myself and see.” Hal was breathing heavily—his whole body pulsed with anger.

“This conversation is over.” Mare gave him a look of warning. Grabbing the last of her tools and stood up to place the bag on the wall hook next to her spear. She turned, exasperated.

“Both of you, sleep.” She was angry, but what was worse was the fact that she was hiding her fear from him. Hal stood, cleaned his bowl and utensils, tore open the curtain and threw himself onto the pelts. He took off his shirt and lay back. Still fuming, he was in no mood to sleep. Staring at the dirt ceiling above, he seethed. What right did Mare have keeping him here? His parents had put her in charge, but he was a man now. If he wanted to go, what right did she have to stop him—how was she ever going to prove that it would be safe for him to go hunting again? Was he just never supposed to go outside? Life was dark enough without the added imprisonment. Hunting had been his one escape. Yes, there was risk, but what was life locked away? He thought of the Maces—a whole family content to let life pass them by. It was a fine living for them, but Hal knew he wanted more. He had to go back. Mare would be angry, but she had done this to herself. After tomorrow she would see how wrong she was.

Hal sat up and peered through the thickening darkness. The room was almost black but through the haze he could make out his pack still lying next to the door. His materials were dirty, but ready. With the mission ahead of him, he closed his eyes. He knew he wouldn't sleep long.

\* \* \*

Hal woke and found himself lying in the woods. His hair was longer and his skin was both thicker and older. Sitting up confused, he heard the howl of the bronte.

*They were coming.*

Looking around he saw his spear on the ground before him. He picked it up and waited. The ground shook as they drew closer. Coming through the trees, they surrounded him in a perfect circle. There were easily thirty of them.

Glancing up, Hal saw a woman he recognized crouched on a tree branch. With her thin frame and light brown hair, his memories of her had always been foggy, but there she was before him. As he stared in disbelief, his mother was even more beautiful than he had imagined.

The bronte continued to pour in, gnashing their teeth, growling and roaring. Still looking up, he realized that neither of them were going to make it out of this alive. His mother must have had the same realization because she smiled at him, winked and with one wild jump, hurled herself spear first onto the beasts below.

"No!" but as Hal called out, his body fell out of itself and he woke again, this time in his normal body in his normal bed. Sweat poured from his body. It was a dream. It was just a dream. But somewhere deep inside, Hal knew it wasn't. He had seen his mother and father in their final moments. Even if the scene wasn't identical, that had been how they had died.

He lay quiet, listening to hear if his yell had awoken Mare or Ames. But the tunnel was quiet.

Feeling more composed, Hal grabbed the flint stone on the floor next to him, cracked them together until a flame lit and looked at the hourglass that rested on the table across the room. As the small flame faded he saw the sand was far from gone. The sun was still far from rising. He rose, grabbed his pack, an orange rot from the table and found his way to the front door. It squeaked as Hal, spear in hand, snuck through and into the dark passageway. The evening before his plot had seemed so much more deserved. But now the idea of what he was about to do was scarier than it had been in the safe darkness of his room. The angry dragon inside him was gone and in his wake, a growing wave of regret for what he was about to do.

Each step up the ladder seemed to slam him with more and more guilt. As he lifted the trapdoor he wondered if he should go back—if he should return to bed. If he was quiet enough, she may never know he had left.

All was black out in the murk, all was black. The dead horizon had not yet come to life. He wondered what waited. What he would never discover if he turned back? His mother hadn't been afraid of death and he didn't want to live another day in fear. He had to go on.

It would be best to head south and wait out the sun in a tree, high above any aggressive predators. Crouching low, Hal began the trek. He would find a hiding place far away from the path where it would be unlikely for anyone to find him. As he began walking through the darkness, Hal found the silence unnerving. It was always quiet, but now it was as if the trees were holding their breath. There was no noise, no animals, and no wind—just the biting cold. Hal continued on, his footfalls echoed out into the dark.

Hal could see the ashen haze of the dawn slowly breaking.

After some time, Hal began to make out the outlines of the black trees against the pallid sky. He had been off the path for a while. Needing a break, he walked over to a thick tree with



large arms that sprawled into the sky.

Lunging for the lowest branch, he pulled himself up and continued climbing until he felt the crisp wind graze his cheek. Mare would be getting up now—moments ago she had probably discovered that he wasn't in his bed. Would she go hunting? Would she spend the day searching for him? Mare had a talent for tracking . . . but he had never rebelled like this before.

In that moment Hal saw it. Within a tangled web of tree and bush was a hazy green glow. His heart stopped.

Paralyzed, he watched. Through the bramble he could see a singular eye staring directly at him. The same eye that had haunted his dreams, the eye that had dug up half of his tunnel and the same eye that had changed his life. After all of this, Mare had been right. The creature had wanted him and now he had him. Hal didn't know what to do. He tightened his grip on the spear.

*What is he waiting for?*

The creature had seen him. They looked at each other until at long last, he had enough. Had he really come this far to hide from death? Was he not his father's son?

"I'm not afraid of you!" he called out, but the beast didn't move.

Hal grabbed his spear and began climbing down the tree. He landed with a thud. With his spear raised, he walked towards the glow. It wasn't far now; he was already within earshot. Each step set a crunch of dead leaves. The bronte was growling. The green eye larger now, he sat ready to pounce.

"What do you want?" his thoughts were as loud as his voice. The bronte growled louder.

He knew the bronte was reading his thoughts. He remembered his dream, he thought about the green eye following him and how similar it was to this moment.

"Are you Ahlo?" he asked. The beast stopped for a moment, eyeing Hal suspiciously and

then bowed its head ever so slightly. All of a sudden Hal felt it again, the strange sensation he had felt before—but this time, it blinded him. He was back in Mare's burrow. He saw himself, spear pointed towards the beast whose thoughts he inhabited.

"I will spare you, if you spare me." And just as quickly as the moment had come, it was gone. Hal fell to his knees overtaken by the memory. The bronte had shown him the scene that occurred three days ago. Catching his breath, Hal remained on his knees before the beast.

"So you won't kill me." It wasn't so much a question as a statement. Standing to his feet, he put his spear on the ground and reached out with his right hand. The creature growled. Hal thought hard and showed the bronte what he was trying to do. The bronte watched him closely.

Pushing his arm further towards the great animal, Hal put his hand on his mane. The fur was soft and thick, and as he pressed his hand down, it disappeared into the tufts. Uncertain, the beast pulled away from Hal's hand and sat upright. It was clear that Ahlo didn't want to kill Hal, but didn't fully trust him either.

Through the trees, Hal heard the sound of footfalls. There was more than one and from the noise, they were drawing closer. The bronte bounded into some nearby bushes. Hal wanted to call after him to wait, but he was gone. Certain that he also did not want to be found, Hal reached up and grabbed the nearest limb and climbed up. He climbed high into the branches. Above, the dead light had risen. The village would be out hunting now. Hal peered down through the immense limbs and saw two men. Darian and Wilvie were just below him.

"His tracks lead this way," Wilvie pointed. "It looks like he went up." They both looked deep into the tree.

"I can't see." Darian breathed. "Do you think he's still up there?"

"It looks like there's more tracks but I can't tell if he's still here or if he just ran around,

or took off into the trees,” Wilvie said. The boys turned their attention to the limbs around them. Hal clutched the tree trunk. He hoped the shadow of the tree and the forest’s natural darkness would be enough to hide him from the brutes below.

“Let’s go this way—I bet he snuck further south,” Darian said. The boys made their way back towards the path.

“Hurry, we don’t want to leave his auntie waiting.” Back in the tree, Hal was angry.

*Why are they following me?* It was clear they were tracking him. They had gone far off the path following his footsteps. But what could it mean? Mare must have told them he was missing.

Once the forest was quiet again, Hal climbed down the tree and went back into the brush where he and Ahlo had been minutes before but the bronte was gone.

They’d ruined everything. How was he going to find Ahlo again? Alive with a strange combination of anger and adrenaline, Hal hurried back to the trapdoor. Careful to make as little noise as possible, he bent low to the ground—aware that he was still being followed.

Back in the hole, Mare sat next to the fire, the dancing light cast shadows across the wrinkles in her furrowed brow. In her hand, she held her father’s small briar wood pipe, slowly pouring smoke out of her mouth and noise.

Even from a small age, Hal had always remarked on how dragon-like she looked as she smoked. Unable to move from the doorway, Hal simply stared at her and waited. Ames sat next to her whittling a small piece of wood. Silenced passed between all of them before Mare finally looked up.

“Where did you go?” she exhaled smoke as she turned away from him and continued looking into the fire.

“I went into the forest.” He had obviously not told her anything she didn’t already know.  
“I had to. I couldn’t sit down here hiding out.”

“I don’t even know what to say to you,” she said. This was a new level of cold Hal had never experienced from her. “I know you’re young and this kind of thing is expected to a degree, but you running out on me after what we went through, after everything I did to trust you—” she broke off.

“You don’t understand—I found him.” Mare stopped. Ames looked up over his knife.

“You what?”

“I found him.”

“Hal, how could you? I don’t know how or why you’re alive, but this has to stop now. You could have died, you should have died.”

“Mare, I’m sorry. I really am. But this is different. He—talked to me.”

“He what? Hal, why do you continue to trust this monster? Did you not see what he did to the tunnel, to our lives? We are being watched—surely you know that. I thought that by keeping you in here, it would keep them away but sure enough, first thing this morning guess who came to the door?” Hal wasn’t expecting that. “Guess.”

“I don’t know.”

“Limand.” Hal’s eyes fell to the ground. They were in trouble. It was beyond dangerous to go out into the darkness before the light—but even more suspicious after everything that already had occurred. He had been lucky in the first incident—but now that Limand had come and he had been gone.

“What did he say?”

“He asked for you. He didn’t believe me when I told him you were gone—reprimanded

me for allowing you to go out in the darkness of the morning and then proceeded to search the burrow. Obviously he thought I was lying—and then left with a mandate that you are to go to Linzal’s passage as soon as you got back.”

“Mare, I’m sorry.” The drive that had pushed Hal out into the woods that morning had died and now all he could feel was the weight of the guilt and shame. He had been stupid and now they all would pay.

“This is out of my hands now. I tried to protect you but you choose that monster over your family.” She was right. He had. Hal dropped his pack and moved closer to the fire.

“What do I do?”

“You have to go. I’ll come as far as I can, but you are going to have to face the questions of Linzal Mace alone.” She was right. He had put himself in this situation. He was the only one to blame. He knew now that Mare never intended to imprison him. He had been rash and selfish.

“What should I tell him?”

“Sit down.”

\* \* \*

Hal made the final turn to face the gated tunnel in front of the Mace’s passage. He and Mare had not had long to plan, but they had come up with a strategy to get Hal through the meeting with Mace. He had never been this deep into the Abyai. The dusty dirt of the Fahri turned into the wooden planked road of the Medai, until they finally came to the uneven red stone that indicated that they were nearing the Abyai. The Mace corridor was the safest of the tunnels. At one point the passageway had spiraled down into a long stairwell. From there it had just been a steady downward descent. Finally in front of the gate, he knocked. A small sickly boy in Mace green appeared before him.

“What’s your business?” the commission asked.

“Elder Linzal asked me to come.” The boy in green disappeared below the wooden stakes of the gate, reappearing a few moments later. Without saying a word, he opened the gate and motioned to Hal.

Hal followed after the boy as they continued downward. The hallway became increasingly narrow and Hal noticed that instead of just paved stone on the ground, the walls were also paved with jagged pieces of rock. The rocks had been placed in long jagged lines. Ahead he could see a green door. The boy reached into a leather satchel and pulled out a set of keys on a large ring. He turned and scowled at Hal.

“Look away.” Hal rolled his eyes and turned. Seconds later the door opened to reveal a room of deep green. Hal turned and they proceeded through the door. Now in the entryway, the boy led Hal down a few more stairs into a sitting room. Instead of wooden chairs, these were cushioned. Instead of dirt, the walls were lined with wood and stone and painted a vibrant emerald.

“Wait here,” the commission muttered as he disappeared up the stairs and back into the tunnel. Hal waited unsure of what to do—he had never been anywhere so lavish and he could only guess that the Maces were not kind hosts. They did not invite the villagers into the walls of their home often and he was certain that Mace wouldn’t take kindly to his sitting on his lush cushions. In the hearth the fire crackled. Hal wondered how deep these tunnels ran.

“Please sit down over there.” Hal spun around to see Elder Linzal coming down some shallow stairs. He was pointing to a wooden chair by the fire. Hal was right; the Maces didn’t like to share. As he took his seat, he noticed the ornate detail of the chair’s woodwork. Little etches in the wood shaped like leaves. Elder Linzal sat in the cushioned seat across from him.

Mace clapped three times and a different commission appeared with a wooden tray carrying a teakettle and carved wooden teacups. He set the tray down on the table next to Mace and began serving him.

“Hal—was it?” he asked without taking his unfeeling brown eyes off the tea being poured before him.

“Yes.”

“Good.” The commission presented the tea to Mace and left the room, following the shallow stairs out of sight. “So, where were we—oh yes, you were too overwhelmed to tell Limand how you were viciously dragged out of your burrow into the forest—and how you managed to escape from a bronte.” Mare had prepared Hal for Mace’s impending judgment and disapproval.

“Yes—I’m sorry about that. You see, I was in shock.”

“‘In shock?’ Mace gave him a look of boredom and took a sip of the steaming tea.

“Uh—yes.”

“I take it from your calm demeanor that you are not currently still ‘in shock?’”

“I woke up feeling much better today, sir.” Hal knew the best road to take with a man like Mace was to be as humble as possible.

“So what happened?” he asked. Hal took a deep breath.

“I was sleeping and I heard something large coming down the tunnel—you know how thin our walls are up in the Fahir, sir. We could hear an ant crawling down our tunnels.” Linzal’s face looked unsure. “Anyway, I woke to the sound of something scratching around and breathing, so I left my room and opened the door and he must have smelled me because I saw his claws digging through the walls, then his body and before I knew it, there he was standing in the

middle of our burrow. I yelled at Mare to stay inside her room and she did.” Linzal was nodding along now, his eyes narrowed and focused. This was what he had wanted to hear. To their knowledge, they didn’t know what the bronte did when they entered a burrow.

“My spear was on the wall next to me, so I grabbed it and looked the beast in the eye and he grabbed me by my leg and dragged me out. From there he carried me through the tunnel and out through the roof.”

“How did he carry you and dig his way through the roof at the same time?” Hal hadn’t thought of that. He was amazed as the lies continued to pour out of him.

“That’s where it got a little fuzzy. I think that’s when he must have dropped me to dig the hole because I kind of blacked out for a minute. It was already dark in the tunnel and then I felt him grab me once again and before I knew it, we were clear out in the open air of the forest.”

“So why didn’t he eat you? What was he waiting for?” Somehow Mace seemed to have fallen into believing the story. This was Hal’s only chance to offer an explanation that not only made Mace believe him, but that left him disenchanted with the whole affair. Hal desperately wanted to find Ahlo and continue on the road of discovery he had been on, but he couldn’t do so with Mace having Darien and Wilvie or anyone else following him into the forest.

“I have no idea—all I know is that I heard a bunch of growling and howls and then the bronte dropped me and ran away. I climbed a tree and as I waited, it sounded like the bronte was getting attacked by the rest of its pack”—this piece was also not a fabrication, just outside of the true timeline of events. Linzal’s excitement had disappeared.

“So you just ran away and climbed a tree?”

“Yep.” Hal searched Mace’s eyes. He was obviously disappointed, but Hal wasn’t sure if the disappointment was simply due to the anticlimactic end of the tale or because Mace simply



didn't believe him. Linzal took another sip of tea, then set the wooden cup down on the side table. He took a deep breath, finally returning his eyes to Hal.

"I think we're done here." Mace and Hal stood in unison. Mace clapped twice and a commission appeared. "Take him back where he belongs."

The commission bowed and gave Hal a look of smug disdain and without another word Mace disappeared through a wooden door. Taking the room in one last time, Hal began his ascent up the stairs and back through the gates.

\* \* \*

That night, Hal shared Mace's conversation with Mare and Ames while they sat next to the fire. Hal also filled them in on the full details of his morning in the woods—particularly the sighting of Darien and Wilvie.

"When I heard them talking in the forest, I thought you had sent them after me." Mare nodded. Her anger had been eclipsed by the fear of Hal's interrogation with Mace; now her anger was gone and in its place, understanding.

"No, I have always helped Raf as hard as it is to understand that man, I believe he does work for the good of the village—for the most part anyway. But those boys, they're nasty. I wouldn't trust them any further than I could throw them."

"I see that now," Hal smiled, but his grin faded. "Mare, I want you to know I won't ever run off like that again—I'm so sorry."

"It's not okay but it looks for at least the time being that things might work out." She returned a small smile.

"Do you think Mace bought our story?" Hal asked.

"It's hard to say." The fire's reflection danced radiantly on her face, fiercely defining her

wrinkles and scars. Hal thought the light suited her; she looked like the true warrior he had always known her to be. “I guess only time will tell.” Hal nodded and followed her gaze into the flames.

“So what’s next?”

“You can’t very well hide out,” Ames said. If Mace continues to have us followed, you staying home would be very suspicious. It would show that we are hiding something.”

“So what’s next?” Hal asked. Mare turned and looked deep into his eyes.

“We hunt.”

## Chapter 4

*Each step took him further into the night, deeper into the cold. Skirting through sharp boulders and fallen stones, he pressed on. He was between the mountains now and the wind cut through him. Squinting through the rushing air, the darkness swelled and all he could see was the unending wall of rock that extended up in every direction. The sky was gone. While he felt more alone than ever, he could feel the walls pressing in and invisible eyes watching him as he drew closer to the keep.*

\* \* \*

The next day brought an early morning. Hal hoped to turn and find the bronte following him—but despite his high hopes, no green glow appeared. As the day closed, together he and Mare brought down a large doe, while back underground Ames spent another day working for Elm. But Hal's hope for the bronte's return did not quiet until he closed the trapdoor behind him and had returned to the burrow. As he cleaned the meat, he wondered if the creature was even still alive. If the other bronte had tried to kill him once, wouldn't they try again? Had the beast somehow been disconnected from their telepathic network—however that worked?

The next three days passed just the same. They spent the following day tending the small hidden faiard they plotted, and the next two out in the forest hunting. But as each day passed, Hal continued looking, hoping to see the elusive green glow, or have another dream—but nothing. They continued their schedule of survival without the slightest mishap. As Hal fell deeper into the return of routine, he felt the burden of the impending restriction deepen. He yearned for the excitement of the beast, so many questions he still needed answered, so many mysteries yet to unravel.

How could he just leave? And before he had the chance to understand the strange

connection between them? As Hal walked through the forest behind Mare and Ames, he felt the weight of the foolishness that lay behind these thoughts.

“What am I saying?” he breathed aloud to himself. Yes, the events that had occurred were miraculous. Yes, he was more than lucky to be alive—but to use the word “connection” in relation to a beast that could very well destroy him, and the lives of the only family members he had left, as well as decimate his entire village, was beyond dangerous. How could he continue to play with this perilous fire?

And yet . . . Hal knew, even as he tried to reason himself out of it, that if the bronte returned, he would follow the beast and attempt to uncover the true nature of what lay between them.

As he crouched and moved behind his aunt and brother, he dug his gaze deep into the trees looking for the glow, but day after day, there was only darkness. Nothing unusual happened and Hal began to lose hope that he would ever see Ahlo again. As far as he knew, the bronte was dead and there would never be light in his midnight world again.

The next day, Mare sent Hal to the garden to get some potatoes and tend to the rest of the vegetables. Since there were a number of small mammals that lurked in the wood, precautions had to be taken to ensure that their weak fortifications would keep the pests out. Mare walked with him out of the tunnels and left him at the fork in the trail. Since they had not brought back enough meat the day before, she was going south to find something small that would give them the food they desperately needed.

“Chop the potatoes up and start boiling the water when you get back,” she whispered, taking off down the road. Hal nodded and turned towards the path and continued walking. He wondered if he was still being followed. Determined to find out, he continued past the garden

and onto the Tiburti. Of course, he wouldn't follow it far. He would go just far enough to make it look like he was sneaking off.

He walked until he was well onto the path, the light above signaling the brightest point of the day. Hal looked down and could just make out the outline of his hand. Just ahead he eyed a spot high in a tree. He rushed towards it, determined to outwit the boys. It was just as he had his hands grasped the branch that he saw it—the green glow. Emanating just ahead of him through the bracken. But this time it was different. There was a more brilliant light, a mix of blue and green. Hal froze. There was no way to be sure that this beast was Ahlo. But one thing was certain. It had seen him—heard his thoughts—and was coming. There was nothing left to do but ready his spear and wait for the creature. Hal grasped his weapon and pointed his weapon towards the predator.

It happened fast. The bronte approached, Hal was certain that it would spring on him any second now. But the creature didn't. Still hidden in darkness, the beast crouched low to ground and crawled nearer. The glow of the green and blue ebbed closer, until out of the grass and branches the beast emerged. Hal gazed wide-eyed at the coming of the bronte. They circled each other. He could see a faint scar around the blue eye, and another around the creature's neck.

“Ahlo?” Hal whispered. At that moment a sensation passed through Hal. It felt like wind inside his body. Hal fell to his knees overtaken by the image of him petting the bronte's mane deep in the tunnels of his village. Overcome by the shock back into reality, Hal vomited into the soft ground beside him. Crushed leaves stuck to his face. The beast crouched low.

“You came back.” Hal said, his strength returning. The creature remained low, soundless and guarded. “Why?” He wanted the answers before it was too late—before the bronte and these miraculous incidents ceased to occur.

Unsure, the bronte remained still. After another moment, Hal felt weakness fall on him once again only this time it was not the bronte's memory of him, but a vision of the deep forest. Hal saw the herd of bronte, he one among them. All around him they poured in, circling and growling at him. Hal felt terror as he felt swallowed by the glaring green. Without words, he sensed their aggression. He was about to die. He was the sacrifice. The smallest of them. The weakest link. In a flash, they tore into him. He felt blindness fall upon him and moments later, pain as meat was ripped from his shoulder, and from his body. Shaken, he dry heaved in pain and the vision ceased.

Hal awoke lying on the ground in front of the bronte. His hands and face, covered in earth and saliva. Sniffing with his pointed snout, the beast inched closer until its nose brushed against Hal's cheek. The beast was so close Hal's perception of him was blurred. As the bronte continued to sniff and smell, he felt Ahlo's nose as it glided through his hair and onto his back and neck. The sensation was unnerving—but seemed to be a mark of affirmation. Ahlo backed away and returned to his crouched position.

"You were meant to die," Hal finally whispered aloud. Ahlo's head bowed as he blinked, allowing the light and glow of his eyes to go out—leaving the world around them in almost complete darkness.

". . . But I saved you." Ahlo blinked again and Hal could feel sorrow emanating from the creature. The bronte were clearly beasts built for community. Their crazed pack mentality was what made them strong.

"I'll be your pack." Hal said it before he realized the full weight of the sentence. The creature stood up and gazed deeply at him. The blueness of his eye was remarkable. It must have changed color as it had healed from the attack. The feature was both beautiful and alarming.

While the green eye haunted you, the blue one seemed to offer a sense of hope.

Hal stood to face Ahlo. He wasn't sure what was about to happen, but it seemed the right thing to do. As they stood gazing at each other, Ahlo lowered his back, bowing his head to the ground. Hal didn't know what to do. The creature must have read Hal's confusion because he was taken by the image of himself climbing onto the back of the bronte. While the sensation was jarring—this thought did not carry with it the same weight that the others had. Maybe his weak body was adjusting to the breach of mind power—or perhaps Ahlo was becoming more attuned to Hal's senses—whichever it was, Hal was being beckoned.

“Onto your back, then?” He asked still unsure. The bronte blinked and bowed again. Hal wasn't sure what would happen, or if he could even hold onto the beast as he ran—but the idea was alluring. Slowly he walked over to Ahlo. He grabbed the thick fur around his neck and pulled himself up onto the bronte's back, he smelled a rush of hide and earth. The scent was calming and unexpected. He squeezed his legs tightly together as he felt the beast below him begin to stand. Clutching his spear in his right arm and tufts of fur in his left, the bronte began to run.

Hal closed his eyes. As they bounded he could feel wind and the blur of the wood rush past. He had never felt anything so invigorating before. He couldn't believe how fast they were going. Ahlo's run was graceful—a single jump measuring spear lengths of distance. His movements were fluid and sharp; they didn't disturb the wood as they passed through it. And as Hal gazed in wonder, they began to run faster and faster, until all of a sudden they came to a jarring stop.

Hal could hear the soft pads of Ahlo's paws gliding softly onto the leaves below them.

Ahlo crouched low. He was listening. In the distance Hal heard two familiar voices through the trees. Within seconds he knew their origin. Wilvie and Darien were just before them. So Mace hadn't bought the story, he was still having Hal tracked.

"Can't believe you lost him again," Darien uttered. As Hal remained on the back of the bronte, he remarked on the oddness of the pair. Altogether they had such a strange dynamic. Brothers, yes—but surely Wilvie must at some point grow tired of taking orders from Darien.

"His tracks just stop here," Wilvie observed. It looked like he was bent low, trying to read the ground. Ahlo backed up. He didn't make a sound as he began to run. As they rode, Hal discovered that holding onto the bronte was not easy. He could feel his legs tiring as they gripped and his biceps quaking as he tried to balance himself on top of the mighty animal. But even through the tiresome struggle, Hal, for the first time in all his life, felt free.

As they ran, he looked down on the forest in a new way. How easily his fortune had changed; from being at the mercy of the forest, to now riding triumphantly through it. He wondered yet still, if he would wake to find this, like so many other false realities, just another dream. It was some time before they stopped and when they finally did, Hal's legs ached. Looking around in the sallow light, they were in a clearing of sorts. It was brighter here on the ground than it had been in his experience of sitting in trees. There was a stillness in the air. Hal had never been to this part of the forest before. The bronte lowered his back and Hal climbed off.

"Where are we?" he looked at Ahlo. Surely the beast would warn him if there were any predators nearby. With his spear still in hand, he walked out into the clearing. For as far as he could see, there was a gigantic mass of scattered stone structures. Hundreds, of what looked like, aboveground tunnels with walls on all sides and the tops of them, many of which had long since caved in. Each had thin walls made of stones that rose up out of the earth. As he drew closer, he



could see they were much larger than he first perceived. Under his feet, remnants of some sort of stone path etched through the moss and raw earth, ruins of a past Hal never knew existed stood before and beneath him.

Walking down the path, he felt safer, as if he was back in his own tunnel walking the path from his burrow in Fahri, to the cavern, or out to the various trapdoors. This was human, something deep inside him knew it and as he looked around the structures told a similar tale. This was a village.

“What is this place?” Following the road, he peered farther into the ruins and saw the remains of a stone structure with a top that came to a sharp point that extended high into the darkness above. Glancing back behind him, he turned to see Ahlo following at a distance. He found the beasts presence a small comfort as he explored.

Approaching the pointed structure, he could see that the walls were covered in markings; he placed his fingers on them. The figures and etched fading scenes told stories. Small men and creatures living inside the structures that resembled the ruins around him. Above each of the scenes, a circle symbol with lines emanated out. As he pressed his fingers against the stone, small pieces of the wall crumbled and fell to the ground. How old was this place? Were these the ruins of his peoples past? There was no way of knowing—but from the evidence, there were no images of bronte on the walls.

Hal turned around to find Ahlo but the bronte was gone.

“Ahlo?” He called out in a voice a pitch higher than a whisper. His protector was gone. The darkness and the shadows around him seemed to grow. The black entrances of the shelters around him felt full.

“Ahlo?” he called out a little louder. A head peeked out from one of the ruins. Ahlo

purred a shallow growl. Hal ran towards him.

“I wasn’t sure where you gone.” Hal suddenly felt how crazy he was; not only was he riding and co-existing with a bronte, but now he was conversing with the beast. Seeming to understand, the bronte turned around and withdrew back into the house. Hal followed and discovered a pile of leaves.

“Is this where you live?” Ahlo gave one of his slow blinking bows and turned to lie down in the pile in the corner next to the farthest wall. Lying there he was tall in proportion to the room. His antlers scraped the top of the deteriorating roof and his body easily filled the space. Lying down, the bronte was going to sleep. Did Ahlo assume that Hal would sleep here tonight? Of course, he had said he would stay with him . . . but what about Mare and Ames? He couldn’t just slip away and never speak to her again. Hal guessed that Ahlo was reading his thoughts because his eyes had opened again and the brows of fur above his eyes seemed to wrinkle and furrow.

“How do you know the other bronte won’t find you?” He realized this was a more complex question and wasn’t surprised when Ahlo simply blinked back at him. Without anything else to do, Hal sat down in the ruined house.

Bringing the bronte back to the tunnels was dangerous. If Mace or the brothers or anyone else heard of the large beasts presence, Hal and Ahlo would surely die. But if Ahlo stayed out here by himself, Hal was certain that the other bronte would find him and finish the job they had started on the day the unlikely pair had met. The dangerous world where Hal and Ahlo lived out in the open, at the mercy of the forest and the beasts within, was the only one where the pair could continue to coexist. Hal didn’t mind it—but the idea of Mare and Ames held him back.

“Ahlo?”

The bronte opened his eyes. His displeased expression showed he had been reading and sensing Hal's thoughts.

"I've got to go back. I need to take care of Mare and Ames—but I promise, I'll come back."

Ahlo growled.

"They're my family. Before I leave them forever, I need to tell her where I am. It's the least I can do."

With his eyes narrowed, Ahlo got up and sprang outside, his actions were fluid and intense, Hal was amazed at the readiness and dexterity of the creature.

Hal followed the bronte back out into the maze of stone and climbed onto his back, and as he did, each of his muscles groaned in agony. He had only just grabbed the thick tuft of fur in time before Ahlo dove through the air and into the depths of the forest.

When Ahlo stopped once again, Hal recognized an old tree it looked like three men could fit inside the trunk alone and it had a knot at its base that looked like a skull. Ahlo had brought him to the head of the Paltra. Hal climbed off the creature's and back faced him.

"Meet me here," he looked around him for a marker, "at this tree knot, tomorrow at first light—I want you to meet Mare, again." Ahlo did not bow, but looked at Hal with distrust. As Hal turned and walked back towards the tunnels, he called back to Ahlo.

"Be safe!" But when he turned to see if the beast had heard him, the bronte was gone. A few moments later, Hal saw a strange blue glow floating deep in the forest. Ahlo was following, keeping an eye on him as he passed back into the village. As Hal opened the trapdoor and entered the antechamber that led back down into the tunnels, he pointed his thoughts to Ahlo.

"Don't forget—first light."

\* \* \*

Arriving back into the tunnels, Hal found Mare pacing in front of the fire, Ames at her side, finishing a bowl of taro. As soon as Hal closed the door behind him, Mare rushed at him.

“Where were you? I got home—hours ago—to an empty kitchen with no dinner cooking, I thought something awful had happened! You dead, carried off by some monster, captured by Mace. And here I was with nothing I could do to save you! And Ames said you had just gone to the garden—of course we knew that wasn’t true once we had gone up there looking for you.”

Listening to her, he felt a smile crest his lips. He tried to hide it, but she spotted it.

“This is far from funny. I cannot live with this constant burden. Our lives are already stressful, but now with you running off and staying gone into the night—” She paused exasperated, her anger dissipating. “—it’s just hard enough as it is without all this extra uncertainty.”

He had made her worry—and just after promising not to run off again.

“So where were you?” her voice was already softer.

“I lost track of time.”

“Tending rots—I’ve never known you to be such a willing gardener.”

No, I got distracted.”

“By what?”

“Ahlo found me.”

“Please tell me you left it alone.”

“I couldn’t, Mare. He’s my friend.”

“Your friend?”

“Yes.”

“How?” she asked unsure, suspicion hanging on every word.

“ . . . He let me ride him through the forest.”

“What?”

“Please don’t be mad it was the most amazing thing that’s ever happened to me. I didn’t have to be afraid or scared, or slow, or in hiding—we just rode and we were free. And he showed me ruins—this old city out in the open air!”

“Hal, This is beyond dangerous!” She shook her head and covered her eyes with her hands. Hal didn’t know what to do. He looked over at Ames, his brother’s eyes were wide.

“A city?” he asked.

“Mare—it’s not as bad as it sounds.” But Mare shook her head.

“When are our lives going to go back to the way they were?” Her voice was weak. Hal knew what he was about to say would hurt her.

“I don’t think I can go back.”

“What do you mean?” Mare and Ames both looked up at him.

“I know this isn’t going to be easy for you . . . but it’s right.” He paused. “He’s been exiled—or something—from his herd. He’s out there by himself and for whatever reason, he trusts me. Maybe because I saved him, but today—today was one of the best days of my life.” Mare lowered her hands from her face, her eyes wide. The pain still hung to the corners of her eyelids.

“I love you so much, Mare. But I want to join him . . . and live up there.” Mare stood frozen. He could almost see the blood pouring from the wound his words had caused her.

“Hal, you’re a lone hunter now. I don’t want to tell you what to do, but what I can tell you is those creatures killed our family. You were too young to remember, but they murdered your mother, your father, my mother and father. They have destroyed our entire family and you

want to throw everything we have away to just run around in the most dangerous place you could choose to be.”

“But Mare, with Ahlo, it’s not dangerous—”

“I don’t believe that! They almost killed him and would have succeeded if you hadn’t brought him down here.”

“But together—”

“What can you do against even one of those beasts?” she asked. Hal looked up. He could see this was a war he could not win.

“I can’t promise you that I won’t die. But for me, being out there is a far better than the imprisonment of living down here. What’s surviving if you can’t even live?” he said.

She looked away.

“I didn’t realize you felt that way about our life,” she stammered. He had cut too deep.

“That’s not what I meant—”

“Sure it is.”

“Mare—” She waved his words away. “I left your dinner over the fire.” Hal looked over and saw the taro sitting over the glowing red coals. The same fire she had made hours ago when she had returned home to the empty burrow.

“I’ll still come back to visit—and I’ll do the hunting for you.” He didn’t know what else to say. Nothing would cure the pain he had already caused her.

“Please—just come hunting with us tomorrow.”

Mare nodded and stood up from the chair. Moving past the chairs, her feet fell lightly on the dirt floor as she passed through the burrow, disappearing behind the barrier without saying another word.

No longer hungry, Hal poured the taro into his bowl and sat next to Ames. Neither of them spoke as the fire crackled and burned. On the walls, the shadows of the rocks were invaded by the flickering light of the flames.

“Do you think she’ll go?” Ames said.

“I don’t know.”

“What does all this mean—the bronte, the city above the tunnels?” Ames whispered.

“I’m not sure—but I think the Maces have been hiding all this from the village.”

“Ok. But why hide it?”

“I don’t know.” The fire hissed beside them as the boys sat in silence again.

“So you’re really leaving then?” Ames voice was somber.

“I’ve got to, Ames.” Hal didn’t turn to his brother. He knew the thought of separation. He would need to take this and a few other tools with him in the morning. The concept of moving out was strange. He made a mental list of the other utensils and items he would bring as he half-heartedly spooned taro into his mouth. When he was finished, he loaded his pack with the bowl, his wooden spoon, his extra shirt and other objects from his list. If he forgot something, this wasn’t the last time he would be around. He could always come back when he was bringing meat or just visiting Mare.

After his bag was packed, he climbed into his pile of pelts and allowed the gentle lull of sleep to take him.

## Chapter 5

The next morning Hal woke up and lay in silence for sometime before rising. He had slept, but his dreams had been uneasy and restless. While his heart yearned for adventures with Ahlo, there was something safe and comforting about his curtained room.

Hal began to hear movement outside his door; the chiming of the pots and the thickening aroma that traveled to his nose awoke his stomach beckoning him to his feet. He realized that he couldn't avoid this day forever; he would have to face it head on. Determined to do it as a man, he rose to his feet and entered the kitchen.

Mare continued cooking without looking or speaking to him. After preparing some jerky, she took her seat next to the fire, leaving Hal to fend for himself.

"Morning, Hal." Ames said cheerfully. Hal smiled back at him.

Hal walked to the pantry and grabbed some of the jerky they had prepared two days before. With a fistful in hand, he sat down across from Mare and waited for her gaze to find his—but she didn't give in. Hal placed his heavy eyes on his food, aware that every bite meant that he was one step closer to goodbye. The silence of the room was filled with sorrow.

"Well, I'm off to help Elm again." Ames said, picking up his pack and heading out the door. Hal watched him disappear and took the final bites of jerky.

"Ready?" Mare finally broke the silence between them.

"Almost. Let me get my spear." Hal walked over to the basin, pumped the handle. Cupping his hands, he splashed water onto his face. There was no avoiding it any longer; his time in the village with his aunt and brother had expired.

After dressing and stuffing the rest of his hunting gear into his pack, Hal joined Mare and together they took the long walk out of the Fahri tunnels. They rambled through the passageway



for sometime until they finally came to the ladder. Mare climbed first and peered out. Hal followed and closed the trapdoor behind them.

The dead light of the forest began haunting the horizon with its pale disease-like florescence. They wandered further into the trees towards the head of the Paltra. The florescent fog of the horizon grew dim as the trees around them became more and more dense. Hal carried his spear loosely at his side and sighed with relief, soaking in the sense of freedom he felt as he walked in what had always been a dark and dangerous place. Hopefully Ahlo would be waiting for them. As they approached the tree with the skull, Hal's spirit fell.

Ahlo wasn't there. Mare who had been following in his wake came up beside him.

"Was this your meeting spot?" she asked.

"Yes." They couldn't have been too late. Had something happened to Ahlo in the night? Mare sat down with her spear extended and her back against the knotted tree. Just as she sat, Hal's eye caught sight of a faint flicker of blue light between the trees in the far distance. His heart skipped a beat. His hopes were not in vain; Ahlo was coming. Within moments the bronte had bounded up to them. His brow was furrowed as he kept his distance from Mare.

"Mare, this is Ahlo." The beast stared back at her with a look of confusion.

"It's probably best if you bow," Hal whispered. The scene made him smile. Mare gave a small bow, her eyes never straying from the giant beast before her.

"—and Ahlo this is my Aunt Mare." The creature mimicked her motion; he too kept his eyes on the human before him. "Now that we all know each other, I suppose we can commence the hunt!" Hal was so hopeful, he desired so greatly for his aunt to feel the same sense of freedom he had felt yesterday.

“Ahlo, we need food—can you help us find some deer?” Hal tried to present the idea of deer and other creatures to his head so that Ahlo could hear and see his intention. Ahlo gave Hal one of his slow nods and bounded ahead of them.

“That’s our cue to follow,” he smiled to Mare. She still looked unsure, but didn’t say anything as she began to trail after them.

They continued on this way for some time. They started a journey towards the Opka. Hal once again took in the strange freedom of the beast. He seemed to know the forest in a way that Hal couldn’t understand.

At that moment, Hal heard Ahlo take off through the trees and Mare ran after him. Hal moved to follow but suddenly felt an abrupt pang of exhilaration and nausea overcame him. In his head he saw the eyes of a deer gleaming in the dead light. In his mouth he tasted the vile taste of flesh and the metallic rawness of blood. He dropped his spear, fell to his knees and began dry heaving; spitting out the memory of the feeling. Mare doubled back confused.

“What’s the matter?” she asked. Hal tried to answer and allowed the sweat and spit to run down his chin into the earth. The feeling passed. Pushing himself off the ground, he regained his feet.

“I don’t know what just happened—I saw what Ahlo saw and tasted raw meat and it just made me sick—it’s happened before.” She nodded her head, but there was worry hiding in the corner of her eyes.

“But you’re okay?”

“Yeah, it just took me by surprise.”

“Where did he go?” she asked looking through the trees ahead of them. Hal didn’t know. He had rejected the feeling and now he didn’t know how he would find Ahlo again. The forest

was quiet. Wherever that deer had run, Ahlo and the excitement had followed. The forest was now returning to its cold state of complacency. He knew he couldn't tell his Aunt they were lost and alone in the forest, without their four-legged protector.

"This way." He could pretend. Sooner or later Ahlo would show up again. He always came back. Decided, he led Mare towards the Opka, hoping they would hear the sound of Ahlo's pursuit or see him bounding through the trees to find them. But no blue light appeared.

The light dwindled overhead. They had been out too long. The pair continued on a lonesome hunt for both prey and their would-be guide. Above them light began to rescind. Coming around a boulder that looked like a giant bear, they suddenly realized they were no longer alone.

"Well Wilvie, look who it is." They had fallen directly into the path of Darien. Standing on the boulder above them, his voice was loud in the forest and the sound of it echoed through the emptiness.

"Darien, why don't you go back to your own hunting route and leave us to ours?" Mare responded in the voice she used to address the children of the village.

"Cause we're here to take lil' Hally Wally away," he said in a voice full of mockery.

"What?" Worry wrinkled on her face. Hal approached the brothers with his spear extended.

"That's right, Hally. Mace finally gave us permission. You see we saw you and your new friend yesterday and again today." Wilvie was out right yelling and laughing now.

"What are you talking about?" Hal called back louder.

"I'm talking about you being a traitor. We've known it all along—it just took the rest of the village awhile to pick up on it," Wilvie chuckled behind his brother's threats.

“I’m not coming with you.”

“Shhh—Hal, we can’t yell. They’ll hear and Ahlo is gone. If they find us, we have no way out,” Mare whispered to him.

“We aren’t asking.” Darien paused. “We’re telling.” The smile faded from his lips. He readied his spear and looked down on them.

Where had Ahlo gone? And why was this happening? How could they have possibly seen them yesterday—or this morning for that matter? Looking up, Hal readied himself for Darien’s attack. He wouldn’t follow. He was not going to let the hope of his new life be blown out by Darien and Wilvie.

But just as he stood to face Darien, the ground began to rumble and the leaves began to fall. He looked to find Mare and even though she was only a few feet away from him, the darkness had grown so thick that he could only see the outline of her thin body. They had come.

“Run!” The ground shook harder and green-eyed lights ran menacingly from the north. Hal and Mare took off, and Wilvie and Darien followed, taking a few extra moments to jump down from the boulder. Together the group began sprinting. Hal followed Mare as she threw herself up the nearest tree. He was five paces too far behind her went up the tree next to hers. As quickly as he could, he threw his spear through the loop on his pack, and began climbing. He felt the flesh on his palms rip as he tore his way up the tree. He could hear Mare’s heavy breaths as she climbed through the air somewhere near him. Hal climbed till he reached the tallest limbs. He had no idea how high up he was, but he could feel the height below him. Falling meant death.

Below and somewhere to the left, he heard Darien and Wilvie running with full force. They had not opted to run up the trees. It was only a few moments before the sounds of screaming were heard. Somebody had been caught.

“Please, no!” It was Wilvie. Hal looked towards the yelling to see green lights circling. He could not see him, but he heard flesh being ripped.

Hal did not hear them catch Darien but he didn’t have time to think about that—once again he cleared his mind. He imagined he was a just another leathery branch of the tree. But this time there was no drowning stream to confuse and muddle the minds of the dark creatures. This time, he knew there would be no escape.

It wasn’t long before Hal heard them directly below him. He clenched his eyes tight, determined not to give himself away by looking at the creatures. He heard their rapid pants, the rough scraping of their thick paws on the forest floor. It took all of his might not to imagine those devilish green eyes. But the worst sound of all was the terrible noise he heard next—the sound of them sniffing and clawing at the tree. But it wasn’t his tree.

Fear tore through his body. He listened to the beasts below; circling the tree, as the one, the aggressor began his ascent. He couldn’t see him, but the sound of the claws lacerating their way up the bark filled his heart with dread and his eyes with noiseless tears.

It didn’t take long, but Hal felt like the moment lasted all the life he had lived. First, he heard the creature rise and fall up the tree. He had the same agility of Ahlo, but gravity was certainly making the creature’s climb quite difficult. The devil’s breathing could be heard mingled with the shrieks of excitement from the others below. Then he heard what he had been dreading: the scream. It wasn’t a fear-filled scream like you would expect, the noise carried with it a sense of dignity, a fighting spirit. It gave Hal hope as he heard another scream—but this one was emitted by the bronte. It was a deep guttural howl that made Hal’s spine twinge. He heard flesh cleaved. Mare was putting up a fight. It sounded like she had run her spear through him. For a split second, Hal wondered if she was going to win, if she was going to take down the

devil—but the next sound, the blend of yelling, the clashing of teeth and the smashing of bones.

Hal tried to turn off his ears as his insides ached. His whole body filled with blinding fire and his ears burned. Mare's yells were gone. The air was filled with the noise of the brute bounding down the tree and the rest of the devils tearing into what he bore. Sitting alone above the nightmare, everything seemed to stop. Hal wanted to throw himself from his tree. His head and muscles pulsed with rage and red-hot hatred as he waited for the sound of clawing and climbing on his tree.

But that is not what he heard. Out of the darkness fire erupted and Hal opened his eyes to see what looked like a giant white wolf standing on his hind legs. The fire encircled the brute as they cowered. With their ears back, they began to withdraw from the blaze of light and flame. The figure began throwing black dust into the flames and they spread quickly, creating a cloud that attacked the brute with biting heat.

The air was filled with whimpering and wild howls as the creatures began to run. Hal didn't know if what he was seeing was real or imagined as the figure pulled back the wolf head and revealed the dark bearded face of a man. In that moment, what had previously been wolf, was now man and the creature was looking right at him. He beckoned him down with the flash of a pale hand. Mesmerized by the scene before him, Hal did as the man signaled and began climbing down. Half-falling, his hands were bruised and bleeding from the flight up moments before. When he finally reached the ground, his knees buckled and he collapsed. Hal felt arms lifting him up as the wolf-pelted man led him to a brown four-legged creature a few yards away.

"Hurry, we don't have much time—they'll be back," Hal heard as he was half-lifted onto a leather seat on the beast's back. The man then climbed on, grabbed reins and yelled foreign words Hal had never heard before. And with that the creature took off running through the night.

## Chapter 6

*He had pushed as far into the crag as he could before he sat down, pushed his back up on the cold rock and tried to sleep. They hadn't told him about this. They should have warned him—but if they had, they knew he would not have come.*

\* \* \*

Hal opened his eyes the following day to a mass of twigs and veiny branches spiraling around him into the treetops above. Reaching out, he could feel soft wool. Above, the sky dawned its pale twilight robe. It was day. He didn't know where he was or how long he had been asleep. Looking around he saw he was outside, a colossal wall of tree bark that looked like part of a giant tree trunk. Hal looked up to see that the trunk spiraled into the sky. It didn't seem to end.

Beside him there was a small white candle illuminating a small open-aired room with no roof above the spreading branches. Beside him there was a small table, and to the left, stairs leading both up and down. Like a flood, the events of the night before began to wash over him. His stomach felt like it had been torn apart and his hands were throbbing and ripped—but he couldn't see his palms because they were wrapped in cloth. But how?

Like a thief, sleep had taken his consciousness and for a brief spell: the pain, the shock and terror of those noises had disappeared. Sleep had found him on the back of that creature from that terrible place—the last thing he remembered was the hoof-beats. But the impact of the experience suffocated him; he jumped up. He looked below and saw the ground hundreds of paces below him. Losing his balance he continued to stumble, at last finding his feet and the stairwell that led to the lower level.

Holding onto the railing, he looked down to see a black-haired man sitting in a chair in

front of a candle staring at a strange square object. A fur robe hung on the back of the chair he sat on. Hal's mind flashed to the wolf pelt and the fire. The man, broad, bearded and stocky looked more to Hal like a bear than like any man he had ever seen. Every piece of hair on his head was thick and course, his hands were giant—at least twice the size of his own. Seeing Hal at the top of the stairs, he put down the object and gave Hal a slow nod of greeting.

“Where am I?” Hal asked without drawing nearer.

“This is my home. I brought you here.” The man was obviously a being of few words.

“But why?”

“To save you. Surely that wasn't your first encounter with the beasts of Thule. Although from the way you foolishly walked about in the forest, it wasn't clear to me. Normally the people of the ground pay more attention to their safety when wandering out of their squeamish tunnels.”

“Sorry, I'm a bit lost—who are you?”

“A soul of the forest.” Hal wasn't sure what a ‘soul of the forest’ was, but he guessed that the bear-man wasn't about to tell him.

“Were you the one that fought the bronte?”

“Yes.”

“Why are they afraid of you?”

“They aren't. They are afraid of the fire. Come sit, I've made that stew your kind is always digging about to make.”

This was too much. It was clear that if this strange “soul of the forest” had wanted to kill him, he had his chance. Hal descended the stairs and sat down at the carved square table. The legs were designed to look like large tree trunks; the details were beyond the craftsmanship of his village. He ran his fingers over the delicate woodwork. How he wished they had never climbed



those trees the day before. He should have died defending Mare. Why did he think he was so strong? The “soul” was right, he had been a fool.

The waves of howling and gnashing teeth washed over him again and for a moment he felt as though he would faint. The man got up and put together the taro he had promised. Taking the wooden spoon in hand, Hal noticed the stem also was carved to look like a tree. The man then retook his seat in the chair by the candle.

“Do you have a name?” he asked taking his first bite.

“You can call me Brael.”

“Brael,” he breathed still in his stupor. “I want to know why you saved me.” Brael took his eyes off the taro and fixed them to Hal.

“I watch your people in the woods,” he paused taking a long, deep breath. I have my ways of concealing myself—most of your kind are ignorant fools who have long lost their humanity to the fear and folly of their underground prisons. But you—you interested me.”

“By hunting? I don’t understand what’s so unusual about that?” Hal wanted to conceal his secret.

“No, that’s not why.”

“Then why?” Hal asked. Brael sighed.

“Because you walk with the creatures.” Hal was stunned. Brael had been watching—but why? If he had so little respect for his people, why was he keeping such a vigilant eye on them, particularly him?

“I just don’t understand why you care.” Hal said. Brael rolled his eyes.

“Of course even you have to be as dimwitted as the rest.”

“What do you mean, even me?”

“I have an idea, that’s all.”

“What’s your idea?”

“There’s too much you don’t know.”

“Like what?” Hal was getting impatient, had it been a normal day he might have been able to stand the suspense but with everything that had just happened, he was almost out of patience. Brael had secrets. His strange power and the ability to frighten the bronte were proof of that—but what was frustrating him was the fact that he wouldn’t even try to explain. Hal put down the spoon.

“If you have answers, why won’t you help me?” Hal asked. Brael seemed to think this question was fair.

“I don’t even know where to begin with you.”

“Just start at the beginning,” Hal said. Brael weighed the choices before him.

“Okay, but before I begin—let’s put on some tea.” Hal waited with his arms folded across his chest until Brael boiled his water, pulled strange colored leaves from a wooden box, sprinkled the odd leaves into the bottom of two wooden cups and finally poured the hot water over them.

“Here,” Brael said. Hal knew he should have said thank-you but he didn’t. Cold anger was still radiating from his fingertips.

“Now the first thing you have to understand is important.”

“And what’s that?” Hal knew he was being arrogant. Brael looked deep into the tea in front of him and then paused, taking a deep breath.

“The world isn’t what you know.”

“Great, more riddles,” Hal said. “Is that it?”

“What I am going to tell you is going to be hard to believe. I don’t suppose the Thulian people still pass on the old legends?”

“What legends?”

“The legends of the past—the ones which tell about a people of Thule that lived above the ground.”

“Mare told me those when I was a child—But I don’t really remember—”

“Of course you don’t.” Brael shook his head. “Those legends tell of the day the dreaded killers, your bronte, first entered Thule. In those days, the people lived outside, unafraid. There was even the myth of a great light, which wrapped the earth in warm rays, scattering the darkness.

“That’s just a bedtime story the elders told to comfort the children—” Hal cut in.

“It’s more than that. “When the bronte arrived, everything changed. They attacked without warning. The brooks and creeks ran crimson and the ground was littered with the uncountable dead. That was the last time the people of Thule saw the great light. It was the last time they lived without fear.”

Brael and Hal sat in silence.

“So?”

“Well they aren’t just legends.”

“What do you mean?” But even as he asked, Hal pictured the settlement where Ahlo had taken him.

“I think you know. You’ve seen the ruins.”

“So those are the remnants of the ancient Thule?”

“Yes. Your people used to dwell out there—before the light was dimmed—before those

beasts roamed the forest.”

“What happened?”

“This forest was cursed,” Brael said. Hal tried to take in what he was saying but these were strange words.

“What is cursed?”

“Long ago, there was an order—an evil order. They sought to release chaos on the land in the hopes of controlling it. They used magic, knowledge from another age and another time—perhaps even another world. This order of men manipulated nature for their own gains, so they could rule over all the realms.”

“I don’t understand—where did they get the power?” Hal asked.

“That is beyond my knowledge. All I know is that the order was overthrown by a legion of men long ago. There was peace for a time, but the dark hunter has started the cycle anew. I believe he means to throw this world into darkness, a darkness that would paralyze every creature and settlement, leaving him alone as the victor. He has already partially succeeded in Thule.” This was all too much—a dark hunter, an alliance of men? Hal tried to stretch his thin perception of the world he knew around this much bigger realm, but he couldn’t.

“But where are all these men—and the dark hunter, surely they would have needed provisions or sought trade with us at some point—if nothing else wouldn’t we have seen or heard something about them?”

“That is where the curse comes in. The dark hunter has enchanted this forest so that the sun can only shine so much—so your people would grow weak, lose hope and die out. I believe that is why he also created the beasts.”

“The bronte?”

“How could he create them? How does one control nature?”

“You are asking the wrong questions. Even if I knew, that darkness is beyond my ability.”

“You can yield magic?”

“Not deep magic. But I can change my form.” This is what Hal had seen occur in the forest. Brael was wild. His blue eyes flickered darkly with a strange lure.

“If there are other lands—why hasn’t he done this to them?”

“I think he means to. It’s about power. The weight of this curse was not a light load to bear. I am sure even he has limits—or he does for the time being.”

“What do you mean?”

“The dark hunter is always searching, always looking for more—more power, more magic—anything he can use to overthrow light.”

“But why Thule?”

“I don’t know for sure—but my guess he is afraid of something or someone.” For a brief instant, Brael’s eyes flickered away from Hal’s. “He has put too much effort into keeping the forest and your people in the darkness alone.” Hal took a deep breath and let the air fill around this new information. So there were people outside of the forest? How do you know all this?” Hal asked.

“I have seen it.” Hal watched as a strange shade creep from the shadows and into the indentions of Brael’s face.

“You’ve been beyond the borders of Thule?”

“Yes.”

“Whyever would you stay here?” If Brael truly had the ability to go and free himself from

Thule, why hadn't he escaped?

"Like you, I'm trapped here."

"What do you mean?"

"The curse has locked all creatures inside the forest, while also keeping outsiders away.

But even if I could leave, I wouldn't."

"But you said you had left?"

"I am much older than I look. I have not left the forest since the curse fell." Brael did not look young by any means. How old was he?

"But why wouldn't you leave?" Hal couldn't understand why someone with the ability to leave would stay. Brael sighed.

"I'm hiding."

"From who?"

"The dark hunter has many enemies and I count myself among them."

"But why hide?" Brael suddenly stood from the table and walked towards the edge of the platform. The wooden boards creaked under him. He could tell he had struck a nerve.

"That is my business." And just like that Brael grabbed the wolf robe hanging from the chair behind him and jumped through the air to the ground. Hal rushed to the side, where a hundred spear lengths or more below, he saw a wolf run headlong into the failing light.

*Strange.* Hal was surprised Brael had entrusted him alone in his tree. He felt the urge to go back to sleep and try once again to allow slumber to lull away the horrors of yesterday—and that's when he remembered Ahlo.

"Grite—" he cursed under his breath. He also had no idea where he was or if he was even alive. But he had to find him. He had chosen Ahlo above his village, his family, and his entire

way of life and now was lost.

Rushing up the stairs to the upper platform, Hal found his pack and saw his spear leaning against the wall of the trunk. Taking his spear and pack he ran down each level of the platform. He was surprised at how many levels there actually were. The tree that supported the house was large and thick; it was impossible to see around it as he stumbled down the stairs and ladders that led to the ground. When he finally reached the bottom, he realized he had no idea which way to run. Looking up, the tarnished light was directly on top of him. He knew that going out into the forest this late was dangerous—but what choice did he have?

He could hear water nearby. Squinting through the half-light he could see Brael's tree was right next to a small lake. He had never been to this side of the lake before but he recognized where he was. He must have passed the other side of that water thousands of times on his way out to hunt. Yet here was a secret so close that he had never known. How many other secrets lay dormant out in the wild—in the great world Brael had spoken of that he had never seen.

Hal crouched down. It was back to the old rules now. He made his way to the lake, cupped his hands and poured water over his face. He could feel the sting of his palms. Picking up his spear, he ran along the water's edge. The lake was much larger than he thought and it seemed to span unthinkably far. The trees were also thicker around the water, making it a bit more tedious for Hal to watch his footing as he brambled up and over each fallen tree and root. There was also a slight slant where the water had eroded the ground and the mass of leaves and fallen limbs was difficult to run through. Hal had already been sweating before he had gotten into the thick of the trees, but now he was drenched. He wondered if he had made a good choice running back to the village—he didn't know if Ahlo had picked up his scent or where he was, but this was his best guess. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't stop thinking that Ahlo too, like

Mare, had been murdered.

Hal could hear his feet echoing into the black around him. This wasn't the way Thulians ran in the woods. Mare would have called him reckless—but he couldn't think of her right now. Determined to put all thinking aside, he ran on.

When he finally reached the familiar far side of the bank, he was not only covered in dirt, but his feet were wet from the moisture. Still panting from the long run, Hal looked up. The light was gone and there was nothing but the lonely darkness. Feeling slightly at ease being in a familiar part of the forest, he tossed his spear and pack to the side and walked back toward the water for a much needed rest. But just as he heard the thud of his spear hit the ground, his world was turned upside down as his body was yanked from the earth and pulled high up. Hal coughed out the last of the remaining air that hadn't been knocked out his lungs. He tried to make out the figures who were filling in around him but the darkness was too dense.

"We've been waiting for you, Hal." He knew that voice. From the dim torchlight Hal finally recognized the face of Limand. He should have known that after the recent deaths—Hal tried to shove the screams of Mare out of his head as he remembered—that Darian would go back and tell them what had happened—with his own twist of course.

"What do you want with me?" Hal called down. He could see eight figures in all. To the left of Limand, he saw Darian, his eyes burning with spite, his lips alive with a malicious smile. The other members of the group were five of the *daivadae* and just behind them, Ames.

"We're leaving you to the beasts!" Darian yelled. "You're going to die for what you've done!" For as long as Hal could remember the village's way of dealing with execution had been to tie up criminals and cut their throat just so they could feel the pain of death eat away at them before the *bronte* came and took over.



“Darian here told the village what happened in the woods last night. All about how you murdered Wilvie and your own aunt.”

“That’s a lie!” Hal yelled. Anger flared. He had expected Darian to bend the truth but he hadn’t expected him to outright lie about what happened. “I didn’t kill them, the bronte did!”

“Everyone knows you’re a pathetic traitor!” Darian yelled.

“We’ve been watching you.” Limand said calmly. “We know you’ve been bewitching the beasts and conspiring against us. What did you think you could do? Use them to take control of the village?”

“That’s not what happened and you know it!”

“Hal, Hal—,” Limand’s calm demeanor was not reassuring.

“There’s no sense denying it now. Elder Linzal’s already given us the order. Cut him down!”

Hal saw two figures retreat to the base of the tree. One crouched and a moment later he felt cold air and then hard ground. Hal coughed again, trying to regain the lost breath, but before he could he felt hands grab him and yank him to his feet. Darian approached smirking ruthlessly as a member of the *dauidae* stepped forward and began tying his hands to the trunk of a tree.

“Ready to die?” Darian yelled.

“Alright, let’s not waste any more time.” Limand ordered.

“Ames, cut his throat and let’s get back to the village. They’ll be here soon.” Hal couldn’t avoid him anymore. He looked at his brother. There were tears in his eyes as he pulled out a dagger carved from dark stone. Ames approached Hal. But as he got in arm’s reach, the ground began to quake. Hal heard leaves rushing to the ground.

“They’re coming,” Limand said in a hushed voice. “Sarv, Fil!” The bearded warrior

nodded, took out a horn and blew three times. The lookouts would hear. Soon a battle of beast and man would rage through the forest.

Darian looked at Hal with pure disgust before turning and running after the others. Hal felt the trees around him rumble louder and louder.

“Kill him!” Limand yelled at Ames who stood before Hal, eyes full, the dagger shook as he held it to his brother’s throat. The bronte began to roll in through the glen. Their shrieks echoed through the trees. Sarv and the rest of the dauidae were racing towards them.

“I’m sorry, Ames. I’m so sorry—” Hal pleaded.

“Shut up.” Ames said. “Don’t ever come back here.” He took the dagger and cut his hands free. Hal broke free of the bonds and looked at his brother.

“Ames—”

“I never want to see you again. Go.” Ames turned his back on him and raced towards the coming bronte. Hal felt the bottom fall out his stomach. He had hurt his brother. He knew he couldn’t stay—but how could he leave Ames like this? Hal stood frozen as he watched Ames run after the others and out of sight.

From behind a tree, a bronte leaped forward. His eyes cast green shadows through the small clearing as he circled Hal. Hal was weaponless. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted his spear on the ground. But the bronte had heard his thought and tried to jump in between him and the weapon, but Hal was already there. The beast shrieked. Doubling back, Hal turned on the bronte and more of them filed in around the other. Hal saw just how unique each of them were, some had shorter antlers, some had darker fur, and others were pure white. When the hoard was almost settled, out of the fray came what Hal assumed was the alpha of the pack. He was gigantic, almost double the size of Ahlo and he had green eyes like the rest of them but they

shined with unparalleled cruelty. His mane was black but his face was lined in white, making his eyes glow all the more.

As he approached, Hal saw death in his pupils. The brute gnashed his teeth with a nasty pride. They must have been hunting him. Hal had been a fool. And his path to foolishness had started weeks ago. This was the result of his mistakes, his selfishness—and now it would be his end.

The bronte all around him waited for their alpha to strike as they howled and scratched the earth with their long, thick claws. Hal grasped his spear and readied himself for the blow. And in that moment, the attack happened just as all of Hal's nightmares had told him it would.

The bronte lowered himself to the ground and in one fluid leap, crashed into Hal, throwing him to the ground as he bit the air, reaching and arching every muscle towards his throat. It took every ounce of strength Hal had to brace the blow with his spear and push the bronte away from him. The spear was against the brute's throat and as Hal continued to resist, he could feel his wrists buckling as the bronte continued to push harder and harder—its eyes furious, pulsing with anger.

It was in that moment that Hal felt it. Ahlo was here. In the vision that followed, Hal couldn't see himself, but he saw the green glow of the circle of beasts. Ahlo was just outside the fray. But what did this mean? What could Ahlo do against all the bronte? Sweat began to pour down Hal's brow. He couldn't go on much longer. Still lying on the ground, he rebounded his strength and head-butted the creature, causing the livid bronte to growl and double back.

Hal jumped to his feet. The alpha had already rebounded from his first attack and Hal could see it would be moments before he would have to bear the brunt of another. In the instant that followed, Hal saw the wood around him ignite in fire and a white wolf leaped between Hal

and the alpha, bearing the weight of the attack.

Realizing that a new creature had entered the fray, the alpha struck with more anger and aggression. The wolf was smaller than the alpha, but not by much. The two rolled and tossed in a vicious tailspin of attacks. Brael was fast on his feet, keeping the alpha at bay with his speed—narrowly avoiding his terrible bite. Hal watched them, stunned. The rest of the hoard around them howled and ran around kicking and scratching the ground. Hal watched in horror as the two continued to bite and claw one another. It was in the following moment that in the sea of green, Hal saw the glow of blue out of the corner of his eye. Ahlo. The creature cautiously approached Hal—hiding in plain sight.

Hal slowly inched his way closer to the blue glow. One of the brutes was bound to notice, Hal braced himself for the worst, but nothing happened. Had Ahlo found a way to elude their thoughts? Hal had just reached Ahlo and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw it happen—to his left a black furred bronte with long spiraling antlers took his eyes off the brawl and issued a deep curdling growl. All around them, green lanterns turned their gaze on Hal and Ahlo. The growling grew louder as the consciousness of the herd fell on them. They had a moment. Hal pulled himself onto Ahlo's back.

“Run!”

Ahlo leaped headlong into the air. The bronte attacked. Ahlo launched himself out of the hoard, taking scratches, bites and a host of attacks as they pushed past them. Hal pulled himself close to Ahlo with both arms wrapped around the beast's neck. Ahlo ran. Out of the circle of lights, the forest was dark. Hal could feel the cold air rush past; he felt his cheeks burn as limbs from shrubs and trees scratched his exposed skin. The hoard was just behind them now. How long could they hope to run? Ahlo was fast, but against the force of the herd, what hope did he

have?

Ahlo began to struggle to boulder up what felt like large rocks. Hal felt the stress of the incline on his arms. Gripping harder with his legs, Ahlo continued to lunge forward. Hal didn't dare glance behind. He knew they were getting closer. Pulling himself closer to Ahlo, out of the corner of his eye, Hal caught the glimpse of red fire and the silhouette of a white wolf breathing it out before him as he ran. Brael was fast.

They climbed on. He could hear the devils behind them. It was in this moment that Ahlo came to an abrupt stop. Hal looked to Brael and saw him howl. Out before them Hal did not see ground, but heard the rush of water. A great river poured out over a rock wall in torrents. Hal could not see the bottom of the abyss but he knew from the sound that it would be a long fall. Brael howled again. Hal looked at the white wolf one last time before Ahlo jumped off the cliff and into the open air.

## Chapter 7

Under the same sky miles away, another soul sat under a sea of stars. Ayn Adylis had never been one for minding directions. The daughter of a dying country, she hated the thought of following orders from others who didn't understand her people's ways. This was difficult because her country, Ayvandeem was a land of lakes and wild woodlands that was being assimilated by another kingdom. Her home, countless miles of winding moss green lakes were connected by culverts in the overgrown forest that spanned to the labyrinth of water and tree that wound southward to the Eydis Sea.

Rhece was a bordering country to the cold north known for their production of iron and steel. For as long as anyone could remember, Rhece and Ayvandeem had alternated between years of war and peace. One hundred years had passed from the time Ayn's country had dictated trade and law in the region. In that time, Ayn's line, beginning with her great-great grandfather, Aayorr, had worked tirelessly to improve the country from the inside out. After years of war, the Adylis' turned to the arts, literature and discovery; while across their borders, the Evander's, the ruling family of Rhece, strengthened their armor and trained for war. They first turned to the weaker nations to the east, overtaking them one by one before finally turning to Ayvandeem. Her father Aynarr, the ruling king of Ayvandeem, was a wise man and knew his kingdom was far from ready for the war the Rhecians yearned for.

Despite how many times her father had told her all of this, she still hated the truth of it. And as she, the rest of her family and all of her people gathered at the summer fortress of Fhyrrkat, preparing for the Rhecians to arrive and begin negotiations for annexation, Ayn lay in bed looking out through her open balcony at the dawn that was just beginning to break over the mass of green mountains. It's radiant orange glow seeped into the lightening purple, snuffing out

the stars above like candles.

Rising from the white sheets, the young girl lifted her arms up and stretched the drowsiness of the evening away. Putting her feet on the stone floor she walked over to her vanity grabbed a brush and began detangling her hair.

Days like today were reserved exclusively for lessons and learning with the other children of her father's council. While she enjoyed some aspects of the lessons, these days of classwork were trying. She much preferred working in the field learning archery and other weapon work. But ever since her brother, Ayryn had been married off; strenuous days of activity had become rare. Now the court was focused on her and the dull pursuit of transforming her into a well-mannered lady of the court. It wasn't all bad, however her best friends Aster and Vera sat in the stale classroom with her and made the task of memorizing histories, languages, and other cultural pursuits endurable, and sometimes even fun.

As Ayn dressed she could hear the servants of the castle and other nobility that dwelt inside beginning to move about in the halls. The castle was exceptionally full right now with the negotiations right around the corner. Ayn opened her dresser and pulled out her brown riding pants, a white blouse and began getting dressed. A few minutes later, Lida, Ayn's lifelong keeper, came through the door with a tray of food.

"It's your favorite this morning," Lida said, placing the tray on the table next to Ayn's bookcase housing a collection of leather-bound books and maps.

"Morning, Lida." Ayn smiled back at the plump woman, sleep still clinging to her tired green eyes. Lida sighed.

"Ayn, whatever are we going to do with you?"

"Come, sit," Lida motioned to the walnut vanity, pointing to the chair just in from of the

large oval mirror.

“I brushed my hair already.” Lida’s brow furrowed. Ayn rolled her eyes and walked over to the chair and sat down.

“You should have been born a stinking boy—how are you ever going to catch a husband if you insist on letting your hair just hang from your head like a moss?” Ayn looked at herself in the mirror. With thin pale skin and a few freckles peeking out from her high cheekbones, she had long chocolate brown hair that lightened on the ends in strands of hint of gold. She looked very much like a girl, but she was certainly no lady in the eyes of the high court of Ayvandeem. Most ladies wore their hair in in low buns on the back of their neck, with soft tendrils hanging from all sides, but not Ayn. She didn’t see the point in spending the time or the energy to look like them.

“Won’t you wear a dress to lessons today, Ayn?” Lida said as she grabbed Ayn’s hair and began tugging it into a thick braid. Lida had apparently heard the whispers from the ladies in high court. Ayn guessed this would happen when the women arrived from Roassgard. While her father spent a great deal of time at the high palace of Ayvandeem, Ayn preferred to stay in the country at Fhyrrkat, it had been her mother’s favorite place and now it was hers.

“Oh, Lida. Don’t let those old women get to you, father doesn’t care that I dress like this and you shouldn’t either.”

“Well he should. You’re sixteen, Ayn. It’s high time you started dressing like a lady of your place in the court.” She began twisting the braid into the customary low bun.

“My place? A woman who can ride a horse and carry a sword?”

“You know what I mean. One of these days you’re going to have to start acting like the lady you are.” Lida pulled Ayn’s hair tightly.

“But this is the lady I want to be. Don’t you know that the women of Ayvandeem used to



ride together and even fight in many of the ancient battles?”

“Those are just legends. And besides, even if they are true, you’re not going to do yourself any favors if you don’t start studying Rhecian history. Their women don’t bother themselves with sabers and knives.” Ayn’s brow furrowed. She knew enough of Rhecian history to know that the women of the capital city, Rhyagg were famous only for the needlework and the ornate tapestries they created.

“So you would have me inside sewing then?” She said glaring at Lida through the mirror. Lida sighed.

“You know I only want the best for you, Miss Ayn. I’ve been with you since your mother and father brought you into this world.

“Okay.”

“Well, I’m wearing this and there’s nothing you can do about it.” She said as she raced out of the room into the hallway.

“Where are you going?” Lida called out as Ayn continued to race down the small set of spiral stairs. “You forgot your breakfast!”

“I’ll just grab something on the way to the way to the Whalery!” She called back. She really did love her nurse. Since mother’s death, Lida had taken care of her. Ayn turned the corner, running her fingers along the white stonewalls. Fhyrrkat was famous for it, the castle was also known as White Hall by many in Ayvandeem and even those in the north. Ayn rounded a sharp corner. Moving too quickly to stop, Ayn slammed into the body of her friend Vera. “Oh, sorry Ayn. I was actually coming to find you.” Vera was eating an apple.

“Where were you for last night’s feast?” Ayn asked remembering that her friend had been absent the following evening.

“Master Verin had a little too much wine—with the added hoopla due to incoming guests—I wonder if he’ll even be able to teach this morning,” Ayn giggled.

“Well, mother made me stay home to be fitted for a dress for the big party your father’s having for the Evander’s. We ate dinner in our quarters.”

“Party?” Ayn rolled her eyes. By party, Ayn knew Vera didn’t mean the usual music filled gatherings out on the edge of the woods that she and her family usually threw in the summer, the type of party that required the type of dress Vera had been fitted for was a stuffy party inside where everyone sat down and whispered while speeches and other boring procedures took place. This was all getting in the way of the castle’s normal summer activities, the events that made the castle home to Ayn.

The girls walked together through the main part of the castle and out the great southern doors, through the rose gardens, up a large hill and through the doors of the Whalery, an old carriage house that had been renovated years ago by her grandfather who wanted a suitable place for her father Ayarr to be educated. He, and now both she and her brother had received all of their lessons there. Ayn’s favorite part of the Whalery was that the stone building itself was built up on the hill overlooking the bay that lead out to the Eydis Sea.

The girls walked in and took their usual seats at the round table where two other of their peers, Rhen and Hazyl, as well as their teacher, Master Verin were already sitting. Ayn, who had never been too keen on Master Verin, sat on the far side of the table, just in the right place where she could look out of the large windows that gave a view of the bay. Hazyl sat on her left and Vera on her right. The room itself was shaped like an oval and had been made to fit the area so that lessons, experiments and other educational activities could be conducted in the center of the room. The name of the carriage house had been given by her father when he had been very

young. Back then, the great gray whales used to migrate and mate in the bay and her father and the rest of the high court would spend their afternoons looking out over them as they came up for air and enjoyed the warm southern waves—but that was a long time ago and since her father's boyhood the whales had stopped returning to the bay. But the name had stuck nonetheless.

“Morning Ayn,” Hazyl smiled.

“Good morning,” Ayn said. Everyone always spoke in a whisper when Master Verin was in the room. Ayn looked out of the corner of her eye at Rhen whose gaze was patently directed at Master Verin. Rhen was the perfect picture of a high court lady and two years older than Ayn. From the top of her head to the tip of her blue silk shoes, she radiated the attributes of a lady. Her younger brother Aster was Ayn's best friend and together they had single handedly teased, spied and picked on Rhen since their infancy. But Aster had gone on an errand with his father the last month and had been absent. She desperately wanted to ask Rhen when he was due to return, but she was too proud. Ayn suddenly felt the cold, seemingly omniscient gaze of the master.

“Rhen?” Master Verin asked.

“Yes?”

“Will your brother be joining us today?”

“When my father returned last week he said that Aster went north to visit a cousin of ours and that he would return sometime this week, but so far, sir, he hasn't arrived home yet.”

“Very well then, I believe the only remaining pupil we are waiting on is Hemming.” And just as he spoke his name, a blond boy dressed in similar attire to Ayn walked through the door.

“Speak of the devil and he doth appear. Mister Iyon you are late.”

“Sorry, my mother had me go to the tailor to be fitted this morning—you know for the big party.” Ayn rolled her eyes. There was simply no escaping it. Hemming walked into the

room and took the empty chair on the other side of Rhen. Hemming was a bright boy about a year younger than Ayn. He was brave and a good fighter, but his mother, Lady Iyon, originally a lady from the city of Fhyrrkat, disliked the southern kingdom she had been forced to marry into very much.

Master Verin shuffled to parchment in front of him, cleared his voice and then began the lesson.

“Very well. Today our meeting will be shorter due to the fact that many of you have other appointments in court and various activities getting ready for the arrival of the Rhecians. In concordance, we are going to be dropping our discussion of the House of Joron and the histories of the Fifth War of Aytos to discuss the houses of the Rhecian line of kings.” Ayn’s blood began to boil. Was it not enough that they were coming here, taking over their country, and stealing their summer—but now they had to study their line of kings?” The room was quiet. Hazyl raised her hand.

“Yes?” Master Verin raised his eyebrows over the piece of parchment he was holding and stared at Hazyl.

“I was just wondering why we we’re changing subjects?” Master Verin’s face wrinkled up. He disliked being challenged.

“It is your the king’s wish that you learn about our guests.” His voice was stern.

“But they are our guests.”

“Yes, what is your question, Lady Huun?”

“Well—my question is, if they are our guests, why should we learn about them? And besides you’ve already taught us this lesson before.” Hazyl was always daring. Ayn was proud of her friend.

“Lady Huun, as you are one of the elite of Ayvandeem. It is in your best interest to learn that in the case of high court, you must always study your friends as well as your enemies and be aware of the alliance and allegiances that said people have otherwise you may find yourself outwitted and powerless. Now can I return to my lesson or do I need to elaborate?” The room was quiet. Ayn could see that Hazyl was embarrassed for her bold resistance.

“Now, it all goes back to the Great War between Ayvandeem and Rhece 1,200 years ago when Atypal and Ortysis battled over the land that now encompasses the section of land in southern Rhece called Nydor. Back then this was all Ayvandeem’s northern kingdom—“ Master Verin went on for another hour. Talking about the great wars and the land that passed back and forth between the Rhecians and the Ayvandeemians, and subsequently about the royal houses that took charge of the possession of said land. And as he talked about King Odis and his father, and his father’s father and how his kingdom would pass to the new high warrior, Prince Oryn, Ayn looked out the window and into the distant sea. How wild it looked with the cloudy mist still hanging to it. What secrets it held in its depths. In her heart she wished her world was less tame. This business of ladies, lords and courts—it all seemed so much less. The great kings of Ayvandeem and the ancient world—their world was wild and their wars were fought to protect that sacred spirit. But now, her world was a world of contracts, a world of windows locking her from away the raging sea.

“Ayn?” She felt Hazyl’s elbow in her side.

“Lady Aylis?” Master Verin repeated, peeved at Ayn’s loss of attention.

“Yes?” She caught his gaze.

“Who was the Fourth Lord of Roassgard?”

“Lord Orrr—“ She stammered unsure of the answer. Master Verin looked annoyed.

“Very good,” he grumbled. “Lord Ore was Fourth Lord of Roassgard.” Ayn relaxed her clenched fists, relieved that all the kings of Rhece named their names that all sounded the same. “Now, we won’t meet until after the council concludes as I will be sitting on King Ayarr’s council.” Master Verin said with his chin in the air. It was clear that he resented his position as schoolmaster and was eager to take his post as part of her father’s council, a position he only held when large council meetings were in session. “So I guess I will be seeing you each in court—good day,” he nodded and began shuffling his parchment papers once again before heading out the arched doorway and out of the Whalery.

Once Master Verin was gone, the room relaxed and Ayn and the rest of the royal children got out of their chairs and followed slowly in his wake back to the castle through the rose garden. Rhen went on ahead of the others and disappeared through the south gate doors while Hazyl and Hemming walked alongside Ayn.

“When do you think Aster will get back?” Hemming asked the girls

“He was supposed to return last week with his father,” Ayn said wondering the same thing herself. Lessons were just not as much fun without him, his jokes and wit just added so much to the small group they had.

“Wow, I wonder what his family is like up there. I’ve never heard him mention a cousin before.”

“Me neither now that I think about it,” Hazyl admitted.

“Well, he’s probably not likely to talk about it in front of us we’re all southerners.” Ayn said defending her friend—but now that she thought about it, it did seem funny that he should go off visiting a cousin that he had never spoken a word about in their long friendship. What other secrets did Aster Delytant and his family keep from them?

“I guess you’re right. Are you guys hungry?” Hemming asked.

“Starved,” Hazyl responded. “You want to join us for lunch, Ayn?” Ayn was still deep in thought.

“Yes.” Making a mental note to ask Aster about this when he got home, the three made their way back to the castle and to the kitchens.

That night Ayn skipped dinner. Sitting at her desk by the open window, she looked at her map of the landscape of Rhece and waited for the sun to set. It was easily a month-long journey to the capital from Fhyrrkat. If Aster’s father had let him go north—for who knows how many miles—he could be gone another few weeks . . . or months. She shuddered at the thought of having to endure the Rhecian visit without Aster there as an ally. Tossing the map aside, she looked out the window and watched the last bits of sun disappear behind the western mountains.

It was time. Standing up, Ayn walked over to her hiding spot. Behind a tapestry of her family’s crest, she began wiggling a loose stone. Setting the stone on the floor she grabbed a small pack and a sheathed sword, set them on the floor and then replaced the displaced stone.

Opening the arched door to her bedroom, she looked both ways down the passageway before venturing out into the candlelit darkness. Somehow, despite all the added guests, the castle was quiet. She had never ventured out without Aster before, but there was a first time for everything and she certainly didn’t need his help with getting out of the castle anyway; in fact, she felt that she knew the route in her sleep. Climbing down the servant stairs, she listened for the sound of feet climbing beneath her, but there was nothing. Everyone must still be busy cleaning up after dinner. When she finally reached the bottom of the stairs, she was in the castle basement. It was always so much darker down here—even in the night when the whole castle was lit by candles. Her brother always told her it was because the lower levels had previously

been used by her ancestors to torture their prisoners, gouging out their eyes and cutting out their tongues to get the answers they sought. These were the type of stories he always told her on dark stormy nights when together they would sit by the fire and tell tales of the dark forest to the west and the ghosts within their own walls. The memory made her miss her brother even more. And even though she had never wanted to believe the stories he had told her when she was a girl, here she was, almost a woman, and the basement seemed more ominous than ever. Her footsteps echoed across the stone hallway. She wondered what was kept down here. When they were younger, she and her brother had hidden in the labyrinth of rooms and hallways that made up the lowest level of the castle. She turned to the right and opened a emerald green door that led to a simple square room. Going to the center of the room, she jumped up and pulled on a small chain that revealed a trapdoor. She pulled down the ladder and climbed up and out of the castle and into the outer stables. It had been Ayran who had found the door years ago. They had used it ever since.

Climbing aboard her chocolate brown mare, Pheot, Ayn rode off into the mist of the warm summer air.



## Chapter 8

*His body ached from the biting cold and the unrelenting wind continued blasting through the pass. He pulled his cloak around him and tried to rub the numbness from his hands. As he leaned forward, he felt arms wrap themselves around his, restraining him. He fought, but as he did, the grip tightened and he felt the sting of a blade press against his throat.*

\* \* \*

Ayn rode through the darkness and into the cover of the western forest. Her people had always wandered in the lower levels of the spreading green, but had rarely dared to go deep into its clutches. Legend said that the land itself was cursed. The great city of Thyll was even said to have been swallowed by the trees and creatures that lived inside. If there were people out there, the Ayvandenians hadn't heard a word from them in over a hundred years. She guessed that if they had ever existed they had migrated out of the forest and in the plains to the far west.

Her horse continued through the woods Pheot knew the trail well. She had been coming this way since her brother had first brought her with him when she was twelve. She knew the pathways of the wood well.

To her left she heard the river Thios raging it was unusual for the river to be that strong this time of year. She rode closer to it, listening for the sound of people as the moon shone above her, illuminating the gently beaten trail. Breathing in deep, she took in the warm moist air. She could smell the green of the plants and flowers that she knew were sleeping all around her. The forest really did have a beauty all its own. Now at the water's edge, Ayn pulled on Pheot's reigns and stopped for a moment, allowing her to drink. They would be there soon she could see the glow of campfires in distance upriver.

Resuming their trot, Ayn and Pheot rode up to the blazing fires and into the company of a

great camp. The Tryterie were nomads and had lived on the forest's edge, moving about as they pleased. Illuminated by hundreds of fires, the canvas tents were scattered beneath the tall trees that surrounded the water. Ayn slowed Pheot and nodded to the men, women and sleepy children she passed as she scanned for the faces she sought.

"Evening, Ayn," she saw Clivan a black bearded man in a blue tunic that she recognized.

"Evening, Clivan, you haven't by any chance seen Breckin and the others have you?"

"I believe Breckin is over there, my lady." Clivan pointed to a cluster of tents in the distance.

Breckin was the leader of the Ete, a rebellious group of men who fought for Ayvandeem. Once some of her father's bravest warriors, these were the renegades who robbed and attacked the northern borders, all in her father's name, doing the deeds he himself wouldn't order them to do. Because of this they had been outlawed and lived in the wild and took camp with the Tryterie, being only loosely pursued by her father's guard.

"Thank you." She rode over and sure enough there he was with five of his brothers, sitting around a fire and drinking ale.

"Well if it isn't Lady Ayn out for another night of swordplay with a few lost souls," Breckin smiled as he took another sip out of the tin mug. Ayn smiled.

"I see your men are hard at work," she teased back. Breckin was just a few years older than Ayran and the boys had been great friends.

"Lady Ayn, if you knew the day we had, you would know how much we deserve this warm fire and this large cup of ale," said the man sitting next to Breckin. His name was Aiken. Ayn dismounted her horse and took her seat at the fire with her friends.

"You drinking tonight, lass?" a gruff man with a greasy blond beard asked.

“Not tonight, Gib.”

“So is there any sport to be had tonight?” she asked looking to each of them.

“Not tonight. As much as we love sparring with you and your little friend—where is your friend by the way?”

“He—uh—he’s visiting family,” Ayn knew the men of the Ete would not take kindly to the news that Aster was north. If they knew that Aster’s family were northerners, they may not allow him to practice with them anymore . . . But they were also shrewd and knew things about the lands and movements of people across the northern borders. If they ever found out that she had lied, then she would have broken the code that existed between them.

“I see.”

“So?”

“So what?” Aiken interrupted. The men of the Ete were rough and while they treated her with respect, they didn’t treat her like a lady of the court and she had always appreciated it.

“So are we going to fight or not?”

“We can’t tonight, Ayn.” Breckin answered.

“We’ve got business in the forest tonight.”

“What kind of business?”

“The kind that we don’t tell to little princesses,” Iysa retorted.

“So an attack then?” Ayn was interested. She had always loved the ways of the Ete, but what she loved most of all was their loyalty. They had always been so faithful to her family.

“No, Ayn. It’s not an attack. But tonight I’m having Rhyad take you back to the castle—and for the foreseeable future you shouldn’t come out here alone.”

“What do you mean?” Ayn was angry. They had never treated her like a girl or a 'little

princess' before. The Ete had always treated as one of their own, and now Breckin was drawing a line in the sand between them and telling her that it was too dangerous for her to even visit them?

“The forest around the Thios is a strange place that even we don’t even understand all of the time. It’s dangerous—and there are creatures—well let’s just say, if there were ever monsters that’s where they would live.”

“What kind of monsters?” Ayn eyes were wide.

“The kind that even a whole company of men couldn’t stop.

“And you’re afraid that they will come out and eat me if I come out here alone?” She laughed. She was sure they were just trying to scare her now. Breckin folded his hands in front of him and looked her square in the face.

“Yes, I am.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” She looked around. All of their faces of the Ete were solemn.

“You—you can’t be serious.”

“There is a strange magic in these woods.” Aiken growled.

“A magic girls like you should take more seriously.”

“Girls like me?” Ayn was insulted.

“Yeah girls like you. Girls like you who come from tall towers with high walls. Girls like you who don’t understand true danger,” he spat.

“That’s enough, Aiken!” Breckin barked.

“Look, just tell me what’s going on and I swear I’ll go back to the castle and behave,” she pleaded. Breckin stared deeply at Ayn and sighed.

“It began after the last full moon. We had been camping deep in the woods; it wasn’t long

before we started hearing them. We still haven't seen what they are, but we know from finding their tracks that they are huge. We sent a few scouts even deeper to try to trap them but the two men we sent"—Breckin paused looking around to the others—"they never returned."

"But what are they?" She couldn't believe what he was telling her.

"I don't know. But whatever they are, it isn't natural."

"Not natural?" The fire crackled as the camp around them grew quiet. Breckin's gaze fell to the fire and in the corner of his eye; Ayn could see a hint of fear. Breckin took another long sip of his ale.

"No."

"What do you mean?" Ayn didn't understand how a creature of the forest could be so menacing. Breckin took another long gulp of ale before answering.

"If you ever get the chance to hear them, you'll understand." The fire was quiet for some time. Ayn could feel the tension. There was real fear in these men. "And besides that, we found this." Breckin reached to his side and tossed her a long stick. It was a spear, but as Ayn looked at it, it wasn't like the spears of her people, or any she had seen before. Someone had taken the time to carve an intricate design along the entire body of the wooden frame—and the head was not made of steel, but of stone.

"Where did you find this?"

"It washed up this morning."

"From the Thios?" Ayn ran her fingers up and down the weapon.

"Yes."

"But—whose is it?"

"That's what we are going to find out."

“Breckin,” Ayn looked up.

“What’s going on out here?”

“I’m not sure.” Taking one last drink, he tossed the empty cup to the side and stood up. The others followed his lead. “But it’s time for you to go now. We’ve told you too much and it’s getting late.” Ayn shook her head and held the spear out to Breckin.

“No, you keep it,” he smiled.

“Rhyad, take Ayn back to Fhyrrkat.”

One of the younger men nodded.

“We’ll see each other soon, Ayn of Ayvandeem,” Breckin smiled again before walking over to a black stallion, mounting and whistling for the rest of his men to do the same. From the surrounding fires and tents, the Ete gathered around Breckin, preparing to ride out.

“Ready?” Rhyad approached Ayn with the reins of his white mare in his hands.

“Yes.” She said as retreated to Pheot and mounted. Rhyad nodded and together they rode off back through the forest, back to the castle.

\* \* \*

When she returned, Ayn returned to her room and sat in the window seat of the tallest tower and looked at the stars that hung over the western mountains. So many times she had wondered what lay in those mountains—what secrets the roots of the mountains held. What hidden dangers lay hidden in the countless miles of trees?

“You shouldn’t have gone out there alone, you know,” said a familiar voice behind her.

“I wish people would stop telling me that. Don’t go out alone—stay in the castle,” Ayn said as she turned to face the familiar blond face of her lifelong friend Aster who stood in the doorway behind her.

"I'm sick of it—and besides that, where in the world have you been? And how did you know I went—" Ayn paused looking around. "—Out there." They never spoke about their secret visits to the Ete, even behind closed doors.

"I visited our cousins to the north. Father wanted me to meet the extended family while we were so close to their castle."

"Everyone is preparing for the arrival of the Evanders, and besides that your father's been looking for you. He said you missed dinner."

"Yes, well—I don't want to be found. And I wasn't hungry," she said as she turned back around to face the night sky.

"My, somebody's in a mood."

He sat down on the seat next to her.

"Breckin says he doesn't want me visiting anymore," she said.

"Well it's probably for the best anyway. With all the castle's added guests you were bound to be discovered at some point. It really was foolish of you to go out there at a time like this," Aster said with a grin. He had a way of being right that frustrated her.

"What was I supposed to do? The castles all in a frenzy—even Master Verin had us learning all about them. There's just no escape—"

"Well, you of all people should be more careful."

"Why me of all people?"

"You're the king's daughter. What if someone had followed you and seen you sneaking out to be with the rebellion's most notorious leader? It would look like you're spinning a plot."

"You're the only one spinning plots," Ayn laughed as she turned to see him.

"That may be—but someone's got to do it," Aster smirked.

“Tell me then, what does my father want?” Ayn stood and together the two walked out of the tower room and began descending the stairs.

“It’s the council really.”

“Oh?” It was always Aster’s way to try to hang information over her head.

“I’m sure they want to make sure their favorite little princess will be on her best behavior before the Rhecians arrive—but what do I know?”

“You play so innocent—like you don’t listen in on every council meeting you can stick your ear against.”

“How else will I know what’s going on in the kingdoms—and you of all people have profited from my—shall we say—listenings.”

“Well, not everyone can be as much a lady as your sister.”

“Yes, well Rhen has always had such a knack for domesticity.” Aster smiled.

“Get to it—what did they say?”

“They’ll be here either tomorrow or the night after. They sent a rider with the drafted contracts and he said their company totals one hundred and seventy-five,” Aster said.

“One hundred and seventy-five?” Ayn cringed. “Is it really necessary to bring the entire Rhecian court to sign a few contracts?”

“Maybe they are afraid of a rebellion.”

“From who?” Ayn stopped and turned to face him.

“Your father, your brother—the people, does it matter?”

“My brother’s been living in Nydor with his Rhecian wife for over a year—how would he plan an attack without an army on Rhecian soil?” she asked.

“Well, I’m not rebelling against the Rhecians so I can’t answer that question for you—



but what I can tell you is these are the concerns that the Caderyns and their men have—and our council is worried that your spirit might spark too much attention.”

“So just because I’m not afraid to speak my mind, just because I don’t think that giving our land to them is a good idea—I’m a conspirator?”

“You know I love your spirit, Ayn. Don’t get mad at me. I’m just the listener, remember?” They reached the bottom of the stairs. “But there was one other thing.”

“Yes?”

“The council feels that it’s in their best interest to continue strengthening the ties with the Evanders. As you recall your brother—”

“Yes, yes—” Ayn mocked and rolled her eyes. “It was his duty to Ayvandeem to marry the Caderyn’s cousin Oria to unite the kingdoms and bring peace to the borders—I’ve heard it all from my father, Aster.”

“Well, they hope to further strengthen these ties—Rhen has just been promised to one of their Lord’s. They’ll be wed at the end of the season,” Aster said.

“That’s shocking. How does Rhen feel about this arrangement?”

“I haven’t had the pleasure of telling her yet—I thought I would come to you first.”

“And why’s that? You know I won’t tease her. These arranged marriages are a farce.”

“No. That’s not it.”

“Well, what is it, then?”

“Rhen isn’t the only girl the council has promised to the north.” Ayn’s face grew grim.

“They haven’t—” Ayn’s eyes begged for words Aster couldn’t give.

“I’m sorry, Ayn. I’m just the messenger.” Heat radiated off her face and arms as Ayn let the news wash over and through her.

“No,” she stammered.

“Ayn, I’m sorry.” Aster tried to grab her hand.

“No.” She shook him away and sprinted down the hallway, through a large oak door and into the inner courtroom of Fhyrrkat Castle. The castle staff was busy running about and all the lanterns were lit. The white stone floor below her was still damp from a fresh cleaning as Ayn continued down the hallway, passing large columns and white statues of her ancestors. Turning left, she ran down another long passageway, before climbing a tall flight of stone stairs. When she reached the top she turned right, and burst open the doors into the library—her father’s favorite spot in the whole castle. And as she gasped in air after her long run, she saw him before her. Together with his two highest councilors, standing before a large table looking over a heap of contracts, maps and other legal documents.

“Father, what have you done?” King Aynarr looked up from the papers and into the eyes of his angry daughter.

“Handar, Hyren, leave us.” The two councilmen looked at each other with a look of annoyance and each took their leave of the room, the latter closing the door behind him. The thud made the silence that followed all the more resonant. “Ayn, what is the meaning of this?”

“You promised,” she said, the fire of her anger beginning to overflow as tears from her eyes.

“What did I promise?”

“You know what I am talking about.” The king sighed, walked toward the large stone fireplace, and took a seat in a large maroon armchair.

“It’s best if you come and sit down, child.” He motioned to a seat facing him.

“No.” Ayn shook her head. She couldn’t hold them in—tears rolled down her burning

face.

“Ayn, I won’t ask you again. Come and sit down.” The king put his hand to his brow in frustration. Slowly Ayn walked toward the chair and sat down and stared at the fire, refusing to look her father in the eyes.

“Ayn, there are many things I have allowed you to do. You have been treated with all the freedoms that your brother was given. I never wanted you to feel trapped or constrained—” He paused. “But this situation with the Rhecians. Avoiding war is a battle all its own. I don’t know how you heard about the marriage—it seems there are no secrets your little friend Aster can’t seem to get ahold of—but I want you to know, if there had been any other way—.”

“But you promised!” Her voice carried with it a shrewd sting and she looked deep into her father’s leather brown eyes.

“I promised above all else that I would never let any harm come to you. What do you think would happen if I didn’t give into these demands? How long do you think our little country could hold them off? And when they took siege of the city—what do you think King Odis’ men would do to our castle—to you?”

Ayn felt the pain in his voice.

“Do you really think I want to see my only daughter move half a world away?” Her anger faded as she saw how much he clearly hated this decision as she did. In one solid motion she stood up and threw herself around her father, burying her head in his shoulder as she had always done.

“Most girls would kill to be queen,” the king sighed.

“What?” She looked up at him. She hadn’t realized that in the horror of the realization, she had neglected to ask whom she was marrying.

“Well Oryn is the prince—so naturally, you’ll be queen.

“Father NO!” She knew it would be a Rhecian—but she never thought she would be promised to the heir to their kingdom. Not to mention all of the stories she had heard about the first sword of Rhece.

“There is no other way, Ayn. It must be done.” He looked away from her and she retreated from his shoulder.

“When?”

“At the start of spring. You will be going back to Fhyrrkat with the royal family once the negotiations are done. From there you’ll spend the winter learning their customs with a host of tutors and ladies at your beck and call.” Ayn gulped down this new information as a final tear rolled down her pale cheek. With a nod she turned her back on her father and the fire and began walking to the door.

“Ayn, wait—this isn’t how I wanted to tell you.” She didn’t stop to listen. She pushed open the large oaken doors, letting them slam shut behind her.

\* \* \*

Ayn walked out the doors and into the long passageway. Where she was going next, she did not know. All she knew was she didn’t want her father, Aster, or anyone else to find her. Breathing in and out she followed the corridor up the servant stairs, to the west tower. She didn’t hate Oryn, but she certainly didn’t want to marry him. Her heart burned as she tried not to think about her new fate. She had never wanted to marry anyone, not even one of the men in her own country—and now she would be given away to the son of her kingdoms’ enemy? And for what? Another ten years of peace—if it even lasted that long. The Rhecians were more apt to kill than negotiate anyway. Outside the moon had climbed high in the sky. She could see the mist rising

over the mountains—she looked out over them and wished for the hundredth time that she could be out there. She and her brother had spent almost all of their childhood out among the trees. Climbing the high limbs, following unbeaten paths with her friends—she hadn't seen him since his own wedding. Last summer they had travelled up to Nydor, the home of the Hensleys, and Oria, now his brother's wife. The Hensleys were of the highest house under the Evanders themselves and their family had numerous holdings and she and Ayryn hadn't met before they married. The marriage was supposed to protect the southern border of Rhece from invasion since it was the Rhecian's southernmost holding. And now her marriage would ensure the rest. She didn't know if her brother's marriage had ensured the safety of Nydor or the Rhecian south, especially considering all the grief the Ete had given them—and then it struck her. Surely Breckin would understand—surely he of all people would object to her marrying the crown prince of the country that he hated the most. She would find them and surely under these new circumstances, they had to let her join them. Anything would be better than a life as a prize—a life being the living proof that King Odis had conquered her home and her people. She had to hurry; they could be days into the forest by now. She had to go before the sun rose and she had to do it without being seen.

Turning to her hope chest she opened the large wooden lid and threw her knives, her sword, her extra riding clothes and cloak onto her bed and began to pack a few extra items into her leather satchel. This hadn't exactly been what her mother had had in mind when giving her the chest—if Krisjan Adylis had had her way, instead of weapons, this chest would be filled with needlepoint and a host of other more domestic wears.

Shaking the thought of her mother to the side, Ayn dressed in black leather pants, riding boots, and a brown leather tunic, she was just about to throw her pack over her shoulder and

leave her room forever when suddenly the door opened. It was Hazyl. She stood in the doorway gawking at Ayn, who couldn't hide the plan she was about to undertake.

"Where are you going?"

"Just out. I—I couldn't sleep,"

"Ayn, you can't."

"What do you mean—I just thought if I—"

"I'm not a fool, Ayn. It's obvious you're running away." Hazyl was hurt. Ayn could see it in her eyes.

"Why are you abandoning us?"

"Hazyl, if you knew what they have planned—"

"It's happening to all of us."

"Well, I'm not going to stay and see if happen—come with me! Let's get out of here before we're both at the mercy of some Rhecian lord."

"You know I can't." Hazyl looked down at the ground. She was so loyal, of course she wouldn't leave.

"Hazyl, they've already taken my brother. And now they're going to take me miles away from home, and Aki knows if we'll never see this place again. You know the way the Rhecians are with their prisoners. Please, you have to understand—please don't tell anyone." Ayn's escape depended on Hazyl now. Hazyl looked at her and nodded.

"I can't keep them off your trail forever but I'll help you. What do you need?" she said solemnly. Ayn smiled at her old friend.

"Do you have food?"

"No, but I'll get you some. The fewer people who see you dressed like that, the better. I'll

be back soon.”

Hazyl turned to leave the bedroom.

“Hazyl?” Ayn called to her. Hazyl turned around

“Thanks.”

With a small smile she disappeared down the passageway. Once she was gone, Ayn opened her bag and double-checked to make sure she had everything. It was strange to think that she would never come back to this place again it had been her room all her life and now here she was leaving the safety of her castle, her friends, and her family. But at least she wouldn’t have to live so far away. At least she wouldn’t have to leave the forest and lakes she loved—at least she would be free. She took it all in, it was strange to think of saying goodbye.

Not long later, Hazyl returned with a small knapsack of food.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Hazyl held the knapsack out to Ayn.

“I have to.”

“Why are you leaving your spear?” Hazyl motioned to the foreign weapon leaning against the wall in the corner.

“Breckin gave that to me. He found it in the woods.” Hazyl walked over to the corner and took the spear in her hands.

“Strange—I’ve never seen anything like it before.” She ran her hands over the carvings. “You should take it with you.”

“But I don’t know the first thing about fighting with spears.”

“Well it can’t be too hard to figure out. Plus if you’re going to be out there,” Hazyl motioned to the window with her eyes.

“You’re definitely going to need as much help as you can get.” She held out the spear for

Ayn.

“Hmm,” she took the spear and laced it through a loop on her pack. “I guess you’re right.” In one fluid motion, Ayn picked up the satchel, now equipped with food and spear, and slung it over her shoulder. “I better leave before anyone else sees me.” Hazyl embraced her.

“Be safe.”

“I’ll miss you,” Ayn said as she pulled away. “And tell Aster—” she paused uncertain what to say. “Tell him, he’ll know where to find me.”

“I will.” With one last goodbye, Ayn smiled at her friend and headed down the passageway to the servants stair and began her descent down to the basement. She walked through the familiar corridors until at long last she emerged from the trapdoor into the stables. As she walked into the open daylight, she could see the sun’s rays beginning to warm the horizon line in the east. She had to hurry. Saddling Pheot, she loaded the saddle and climbed on the white mare’s back. Just as she turned her back on the castle, she heard a horn sound over the high castle walls. They were coming.

“Osha!” and into the lightening air they rode.

\* \* \*



## Chapter 9

Lying on a riverbank half in the water, Hal awoke with his face in the dirt. Slowly coming to, he began to recall the fight, the chase and the fall—that feeling in the pit of his stomach and the way they fell—suspended in air for as long as he could remember. The crash of the water around his body must have hit his head because the water’s piercing cold was the last thing he could remember.

Feeling around him, he could move his arms and his legs—that was a good start. At least he wasn’t crippled. His head was throbbing. He moved his right hand to his forehead, he could feel dried blood and the pain of a gash on his left temple. He slowly opened his eyes—bright, brilliant light poured into them. He felt them burn as he threw his hands over them, trying to shield himself from the brightness. He must have gone blind—he couldn’t explain it. How had he survived the fall and whatever else had happened while he was unconscious . . . but gone blind?

“Ahlo!” he called out, unable to see anything but the bright white of a color he had never seen before.

“Ahlo!” On his hands and knees, Hal fumbled around weakly reaching out, feeling nothing but the damp rock and soil. The rocks beneath him bruised his knees. Hal felt a large wet tongue lick him on the side of his neck, up to the fold behind his ear. The shock of it pushed Hal over and onto his side, discombobulating him even more.

“Ahlo, is that you?” Hal was almost certain that the tongue must belong to the bronte. In the next moment, he saw himself, in the bright light, under a sky the deepness of another color he had never seen before, around trees with bright healthy looking branches. Under the brightness, under the glory of this unknown world, he looked like a fool. He was bruised and battered

through and through and there he was blind, on his hands and knees at the mercy of whatever came his way. The vision confirmed that the creature was Ahlo. Ahlo must have felt Hal's reassurance because as soon as he felt the relief of it, the vision disappeared leaving Hal in the darkness of the white yet again.

"Ahlo, help me." The creature approached and placed his large legs next to him. Using his touch to guide him, Hal grappled his way up and found the beast's torso, pulling himself up on top of the bronte.

"You're going to have to be my eyes." Hal guessed the creature could feel his disability through their mind link but it seemed more polite to ask all the same. Ahlo began to walk slowly forward. Now awake, Hal tried to guess their location. The chase had seemed to last for ages. They had run east of the village—but he had never been that far east and he certainly had never seen the place where the water fell over the cliff before—and the brightness. Suddenly Hal remembered what Brael had told him; about the world outside of theirs, about the world shrouded in a great light. That sounded about right. From Ahlo's vision, Hal could see that the world they had landed in was quite different than the dead one he had always known, but how had they escaped? Hadn't Brael said it was enchanted with some sort of magic? Then Hal remembered—Brael. What had happened to him after their fall? And the rest of the bronte? They must not have followed them; otherwise he and Ahlo would surely not be here now. Had Brael sacrificed himself for them? What had happened to him after they fell? Hal shuddered to think of another person dying for his life. And now on top of the mass of unanswered questions that left him in the dark, he was now literally blind.

Outside of the pile of troubling thoughts brewing in his mind, Hal's other senses came alive. Hal's hands and legs grasped Ahlo's mane and with a new awareness. With his ears he

could hear the forest alive around him. In place of the faint calls of the winged ones, he heard strong chirps and their calls rang out and echoed across the wood, the water from the nearby river ran with a revitalized vigor, and even the wind rustled with a freer voice. Hal lost track of the time as they continued their ride through the forest. Ahlo seemed to be staying right next to the river because the soft sound of gurgling remained behind them.

A long time passed before Ahlo stopped in his tracks. Hal heard it too. The sound of voices nearby echoed across the wood. Whoever it was, they were being very reckless—but then again, the bronte hadn't followed them out here. For whatever reason, they had left them alone and didn't seem interested in following them . . . At least for the time being. Ahlo lunged through the air and into what Hal could only guess where the limbs of a tall tree. It was amazing how fluid his movements were. Hal braced himself, trying to hang on. Opening his eyes, he saw blurs of green but the light was still too much.

“Who is it, Ahlo?” he whispered. In a rush, Hal felt his stomach lurch as a vision of men walking through the forest in a long line passed before his eyes. Hal stared at their clothes, how fine they looked compared to his rags. He looked at their skin it didn't shine like his pale skin, it was darker, healthier. They were also strong. Their skin didn't cling to their bones they had muscle and they carried themselves through the forest unafraid. Whoever these men were, they were more similar and different than anything he had ever known. In the back of his head he wondered if they should follow them, see where they came from—learn about the lands that Brael had told him existed. Were they good? Evil? Did good people from their towns and villages die in the forest looking for food as his people did? Judging by how freely they walked, it didn't look like it. Hal thought of Mare. He felt in his heart that this was a place she would have liked. The thought hurt. It was all so unfair.

“This way men!” he watched a tall one yell. The man had a black vest, curly blond hair and a grizzly blond beard. Then just as suddenly as Hal saw him, the vision was gone as Ahlo began lumbering up the tree, higher and higher. Still blind, Hal imagined himself and the large animal at the top of a bunch of flimsy tree limbs. Had one of the men seen them? As the voices got closer, Hal heard the bellows and growls of dogs. Suddenly, Hal felt the rush of wind and the feeling of falling in the pit of his stomach.

Ahlo was jumping from tree-to-tree.

Hal’s legs began to shake from holding so tightly. His arms were wrapped all the way around Ahlo’s neck, but he still felt himself falling. He grabbed his wrist as he tried to hold on for his life as they crashed and hurdled. While Ahlo was graceful, he could tell the added weight of his body was taking a toll. Hal was sure they would both plummet to their deaths, but at the moment when he thought they were going to fall, Ahlo used his claws to secure them back into the trees. It was terrifying. All he could feel was the rush of each fall and the brunt of each landing. The suspense of each bound was painful. Then slowly he felt Ahlo descend and the urgency of his leaps decrease. They must have escaped. As they came back to what Hal could only guess was the ground, Hal could no longer hear any voices around them. Ahlo stopped jumping completely and slowed to a tired walk. Hal could feel that the precision of Ahlo’s movements had expired. He must be exhausted. Feeling powerless to help his friend, Hal stroked the beast’s neck.

“Thank you, friend,” Hal whispered. The bronte made no reply but simply stumbled on down the path. Feeling that for the moment they were safe at last, Hal relaxed his sore arms and legs and just listened to the forest. Around them the air was filled with the whisper of air. He could feel it rush past his ears and through his hair. He could hear it in the trees around him. The

sound was soothing and as he listened to it and the repetitive beat of Ahlo's feet on the ground as he lumbered on, Hal found himself falling deep into a steadfast sleep.

\* \* \*

When he opened his eyes again he was in the middle of a great plain. Not only was it ground without trees, but the sky was grey and filled with white and evil looking giant beings that shot great spears of light through the air and at the ground. A great surge of this light hit the ground in the distance, illuminating the plain. There was a great fight occurring. All around him men brandished their weapons and war cries and were at each other's throats. Hal sat up and reached for his eyes. He could see again. He almost smiled, but before he could he saw a man like the ones he had seen in the forest earlier that day, running straight for him with eyes filled with death. In his hands he had a short looking spear pointed for Hal's heart. Hal reached to his side, found a decaying limb and jumped to his feet just barely blocking the man's attack by using the limb to thwart the blade.

Hal had never seen a weapon shine so brightly. It was clear that these men had weapons beyond his people's capabilities. The man redoubled his attack. Hal knew he had to get the short spear away from him. Using the branch, Hal aimed the end at the man's chest and pushed with all his might. Stunned, the man fell backwards, dropping the weapon. The short spear fell next to a dead bush. Seizing his opportunity, Hal ran for the weapon and without thinking, ran it through the man. It cut so cleanly, so quick. He pulled the short spear out and watched the man fall forward. He had never killed another man before. But before he could pay much attention, Hal saw more men coming for him. He held his ground and followed the pack of those run before him. They were all headed for a great figure in the distance.

As Hal fought his way closer he could see that a dim light radiated off of him. He had a

weapon similar to the short spear he carried but this one was longer and emanated the same golden glow. The man fought with a skill and harshness that was beyond any of the men before him. Each that encountered him and the army of few behind him fell to him. It wasn't long before Hal found himself right before him. His hair was blond, straight and long. His eyes were a blue, a blue that seemed oddly familiar and on his breastplate, a round golden orb that seemed to be the source of the great light. Hal stood before him unable to move, paralyzed by fear. Hal closed his eyes and waited for the attack, but the warrior's sword didn't fall. Confused, Hal opened his eyes but instead of the chiseled face of the warrior, Hal saw his own. The only difference was the eyes. In place of his usual green, he saw the same bright blue. In that moment, Hal felt heat radiate through every vein in his body and ran at the man's throat. But not like he expected. His hands were not his own. Where once there had been fingers, now were claws. And as he fell over the man, he attacked him with the instinct within him and ripped out his throat with his bare teeth. He tasted the blood and veins in the meat he now held in his mouth. The taste of the raw flesh brought him out of the adrenaline of the moment and he was suddenly shocked at his own actions. He couldn't believe what he had just done. Without knowing what else to do, he began running away and was even more dismayed to find that as he ran, he ran not on the legs he had known but on legs that looked like Ahlo's. Beyond confused, Hal ran through the field and to a shallow unhealthy looking pond. Above him the sky quaked with yellow fire from the giants above and he beheld his image. In the water below him he saw what he now was--a bronte.

Hal gasped, sitting up and finding himself caked in sweat. Opening his eyes, he could see patches of darkness in the infernal white light. Running his hands in the darkness, he felt his head and arms. The fur and four legs were gone.

"It was just a dream," he panted. The small sound seemed to echo. He could hear and

taste moisture around him. Reaching out, he felt wet rocks. He could even feel them poking into his back as he sat up further.

"Ahlo?" his voice echoed. In a moment Hal felt his stomach lurch as he saw himself sitting on a pile of flat rocks. It was dark and he could see a small stream running through what appeared to be the belly of a small cave. Water dripped from the ceiling and the walls of the cavern seemed to glow with a vast wealth of minerals. In the next moment the vision disappeared and Hal returned to himself. His sight seemed to be coming back, but Ahlo's luminous eyes seemed to be able to see much farther into darkness. Looking around, he made out the blurry glow of the blue and green of his eyes. Standing to his feet, he tried to remember the vision and what had been around him. He could see pieces of the rock floor below him. The image itself looked burned through his poor eyes. Half walking, half lumbering his way to the stream, Hal used his hands as a guide. When he finally found the water, he cupped his hands and splashed water over his face. The water was refreshing. Recollecting the dream, Hal wondered what he had just seen. What was the golden orb? Who was that warrior . . . and why had he turned into him? It must be nonsense--surely just a side effect of jumping from the forests of Thule to this new unknown world.

After taking a long drink at the stream, Hal looked up and saw a ray of delicate yellow light appear just over his shoulder. At least he could see. Things appeared to be improving. Hopefully the rest of his vision would return soon. Ahlo must have brought them below ground to give him time to heal . . . but eventually he would have to return to the surface, back to that light—and then what would they do? The question brought a lurch of anxiety to Hal's stomach. As Hal stared at the light before him, he couldn't help but feel it's ominous pull.

Curious, he cautiously began lumbering towards the glow, stumbling over the wet stones

as he neared it. They were far deeper in the cave than Hal had imagined. As he got closer to the cavern's opening, he could see that the stream was much deeper at this end of the cave. The hole where the light came from was drenched with what appeared to be more falling water, like the kind they had jumped over when they had fallen over the border into this strange world. Looking ahead, the light before him didn't burn his eyes quite like it had the days before when he had gone blind. Using the roots of nearby trees he began to climb through it. Pulling his arms onto the boulders above he emerged back into the forest. Tall giant trees hung above, feasting off the watery stream. Hal had never seen trees so tall. But what was even more miraculous was the sight of heavens behind them. Filled with brilliant light it was a soft yellow, pale white and a pink—colors beyond his imagination. Hal's jaw dropped in awe. It didn't matter that his vision was still blurred. To the east, the sky burned gold behind the blackened mountains. He could never have imagined anything so magnificent. He couldn't help but fall to his knees and watch as the gold continued to deepen. Frigid water washed over his legs but he didn't notice. Something bright was coming over those mountains, something the same color as the orb from his dream. But just before it came Hal's world went black. Something itchy had been thrown over his eyes and hands had already grabbed his, pulled them behind his back and were binding them. He could feel something sharp digging into his side.

"You'll be coming with us," a strange, cold voice bellowed menacingly. He had never heard a voice sound so strange. The words were right, but the way the man used them was foreign. Hal didn't know how many of them there were but he knew there were more than two. They pushed him forward and he stumbled along blind once again.

The large troupe of men that began leading him away had not seen Hal come through the cavern's mouth. If they had they would surely have seen the two lantern-like eyes watching



angrily from the abyss below.

## Chapter 10

*In the distance, yellow eyes pierced through the gloom. Their haunting light hung from the rock walls, defying reason. The grip around him tightened as he continued to fight.*

*“I am his seeker—I’ve brought a gift!” he yelled through the roaring wind. The arms released him, pushed him forward and he fell on his face. His head slammed into a rock, but the wound was already numb. Around him, the yellow lights disappeared and faded into the darkness. Tiny pieces of rock stuck to his cheeks as he turned around to face two big-shouldered men, their faces obscured.*

*“You take your life in your own hands when you enter the Nairowlance.”*

*“I understand,” he said.*

*“Then come,” one of the men was already climbing the steep wall, and moments later disappeared through an unseen hole.*

*“After you,” the shrouded man said. Hesitant, the pale man climbed up onto the rock wall, sure that in moments he would fall through and into the danger that waited.*

\* \* \*

They had been riding for two days. Ayn had pushed Pheot harder than she had ever dared before. But despite how hard and how fast they drove forward, she knew her father's men were at her heels. It had only been two days and already their food supplies were dwindling. Hazyl clearly didn't have much experience in packing rations—and if Ayn were honest, she didn't either. She had never run away before. The thought of really leaving home, of truly turning her back and fleeing had never been something she had actually considered.

But it wasn't just the speed that was wearing on Pheot—it was the terrain. Their only

hope was driving deep into the forest, deep into the wild and she knew just the path to follow. She had avoided the trail to the Arwa. The guards would have expected her to go there. And for all she knew some foolish Tryterie would have given her up.

No, Breckin had told her accidentally exactly where she needed to go. The Thios was the key it was the river the spear had sprung from and where she would find her friends. She had gone round the camp to the west. It had taken double the time, but she had to find it today. This area of the forest was foreign. Sure she had seen it on the many maps Master Viran had provided in the Whalery, but seeing and trekking were two very different things. She depended on finding the Thios. She didn't have much water left; surely she would be at the river's banks before sunset. But as Pheot climbed higher into the foothills of the mountain and the forest got denser, she began to wonder if they were truly lost.

As she looked ahead at the sea of trees, she couldn't help but lose heart. Already her legs were sore from the ride and the lack of sleep was becoming a problem. Behind her she heard the horns of her father's men hunting her. If she kept on, they would surely find her. She had already heard the cry of their dogs.

"Osha! Pheot, we have to go," she called desperately. The horse panted and began to accelerate. But as he pushed harder the ground before them continued to slant, the trees and brush grew thicker, and the terrain more ominous. Inside her, Ayn knew it wasn't going to be enough. Despite her best efforts, they had won. They couldn't be far now. Soon they would overtake her and the last ride home would begin . . . and after that, a long ride away.

Behind her she heard more calls, not from the pursuing hunt she expected but yells of distress. Even from a distance she could hear the dogs whining and howling. From the sound, it seemed they were losing ground on her. Like she was escaping--but why? How? With dogs and a

small army of men--what had happened to them? Listening, all sound from the hunting party was gone. The forest returned to its silent state but the quiet was not comforting. Something had happened to them and whatever it was, it wasn't far away. A new fear took hold inside her. It was one thing to be captured by people who served her father, but another to be caught by an enemy.

"Run, Pheot," she whispered to the horse.

In the west, she could see the sun was setting. It had already fallen behind the tall mountains before her. She hadn't been afraid of the forest or darkness since had been a little girl but now she could feel the gaze of something large, something evil on her. The horse's breath was heavy in the air. The sound of his feet hitting the fallen leaves and stones reverberated harshly around them. They were making too much noise and there wasn't anything she could do to fix it. Slow down and if something was chasing them, they would surely be caught. This had been a mistake. She had put herself in danger. Hadn't Breckin warned her? Hadn't he told her it was too dangerous for her to venture out alone?

Ayn looked wildly around as the light continued to diminish. It would be gone in a matter of minutes. Over her shoulder something caught her eye but in a flash it was gone, her eyes raced to find it but all she saw was just piles of stones, boulders and thick trunks of trees. She would have bet her life she had seen a green light. But they pushed on and it was gone.

"It must have been fireflies," she said out loud. "Surely it was fireflies." The solitude was too much. Talking to Pheot was better than facing the reality that she was alone. As the horse pushed on, they began to crest a hill and when they finally reached the top, Ayn heard the beautiful sound of water.

"We made it, Pheot," she breathed. The rushing sound distracted her from her fear. She hadn't yet found Breckin, but this was a good first step. The horse slowed his trot, carried them to

the river's edge and then began gulping down water. Ayn dismounted and immediately did the same. Finding the river was such a relief. The cold wet was so refreshing. She let it fall over her face and down her neck. It washed away the doubts and fears she had felt as they had raced up the foothills. How silly she had been to allow herself to be overcome by the darkness. For all she knew, the men she had heard might have just been hunters from another village. Maybe they had stumbled on a bear or their prey—maybe everything was going to be okay. She sighed, allowing herself to relax. Whatever it was, they had outrun it for the time being.

"We'll camp here tonight." The horse had stopped drinking and was now grazing on the riverbank. Going to the creature's side she patted his mane. Even as she reached, she could feel the soreness in her arms. The both needed sleep and rest. Hopefully the night would be kind. Reaching over the saddle she grabbed her pack but as she did she saw it. On the other side of the river there were two green eyes. She froze paralyzed with fear. It was dark now and she couldn't see the shape of the creature the eyes belonged to. The eyes continued to stare at her and she at them. Ayn had never seen eyes like these before and every fiber of her being told her they wanted to tear her to pieces. The moment seemed to last an eternity before they disappeared into the darkness. Fear gripped her heart. Her breathing seemed to echo across the entire forest. Without knowing what else to do, she mounted Pheot and took off in an all out sprint. She didn't know what direction to go, just not towards those horrible eyes.

They raced downhill following the Thios. She couldn't bear to glance back, afraid that she would see the creature and that menacing green glow. They were going faster now; the downhill seemed to help despite the fatigue she knew her horse must be feeling. Ayn felt helpless as she pushed him on. After racing forward for a while, she began to wonder if the creature was even following them. Listening, she could only hear the beating of Pheot's hooves

on the dirt and stone mixed with the wild current rushing past them on the river. Had it let them go? She almost had the courage to glance back and find out just before she saw them. Two of the large beasts were chasing them, one flanking each side of her horse. To her left one of the beasts howled.

“Osha! Pheot, Run!” she cried. The beasts were closing in; they gnashed their terrible teeth as the monsters ran beside them. Ayn couldn’t think. Adrenaline pumped through her veins. In her heart she knew they weren’t going to make it out alive. Feeling it was her last option, Ayn took hold of her pack and jumped from the horse. She felt a brief moment of falling and then the impact of the ground. Rolling forward she felt her body roll into a tree trunk. Gasping for air, she tried to collect herself. As she stood up, she couldn’t help but almost fall down again. Her balance was completely off and she tasted blood.

Turning quickly around, she loped around for her pack and saw her sword and the spear lying on the ground in front of her. She didn’t have much time now; the beasts must have seen her jump off the horse and would rally to find her. Hopefully without her weighing him down, Pheot could make a good run for it. Her hopes were dashed in the next second when she heard the horse cry. They had taken him. The sound didn’t last much longer.

Doubling back, she readied herself. Just as she took her stance, green eyes slinked out from the bushes. One had chased Pheot and the other had come for her. These creatures were clearly not only brutishly strong, but also alarmingly clever. With the spear in one hand and the sword in the other she swung them out over her head, ready for the beast’s charge.

“Come on then!” she yelled. The creature glowered at her and growled. But just as he was about to attack, the brute looked over his shoulder. Through the trees she saw it too. A long line of light was approaching and from the color it looked like fire. She could also hear voices,

right before her eyes a whole host of men were approaching, all carrying torches. Ayn turned her eyes back to the beast. But he was distracted. His gaze looked confused and frightened. In a flash the brute cried out, gnashed its teeth at Ayn and fled into the forest.

Even as she watched him run, Ayn couldn't move. Paralyzed with fear, she stood completely still. The sound of the nearby water washed over the scene but in her head all she could hear was the pitiful cry of Pheot and that terrible shrieking. Ayn fell to her knees and tears flooded her eyes as torches surrounded her. She didn't see the hands or faces of those that carried her out of the forest. All she could see was the glow and those haunting green eyes.

\* \* \*

When Hal opened his eyes he was no longer in the forest but in an enclosed room cobbled floor to ceiling with stones. There was a square wooden door before him and two openings near the ceilings, one that led to darkness and the adjacent one to light that glowed from outside. Slowly getting up off the floor, Hal stared deep into the light. Running his fingers through the air felt how warm it was, how light, how beautiful—Ahlo! A familiar rush of fear ran through him as he rushed to the window. He had to go find him. He would climb out and find his way back—standing on the bench he lifted himself up to the window and pulled at the cold bars that blocked him. Gripping with all his might, he pulled but it wouldn't budge.

“Grite,” he cursed under his breath. The other window, he thought. But as he pulled himself over to the other opening, he looked through to see nothing, a room identical to the one he was in. The same bars were placed over the hole. He was trapped. But by who? The men he had seen walking through the woods? Or some other company of men? Sitting back down on the wooden bench he didn't suppose it mattered—without his spear, without his pack, and without his bronte he didn't have anything. He was lost.

“Looks like we’ll have a full keep tonight, Erynie!” Hal heard footsteps and a cold rattling. Someone was coming down the hallway. Hal rushed to the door and tried to peer under the door. He couldn’t see anything but shadows.

“Who is our new guest, Vik?”

“Well Ern, what we have is that runaway princess we’ve all been hearing so much about.”

“The one our prince is set to marry come spring?”

“The very same.”

“Where are my manners? How do you do, your highness? I do hope our temporary accommodations will suit you.” The men laughed together. Hal heard the door next to his room open. He quickly rushed to the window and peeked over. Three figures stood in the doorway of the stone room. One with fiery red hair and a beard that’s tip turned white and the other dark brown. Both wore matching silver plates and black leather and at their sides, the same short silver weapon he had seen the warrior use in his dream.

“King Odis says no funny business,” The red-bearded one said. She’s got more fire in her than you’d think.”

“You’ve got it, Vik.” The men pushed the girl into the cell. “You stay put. They’ll be taking you home to your father tomorrow.” The girl tottered over to the bench and sat down slowly. Then men carried on through the passageway and silence returned but Hal couldn’t stop staring at the girl on the bench. She was young like him—she had to be. Her hair was brown and fell in long waves down to her abdomen and even though she wasn’t clean and looked like she had been in the forest, she was very pretty. Her face and the color of her skin was healthy and tan but she looked desperately sad, sitting and staring at the ground before her. Should I say

something? Hal couldn't speak—she couldn't hurt him, nor he her, the bars were in the way; but what should he do? They were both prisoners they at least had that in common. The girl curled up into a ball, holding her knees in her arm's she began to whimper.

“Are you okay?” He heard his voice ring out into the cell without realizing it had come from his own mouth. Hearing the voice, the girl jumped. Turning to face him, she wiped her eyes.

“Wh—who are you?” Her voice cracked. This was something Hal should have prepared himself for. Of course she would have questions—but how much could he tell her. How much could he trust her?

“I'm Hal.” He attempted an awkward smile. Through her tears, the girl smiled back.

“I'm Ayn.”

“So—you're alright then?” He said as he began backing away, he felt that he should leave the girl alone.

“I think I will be. It's actually a long story—“

“Oh, I see.”

“It was kind of a ‘from whom’ thing for me.”

“Well who did you run from then?”

“My father—well, not really him, you see my father's King Aynarr.”

“Oh?” Hal had no idea what a king was—or who Aynarr was but she said it in such a way like he should. It was best to say as little as possible.

“Yeah and well I'm sure you've already heard all about it. I hear news travels faster among the towns and cities outside of the palace.”

“I haven't heard a thing.”



“Oh—well, I’ve been promised to Prince Oran.”

“Oh.” Hal felt like he was drowning. He had no idea who Prince Oran was or what “promised” meant. “That’s very interesting.” Surely that was an ambiguous enough response.

“Interesting?” She looked at him with a look of suspicion.

“Are you a southerner?”

“Um—no.”

“Oh.” She said with a look of regret. “Well then forget what I’ve said. I assumed you were an enemy of the north since you are their prisoner—I didn’t realize you were one of them.” She turned to the side.

“One of what?”

“A northerner.”

“I’m not a northerner.” She didn’t like whoever these northerners were. She turned back around, perplexed.

“Then what are you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Where are you from?” She looked suspicious.

“The forest.”

“You don’t look like a Ayvandenian.”

“I’m not from that part of the forest.”

“Then who are you?” She was getting frustrated. He was going to have to tell her something. To lie would mean fabricating a story in a world he knew nothing about. Telling the truth made him vulnerable. Hal bit his lip. He didn’t have a choice.

“I’m from the village of Thule.”

“Where?”

“I—I, I came through the forest. My people, we live deep in the darkness. There isn’t any light there. That great fire,” he pointed out the window when to his horror he realized the light had turned orange and was falling just behind the western mountains. “It—it’s falling! he cried.

“What do you mean?” Ayn stood to her feet and jumped onto of her bench looking out the window. “What do you see?”

“The great fire! It’s falling!” How could she not see that?

“You mean the sun?” If she hadn’t looked confused before, she certainly did now.

“The sun?”

“Yes, it rises in the east in the morning and sets in the west.” She slowly lowered herself back onto the bench. Hal was used to the light and its cycles in the forest but he didn’t understand how this new great light could die out into darkness. He nodded, embarrassed he had made such a spectacle of something so ordinary.

“—In the village where I’m from, the light isn’t bright. It doesn’t light up the sky. It’s dull and well we don’t live outside like this.”

“What do you mean?”

“Me and my people, we live under the ground. We dig deep tunnels so they can’t hunt us.”

“They?”

“The bronte.”

“What are bronte?”

“The great beasts of the wood.” As he began talking about them, his thoughts fell to

Ahlo. Once again he had no idea where his friend was.

“What do they look like?”

“Most of them are pure evil—they have green eyes, spiraling antlers and are twice the size of most wolves—“ As he described them, Ayn’s eyes lit up.

“I have seen one! Just before I was captured it killed my horse and would have killed me too if it hadn’t been scared off by the Rhecians.” Anguish rushed over her face. “If I ever see another one, I swear I’ll find some way to kill it.” Hal didn’t know what to say. He of all people hated the hoard. But Ahlo—he was different. Seeing her distaste for the creatures, he knew it was best to leave Ahlo out of the story for now.

“So they don’t hunt your people?” he asked.

“Last night was the first time I had ever seen one.” Ayn paused. “I can’t imagine—do they—do they eat people?” He could tell she was trying to be delicate. Hal nodded.

“My mom, my dad, my aunt—my whole family.” Hal looked at his feet. It seemed strange to unload so much on someone he hardly knew. There was silence between them for a brief moment.

“None of this makes any sense,” Ayn said. “How could you be from a place I’ve never heard of? How can there be beasts I’ve never seen?”

“I never thought there could be a place with a sun—without darkness and fear—well, all this.” Hal said.

“I guess the world is full of more mysteries than either of us could ever have imagined.” Ayn smiled.

“Are they all as poetic where you’re from?”

“What is poetic?”

“Never mind.”

“So how far away is Thule?”

“I don’t know—I don’t really know how I got here. I was being chased away from the village then I fell over a waterfall, went blind from the light and found my way to a cave where they took me.”

“I wonder—“ Ayn was deep in thought. “You say you’re from a village in the woods?”

“Yes.”

“It’s over what sounds like the great falls, so that must be to the west. Father used to talk about the city of Thiolos.”

“What’s that?”

“If I had a map, I would show you.”

“What’s a map?”

“Ugh—never mind—I’ll show you later, what’s important is that the city of Thiolos—we’ve always heard these legends about a city of men deep in the woods. They were rich because they made the best bows and weapons in the southern kingdom but one day they just vanished.”

“What do the legends say happened?”

“One day the city was there and the next . . . lost.”

“And its people?”

“Never heard from again—I think the legend of Thiolos sounds like Thule.” Ayn was solemn. Hal was shocked. The ruins, Ayn’s legends—all the legends of Thule had been right. Thule had not always been in darkness. But if this was true, what had caused this? Why had the bronte—the beasts who seemed oddly afraid out of Thule—descended on his people?

“So you’re saying . . . Thule was once part of this world?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“But what happened?” Hal asked. Perhaps in this new world there was some power—Ayn must know. But as Hal looked to her for all the answers, she shook her head.

“I wish I knew. I’m sorry.” She looked at him with a pleading gaze. Hal nodded, and climbed down from the ledge, back onto the bench and the bellows of the cell.

“Wait!” she called after him. Hal raised himself back up to the window. “I may not know what happened. But I can help you find out.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come with me back to my father’s castle.”

“Why?”

“Well, because I’m your best chance at figuring out what happened to your people.” She smiled. “And besides, how else do you plan on navigating this place. You don’t know anything about Ayvandeem—or how to live under the sun for that matter.”

“Ayvandeem?”

“That’s the name of our land.” She smiled. In his heart, he knew she was right.

“I can trust you?” he looked at her, his eyes full of urgency. “If I do this, if I follow you, I’m putting my life and my people in your hands.” Ayn rose up on the bench, leaned into the window and grabbed his hand.

“Hal, I know we’ve only just met. But I promise you, as long as you are in my family’s kingdom, I’ll do everything I can to protect you and your secret.” With one long smile, Hal and Ayn looked at each other. Ayn pulled her hand away from Hal’s and slid back down into her cell.

“You’d better get some sleep. Tomorrow we face the wrath of my father.”

“Oh—is that something I should be afraid of.” Hal asked. Ayn laughed.

“I guess you’ll find out soon enough.” She was now lying down beside the bench, looking up at him. “Good night.” The way she said it was kind, but he could tell she was ready to be alone.

“Oh sorry—goodnight,” he climbed down from the ledge and lay down next to his own bench. The ground was hard and the stone pressed against his back. Looking around in the darkness, he waited for sleep to take him for the night but he was distracted. It was strange to be so close to a girl yet unable to see her.

She’s just a girl, he told himself. But despite how hard he tried, he couldn’t turn off his brain. There was so much he didn’t know about the girl, this new land, and even the mystery that clouded the uncertainty of what happened to his home. Outside the moon that Hal could not see climbed high and descended behind the mountains before sleep finally found him.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 11

The next morning, gentle light poured onto the stone walls that held Hal and Ayn. Opening her eyes the memory of the night before flashed back to her—Hal, the legends but also the reality of her capture. How could so much happen in one night? She wondered if Hal was awake, she climbed up on the bench and tried to see him.

“Hal?” Placing her hands on the iron bars as she looked through the window and into the cell. He was still asleep on the floor.

Down the hall a door slammed.

“It’s like I was telling you, Eryn. The water down here is just bad. When you go south of the line, it just gets nasty.” Keys rattled as the men begun unlocking the door to her cell. Ayn quickly jumped down from the bench back onto the floor.

“Morning, my lady. We hope you enjoyed your stay,” the men snickered together.

“Is it time to go?” She stretched, annoyed that they found her discomfort amusing.

“Not quite. The king wants to have a word with you before we depart.”

“King Odis?”

“He’s the only king we know.” It had been three years since Ayn had seen him. Their last encounter had been at her brother’s wedding and she had done her best to avoid him at all costs.

“I see.” A rush of heat ran through her. Facing her future father-in-law just after trying to run away from the prospect of marrying his son was not something she had prepared herself for. “Okay.”

“This way.” They led her out of the cell and into the hallway, through the doors and back into a large atrium and as she stepped through the doors she finally recognized the keep. They were in the great Southern Watch Tower of Irian. Once one of her people’s holdings, it had been

one of the many places they had given away when her brother Ayryn had married Oria. Situated in the woods of the southern border, it was only half a day's journey back to Fhyrrkat.

"Keep walking you're taking too long." Ernye pushed her up a small flight of stairs and through a dark door. As she entered the room, she saw King Odis standing before one of the keep's open-air windows.

"Welcome, Ayn," the king said without turning around. Ayn walked forward, unsure of what to say or do.

"Good morning, your highness."

"I hope your stay wasn't too uncomfortable."

"It was fine." He didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing the truth.

"Oh, good. You see, when I sent a rider telling your father that we had found you in the forest, I told him that while I would allow him to see to disciplining you once you returned, I thought it might be good to go ahead and set some ground rules while you were under my roof—since after all it won't be long till you'll be joining us in Roassgard. Under these circumstances, I'm sure you'll understand, I thought it would be best if I showed you what happens to runaways in my household." King Odis slowly turned around to face her. His face was pale and he had short gray hair that lay flat against his balding head. His hands were cupped together, and he wore a grim smile. "Do we have an understanding then?" This was an interesting debacle. Should she outright refuse to obey or allow him to think he had won? He should know better. There was no way she was going down without a fight.

"Yes."

"My son Oryn, as you know, is the future king of the realm. The last thing he needs to worry about is a runaway bride. Especially since every other female in the realm would give



anything to be his bride.” Ayn scoffed. His smile faded.

“Well, just so we understand each other: if there are any further mishaps, I think it goes without saying that after you are caught—and Ayn,” he paused, looking deep into her eyes. “You will be caught—and once you are, you’ll be begging to spend a night in jail.” King Odis was every bit as Ayn remembered him from the wedding. “Ernie, Vic, take our princess to get cleaned up—after all, she’s going to be meeting my son today—when was the last time you two saw each other Ayn?” He turned and caught her eye, his gaze pierced hers. He was dangling the marriage before her, taunting her. The last time they had met had to of been the last time they had visited Roassgard—her family had visited the northern kingdom in a futile attempt to make peace.

“Seven years ago, your highness.”

“Ah, that’s right—your last visit to the north. Well, I think you’ll find our prince much changed since then.” King Odis chuckled to himself. “Take her away,” he motioned to Ernye and Vic.

“Come on,” Eryne once again began pushing her out the door.

“Oh, your majesty?” Vic asked.

“Hm?”

“What about that other one?”

“Who?” The king turned back around.

“You know, the boy we found, the one we found in the caves.” Ayn began to sweat. She had promised Hal she would take care of him.

“What use is this boy to me?” the king asked unamused. Eryne and Vic shrugged their shoulders. “Do away with the menace then.”

“King Odis!” Ayn yelled.

“Yes?” the king looked at her confused by her abruptness.

“He’s one of my father’s guard—he was out looking for me. He’s a loyal soldier! My father will be upset if he doesn’t return.”

“Then tell me, Ayn, why was he in the woods by himself—not in the attire of a normal Aydalian soldier?”

“He’s—he must have been caught off guard when the call was made to begin the pursuit after me—but I swear to you, he’s a Captain in my father’s ranks.” It was a terrible lie. I should have thought of this before. King Odis shook his head.

“Well—release him to march to Fhyrrkat with us—“ Relief washed over Ayn. Somehow he had believed her.

“Upstairs you go.” Eryne began pushing her through the doors once again. Down the stairs, and out into the hallway, the soldiers took Ayn up into the east tower. Inside there was a small bowl of water and a dress—a northern styled dress with navy fabric, gold trim and the typical Rhecian heavy skirt.

“So you expect me to ride back to Fhyrrkat in this?”

“The king does,” Vic snickered as he slammed the door shut behind him.

Once alone, Ayn took off her soiled clothes and washed herself. While it was no bath, the water—cold as it might be—was a relief to her bruised and battered body. She hadn’t realized how dirty she had been. When she was done, the basin was thick with mud. Clean, she dressed herself in the navy dress. Looking in the small looking glass, she saw a girl she didn’t recognize. Never in her life had she worn anything so foreign. Even when she and her family had travelled north, they had always kept with their own kingdom’s attire. She, her brother and their friends

had always made fun of the ladies of Rhece who wore such tight, impractical outfits. It made her uncomfortable to wear something so restricting.

A heavy fist beat on the door. “You almost ready in there?”

“Yes.” I’ve got to face them sometime. She tripped on a pair of shoes and opened the door.

“Well look-e-here, Vic.” Ernye’s eyes looked her up and down. Ayn felt violated. She tried hard to hide it but she felt herself blush.

“You would never know it was the wild princess from the looks of her.”

“Can we get on with it?” She was more than ready to be done with these two buffoons.

“This way then.” The men led her down the tower steps and outside where a host of men and the women of the Rhecian court were on horses ready for the final ride back to Fhyrrkat. Ahead she saw King Odis on horseback next to a handsome young man she barely recognized. They watched her as she walked out to them.

“Ah, Princess Ayn.” Odis smiled grimly. “What a difference. I believe you remember my son, Oryn.” The king gestured to the young man on horseback next to him. Oryn grinned dully—and unlike his father, his smile was reserved, but warm. His eyes were a piercing blue and his hair a dusty blond. He wore the black armor of Rhece and his horse was a black stallion. Ayn bowed her head and curtsied—feeling like it was the most appropriate way to greet someone in her current attire.

“We have a horse for you—“ he pointed to a brown mare to the right of her. Ayn walked to the horse and grabbed the bridle.

“My belongings?”

“You’ll receive those once we arrive,” King Odis said sternly. Of course they wouldn’t

allow to have her sword and spear before she was returned back to Fhyrrkat. They didn't trust her.

"And my—my soldier?"

"Oh, of course. Vic—bring the soldier." Vic went to the back of the line and appeared a few minutes later with Hal, his hands bound behind his back.

"What are you doing? Release him!" Ayn barked at Vic.

"Sorry, we aren't taking any chances with this one—he's a bit different."

"Well at least give him a horse."

"We're fresh out of spares. He's going to have to walk." Vic attached Hal to rope that ran to Ayn's saddle. "You can keep each other company." Vic retreated, mounted his horse and reappeared right behind Ayn and Hal. Odis was clearly suspicious.

"Are you okay, Hal?" Ayn whispered to him.

"Yeah, everything's okay," he smiled back to her. Ayn nodded once and mounted the horse.

"I'm really sorry it has to be this way—they shouldn't make you walk like this."

"It's okay—really."

In front of them, the Rhecian party began to ride. Led by a host of King Odis' soldiers, the king, Oryn, and the rest of the court followed. Odis had Ayn and Hal ride behind the ladies of the Rhecian court. Which wasn't so bad since they all wore similar attire to hers and made her feel less out of place. They rode on like this for a long time. The ride southwest would take until nightfall. They would meander through the Ryian Forest, a soft gentle forested area on the banks of the Iriyte—one of the larger lakes in her father's kingdom.

As they rode, every once and awhile Ayn would sneak a glance at Hal. He was so pale;

his skin was almost translucent in the light of the sun. His hair was a deep chestnut, which hung thickly down to his shoulders. And while he was thin and his skin stuck to him, he was muscular. Still without a shirt, she could see every muscle group in his torso. But as each moment passed, her anxiety grew. The closer they got to the castle, the closer they came to her father. When they arrived she would have next to no time to try to explain Hal to her father—and the rest of the court. It was going to be hard. With the entire Rhecian party arriving, it would be more than difficult to find time alone with her father, not to mention a place to hide him so Hal didn't talk to anyone in the meantime. Even one conversation and she knew even the simplest mind would know there was something amiss with the forest dweller. I've got to talk to him. Somehow I've got to tell him not to talk to a soul. Yes, that was it. It would be better for him to be rude than to be a—what did he call it—a Thulian? But as she glanced out of the corner of her eye, she saw Vic. Eager as ever, watching her every move.

“Step to it, scrawny,” he bellowed at Hal. “The King won't stand for you slowing us down.” She watched as Hal gave Vic a nasty look and quickened his pace behind her.

“Let him ride with me at least, Vic. This is ridiculous.”

“The future Queen of Rhece, riding with some no-count soldier? What would your betrothed think? I wouldn't push your luck with King Odis, missy—he's riding just a few paces in front of us after all.” Ayn didn't look back at him. She knew without turning around that he was enjoying this too much.

“You know, Vic you have a point. One day soon I will be the Queen—do you really want to upset the future Queen of Rhece? It might not due to have an enemy so high in the court.” Ayn said.

“One day at a time, little miss. We'll see what happens,” Vic laughed back. She didn't

like the sound of his laughter. He clearly didn't have faith that she would ever have any power in Rhece. There was no sense talking to him anymore. For at least the rest of the ride to Fhyrrkat, she would do all she could to talk to Vic. They walked on for sometime. The lakefront was now on their left. Only a few hours more and they would be back. Ayn knew she didn't have much more time. Between the noise of the woman in front of them chattering and the hooves of the line of horses would muffle her voice a little bit. It was now or never.

"Hal—can you hear me?" she breathed looking down out of the corner of her eye. He nodded slightly. At least he understood how to be subtle.

"Listen, you cannot talk to anyone—not a soul when we get back to Fhyrrkat. You have just got to keep your mouth closed. If you say anything, they are going to know that something is wrong." Hal nodded again. It might not be enough, but it was all she could do. When they got back—she would have to pull her father aside somehow. If Odis was suspicious, which he clearly was, he would ask questions. She had to get to her father before Odis did. Hal's safety depended on it.

Walking along, the company began to climb a steep hill. The trail narrowed against the water's edge and the tree line. They were getting close now. She drove her fingernails into her thumbs—her own nervous habit. Think of something else. Think of something else. She looked out over the lakefront. The sun was going down in the west, the last rays falling in golden spindles over the ripples in the water. Somewhere across the lake, a loon cried. The sound was haunting. Another aspect of her kingdom that she would miss when they took her away.

Just ahead, the company began cresting the hilltop. Castle Fhyrrkat lit up in a blaze of torches and lights rose up out of the valley on the crest of an even higher hill. It was nothing but a long climb and they would be back.

But before the claws of dread took her, Ayn heard the whistle of an arrow. It whizzed overhead and landed in the lake and as it sank, it created a ripple that destroyed the placidness of the water. Arrows flew all around them, taking down men and horses. Ayn looked to Vic who was already running with the other soldiers toward the tree line, shields out born. Arrows continue to fly from the darkness of the forest and the sound of a great company of men ran from the trees. Their swords clashed with those of the Rhecian soldiers. The attackers wore nothing but black masks, black body suits with no insignia. As they ran and took down the unarmed, the Rhecian woman began crying out in terror as the line broke.

“Give me your arm!” she yelled. Hal thrust his arm out to hers and jumped on the back of the horse. Ayn kicked the creature and they began running away from the castle, back down the road towards the Tower of Irian. Black masked men wearing matching black tunics drove out from the forest, each brandishing a blade. Ayn counted—there must be close to fifty of them. They dodged Rhechians running alongside them, fleeing from the coming attackers.

“What’s happening?” Hal yelled over the sound of chaos.

“We’re being attacked!”

“By who?”

“I don’t know! But we’ve got to go!” Just ahead of them, a masked man ran his blade through a Rhecian nobleman. He fell to his knees as the masked man cleaned his blade. His eyes fell on them. He put the dagger back in his belt, jumped on a horse, and began running after them.

“Osha!” Ayn cried as she dug her heels into the horse. The beast shrieked and took off in an all-out run. “We’ll lose him the trees.”

She drove the horse deep into the forest. Tree limbs beat them as they began climbing.

Racing through the trees, they rode higher and higher into the foothills of the mountains. The horse's breath was heavy in the air and his footsteps beat against the rocks, branches, and leaves of the forest floor. Behind them another pair of hooves beat the ground.

"Can you see him?" Ayn whispered to Hal.

"No—but he's there."

She drove the horse headlong into the forest. A sharp limb scratched her forehead. Ahead she saw a large boulder, she pushed the horse forward and they stopped behind it. The new quiet was unnerving. Lying on the ground just ahead was a branch. It would have to do. Ayn dismounted and ran to pick it up. It was just as sturdy as she had hoped. With branch in hand she ran back to Hal.

"Can you help me down? My hands—" He whispered.

"No, stay there."

"I can help you."

"I've got this—shh." She held up her finger over her mouth. The sound of hooves echoed through the forest. Ayn jumped onto the boulder and climbed to the top, the branch grinding the stone ever so slightly as she ascended. It was now twilight and very hard to see—Ayn squinted through the darkness, watching for movement. The horse and rider erupted through the trees and slowed his pace. The creature had a patch of white on its torso that reflected in the fading light. He was just feet away. She watched as the rider trotted right in front of the boulder.

Now. Her heart almost beat out of her chest as she took one giant leap into the thin air above him, swinging the branch right onto his head. The impact knocked him off his horse and they both fell to the ground. Landing on her side, Ayn ignored the pain and jumped to her feet. The rider followed suit, pulling a dagger from his belt. She took in the man before her. He wore a



black, mask-like turban that only revealed a set of menacing dark eyes. The rest of his black clothing was dusted with dirt and crushed leaves from the fall. Light flickered off the dagger he brandished as the eyes zeroed in on Ayn, ready to attack. At that moment, Ayn watched in slow motion, as arms wrapped themselves around the rider's throat.

The man cried out as he fell backwards on the arms that were now wrapped tightly around his neck, the arms that Ayn could now see, were Hal's. The dagger fell to the ground, lost in the darkness and the tangle of leaves. Now wrestling on the forest floor, the masked man drove his hands under Hal's freeing himself from the chokehold. The masked man knew how to fight and was using his skills to overcome Hal who was now underneath the grasp of the masked man. Ayn ran to the fallen limb.

Hal continued fighting the man, but it was too late. The man had his throat and was squeezing. Hal was thrashing wildly. Ayn ran and hit the man over the head with the branch and backed away as the masked man stood once more to his feet.

"Your time is almost up, Ayn of Ayvandeem," he said. He looked to the ground beside him and under a oak leaf lay the dagger. In one fluid motion, he bent down and took it into his grasp. "You and your people will soon be dead." He stepped slowly towards her. Under his mask, his dark eyes glinted as if he were smiling. Ayn watched him and prepared herself. But as she waited for him to strike, through the trees her eyes fell on two glowing lights. One blue, one green and just as suddenly as she saw them she realized that the beasts were back. With a giant leap, the angry brute jumped on the back of the masked man and began tearing him to pieces.

The man cried out in pain. Ayn ran and hid behind the nearest oak tree. It was only a matter of time now. The beast would finish with the man, then take Hal . . . and then he would find her. There was no point running. With her back against the tree, Ayn tried not to listen as the

man's screaming ceased. Her eyes filled with tears as she curled up into a ball with her back on the tree. She thought of her new friend and how she had failed him.

"Ayn?" Hal's voice rang out through the woods. I must be imagining it. "Ayn? Where are you?" the voice rang out again. Ayn stopped crying. Perhaps this was some sort of trick the beast played on its prey. "Ayn? Can you hear me?" Ayn peeked her head around the side of the tree and saw Hal standing in the clearing. How? Coming out from behind the tree, Ayn ran to Hal and threw her arms around him.

"Come on, let's go over here." Hal ushered her away from the remains of the masked man and back behind the boulder where the horse was still waiting.

"How are you alive?" she whispered.

"I need to tell you something." Ayn looked up at him unsure. "I should have told you before but—" Two glowing lights appeared from behind the boulder as a bronte walked towards them. Ayn gasped.

"Hal!"

"It's okay." Hal walked over to the beast and began rubbing its torso. Ayn looked at him with a face full of disgust.

"You—you know these creatures!" Anger pulsed from her. She looked at the bronte. The creature had a light brown coat of fur with little flecks of white. He was smaller in stature than a horse, but had four gigantic paws with terrifying claws and two spiraling antlers. But what was most striking were the eyes. The green was the same as the others she had seen in the forest—but the blue, it radiated with an almost beautiful light. The color reminded her of forget-me-nots.

"It's not what you think—Ahlo isn't like the others."

“Oh, so he didn’t just murder someone?”

“He was protecting us!”

“Protecting us—Hal, those things are murderers.”

“Ahlo is different.”

“What is the matter with you? You told me yourself. They hunt your people, they killed Pheot—“

“I know I said those things, Ayn. But you have to understand Ahlo is different he saved me. He’s the only reason I’m standing here today. He’s the only reason I escaped from Thule. He’s—he’s my friend.” Ayn looked at him for sometime. The only noise, the gentle quiet of the forest around them. All sound from the struggle that had driven them deep into the forest was gone.

“Hal,” Ayn sighed. The tone of her voice was calm. “I trust you.” She looked at the bronte and bowed her head slightly. Hal smiled.

“What do we do now?” he asked.

“We’ve got to go.”

“Where?”

“To Fhyrrkat—I know a shortcut through the forest.” She walked over to the horse, put her foot into the strips and climbed onto its back. “Come on.” She motioned for him to follow suit.

“I’ll follow you,” he said as Ahlo lowered his back and she watched as Hal climbed onto the beast. Seeing him on the back of the bronte was striking. The two of them together looked dangerous and wild.

“Follow me, osha!” The horse began to gallop through the trees. They would go the back

way. Beside her Hal and Ahlo appeared. Through the darkness, she could see their shadows through the trees. As they rode on, Ayn was anxious. She had no idea what awaited them at the castle, what had happened to Odis and the Rhecians, or how she would hide Ahlo when they got there. After some time, they finally emerged from the trees. Castle Fhyrrkat once again stood before, light ablaze with a host of torches. She stopped and gazed at the beautiful sight. Hal and Ahlo appeared beside her.

“You trust me?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Good” and she kicked her horse and took off in a run towards the secret passageway under the stables.

## Chapter 12

*Under the mountains, beneath a labyrinth of granite stone tunnels, the keeper sat in front of a large table. The room he currently inhabited was littered with weathered maps and ancient documents; crisp stone colored pages, wrinkled and frayed with age. An emerald green book lay before him with a single candle lighting the page. The cell itself was a circular chamber covered from ceiling to floor with shelf after shelf of pale leathery books, their bindings peered down with an eerie glowing haze. Other objects, bottles and jars filled with colored liquids and specks of dust were scattered throughout the shelves. Through the dim light, a figure was deep in thought, carnivorous malice framing his features with contempt. His long pale finger traced over the words repeatedly. The object he desired for the last century continued to evade him. The pieces of the puzzle lay before him, but the missing link was out of reach.*

\* \* \*

The trapdoor they used to climb down into the castle slammed shut behind them. It had been a difficult fit, but Ahlo had successfully climbed through. Climbing down into the tunnel felt funny to Hal. He had spent years calling holes like this home, but this was strange.

“The beast—he’ll have to wait down here for us. No one here has ever seen anything like him.” Ayn said as she marched forward, looking both ways before emerging into a long stone hallway.

“Is it safe?”

“It’s our best option. Over here!” She led them into the dark hallway. There was no light, other than that the issued from Ahlo’s eyes. Hal followed to sound of Ayn’s footsteps. He felt silly walking along with his hands outstretched. All his life he had been so used to darkness, but after living in the sun these last few days, being back in the black was harder than he

remembered.

Ahead of them, Ayn's moved quickly, the sound of her feet grew more distant.

"Are you guys coming?" Her voice sounded even further.

"Yeah—right behind you!" Hal took more steps into the unknown. He felt a hand grab his.

"Here, follow me." She said. Her skin was soft, so much less weathered than his or Mare's anyone he had known in Thule.

With her leading them, they moved much faster and a few moments later they stopped. Hal held out his free hand and felt a wall. Ayn let go of his hand and began rummaging around in the darkness. He heard the sound of something rattle.

"Through here." She grabbed his hand again. Hal turned around to Ahlo and ran his free hand across his mane. As they moved through the wall, Hal could see they had passed through a doorway. Ayn let go of Hal's hand once again and walked into the darkness. A moment later orange light illuminated around her face. The light radiated from a match that held next to a small piece of rope inside a glass cylinder.

"What is that thing?"

"This?" She held out the cylinder. As the fire spread and ignited the end of the rope. "It's a lantern. The wick is in oil so it will stay lit." She held up the lantern and around them a small room came into view. It wasn't large, but the ceilings were reached up far above their heads and there was more than enough room for the bronte to lay down. The only piece of furniture in the room was the table that the lantern had been on and an old wooden chair in the corner.

"What is this place?"

"There were the dungeons of old."

“Dungeon?”

“A place to keep prisoners—you know those who commit crimes against the crown.” She paused running her finger over the dust on the table. “My brother and I used to play down here when we were children.”

“You used to play . . . with prisoners?”

“Oh no!” Ayn laughed. “This place hasn’t been used as a dungeon since—well, long before my grandfather was king.” She set the lamp back down on the table. “But we better go. I have no idea what’s going on upstairs. We need to find my father and figure out happened with the attackers and if the Rhecians—well, if they are alive.” Ayn walked over to the door. “We can bring him food and other things later.” Hal looked from Ayn to Ahlo and sighed.

“I really don’t like leaving him here.”

“I know, but until we clear all of this up, we risk it.” Her face was stern as she looked to Hal. “You’ve already seen how pompous King Odis is. We can’t risk him seeing Ahlo before we have a plan. Once we get everything in order, once we know he’s safe, then, I promise we’ll bring him right upstairs straight away.” Ayn looked through the hallway. He could tell she was anxious. He had told her that he trusted her. Now that trust was being put to the test. Walking over to Ahlo, Hal once again placed his hand on his snout. The fur was so soft. Even after all this time it surprised him.

“I’ll be back for you,” He whispered. Ahlo blinked slowly and took a deep breath, warm air rushed out of his nostrils and onto Hal’s face and he felt a strange sense of peace. Was this his way of telling him it was okay to leave him?

“This way.” Ayn grabbed Hal’s hand once again, pulling through the doorway she slammed the door closed behind them as they jogged through a maze of more darkness. He felt

them turn left, right—or was it right and then a left? Until at long last they stopped once again.

“Be careful, the stairs are always a bit damp.” She said as her hand pulled him up and he found himself climbing a mountain of steps. Then finally, sufficiently winded, Ayn opened a creaky door and they emerged into the light of another hallway, lined with ivory-colored stones and lit by torches hung on the walls. All around them, injured men and women swarmed the hallways. There were men sitting in the hallways nursing battle wounds, women with looks of shock, and their faces as pale as the women of Thule.

“Inside everyone!” they heard a tall soldier yelling, ushering the Rhecians through the castle passageway. “Come this way!” Ayn pulled Hal down the hallway towards the man.

“Elrick, where’s my father,” she asked

“In the Herrow, Lady Ayn.”

“Thank you.” She nodded and looked to Hal. “Stay with me.” Hal shook his head as more and more Rhecians piled into the castle around them. A thin man with a black goatee bumped into Hal’s shoulder. Turning around to face him, Hal was surprised by the look of him, his mouth agape and eyes hazy. He didn’t say a word and kept on moving down the passageway.

“Hurry, close the gates!” More soldiers ran past, rushing towards the noise. The sound of heavy wood being moved echoed through the hallway.

“Fairor, where have they gone?” A voice cried from above. Hal looked and saw a man in thick armor glancing off into the distance through a metal object.

“They’ve disappeared!” Another voice cried from beside him. “An army of ghosts!”

“Ghosts don’t bleed.” Elrick said. He had climbed the tower and had joined the others, each looking off into the thick darkness.

Ayn took off through the rest of the passageway and into what looked like a grand room.



Hal had never seen anything so ornate. With more ivory stone the floor, the walls, columns and beams were all carved with intricate designs, each showcasing a different image; many depicting scenes from the forest and what looked like a giant river. Ayn ran through the rows of pillars. Hal followed close behind her. As they went deeper into the castle, they saw more and more of the Rhecians. Men in cloaks were wrapping wounds. Women in white aprons also began to appear, each of them with a candle, ushering the wounded and shocked deeper into the castle. Hal watched, taking in the mass of people and didn't see Ayn stop. He slammed into her, pushing her clumsily into two large doors.

"I'm sorry!" He grabbed her arm, helping to her to regain her balance. It was at that moment that he noticed the two men standing on each side of the door, each of them armed with a long silver blade. The men stared back at them with disapproving grimaces.

"I need to see my father," she said.

"He is meeting with King Odis now. They are not to be disturbed," the guard to the left retorted.

"I don't think you understand—he'll want to see me! He'll want to know I'm safe." Her eyes held a deep-seated desperation.

"Not. To. Be. Disturbed." The men looked frustrated, their eyes brows furrowed as they starred down at the young girl. She looked to Hal and in the next moment flung herself headlong at the door before them. She had just gotten it opened wide enough to slip an arm through before the armed men grabbed Ayn and began pulling her away from the heavy door. Hal watched on unsure of what to do. Just a few feet away the doors were open.

"Hal! Help!" Ayn cried. She was kicking and scratching the guard. Ayn struggled to wrestle her way back towards Hal but each time she did, the man overcame her.

Hal looked at the doors. It's the only way. In one fluid motion he grabbed the door and pulled it open. The door creaked loudly as Hal stumbled forward. Inside a table of men in long garbs sat deliberating. The noise of the door drew their attention abruptly, each of them now were staring back at Hal.

"King Aynarr!" Hal yelled across the long room just as the second guard wrapped his arms around Hal from behind and pulled him back out of the room.

"You!" King Odis stood from the table with menacing eyes. To his right another man stood, this one had a short red beard.

"What is the meaning of this?" The red bearded man boomed.

"Your daughter—" Hal pointed towards Ayn who was still wrestling with one of the men.

"Father!" She cried.

"Release her!" The red bearded king barked at the guards. Each obeyed, letting Ayn and Hal go. Ayn ran through the doorway and into her father's arms.

"You're safe." He wrapped his arms around her. Tears formed in his eyes. "—I thought we'd lost you."

"I know, I'm sorry." Ayn and her father held each other for a long time as Hal and the others looked on. Looking closer at the man, Hal recognized the freckles on his cheeks. If not for his height, and his beard, Ayn was almost a spitting image of her father.

"As heartwarming a homecoming as this is—" interrupted Odis, still standing at the table. The rest of his men remained seated at the round table; half of them appeared to be the same group of councilors that had accompanied him earlier that day. The other three looked to be men who assisted Aynarr.

“I think, we’d better get back to the business before us.” Odis said. Aynarr kissed his daughter’s forehead before turning back to Odis.

Turning around to face the company of men, “As a matter of fact, your majesty. The walls are fortified and everyone is inside. I believe there’s nothing we haven’t discussed which can’t wait for morning. My daughter is home after a long journey and I need to see her to bed.”

King Odis looked on with a disapproving grimace, biting the side of his cheek. “Very well. We will reconvene together first thing in the morning.” The four Rhecian men all rose, gathered their belongings and made their way to the door, walking past Aynarr, Ayn and Hal. They whispered together in hushed voices. Odis slowly followed behind them, stopping just in front of Ayn. “It’s good to see you are safe, Princess Ayn.” He looked at her with a half smile. “I hope you weren’t badly injured.” Hal looked at Odis. He had never taken kindly to the king of Rhece, but in the way he was now looking at Ayn, he was sure he there was a slight hint of disappointment. Odis sauntered slowly through the large doors; a boom resonated as they closed behind him. As soon as the sound reverberated through the hall, Odis turned his attention to Ayn.

“What were you thinking? Running away? Don’t you know the spot you’ve put me in?” His voice was harsh—but in it, Hal sensed the same tone of concern that Mare had used on him. As he looked closer at his face, he saw the shadows under his eyes, and the fatigue on his brow. The man had clearly not slept a wink since his daughter had run away.

“Father—I’m sorry!”

“And to be captured by Odis?”

“I’m sorry!” She cried again. “I don’t know what else to say—” her voice cut off. Tears welled up in her eyes. Looking at his daughter the king finally sighed and pulled her back into his arms.

“No more running.” He whispered in her ear.

“I promise.” She wrapped her arms tightly around her father. I know you were upset—but the forest? Ayn, what were you hoping to achieve?” The man’s green eyes were angry. Hal felt out of place watching them, trying to back away to give them space, he caught Ayn’s eye.

“Father—“ she pulled herself out of her father’s arms. “This is Hal and we need to talk to you—“ she looked around suspiciously—“somewhere safe.” Ayn walked over and stood next to Hal once again. Aynarr’s eyes fell on Hal. He nodded.

“Father, he’s the one who saved me in the woods.” Hal felt his cheeks redden. The king looked suspicious as he continued to stare at Hal.

“Let’s retire upstairs,” he said leading them through the thick wooden doors.

The king led them out of the room, out into the grand hall, past the crowds of people which seemed to be declining as more and more of the Rhecians were led to their own chambers. They continued following him, up a wide flight of stairs that rested in the middle of the room. Turning down a winding hall he grabbed one of the torches off the wall and led them on, they followed close at hand. Hal took it all in as he passed more and more of the beautifully carved walls. The passageway they followed seemed to showcase a great battle of some kind. Hal recognized the spears in their arms. The stone warriors were also on horseback, hundreds of them riding one after the other towards something farther down the hallway—but just as they were about to turn a corner, the corner which Hal was sure would show the battle or what they were headed towards, Aynarr lead turned a different corner. Hal paused. Something compelled him to follow the riders.

“Hal, this was,” Ayn whispered through the torchlight.

“Coming.” He took one last look at the soldiers before following Ayn and her father.

Looking at the walls on this passageway, they were just a simple scene, the forest and little eyes from various creatures, a fox, an owl, a bear. I'll go back and find the carvings, Hal thought to himself as his attention fell from the walls to following the king and his daughter.

"There you are, Hal." Aynarr boomed through the hallway. These quarters will suit you nicely." Any opened the door and in they all walked. It was a small room, with a bed, a wooden desk and a chair. Just to the side of the bed was a small arched door. There was also one of those orb-like lights Ayn had lit in the dungeons. She walked towards the lamp and lit it the way she had done before, smiling at Hal she handed him the lamp and retreated back to the hallway with her father. "Sleep well, Hal." Ayn said but just as she closed the door behind her. What? He couldn't figure out what was going on. Hadn't he said that they would talk—hadn't Ayn told him they desperately needed to explain—? He looked at the bed. How could I possibly sleep after all this? Walking past the bed, he noticed the window. Looking out, shining lights caught his eye. Not only were there hundreds of tiny little lights blinking in the great black of the night, but there was also a greater light, a huge circle, less brilliant than the sun was shining high on the horizon. But what was even more shocking was that the lights were being reflected by something even greater down below. It looked like a great river—the same river he had seen in the carvings. Looking out over the expanse Hal had never seen so much water. The rippling current seemed to spread extend as far as the eye could see before him. It was mesmerizing. It surged back and forth creating the most intoxicating sound. The smell, a stinging salty smell tickled his nose. Suddenly Hal heard a quiet creak. Hal whipped around to see Ayn crawling out of the small door. She had had to duck low to come through the door.

"What's going on?"

"Shhhh!" Ayn held up a single finger to her mouth. "There are eyes everywhere in this

castle. We had to make it look like we all went to bed so we would be safe.”

“But where—“

“Through here!” She motioned for him to follow here through the small door. “We put you in here on purpose. Some of the rooms in the castle are connected through secret passageways.” Hal followed Ayn, ducking his head as they climbed through the doorframe. The passageway seemed only large enough for a child to fit through, he continued ducking as they began spiraling up a staircase. Hal put out his hands in front of him as the ceiling dropped even further, forcing him to almost crawl on all-fours. They crawled for what seemed like days before the darkness broke and they at last climbed out into small circular room. “It’s the top of the east tower people, most have ceased using this side of Fhyrrkat,” she said as she pulled him towards her father who was waiting for them. King Aynarr smiled at him as Hal walked into the light that fell through the arched opening the looked out over the great river.

“Now tell me what happened.” He looked at both of them, his eyes seeking an explanation.

“Before Odis and his men found me in the woods—I was, I was attacked by something, something I had never seen before.”

“What was it?”

“Well, it was a beast—from Thyll.” Aynarr’s brow furrowed as he looked at his daughter.

“What do you mean, Ayn?”

“What I mean, Father,” She took a deep breath. “Is all of the legends, all of the stories and myths—all of them are true. The people who lived in Thyll, well, Hal is living proof that they are still out there!” Suddenly both Ayn and her father’s eyes fell to Hal who once again found himself blushing. Aynarr looked at Hal suspiciously.

“Except it’s not Thyll to them, it’s Thule!”

“It’s true,” Hal heard himself say.

“They live trapped in darkness, in a world where they are hunted—hunted by the very beast that tried to take me—that murdered Pheot.” Ayn’s eyes shone the deepest green as she pleaded with her father to listen. Any looked away and put his hand to his chin before turning back towards Hal.

“If this is true, how did you escape?”

“I—I don’t know. I was riding my—Ahlo and we just ran out, we fell from a great cliff into a river and the next morning I woke up and the—“ Hal looked to Ayn—“sun, well it blinded me, I had never seen anything so bright.” Hal felt himself failing. He felt Aynarr skepticism rising.

“So, in the wake of a mysterious attack from a foe we can neither identify nor trace—you come out of the forest. You, a mysterious young man claiming to be from a city, that to all written record disappeared off the map over a hundred years ago—“ He began walking back towards Hal. “—You befriend my daughter, and you expect me to believe that you are have nothing to do with this. That these aren’t your people?”

“Father!”

“I—I’m just lost.”

“So what do you mean to do now?” As Aynarr asked Hal this question with deep concern etched into the thick wrinkles on his forehead, it hit him for the first time that he truly didn’t know. He couldn’t go home and he didn’t appear welcome here.

“I—I don’t know.”

“Father, he’s my friend. He saved me and I swore I would protect him.”

“Ayn, you don’t know this boy. You have no way of knowing if what he says is even true.” The room was quiet for a moment. Hal knew he was right. What proof did they have—but then it struck him.

“But we do have proof!”

“Oh?”

“Ahlo—well—he’s my bronte.”

“Bronte?”

“The beasts Ayn spoke of. Well, Ahlo is good. But he’s here with me.” Hal said cautiously. Aynarr turned back to Ayn.

“The bests that you just spoke of, the ones you said were capable of murder?”

“He saved us, father. When we were running from the attack, Ahlo, he listened to Hal. These beasts, they can read minds, and Hal told him to save us and he did.”

“I don’t know how it works,” Hal said resolutely. “Or why all of this has happened, but it’s true.” Aynarr paced back and forth, his hand still to his chin.

“Where is the beast, then?”

“We left him down in the old dungeons, father.” Ayn interjected. Aynarr shook his head. “He can’t stay there forever, Ayn.”

“I know.” She agreed quietly, looking at the ground. Aynarr bit his finger as he took one last sigh.

“Hal of Thyll.”

“—they call their home Thule, father” Ayn interrupted.

“Hal of Thule, I don’t know what to think of these events but my daughter trusts you. So for now, you have my trust. I will protect your secret—but you two better stay out of trouble and



out of the attention of King Odis. It's better for all of us if your true home is not revealed while he and his guard are in Fhyrrkat." Behind her father, Ayn smiled at Hal. "From now on, you are a Tryterian. You were lost. You bumped your head. Ayn is one of your only friends and you are here to recover from your injury. Do you think you can manage that story?"

"Yes, I can." Relief rushed over Hal.

"Ayn?"

"Yes?" The smile still lingered on her face.

"You know what's at stake here." His eyes looked deep into hers. "You know what I'm talking about. King Odis cannot think that anything is off about your relationship with Hal."

"I understand." She winked at Hal once he turned his attention to a wooden shelf. Pulling at one of the books a square opening appeared and Aynarr walked through the doorway.

"Welcome to Fhyrrkat, Hal of the Tryterie. He turned around once more, "We'll see you at breakfast." And with that he disappeared into the dark passageway.

"I should go too." Ayn said. "Get some sleep—tomorrow we have to dig around and figure out who's responsible for the attack." She walked into the doorway as her father had done and turned around to face him. "You remember the way back to your room?"

"Oh—yes."

"See you in the morning then—" She started to turn around.

"Wait!" Hal called to her. She turned. "Thank you for this," he said. She smiled and whipped back around and pulled at something in the wall. Between them the wall swung shut leaving Hal alone in the tower. After climbing back down the spiral stairs, Hal climbed into bed and for the first time in countless days he fell asleep feeling safe.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 13

The next morning Ayn awoke to the sound of birds chirping outside of her balcony. She rolled over onto her side and climbed out of bed. It felt so strange to wake up in a bed—let alone her own. The nightmare of the last few days was still stung fresh. Hal! Ayn's thoughts first went to her new friend. He didn't know his way around the castle. She was going to have to help him find his feet. But her father's warning was still fresh too. "You know what's at stake here. King Odis can not think that anything is off about your relationship with Hal." His voice rang through her ears. What was her father really getting at? Was her father really that afraid of her friendship with Hal? Sure, he was handsome. Even though his skin was pale, his eyes—his hair—his innocence. It was appealing. But all the same, she only saw her new friend as just that—a friend.

The door opened and Lida stepped into the room.

"Good, you're awake!" Lida said in her usual sassy tone.

"Morning," Ayn yawned.

"How dare you run away like that! You had us all sick with worry!" Pulling Ayn, she pushed her into a chair and quickly began brushing her matted hair.

"You could have been captured, killed, eaten—"

"—But I wasn't!"

"Now you listen to me!"

"Lida, I've already heard all of this from my father and he has properly punished me. Not to mention the night in jail that I received from King Odis."

"Well good. You deserve it for being so foolish." She pulled at Ayn's hair fiercely.

"Ouch! If you pull any harder, there won't be any hair left to brush!" Ayn looked at the nurse through the looking glass in front of her. Lida rolled her eyes. They sat in silence for a long

time and Lida finished brushing Ayn's hair. Another maid brought in a dress and laid it out in the bed before silently exiting the room. Ayn walked over to the bed and picked up the dress.

"Really?"

"Oh, yes." Lida smirked. The emerald green garment was exactly like the other Odis had given her. "It looks like your days in riding pants are over." Ayn took the dress and began pulling it over her head.

"Well then will you at least do me up?"

"With pleasure."

"I'm only doing this for my father—I don't want Odis giving him any more grief."

"I don't care what your reasons are." Lida pulled the strings that tightened the bodice.

"I'm just glad you're starting to dress like the lady you are."

Ayn finished dressing and ran out the room, through the hall, and down the passageway till she reached Hal's room. She knocked and waited but there was no answer. Surely he didn't go downstairs by himself. To be sure, Ayn took hold of the door handle and cracked open the door. No one was there. Closing the door behind her was suddenly anxious. There's no telling who he's talked to. She took off down the passageway, the thin slippers on her feet were almost soundless—at least they were good for something. If it weren't for the bulkiness and uncomfortable nature of the dress, it wouldn't be so bad. Racing down the stairs she bumped into members of the Rhecian court coming out of their rooms for breakfast, most of which gazed after her with interested glances.

"There goes that Ayn." She heard gray haired woman whisper loudly to her friend after she turned the corridor. "What a wild one she's turned out to be."

Ayn arrived a few moments later in front of the arched doors that she and Hal had been

locked out of the night before. But as she entered, she noticed the room was much changed. All of the long oak tables had been brought out and the room was alive with the voices of the Ayvandeens and Rhecian court members. Scanning the crowd she couldn't see Hal anywhere—just table after table of people gathered around what looked like steaming bowls of portage and what looked like wild boar. Walking towards the royal table at the front, Ayn finally spotted her father sitting next to King Odis, Oryn and a few members of each of their councils. As she walked closer, he met her gaze.

“Ayn, dear! Over here—come get some breakfast!” He stood and waved her over to them. Reaching the table, she took her seat next to her father.

“Morning my love.” Ayn smiled warmly at her and filled her plate from a pot that sat in the middle of the table.

“Good morning,” she uttered as she continued looking through the crowds of people for any sign of Hal, his bushing brown wild hair, that pale skin—don't despite her best efforts she couldn't find him.

“It's as I was saying—something drew the attackers away.” Ayn looked to the voice. It came from one of her father's councilor's Mathys Flyne. With dark hair and flecks of gray hair he was one of her personal favorites on the council.

“That's ridiculous.” Odis mumbled, taking another bite of the boar leg. “Once those thieves realized who they were messing with, they knew they were outmanned and ran away—it's as simple as that.” Mathys looked displeased.

“But the fact of the matter is—we can't be sure until we have proof.”

“So you don't know who the attackers are?” Ayn piped up. The table was suddenly silent as all of the eyes starred at her. Ayn avoided that glance from her father. She could tell she

had asked the wrong question. Odis sat up in his chair; a curious smile graced his lips.

“How could we Ayn?” Her father jumped in eyeing Odis. “Fifty men jump out of the woods wearing all black. They attack a few people, run around and cause a stir and then just as suddenly as they appeared, by Odis’ account they were gone. Disappeared without a trace —it’s all very odd.”

“Well Aynarr—let’s be honest. It’s not like this type of thing doesn’t happen on the northern borders all the time. I can imagine the endeavor is quite lucrative. Stealing cargo from tradesmen—why, a weak kingdom could survive a long time with a covert operation like that.” Odis smiled before taking a long sip from a silver goblet. Ayn watched her father out of the corner of her eye. His whole body was rigid and his fists clenched.

“That sounds like an accusation.”

“Oh—don’t be silly, Aynarr. It’s simply a speculation. A conjecture. You southerners—“ he stopped snapping his fingers. “You all have such a flair for drama.” His eyes landed on Ayn just as one of the servants appeared behind him. “Yes, bring the wine.”

“Your highness,” Diadil another one of Aynarr’s councilmen interrupted. “Surely you don’t mean to drink this early in the day?” Odis turned his attention to the man as the servant disappeared behind a tapestry.

“What’s this ones name?” Odis turned to Aynarr.

“Diadil, your majesty.”

“Well, Diadil. I’m king of this forsaken land am I not?” Ayn bit her tongue. Her body was now just as tight as her fathers. She wanted to scream out. She wanted to slap him. What right did he have? They hadn’t even begun negotiations.

“Yes your majesty.” Diadil’s voice was weak. From behind him the servant reappeared

holding a glass bottle. He uncorked it and proceeded to reach for the king's goblet.

"Then I'll damn well drink when I damn well please." Odis slapped the servant's hand as it reached in front of him, snatched up the goblet and filled the cup with the red liquid. All of it was too disgusting to endure. Ayn felt her stomach turn as she watched him gulp down the entire goblet. The Rhecian women at the table followed suit, giggling as they too poured themselves wine. Ayn looked around, Oryn and another boy about his age were talking and ignoring the king. Of course he would feign such idle ignorance. I don't have time for this.

Once again Ayn turned her attention to the Harrow. Where is he? Where could he have gone? It was at that moment that she knew. King Odis and the Rhecian men and women were now all drinking.

"You there—bring more wine!" Odis bellowed to the servant who once again disappeared behind the tapestry.

"Father," Ayn leaned over to Aynarr. His face was grim. She didn't envy him, now he would have to entertain a bunch of drunken fools. "I've left something in the dungeons."

"Ah, yes. Well, You'd better see to it then." Aynarr reached for his daughter and kissed her forehead. "But before you go, we still need to discuss your decision to run away." His voice was quieter as he looked over his shoulder. Farther down the table, Odis and the rest of the Rhecians were carrying on with the wine. "You will now be escorted by one of my guard at all times."

"Father!" Ayn grunted in a loud whisper. "I promised I wouldn't do it again. I told you I was sorry—"

"Ayn!" Aynarr's eyes were aflame. "This isn't my decision." Her father motioned with his eyes to Eryne sitting across the table. His glass spilling as he laughed at the King's latest

joke.

“Not him.”

“No—it’s not him but it would have been if Odis had his way. You’ve got to be careful—any more unwanted attention and Odis is going to be very unhappy with us.” Her father’s whisper was barely audible. She rolled her eyes.

“May I go?”

“Yes, but please be safe.” He squeezed her hand. “I do love you, you know.” Ayn stood up from the table and took off through the doors, and out into the hallway. But as she turned each corner, she heard the footfalls of someone following her. Her father’s bodyguard had clearly not missed her leaving The Harrow. This must be him.

Ayn quickened her pace, the dress was still weighing her down. The footsteps behind her followed suit. There as no outrunning this man. Turning a corner, she stopped and put her back against the wall and waited. The footfall echoed across the stone as they drew closer to her. On the ground before her, a shadow appeared, the shadow fell across the walls as the man turned the corner and then before her stood a familiar face.

“Breckin?”

“Did you really think I was going to let you get away?” he laughed.

“What are you doing here?”

“Your father requested my services.”

“But—you’re not a soldi—“

“Now stop right there,” he interrupted. “Let’s not go into particulars, all that matters is that I’m going to be keeping an eye on you.” He looked around the hallway, indicating it wasn’t safe to talk. “Now, where are we off to?”

“Breckin, I have so much to tell you!”

“Yes, I heard about your little adventure.”

“Hurry—“ she pulled his arm, “we’ve got to find Hal.”

“Ah yes. I am eager to meet this one.” Beckin seemed interested. He clearly knew something.

“Why?” Ayn asked curiously.

“Nothing mentionable at the present time.” He motioned once again to the walls around them. “Where is this Hal?”

“This way.” She pulled him down the hallway and through the door down into the dungeons. Once again the darkness greeted them.

“Wow. Slow down there, sister.” Breckin slowed his pace.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been down here.” She pulled him forward and the continued down through the black murk. They walked this way for long time, turning this way and that way until they finally saw them: two luminous eyes and a deep growl piercing the dark.

“Whose there?” Hals voice rang out.

“Hal it’s me.” Ayn called out. “I’ve brought a friend.” The green eyes before them narrowed but the growling ceased. But they were out in the hallway and not in the Ahlo’s room.

“Where were you going?” she asked with a hint of confusion in her voice.

“I wanted to take Ahlo out into the daylight. He can’t stay down here, Ayn. It’s not like he’s a pet or something.”

“Hal, you know I don’t want to keep him down here, but what choice do we have?” It was unnerving trying to argue with him in the dark. “Where is that lamp?”

“Oh—that. I tried to light it, but I couldn’t figure it out.” Hal answered.



“Let’s go back to the room and find it.” Ayn and Breckin followed the sounds of Hal and the footfalls of paws ahead of them. They turned one last corner and returned once again to the room. Ayn quickly lit the lamp, illuminating their four faces.

“Hal, this is Breckin. He’s—well, now he’s my bodyguard.” Breckin held out his hand to shake Hals. Hal looked at the hand, unsure of what to do.

“Hi.” He uttered shyly. “This is Ahlo.” The bronte did not move, his eyes still narrowed on the newcomer.

“So this is the legendary Hal.” Breckin put his hand back down. “Welcome to the Ivory Keep.”

“Thank you.”

“Breckin is from Thiodor—it’s a village of sorts—it’s pretty close to where you’re from—relatively anyway.”

“I guess it’s no secret now.” Breckin looked at Ayn as he spoke. “But we’ve been looking for your people for years.”

“Is that what you’ve been doing all this time—is that what you wouldn’t tell me?”

“Yes. And recently we found a spear—a weapon so beautiful and foreign, we knew it must have come from the people beyond the darkness.”

“What? A spear?”

“Yes, I assumed once the king came to me last night and told me about you and the story you brought, I assumed it was yours.”

“Where is it? Do you have it?” Ayn watched Hal through the dim light of the lamp. His eyes were desperate.

“Well I gave it to Ayn in the woods.” Breckin looked to Ayn.

“Please, please you’ve got to give it to me. It’s all I have left of my father!” Hal’s voice shook with urgency. The room was silent.

“Oh—“ Ayn’s heart raced. “Odis—“

“Odis has my spear?”

“They took it from me after they found me in the woods.” Ayn felt his heart fall as she told him the news. “But—I know he still has it! I asked him before we left Irian. He said he would give it to me once we returned to Fhyrrkat.” Hal ran his hands from the crook in his nose, through his bushy hair. The brown tinder’s fell gently back in his face as he sighed.

“How do we get it?”

“I’ll take care of it.” Breckin said dryly.

“I’ll find it and bring it to you—Ayn can’t cause any more attention to herself. If she goes to the king demanding weapons, he’s only going to get suspicious that she’s plotting something, and if he knows she’s trying to retrieve it for you, he’s only going to think you two are conspiring some plot.”

“He’s right.” Ayn breathed. “Thank you.”

“Now, let’s get back upstairs. For the foreseeable future, you need to stay within eyeshot of the king. It wouldn’t hurt for him to see you and that son of his together.” Breckin had said the one thing she did not want to hear.

“That’s the last thing I want to do.” Ayn looked at Breckin with deep disgust.

“The court is spending the day on the lake. You’re already late for the festivities.” She knew he was just obeying her father. But how could Breckin push her into the arms of a man from Rhece—the king’s son, no less. She wished he would do more to keep Oryn away from her.

“But what about Ahlo?” Hal interjected.

“Hal, we can’t take him up there. No one has ever seen a beast like Ahlo. It would cause too much attention.” Ayn pleaded. Hal ignored her and turned his attention to Breckin.

“I wish I could disagree with her, my friend. But for the present, the bronte must stay down here. And we need to go. We’ve already been gone too long.” Breckin began walked back into the hallway. Ayn followed. Hal turned to Ahlo and stroked his nose.

“I’ll be back, my friend—listen for me.” He whispered. Ayn turned to see the beast make a bow-like gesture. Hal then turned and followed her out of the room. Listen for him? What did that mean? She had a feeling there was something that Hal hadn’t Breckin lead them out of the passageway and back into the busy corridors of the castle. Light poured in through the windows as they followed Breckin out through two heavy arched doors. The light stung his eyes as he, Breckin and Ayn walked out onto a large stone covered area.

“This is the castle terrace,” Ayn smiled. He was thankful for her. She had a way of making her world make sense without treating him like a child. Out ahead of them, on the far side of the castle, back towards the forest, the waters of the large lake glistened in the harsh sunlight. Through the rays he could see people out on the shore. They looked like little colored insects roaming and splashing about.

“Would you like to see the ocean?” Ayn looked at her friend.

“That, out there?”

“No—that’s the lakefront. The ladies of the court typically like it because they don’t have to worry about the waves splashing them. But I want to show you the ocean—it’s actually a bay but it leads to the real ocean.”

“Okay.” Hal smiled. Ayn lead them around the terrace, along the side of the massive castle walls. The high arched windows seemed to stretch to the sky.

“Through here.” She stopped in front of a small square stone. She pulled at the edges of the stone and placed it aside. “It’s not really much of a secret. Most people know about this entrance nowadays. But for today, we can use it to explore.” Hal climbed in after Ayn and Breckin followed, carefully placing the stone back in its proper place before jumping off the ledge. Inside, the interior was like the dungeons, but the lower windows allowed light in. The walls were the same ivory, but much rougher. It was actually quite beautiful.

“Ayn, where do all these other tunnels lead to?” Hal asked looking around in awe of the ornate design of the castle.

“Well, some lead to the kitchens, some lead to the Harrow, others to the gardens, but it’s hard to tell which ones still work. Some of them have caved in or were blocked off.

“This way!” Ayn led them to a spiraling staircase carved into the stonewalls. “Down we go!” The pack of three walked down deep into the heart of the castle. The path was narrow and seemed to get thinner and thinner the more they descended. The light was now gone and a salty smell pierced Hal’s nose. He felt like he should sneeze, but he didn’t. The scent was oddly soothing. Moments later they finally stopped spiraling and walked out into a strange uneven ground. Ahead of him, Ayn and Breckin seemed to be having a much easier time at navigating it, he just couldn’t stop stumbling over each step.

“Not used to sand, are you?” Breckin smirked turning to see Hal stumbling forward. Hal didn’t respond, but gave him a glowering look. “Try to step lightly.” Breckin laughed. Around them the walls had changed from the clean ivory to a brownish color and a soft bluish light radiated off them. A rushing noise rushed through the walls. It was repetitive, yet mesmerizing.

“These are the caves of Ahshare.” Ayn turned to face Hal. “In the last great war, the people of Fhyrrkat and Thiodor hid down here for days while the siege went on and on. This was

their sanctuary.” Turning a corner, a small wooden alter with unlit candles sat above the sand. Breckin pulled out his flint stone, stepped forward and struck the stones together to light one of the candles. Stepping back, he placed his hand on Ayn’s shoulder as she took another candle from the alter and let his candle’s flame consume hers. Hal walked forward and watched as she set the candle back in the alter.

“What is it for?” he asked quietly.

“For my mother. During the siege to thwart the invaders from finding us, many brave people stayed behind in the castle while it was overtaken. My mother was among them. She was a warrior herself, and she fought and died bravely defending her home. It was a brutal move by King Trenton of the east plains. He knew my father was out fighting. He sent assassins to kill the rest of the royal family. My mother knew and sent my brother and I down here with the rest of the civilians. We were too young to know it while it was happening, but that was the last time I saw her.” She stepped back from the alter. They were each silent.

“How do you—I mean, how do you deal with it—her death I mean?” Hal stumbled. She placed her arm on his shoulder.

“When I was finally old enough to understand what happened, I wanted to kill anyone who had anything to do with her death. But thankfully, my father had already taken care of that. But Trenton, is Odis’ cousin so you can imagine where my imagination led me next. But in the heat of it all, what my father told me is it’s always easy to draw webs from our lives to those we have lost. What’s hard is having the courage to let go. We never really lose our loved ones. We just have to live our lives the best we can in memory of them.” She smiled warmly. She left Hal alone in the corner with the alter with Breckin in her wake.

Bending down, Hal took hold of a unlit candle and let the flame spread over the wick.

Ever since Mare's death he had been at the mercy of this world. First to the strange light, then to Odis, and even now his guilt haunted him. For the first time since his world had been thrown into the sun, he knew what he had to do. But first, he had to let go. "I love you, Mare," he whispered as he set the candle in the holder on the alter

## Chapter 14

*Short footsteps began to fill the emptiness of the hallway behind him with hushed cuffs of sound. Without turning, the keeper's voice boomed through the room and into the hallway.*

*"I hope you this interruption is worthy of my time." A man in a thick hood stepped out of the shadows and into the circular chamber.*

*"I thought I owed you a visit," he said. The hooded man's voice was warm and inviting. Walking further into the room his footfalls stopped as he reached for a golden telescope resting on golden-clawed feet. He handled the delicate eyepiece, pausing to look through the spyglass. "Where is this place?" he asked.*

*"Don't touch that," the keeper said. The hooded man stepped away from the telescope and turned his attention back to the keeper.*

*"I wanted to make sure our deal was still intact," he said resuming his slow walk around the room. The keeper dabbed his nib in ink and began scribbling notes onto a piece of parchment, his eyes elsewhere. He pressed the page down as he wrote.*

*"I owe you nothing," he said. The nib etched deep into the page and seemed to cry out in pain. "I—I brought you a gift."*

*"There is little you could offer me." He dabbed the nib into the ink again.*

*"They told me you would like it." The hooded man reached into his robe and began to unwrap a small object from rags. "They said you feared this was lost to time . . ." For the first time, the eyes of the keeper were fully on him. He could feel their hunger pressing into the object in his hands, eager to see what lay beneath the tattered cloth.*

\* \* \*

Running out of the caves and into the sunlight, Hal was surprised to see Breckin and Ayn

and three other figures standing near the water's edge. He ran towards them. Hal recognized their armor. At least two of the boys were Rhecians.

"But what are you doing with him?" Ayn seemed to be upset with the third. He was blond and wore emerald robes that seemed to draw an unnatural green hue from his eyes. As Hal approached, the blonde boy's eyes fell on Hal. He looked curious.

"I was just entertaining our new guests, Ayn. It isn't a crime to associate with the future king of Ayvandeem."

"It is to me." Hal watched her react. All the calm and peace she had in the cave was gone.

"Ayn, what is your problem anyway?" The boy in the middle interrupted. Hal recognized him. It was the prince of Rhece.

"Oh, gee Oryn. I dunno. You and your father take me prisoner. You make me wear a dress just to torture me. You come down here and force your Rhecian ways on all of us—take your pick."

"From what I witnessed in the forest when we 'captured you' it seemed like you were in trouble. Don't pretend that you didn't need help."

"Yes, okay—I did. But you didn't have to throw me in jail or parade me around as proof of your conquest."

Oryn paused taking a deep breath. "You've clearly already got your mind made up about me. I guess I can't change that. But if you must know, I had nothing to do with the stupid dress or any of the rest of it. My father is the king and his decisions aren't mine. I'm truly sorry you think so ill of me." Oryn looked to the other Rhecian next to him. "Come on, Jued. Let's go," Oryn motioned and they walked further up the beach and out of sight.

"Goodness, Ayn." Aster looked at her with a smirk.



“I don’t even know what to say to you.”

“Well since you’ve been back you’ve ignored me—and well, as you can see there were other people to talk to in your absence.”

“You’re supposed to be my friend.”

“Who says I’m not?” Ayn’s eyes narrowed on her him.

“Okay, okay. Calm down you two,” Breckin stepped in between them. “Aster, why don’t you go on back to the castle.”

“Let me know when you’re ready to be reasonable.” Aster said as he trotted off after Oryn. They waited till he was out of earshot.

“What was that about?” Breckin turned towards her. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m not going to pretend to like him.”

“What do you think is going on here, Ayn? Did he sound anything like his father to you?”

“Oh, so all of a sudden he’s a saint just because he claims he doesn’t get some sadistic pleasure from torturing me? What happened to you, Breckin? I thought you hated the Rhecians?”

“You have no right to judge my loyalty,” He said flatly. She had clearly struck a nerve. Hal suddenly felt awkward. He kept finding himself in the middle of Ayn and these serious moments. He wished he could back away but each step took him closer to the unknown waters behind him.

“I want to be alone,” she said.

“Unfortunately, you and I are stuck together because you chose to run away.”

“Unfortunately?”

“Yeah, Unfortunately. You think it’s fun for me to have to follow you around? I told you to stay out of the forest and you didn’t listen and you almost got yourself killed.”

Hal watched as Ayn's eyes filled with tears. He felt even more uncomfortable. Why was she so upset? Without saying another word she took off down the opposite side of the beach.

"Where are you going now?" Breckin called after her.

"I'm going to sit over here. Don't follow me." Ayn walked off into the distance. Breckin and Hal watched her as she walked along the giant rocks near the water's edge and sat down in the sand facing the water.

"Women." Breckin sighed.

"Is it always like this?" Hal asked.

"Actually no. Ayn is an incredible girl. But ever since Odis has begun digging his claws into the south, it's been very hard on her. For whatever reason, he seems bent on destroying Ayn's spirit." Breckin sat down with the ocean to his side, still keeping his eyes on the girl.

"So what's your plan anyway?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" Hal took a seat next to him.

"I mean, why are you here?" Braden's voice was serious.

"I—I guess it's because I can't really go back."

"Why?"

"When I left—because of Ahlo—my people, they didn't understand."

"So you are an outlaw then."

"Outlaw?"

"A criminal." Breckin's words stung. Had this been his plan all along—to find out what he was up to? Then it struck him. It was clear now. Breckin was sitting between him and Ayn. It was his job to protect her from him.

"Yeah, I guess I was." Hal knew in his heart that it was the honest truth. He had been a

criminal in the eyes of Mace and the others. And hadn't it been his fault that Mare had fallen to the bronte? Hadn't he been the one to lead her through the forest under the false presence of safety? He had lied. He had broken the code of his people. He couldn't blame them for wanting him dead.

"So what then?"

"My people, they're suffering. They're starving. They're hunted and they aren't living. There has to be someone behind the darkness. I want to find out who." Braille's warning about the powerful sorcerer pounded in the back of his head.

Breckin was silent. He watched the girl as Hal watched the waves roll in. Above them, dark clouds filled the sky.

"My heart tells me that asking questions like that will lead you down a dark road." He paused. "If some thing or someone is responsible for the darkness that was thrown over Thule, you can bet that they are powerful. You can also bet that they are not going to give up that power easily." The waves rushed towards them and almost touched the tips of Hal's toes. "You know, I think the entire world has forgotten your people except my people, the Tryterie."

"Oh?"

"Our people—they used to trade with each other, or so I'm told anyway. But the legends of Thule are strong and when it all disappeared, well, we were less eager to forget it. My grandfather—he used to tell me stories about the great weapons that would come out of the deep forest. He made it seem like a lost city made of these amazing tools, a city just waiting to be found—I've been looking for it out there ever since I was young. Every time I thought I was getting close, it would disappear again—like smoke in the air."

"What stopped you?"

“That’s a good question actually. Every time we get close to what I assume is Thule— every time we thought we’d found the right path . . . night overcame us.” Breckin looked out into the air like he was looking at the forest itself. “The darkness. It’s a wall.” Hal looked at Breckin. He was disturbed by the darkness.

“Does that normally happen here?”

“No.” Breckin said as he rose from the sand. Hal glanced down the beach. Ayn was walking back along the wall of rock. She was still small against the crags.

“What’s going to happen to her?”

“Only time will tell for sure.” Breckin turned towards the ocean. “But my heart tells me that whatever Odis has planned, it isn’t good.” Hal and Breckin followed Ayn as she made her way back to the caves and up the stairs back to the castle.

\* \* \*

Dinner was better. Ayn had sat with Hal and Breckin and together they dined with Hazyl and Vera at a lesser table in the court. It was nicer than having to pretend all was well at her father’s table with Oryn — she had avoided looking at him and his gathering. She didn’t want to see Aster with him.

After dinner the five of them had sat in front of a large hearth and enjoyed a fire and a cup of tea. After awhile, Hal stood up. Putting the cup of tea on a nearby, table Ayn could see he hadn’t drank much of it.

“I’m going to bed.” He said looking at Ayn. She could see his eyes were actually saying he was going to Ahlo.

“Sleep well,” she said. Things had been a bit weird since her explosion on the beach. Ayn watched Hazyl give Vera a look out of the corner of her eye. Breckin also stood and walked out

of the room.

With the boys gone, Ayn could tell the girls were eager to talk about the stranger.

“So what’s the story with Hal?” Vera leaned over her teacup. Ayn always admired how lady-like she was. It seemed that no matter what she was doing, she always held herself with a beauty and dignity all her own. Her brown eyes sparkled as she spoke.

“What do you mean?”

“He’s from Thiodor? One of the Tryterie? How have we never met him?”

“Oh—“ she had forgotten that she would have to keep the story up with her friends from court too. “He’s just from one of the more wandering tribes.”

“He’s different.” Hazyl said with a smile. “I like him.” Hazyl had always been one to have a weak spot for anyone new. Her golden hair and innocent face had always gotten her what she wanted.

“Will he be staying at Fhyrrkat?” she asked.

“Yes—he’s actually going to be training under Breckin.”

“Whose now your body guard?” Hazyl said. Ayn met her gaze. The way she held her teacup, it was clear that she implied more.

“Yeah.”

“Well, well Ayn of Ayvandeem, it would appear that suitors just fall left and right around you.” Hazyl said. Ayn felt her cheeks burn. It was fine when the two girls talked about their own romances, but it was another when they pricked at hers.

“I really don’t know what you mean.” She looked at the ground. Her palms began to sweat.

“Oh, Ayn. You know you can trust us. Oryn is handsome and all, but we don’t blame you

for hating him. After all his father's put your family through—" Vera and Hazyl leaned in, Looking over their shoulders to see if anyone was listening.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I mean, he and your brother were really close friends—and you, well that only made it just that much easier for you to like him," Vera said. Ayn was now staring hard into the ivory tiles on the ground before her. One to the left of the fireplace was ever so slightly cracked. Her eyes tore into the stone.

"I mean, Breckin is very handsome," Hazyl said.

"Especially when he carries that sword," Vera said as she giggled. Ayn felt as though her checks were being branded.

"I've got to go," she stood suddenly.

"Oh, Ayn—don't be so sensitive, come back!" Vera called after her. But she was already gone, running down the ivory corridor, back to her room. Anywhere was better than here. She couldn't take anymore of it—her stomach ached and she felt as though she would throw up.

Racing up the stairs, the ivory carvings on the walls were still riding towards the east tower. She saw the ancient Ayvandanians adorned in armor with helmets and swords in hand. The image of Breckin ran threw her head as she watched them. Yes, she had always known he was handsome. Yes, she had always admired him and his skills in the forest—but she hated the feeling she felt. It seemed to betray some kind of code.

Coming to her room, she slammed the door behind her and threw herself down on the bed. It was nice to get away from the noise of dinner—from the prying eyes. She starred deeply at the ceiling and soaked in the calm. Somehow in the last days, the world had become a wad of complexity. Everything she had known was now different. Replaying the last few hours in her

head, she knew Vera and Hazyl were right. She did have feelings for Breckin. It was the reason she had run headlong for him after the news of her betrothal, why she had felt so betrayed after he had sent her home, why she had been so relieved to see him when her father told her she would now have a bodyguard. He was the man she admired—

It was at this moment of acceptance that she suddenly heard a rock seem to fly through the room, land on the ground near her bed and roll just in front of the door. She sat up to look. What?

A few moments later, another one rolled and landed near the other. But this time Ayn had seen it. It had come from outside her balcony. Standing to her feet she walked out into the open air. The stars above her glimmered and the moon shone out over the waters, reflecting broken teeth down below.

She looked down below. Her room stood three stories high above the ground. As she scanned for the culprit behind the fallen rocks, she saw a shining head of golden hair. Down below her was Oryn atop a brown horse. She called down, “What are you doing out here?”

“I want to talk to you.” His voice echoed off the castle walls. She looked around to see if anyone else heard them, but aside from the Rhecian prince, there was no one else.

“I don’t want to talk to you.”

“Come on—don’t be a ninny.” She couldn’t believe her ears.

“A ninny? What does that even mean?”

“Come on. It’s time we make a truce.” The horse below him brayed. She sighed.

“How exactly do you expect me to get down there?”

“Don’t pretend this is your first time to sneak out. We both know you have a way.”

“Fine.” He was right. She did. She climbed onto the ledge of the balcony. To the left, she

jumped down, landing squarely on another balcony. Jumping once again she was now level with the first floor. Oryn rode up just in front of her and extended his hand.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.” She looked at his hand for a moment, unsure. It hadn’t struck her until just now, but if he had wanted to harm her, now would be just as good a time as any.

“Come on, Ayn of Ayvandeem—what are you afraid of?” He smirked. Even through the darkness, she could see his stone colored eyes. While she still was unsure about his intentions, she knew he wouldn’t hurt her.

“Nothing,” she said as she grabbed his hand and pulled herself on to the back of his horse. Together they rode off through the night.

They rode for a while. Cold air rushed past them and Ayn felt a chill that whispered of the coming winter. She felt awkward riding behind Oryn. Unsure of where to put her hands, she tried holding onto the saddle to avoid wrapping them around Oryn’s waist. Not long into the ride her legs began to ache. It was much harder to ride this way. She wished it would end soon. But it didn’t. They continued out through long winding road that meandered out through the village surrounding the castle, out the front gate, and into the fields outside the walls of Fhyrrkat. Above them the moon still shown as Oryn took them towards the forest. It grew darker as the trees grew bigger.

“And you’re still not going to tell me where we are going?”

“We’ll be there in a soon enough.” Ayn’s legs were now beginning to shake. Oryn had to notice. “You know, I don’t have a disease, you can hold onto me if you want to—I promise I won’t think less of you for it.”



“That’s okay.” She wished her pride would allow her to give in.

“Suit yourself.”

They rode on awhile longer. Just over the mountains, the moon rose and fell behind a gathering of clouds. Through the trees, the song of the late autumn cicadas filled the air. Oyrn stopped and waited while Ayn dismounted the horse. He followed her a few moments later.

“Where are we?” she asked through the darkness.

“Not very patient, are you.” He said, grabbing her hand and pulling her through a gathering of shrubs. His hand was warm and his touch made her uncomfortable.

As they emerged through the undergrowth, they suddenly stood before a placid lake. The moon shown through the clouds and trees illuminating a serene overlook that was paved with primitive cobblestones.

“What is this place?” They walked out closer to the water’s edge. Before them, above the shore was a large stone with ancient runes. Ayn walked forward and ran her hand over the engravings.

“I take it, you’ve never been here?” Oryn asked watching her as she inspected the stone.

“I haven’t. What do they mean?” Her brother had been the scholar of their family. She had never been one for languages and from what she could tell this one was very old.

“This was the old landing of Ayvandia.” He said. She turned to look at him.

“Ayvandia? Like from the bedtime story?”

“I don’t believe you,” Ayn scoffed. How could so many things that were supposed to be stories actually be real?

“You don’t have to.” Oryn said looking calmly out over the lake. Glancing at him, he wasn’t what she had remembered him being. The prince she had made up in her head was not the

person that stood before her.

“So why bring me here?” She said finally, breaking the awkward silence between them. Oryn sighed, stepping forward to examine the stone himself.

“When I was a child, before she died, my mother used to bring me here. We’d skip rocks and she’d tell me stories.”

“How did she know about it?”

“Because she was from Nydor—she knew the legends and from what she told me, this was quite a romantic spot for many people back when she was in court.” Oryn picked up a rock and skipped it over the still waters. The ripples ran through the water, multiplying the reflection of the moon. Ayn suddenly felt uncomfortable.

“But the real reason I brought you here was because I want a truce.”

“A truce?”

“The way I see it, we both are locked into this—this marriage,” he struggled as he uttered the word neither of them had wanted to hear, “and I just wanted to work out some kind of agreement—I mean we both don’t want this, it just makes sense that we make some terms so we both get what we want.”

“Both get what we want?” Where was he going with this?

“Yes—obviously until I take Rhece, my father will control us—making us do what he wants. But after, once I’m king, well, I just wanted you to know that I’m not him. I—I don’t want what he wants.” Oryn was stumbling over his words. Ayn didn’t understand what she was hearing. “In the legend, Dridian took Ayvandia’s hand and united the north with the south—of course that was before the Great Wars that followed—but regardless, through their union, their tribes saw years of peace. I mean, we’re not Dridian or Ayvandia but maybe we can be that for

our people—in appearance only of course.”

“But why?” She interrupted. Oryn looked back at her.

“Why should we be any more or less?” he asked. She looked at him unsure of his words.

“So what exactly does this mean?”

“It means that if you pretend to not hate me, I won’t force you to be anything you don’t want to be.”

“I don’t want to be married.”

“You and I both know there’s no way out of that—I mean, you can’t keep running away. You’ll only make it harder on yourself. And I—well, I’ve got to face it too. But once we are—you know—and once my father’s power has diminished, well, then as long as you and I have an agreement, you can return to the south.” Ayn perked up. Was he really saying what she thought he was?

“You mean, I can go home?”

“Yeah—well you’ll have to come back for appearances, but as long as you and I have an understanding, I don’t see why you would stay in the north. I can’t imagine you have any tolerance for the cold.” Oryn smiled. Ayn couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“How do I know I can trust you?”

“I guess that’s up to you. But this was the spot that Dridian and Ayvandia said their vows. And since neither of us wants to get really get married, I thought we could use the irony of this spot to make a promise. Instead of beginning a marriage, how about we begin our own secret friendship, a friendship that ensures the mutual benefit of our nations without the exhausting drain of keeping up the expectation of marriage,” he held out his hand. “What do you say?”

Ayn was dumbfounded. She still didn’t know if she could trust him, but the truce seemed

to be the best she each of them could hope for. Taking Oryn's hand in hers, she shook it. “

“But if this makes you feel any better,” he reached inside his tunic pocket and pulled out an aged brown book. “I nabbed this from my father.” He held out the book for her to take.

Unsure, she reached out and took it. Running her fingers over the binding, the book felt delicate and worn. An odd symbol was etched on the cover. She ran her fingers over it. The shape of the symbol looks like two triangles pointing into one another. She opened it, the book contained the same ancient runes that were found on the stone.

“What does it say?”

“I don't know. I can't read them. My mother could, but well . . . she passed many years ago.”

“Why are you giving this to me?”

“Because for reasons I can't give you, it seems to mean a lot to my father and I thought whatever is good for him, must be bad for you.” As she listened to him, she couldn't help feel the unrest Oryn carried while talking about his father.

“What did he do to you?”

Oryn turned back towards the water. “That—“ He took a long deep breath. “is a very long story. But I can tell you this, he doesn't play by the rules and I know in my heart that whatever his plans are for your family, they can't be good.”

“That still doesn't explain why you're helping me.”

“Whose to say I am helping you?” He turned back around to face her.

“You gave me—I mean you took this from him—the truce?” She was stumbling over her words. She couldn't figure him out.

“Just because I don't share my father's taste for destruction and greed doesn't mean that

I'm doing it all for you." He smiled. "Taking away an object he means for ill was done for the greater good. Making a truce with you, well, that was done for the sanity of us all." His stone cold eyes pierced hers. She looked away quickly, feeling herself blush.

"Then the deal is done?" he asked. She looked to him and back to the lake.

"But what am I supposed to do with a book I can't read?"

"Well, I suppose that's for you to figure out. But you have your first clue here—the runes are the same age and style of that of the stone just there." He smiled once more and began walking back to the horses. "Oh, and I would hide that somewhere—somewhere safe. Once my father finds out it's missing he's going to use any means necessary to find it again."

She followed him back, and all the way home she was still unsure about what had just transpired between them.

## Chapter 15

That night, Hal had gone down to the dungeons to feed and spend time with Ahlo. Once back in the dungeons, the pair had escaped the castle through the hidden passageway and run through the forest. It felt good to be free. Hal could feel Ahlo's nerves were tight staying in the cramped, dirty room in the dungeons. The whole evening before, Ahlo had called Hal down. It had been hard to sit and eat with the frequent visions beckoning him to the dungeons below.

Once free from the castle walls, they ran hard and long. Hal could tell Ahlo didn't want to return to the castle. But Hal tried to think out loud to him, showing him that it was necessary to stay to find out why the light of Thule had been extinguished. The moon had fallen across the sky before Ahlo actually turned around to go back. Even when he did, Hal could feel the tension. Something had to change soon.

They got back and Hal fell asleep in Ahlo's room. The smell had been hard to endure, but once sleep took him, it and all of his other worries soon drifted away.

Hours later he awoke unsure of whether it was night or day. It was strange to think that he had spent his whole life in almost complete darkness . . . but after just a few days in the light, how different his world now was.

In the darkness he felt around for Ahlo. But as his fingers ran over the cold stones, he found no one. He was alone.

"Ahlo?" he called out but his voice echoed off the walls. It sounded like he was deep down in a great cave.

"Ahlo?" he yelled out again but the space of the void seemed to only grow. Fear began to seize him.

"Ayn?"

“Breckin?” But the more he yelled the more he felt the magnitude of the emptiness around him. Standing to his feet, in complete darkness he began to run forward. He ran as fast as his feet could carry him. He was certainly not in the dungeons of the Ayvandeian castle anymore, but somewhere darker, somewhere lost in time and space. He ran until his heart pounded so hard he thought it was going to escape his chest.

“Where am I?” he yelled into the void. Full of frustration, panting and exhausted he looked out into the pitch. There was nothing. He was nothing. All the light and goodness was gone.

He screamed. It was then that it appeared as almost an answer to his cry. In the far distance, as far as the most distant mountain, Hal saw a shining gold light. It looked so much like that orb Ayn called the sun. But it separated the black in such a way that Hal felt fear. It shined on the darkness and illuminated the great nothing that surrounded him. Hal felt in his heart that he had a choice. Glancing all around, he looked on at the amassing black. That’s when he noticed that the gold light was fading. He had to go. He charged forward.

Racing ahead he felt himself getting closer. As the light began to fall on his skin, he felt the warmth but it did not make him tired. It only seemed to create a trance and under the spell, his legs seem to go on without effort.

Hal began to feel the change. Suddenly the stone ground began to take shape and from it walls sprang forth. The more he ran the taller they became. They were the walls of Fhyrrkat castle, the ones he had seen that first night he and Ayn had arrived and on them the stone soldiers. But they were not as they had been before. The more he raced on, the more life-like they became. They went from being the little figures he had seen days before to tall and three-dimensional warriors. He stared on in amazement as they continued to grow until they were not

even stone at all but real, breathing, heaving men. He suddenly found himself standing in midst of a giant army. Their armor clanked as they marched. The mass of men, blades, and metal overwhelmed his senses; there were more of them than Hal realized. They raced alongside him, pushing and bumping as one after the other, they made their way forward toward the growing light.

As they banded together, armor and a spear wrapped themselves around Hal. He was now one of them and the light was just ahead. On they marched until at long last, Hal stood just in front of the golden rays. He shielded his eyes with his hands as he tried to see what stood before him. As he gazed the radiance of the glow seemed to soften and through the brilliance, Hal saw the same man from the dream. The light beamed from the golden orb on his chest. Long golden hair fell from his head and his hands clasped the same rose gold sword. But as Hal looked at him, his piercing blue eyes changed to green and the orb floated from his chest and hovered above his head, then disappeared. Darkness surrounded them again but before the fire was completely gone, Hal looked to the green eyes once again and saw his own face staring back at him. He gawked as he saw himself in the fine armor. But just as suddenly as the vision appeared it was gone and darkness consumed him once again.

Hal came to on the ground, but this time he felt a large warm body next to his. Droplets of sweat covered his entire body. Rising from the ground, his neck and back ached. Lying next to Ahlo had kept him warm, but the toughness of the ground was unrelenting. Sensing his movement, Ahlo's eye opened and the glow of his eyes illuminated the room around them in a green and blue blur.

"I've got to go back up there," he said aloud rubbing his eyes. The vision of the army of ivory soldiers haunted him. He had to find out what it all meant. The room dimmed as Hal



watched Ahlo's eyes narrow. Hal felt his insides flatten. This was clearly not what Ahlo wanted. Suddenly the room began to spin and Hal felt the familiar rush as he saw Ahlo ascend the stairs of the dungeons with him. Hal fought back. He resisted the urge to throw up. This was getting easier.

"You don't understand, this isn't the forest—they could hurt you." Hal sighed. Ahlo turned his back and sat facing the corner of the rank room. His eyes were shut and the room was completely dark again. Hal turned to retrieve that lamp device—but turned back again, realizing that he wouldn't know the first thing about actually lighting it.

"I'll be back soon I promise," he said. But there was no reply from Ahlo. Only a long, deep frustrated breath. Hal turned his back to the creature and marched out of the room, up the stairs and back out to the light of day.

The corridor outside was quiet and light poured in through the clear arched windows, making the brightness of the ivory walls radiate with a lovely temperance. Hal looked down the far hall and heard voices and some women laughing from the Harrow. Turning away from the sound, Hal raced back through the smaller hallway that he hoped lead back to the passageway they had taken the night he had seen the stone soldiers. He began climbing a spiral staircase. Glancing at the walls, before him the scene was not the depiction he had hoped for. The walls moved with the same ancient magic, but this time it was not soldiers but what looked like men planting seeds out in the fields surrounding the castle walls. Hal followed the scene hoping that continuing down the corridor would make a difference, but it didn't. Running his hands down the wall, he felt them as they moved. The stone seemed to breathe as the figures plowed the field before them.

"It's a rare guest that pays attention to the castle walls of Fhyrrkat." A voice said from

behind him. Hal turned around to face King Aynarr. The light was dim but through the torches he could see the familiar wrinkles, the blading gray head and the red, but graying beard.

“I—I didn’t know it was forbidden.” Hal said. He suddenly realized he had no idea how to address the king.

“It isn’t, my friend,” the kind king smiled. “But most ignore the magical walls. Most have forgotten their significance.” On the wall before him, a deer lunged through the ivory forest and disappeared out of sight.

“And—what is the significance?” Hal asked. He wasn’t sure if he was crossing a line, but he was desperate. “These are the chronicles of Ayvandeem. When the castle was built by my great grandfather’s, great grandfather, they were rebuilding after the great war with the north. Peace had been made, through a marriage of course, and the castle was to serve as a reminder of the triumphs and failures of the kingdom so the leaders of the nation would be forced to look upon the walls and be reminded not to repeat the mistakes of the past.” Aynarr said as he put his hand on Hal’s shoulder, leading him further down the hallway.

“So you mean, the scenes it shows actually happened?” Hal’s stomach tightened.

“Yes, in fact they did.” Aynarr stopped and turned to face Hal. “If you don’t mind me asking—why are you so interested?” Aynarr asked. His eyes starred down at him curiously. Hal took a deep breath. He had to get answers.

“The first night I was here, I—I saw a great battle scene mounting. Dozens of soldiers rode out—“

“Ah, you mean the great battle of Min Dace.” Aynarr turned and continued walking. Hal followed.

“What happened?”

“That is one of the oldest stories that the walls tell. I wish I knew more. All I know is the legend of Iktarius is said to come from that battle.”

“The legend of what?”

“Oh, of course you’ve never heard it before. Iktarius, so they say, was the great warrior of light.” They turned a corner and Hal could see the king was leading him away from the hallway he had remembered going to the first night. They emerged on the upper level of the main passageway. “It is said, that in the age of old, before men, the power of good was forged. But in the shadows, good took on a new form in its own vanity. The early beings fought hard, and many wars were waged in the wake of the rebellion. In the end, good and evil were at last separated. The weapons of old were created in the beginning to guide and protect the people of Mira. Unity of the three would bring peace and prosperity to all the realms . . . but under the reign of man, darkness was allowed to linger. To the three kings and rulers of each realm were given the power to control one of the three weapons. Overtime the weapons were wasted on them. Supposedly, countless wars were fought over them until at long last the powers of the weapons were wasted on wicked men. They exchanged hands so many times their locations.” King Aynarr paused as he began descended the stairs. “This is of course why not many believe the legends—there is simply no proof to their actuality.”

“Yes but where does Iktarius come into the story?”

“Oh well, these legends tell of a great hero who rose from the shadows to unite the people in good once. It was said that the battle of Erian was the historical battle where light and darkness fought. Light one, and for the last age we have enjoyed the fruits of that battle.”

“Do you believe it, sir?” he asked the king. Aynarr stood still and looked at the ground. The king suddenly grew very serious. A spell seemed to take him. “All of this happened so long

ago. The kingdom has changed so much even since Ayn and Ayryn were born. My belief is that the world and the spirits that are inside it are so much wilder than we give them credit for.” He looked at Hal, coming out of his trance. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Where have you been?” Ayn asked standing before him. Hal looked at her. Her hair was braided over her head and she wore white pants and a long sleeved white tunic that fit tightly showing her attractive frame. On the upper left side of her outfit an unusual picture of two wild razorbacks holding up a large shield and flourishes. Ayn caught his gaze. She put her hand to the picture and smiled.

“It’s my family’s crest.”

“I see you’re dressed for the day’s festivities.” Aynarr said as he looked down at Ayn.

“Yes, I’ll be competing in the mounted toss,” she said airily. She was clearly happier than she had been in the days past. “Hal, would you like to come and watch?”

“Yes, of course,” he answered, “thank you,” he nodded to the king.

“My pleasure,” he said. “I’ll see you at the tournament then. Good luck, darling.” He smiled at his daughter then turned and took off down the passageway to the great hall.

“What were you doing with him?” she asked.

“I’ll tell you later—where are we going?”

“My father’s tournament. Come on, this way.” He followed her as she led him down the passageway and out the wide arched doors into the crisp autumn air. The sun beamed over the crisp green lawn. Hal squinted and in the far distance, a mass of white tents stood near the edge of the large lake they had passed the day of the attack. How different it was now. In the bright sun the world was so much more cheerful. The fear and uncertainty of the masked assailants was gone and there was nothing but bright beautiful air, the clean water refracting the fullness of the

light against the distant forests and mountains.

The walked through the grass, following a loose line of Ayvandians and Rhecians, the closer they got, the more the meaning of “tournament” made sense. The smells of roasting meat hung in the air. Through the mass of people and crowds that congregated, Hal could see a mass of weapons. Everything from daggers, spears, and shields to those long daggers that he had seen in his dream. Ayn led Hal to a far tent where a series of square stalls had been erected, each holding a horse. In front of one of the stallions, Hal spotted the Rhecian prince. Their eyes met and Oryn approached them. This isn’t going to go well.

“Morning, Ayn.” Oryn said cheerfully.

“Good morning, Oryn.” Ayn answered kindly as she approached one of the stalls holding a gray horse with a black mane. Hal was shocked. He didn’t expect her to be kind—let alone nice to the man she had only yesterday thrown a fit over.

“Are you competing in today’s toss?”

“As a matter of fact I am.” She said as she took the reigns and a man appeared to open the gate, the horse followed her out of the stall and the man began saddling the horse without saying a word.

“Are you competing as well?” Oryn looked at Hal. He wasn’t sure how to answer.

“I’m afraid, I don’t know the rules—“ he said. Oryn looked surprised. Ayn jumped in quickly her eyes warning Hal.

“Yes, well our bodyguards don’t have time for leisure. And they have different sport in his village.”

“I see,” Oryn nodded. Ayn seemed to relax a bit, content that the prince seemed to believe the story “So what sport do you do then?” Hal tensed up again. He had to be bold there

was no other choice.

“The spear.”

“Ah, I see. You should compete!” Oryn turned around and called to a man wearing a black suit. “Onyx, is there still time to enroll in the mounted throw?” Hal looked to Ayn begging her to help.

“Oryn—“ she called out trying to get his attention. Oryn turned. Hal is busy today. He couldn’t possibly--”

“It will be good,” he interrupted. Hal watched on. Something was going on between them. “My guards are all competing today too—it will help everyone get acquainted with your new bodyguard. It will help our people, you know, with the unity and all.” He was strangely serious. Ayn looked uncomfortable.

“Onyx, enter Hal here in the spear.” The man in black nodded at the prince and disappeared in the crowd.

“Don’t worry, Ayn. Hal here will do fine. He’s a bodyguard after all.” She looked at him for a long time before finally nodding.

“Good luck!” He took off through the tents and people to another venue. Ayn guided the horse along and grabbed Hal’s arm, pulling him in their wake.

“You can throw a spear, right?”

“Of course.”

“You can ride a horse?” She looked hopeful.

“If riding Ahlo counts,” he said sarcastically. “What’s going on between you two anyway? Why are you all of sudden doing everything he wants you to do?” Ayn looked around to make sure no one listening. “Oryn came to talk to me last night,” she whispered.

“He did what?”

“I know it’s crazy—he made me an offer. We have a—a contract of sorts.”

“A contract?”

“Yeah—he’s not going to force me to stay in Rheece after his father is no longer in control of the throne.”

“So he’s just going to let you go?”

“That’s what he said.”

“Wow.” Hal was surprised. Ayn seemed to be a very skeptical person and yet she trusted him.

“How do you know he is telling the truth?”

“He gave me something as a token of goodwill.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a book—but it’s written in rune. I can’t read it.”

“So why does that make you trust him?” Just ahead of them people began to gather behind a large red flag that waved gently in the wind. One of the competitors put on his helmet and mounted his horse; taking a hatchet in hand the rider began to gallop before throwing the weapon directly into a large target that was set up further down the field. For a moment, the glint of the hatchet caught the fullness of the sun as it soared through the air, narrowly missing the target.

“Because—he said he took the book from him father. He said it’s something that he would miss dearly.”

“How do you know he’s telling the truth?” Hal asked. Ayn looked at him, taking her eyes off the rider who was getting ready to make another throw. He had clearly hit a nerve.

“I just know, okay.” She looked away and took off towards the competition. Hal was still leery. It wasn’t his business, but how strange that Oryn suddenly wanted to help Ayn. What did he really have to gain by allowing the southern kingdom to have rights under his rule? He shook off the thoughts and ran after her. This wasn’t the time for her to be mad at him. He was now entered into the tournament and he had no idea what was about to happen to him.

“Ayn!” He caught up with her and grabbed her shoulder.

“Please, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have stuck my nose where it didn’t belong. Please—you’ve got to help me through this.”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay, okay.” They walked closer to the games. There was now a new rider throwing hatchets.

“So, will I be doing that—except with a spear?” It wasn’t so bad after all. The worse that could happen would be him throwing poorly in front of the crowds. While that wasn’t ideal, it wasn’t the worst thing.

“That?” She asked puzzled. “Oh, you think that’s the game?” She laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“That’s not the game.”

“What do you mean?”

“They are just warming up.” Suddenly this was all making more sense. Suddenly Hal realized why she had been so hesitant when Oryn had suggested that he play. To the right, a man began yelling to get the attention of the crowd.

“Listen, Listen!” he cried. It took a few more tries before the crowd around them finally got quiet. On a platform above them, King Odis sat next to King Aynarr, along with the rest of the men who had taken seat with them at the royal table. After a few moments, King Aynarr



stood and waited for the last voices to quiet.

“Thank you all—Rheican and Ayvandeian alike—for coming out on this marvelous day. I won’t talk long. I can see our champions are all ready to begin and I know we are all eager to see the victories of the day unfold. Before we begin, though, I believe King Odis would like to say a few words.” Aynarr looked over to Odis.

“Tookatora!” He yelled arrogantly, and the Rheicians and all those around him laughed. Clearly he had been drinking for sometime before arriving to the tournament fields.

“Then let the tournament begin!” King Aynarr yelled and the crowd cheered. In front of Ayn and Hal, the two men who had warmed up throwing the hatchets mounted their horses. Weapons in hand, a man wearing a similar black uniform as the other who had been sent to sign Hal up for the tournament appeared with a white flag. He walked between the two riders. Each horsed man had a different painted picture on his chest, similar to Ayn’s. Hal couldn’t make out one, but the other seemed to be a brightly feathered bird.

Suddenly the man drove the flag high into the air and the riders took tail and ran in opposing positions. Somehow, without looking, he seemed to bring the flag down at just the moment that both riders stopped in unison and turned back around to face one another. It was at that moment that the man with the flag wove the white banner one more time and then tucked tail and ran into the safety of the on-looking crowd. Hal watched on in amazement as the two riders drove their horses towards each other, while at the same time, each threw his hatchet at the other.

Swooshing through the air, the weapons collided, sending a few sparks into the air. The riders passed each other, coming inches away and turned around to redouble. Hal was amazed as the weapons then flew back through the air in the same sweeping motion and returned to their owners. As soon as the metal hit their hands, the men threw them once again at the other, but

now the rhythm was off. The real fight was about to begin.

The peacocked man had been slow to the second throw. From what Hal could tell, he had just taken a few more moments to aim before his opponents' blade came spinning at him. There wasn't time to duck or move. The blade crashed into his chest, knocking him from the horse as he cried out in pain. The crowd then began to cheer and Hal looked around disgusted. Even Ayn was clapping. She looked at him smiling.

"What's wrong?" she asked over the noise of the cheers.

"That man—he needs help!"

"What are you talking about?" She looked just as confused as he did. Hal was frustrated. How could she possibly miss the dying man out on the field in front of them? "That man—" He pointed. But as soon as he did, he noticed that the man was rising from the ground unharmed. "But how?" Hal's jaw dropped. How was he okay?

"The weapons are dulled. It can be quite painful, but no one actually gets killed," she was laughing again. Hal was less amused. His naivety about the new world was getting old. He hated not knowing anything and constantly being at the mercy of others.

"Oh Hal, I'm sorry," she saw right through him. "It's cruel to laugh. I'll be better. I'm sorry." Hal didn't say anything and just kept watching the tournament. Around them other games began. There was a mounted sword fight and other games on foot. Not long later, Ayn left him to go warm up on the gray stallion. He watched her throw. She missed the target the first time, but the second time she hit it.

"It looks like I'll be fighting her today." Breckin walked up behind him. "She's very good, you know. She and her brother have an uncanny skill with the small axe."

"Are you going to warm up?"

“Not today.” Breckin said coolly before leaving to saddle his brown mare. When the game before them finished, Breckin and Ayn mounted their horses and once again the flag bearer marched out on the field and signaled for them to begin. The first three throws resulted in the hatchets colliding in mid-air, but on the forth throw; Ayn threw her tomahawk a few moments fAster than Breckin. The weapon flew through the air so quickly and so sharply that Breckin had to fall to the side of his horse to miss the hit. It glanced his right shoulder as it passed over and flew back into Ayn’s grasp. But it was too late. As he stood up, Breckin threw his hatchet and as it flew, Ayn tried to turn her horse away from the oncoming blade, but turned too sharply and fell off the side of the gray stallion. The crowd’s reaction was split as many tried not to clap out of respect for the fallen princess. Back towards the platform, a few Rhecians burst out in laughter. Some gasped as they waited for her to stand. Once she did, the crowd clapped and watched on as Breckin dismounted and came over to help her to her feet. Ayn stood and she and Breckin bowed to each other before exiting the field. Hal walked over to them.

“What happened? Why did you stop?”

“Falling from a horse is an automatic disqualification,” Breckin said lightly. Ayn didn’t say anything and led her horse to the stalls. Breckin took off in the opposite direction.

“Come on, let’s get you to the spear,” she said. They walked through the crowd and back through the tent with all the food. Once again the smell of the roast pig called his name and he suddenly realized how hungry he was.

“Ayn, are you sure I have to do this?”

“It’s too late to stop it now,” she said. They walked forward and arrived at the tent in front of the king’s platform. A slew of spears stood piked on the ground in front of an area that had been set apart for what Hal guessed was the spear.

“Okay rules: this event is different. Being knocked off a horse in this event is allowed. The fight continues so if that should happen one way or the other—you know what to do.”

“Okay.” Hal nodded nervously. “But how do I win?”

“You’ve got to spear him before he spears you.”

“Who am I fighting?”

“That would be me.” Hal turned to face a mess of blond hair.

“Hal, I had no idea you were trained in the art of the spear,” Aster smiled. Hal took him in. Aster had a condescending smile on his lips as he looked down on him. In his arms he carried a helmet. On his white tunic was a crest that had a single Hart on a shield.

“Yes, well it was a long time ago.” Hal stammered.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take you fast.” He laughed as he walked towards the field and began to warm up. Hal and Ayn watched as he tossed a spear at a hay bale. The tip went straight through it, and went straight through, the point coming through the other side.

Hal turned back to Ayn, a look of disbelief on his face.

“You can’t be serious.”

“Don’t give in so easily, Hal. Just because he has all that finesse doesn’t mean anything when it comes to true instinct.”

“Yes but—“

“Don’t doubt yourself. You couldn’t have made it out of the forest and tamed a bronte without some skill with the spear.”

“Well, Ahlo isn’t tame—“ She gave him a look. He knew she was right. The spear had always come very easy to him—come to think of it, his spear hadn’t ever failed him. And that’s when he remembered—

“My spear!”

“One step ahead of you there,” Breckin marched up to them, Hal’s spear in hand. “A good warrior is never caught off guard without his weapon. Of course, you won’t be able to fight with it, but may it bring you luck all the same.” Hal nodded. Breckin was right; he had been foolish to waltz around this new land without his spear.

“Thank you.”

“Good luck to you,” he said as he smiled and then disappeared into the food tent.

“Alright, you should go warm up your throwing arm,” she said. Hal nodded. “It’s over there.” She pointed to the field that Aster had just exited. His stomach felt like it was trying to digest rocks as he began to walk.

“—And don’t forget!” she called after him. “Hold onto the horse with your legs!” Hal felt the rocks in his stomach turn into boulders as he passed onto the field. He could feel the eyes of the crowd on his back and he suddenly became aware of every awkward movement. Even stretching holding the spear suddenly felt awkward. In the back of his head, he felt Ahlo calling him. The luminous eyes appeared and it took all of Hal’s willpower to not throw up and to push Ahlo away.

Holding the spear out, he looked at his grip. How many times had he thrown a spear—he knew the number was countless, but yet here he was so unsure of himself. His palms continued to sweat as he threw his spear at the hay bale. It soared through the air, landing in the ground just in front of the target.

*Grite.* He was rusty. Only a few days out of the forest and he was already losing his skills. He ran out to the field, grabbed his spear and readied himself to throw again. This time, the spear shot straight and hit the side of the hay bale. The crowd cheered and Hal was felt a

moment of relief. The spear had not gone all the way through the hay bale as Aster's spear, had but it was a decent hit all the same. A moment later, the feeling was interrupted with the sound of a horn signaling that it was now time for the next event to start.

Ayn appeared at the edge of a line, the gray stallion at her side.

"This was my brother's horse." She handed Hal the reins.

"His name's Pinflax." Hal took the reins and ran his hand over the bridge of the horse's nose. "He won't let you fail," Ayn's bright eyes looked deeply into Hal's. Without saying a word, he turned and began to walk towards the field. Aster was already mounted waiting for him.

"Hal!" Hal turned back to Ayn. "Left foot first," she mouthed. Hal shook his head nervously. His breath was tight. He sensed the horse was calm, but he wasn't sure how Pinflax would do once Hal was on his back.

Left foot first. He followed Ayn's directions as he shakily pulled himself up onto the horse. It was harder than pulling himself onto Ahlo had been. Once atop, Hal struggled trying to find somewhere to hold on. Ahlo's back was so much fuller, and his mane was so thick, there was always somewhere to hold on. But ontop of Pinflax, the arch of the animal's back was so sharp, Hal struggled just holding the reins—and soon he would have to take hold of a spear. Hold on with your legs, Ayn's words ran through him again. He turned attention to his thighs and squeezed the leather saddle and the animal's trunk. This wasn't completely alien. When he and Ahlo had run through the forest, this action had been the one that had kept him from flying off and becoming the prey of the pursuing bronte.

A moment later, the flag bearer came onto the field. It was all about to begin. Hal's heart began to beat rapidly. I'm not ready. Another man in black appeared holding two spears. He first walked over to Aster and handed him the spear. Aster took it in his hand and then placed his

helmet on his head. The man then walked over to Hal and held out the other spear.

“Ready?” he asked as Hal took the spear in his hand. It was lighter than he expected and was very plain compared to the beautiful engravings on his own spear, but at least this way no one would die at the end of the battle.

“Yes,” Hal said. He suddenly realized he didn’t know how to make the horse go. He watched Aster. He kicked the horse and they took off as the riders before them had. Hal kicked his horse and Pinflax took off in a straight line.

“Turn, Turn!” Hal yelled at the horse—trying to keep his words at a level on the horse could hear. But it was no use. The beast didn’t know how to listen. The reigns. Hal pulled the reigns and the horse moved, but by this time, Hal had trotted off in the wrong direction. It now looked to the crowd like he was showing off—or that he was a complete idiot, which wasn’t too far from the truth. Now standing almost where he was supposed to, the flag bearer looked to Hal again.

“Are you quite ready?”

“Yes.” Hal breathed. He wanted to shout and run off the field but what choice did he have now. Ayn might not hate Oryn anymore, but he sure did.

“Then go.” The bearer was clearly waiting for Hal to turn around and run as the others had down in the hatchet throw.

*Grite.* He had no idea how he was going to magically run, turn and then fight Aster astride this stupid animal. Hal had clearly taken Ahlo’s intelligence for granted. How different the game would be if Aster had to face him with Ahlo on his side.

Hal kicked the animal and awkwardly the beast turned but they were not going as fast as the gallop he heard behind him. He had already messed up. He kicked the horse again and the

beast whinnied loudly and took off in a fast trot away from the flag bearer.

“Slow down!” Hal gritted his teeth and held on with his legs. They ran quickly to the other end of the field. Hal felt that he would fall from the horse at any moment. It was at the moment that he completely felt out of control when the horse turned on to face his opposition.

“Thank you.” He said through gritted teeth. Clearly Pinflax had done this before. Ayn had known what she was doing when she lent him. But Hal didn’t have time to be thankful because Aster was now charging him, his spear already spinning out of his hand and through the air. Hal kicked Pinflax, the horse whinnied and took off once again racing towards the crowd. Aster’s first spear landed tip-down in the ground where Hal had stood moments before. He didn’t have time to look at it long because as soon the tip touched the ground, another spear regenerated in Aster’s hand.

*Grite.* Hal could see Aster’s smile as he charged forward once again, racing towards Hal, letting his spear loose once more. All Hal could do was dodge. Directing Pinflax to the right, the narrowly missed the spear as it hit the ground once again and regenerated in Aster’s hand. He couldn’t go on like this. He heard laughter from the crowd. He looked like a coward. It’s time to take the offensive.

Hal guided Pinflax as best he could back to the center of the field and took aim. His spear left his hand and threw it at Aster—but the throw was no good and landed short. Aster didn’t have to move much to miss the blow. Hal could tell he was not going to win this fight playing by the rules. An idea rose in his mind as the spear appeared in his hand. Aster was already charging him again, and had just let another spear fly. Hal dug his heels into Pinflax and guided him towards Aster. Running straight towards him, He leaned down close to the horse, just barely dodging Aster’s spear as it glanced his shoulder. Pinflax continued to run right for Aster’s horse,



Hal just barely caught Aster's face as he jammed his spear in between his horse's legs. He felt the impact of the blow and heard the horse's cry as his legs buckled and Aster plummeted to the ground. The crowd gasped.

Hal pulled back on the reigns again and didn't wait for Pinflax to come to a complete stop before he jumped off the horse's back and onto the ground. He had never been so happy to have his legs on solid ground. But once again, he pushed those thoughts to the back of his mind as he readied himself for the coming fight. At least now he and Aster were equal. Aster quickly brushed himself off and took hold of his spear—but Hal was now one step ahead of him. He threw his spear directly at Aster's heart. Aster saw the coming spear and jumped to the ground, just missing the hit. Another spear appeared in Hal's hand. But Aster was angry and running right for Hal.

He yelled as he tried to run Hal through with the tip. But Hal threw up his own spear, blocking him; the weight of Aster's charge was almost too much to hold. Pushing him back he swung his own spear and hit Hal's legs. His eyes narrowed on Hal. It was in that moment that Hal felt Ahlo. The green eyes stung his and for a moment he felt anger and a surge of power. It ran through his veins, blinding him to the battle. Aster took advantage of Hal's moment of weakness and swung his spear low hitting his shins with a merciless crack just as Hal had done to him, but Hal's eyes were not his own. He didn't see it coming. The blow knocked him on his back and out of the horse's mind lock.

Out of the trance, Hal shook himself as Aster came down his brown eyes ablaze, his spear aimed right for Hal's heart. With only a moment to react, Hal rolled to the side, but his arm didn't escape and suddenly blazed red with pain. Aster pulled the blade out of his arm and laughed.

"You're putting up more of a fight than I expected," he said through deep breaths. He

then heaved hard, putting all his force into another stab at Hal's core.

Hal grunted as he pulled his own spear up to block him. Aster fell forward onto his hands, dropping his spear, giving Hal just enough time to get to his feet. Aster regained his ground and each of them circled the other, both of them looking for a hole, an opportunity.

It was at that moment that a woman in the crowd screamed. The sound distracted both Hal and Aster from the fight. The entire audience looked around wildly trying to figure out what caused the commotion, but moments later Hal saw the answer running through the field. Ahlo was coming for him.

The bronte lunged forward, bounding closer and closer to the two boys. More screams imitated from the crowd. Hal turned his back to Aster, and began running forward towards Ahlo to stop him, to console him—but as soon as he moved he felt it. All breath left his lungs as his entire core screamed in agony. He looked down to see the tip of Aster's spear glinting. He had run him through just as he had done to the hay bale during the warm up. He had lost.

Ahlo roared a long horrible howl. Falling to his knees in anguish, he waited for life to leave him. But just as he felt everything beginning to go dim, the spear and the pain disappeared and his breath returned to him. He heaved in air. But as his vision returned he saw Ahlo lunging forward onto Aster. Behind them, people in the crowd screamed.

"No!" he yelled. He raced forward, adrenaline pumping through his veins. "Ahlo, no!" The bronte turned around, breaking himself free from the fallen human, clearly shocked that Hal was still alive. But the damage was done. Aster was okay, but the arm he had thrown up between himself and Ahlo was bleeding badly. Crimson dripped onto the green grass around them. Men with swords drawn rushed onto the field. Women and men ran from the tents to the castle. Hal threw himself between them and the bronte.

“Get away!” he called to them. Ahlo growled. Looking around for his spear, he realized he had left where he had warmed up. Breakin’s words rushed over him. Without a weapon, they only had one choice. Hal quickly jumped onto Ahlo’s back. They had to be ready.

Chaos erupted under the tents. Women and men ran headlong for the castle. Oryn ran forward barring his sword and his guards. Ahlo backed up. They encircled them. Aster stood to his feet. Holding his arm, he ran back through the guards to the tents.

“I don’t want fight!” Hal yelled to Oryn. “Call off your warriors.”

“It isn’t that simple! Your beast just attacked a member of the court.”

“Call off your warriors.” Hal said. Ahlo growled and his fangs glinted in the sunlight.

“Stop it, both of you!” Ayn jumped in between them. Her father at her side.

“Hal, take the bronte back to the castle,” King Aynarr said. “Oryn, let’s take this matter behind closed doors—“ Aynarr looked down on him with a deep look of concern. Oryn looked displeased.

“As you wish.” He waved off the guards and they took off back towards the tents. “Calm the people—gather them back at the castle,” he called to them.

Come Ahlo—Hal thought and the bronte took off. Racing towards his spear, he picked it up before they ran back towards the catles stables. As they rode, Hal’s stomach turned. For good or for evil, Castle Fhyrrkat now knew his largest secret. But this time he had taken Breakin’s words to heart. This time he wouldn’t be caught without his spear.

## Chapter 16

*“If you are lying—” The mass of his large presence filled the room as he stared down at the man before him, cold heat radiating from his gray eyes.*

*“It wasn’t easy to find . . .” the man said as he pulled a humble book out from the heap of rags. But before he could finish his sentence, the keeper snatched the book out of the man’s hands. On the mangled cover there were several symbols, but the clearest formed the shape of two triangle’s pointing into one another. The keeper began turning through it, his eyes thirsty. Minutes passed as he flipped and fumbled through the pages. His heat faded and a thin smile graced his lips.*

\* \* \*

Ayn awoke the next morning in a whirl. The tournament. The uncertainty of what had happened after . . . Her father had smoothed things over with Oryn after they had all returned to the castle but what was going to happen after Odis came to. He had left the tournament field drunk just before Ahlo’s entrance, but what would he say when he knew that inside the southern kingdom there was a beast as fearsome and strong as the bronte? The door opened and Lida entered. “Master Aster outside to see you miss.”

“My robe.” Ayn said through a yawn. Lida went to the drawer and pulled out the robe and helped pull it over Ayn’s shoulders as she stepped out of bed.

“Send him in.” Lida bowed her head, opened the door, signaled Aster and nodded before leaving the room. Aster stepped in.

“Explain.”

“Good morning to you to.”

“I’m told you knew about this?”

“Ah, I see why you’re mad—“ she said as she sat down in front of her vanity. She picked up her brush and began combing it through her hair. “For the first time in forever, I know a secret before you do.”

“That’s besides the point. That creature could kill.”

“That creature isn’t hurting anyone. I trust Hal.”

“Oh please. He could hardly defend himself. You saw how easy it was for me to kill him.”

“By stabbing him in the back? Yeah, good job.” Ayn laughed. “Just admit it. You’re threatened by him.”

“Don’t be absurd.” Aster was angry. Ayn put down her brush and watched him.

“You are!” She had never seen Aster show so much emotion.

“Please!”

“You are, you’re threatened by him.”

“Think what you will. But here’s a fact: I may not know your forest dweller’s secret, but rest assured when I do—“

“Who says he has a secret?” Ayn picked up the brush again and quickly began running it through her hair. Aster was clever.

“Don’t be a fool. Everyone has a secret.” He looked at her through the mirror. His brown eyes pierced through her and she suddenly felt uncomfortable. “Why else would you be helping him so much?”

“What do you mean? I’m not helping him—Breckin’s training him—“

“I’m not a fool, Ayn.” He looked hurt. She turned away from the mirror to face him. “You’ve replaced me.”

“Aster—I—you—“ But even as she sought the words to defend herself the truth stung.  
“I’m sorry, Aster. I didn’t realize—“ Aster sat down on the bed behind him and smiled weakly.

“You’re my oldest friend, Ayn. I know you’ve been going through a lot with the Rhecians, but when I tried to be there for you, it seemed there wasn’t room anymore for me.”

“I see that now.” She looked at him. While he had sought refuge with Oryn, she realized now that she had already befriended Hal and pushed him out. Besides her brother, Aster had always been there. Through the years, things between them had not always been easy, but he had been there nonetheless; he was her oldest childhood friend and she had betrayed that bond.

“Tell me what’s going on. Who is this Hal?” he asked quietly. Discord stirred within her. She couldn’t betray her new friendship with Hal, but in doing so, it seemed that she was now betraying Aster—her friend who she had traditionally told all of these secrets to.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Just start from the beginning—“

“I can’t, Aster.”

“Ayn—“

“It’s not my secret to tell.” Her eyes pooled with tears. Everything—the attack, the tournament, the bronte, the secret alliance with Oryn—all of it was too much. It was too heavy. She wiped her eyes, even though they had been friends for years, she still didn’t want him to see her cry.

“Look, I understand— Aster sighed folding his arms. “But is it okay if we agree to disagree about the guy?” He asked through his usual smirk. “And—if I should be right about the him, will you please send him back to wherever it is that he came from?”

“—Only if you promise to stay open minded about him and if you do see that he’s

actually the nice guy he says he is, that you will let go of your grudge?”

Aster rolled his eyes. “We’ll see . . .” He said as he opened his arms. She stood up and hugged him. It felt good to put the secrets and hurt away.

“So what’s on the docket for the day?”

“I think I need a break from all this.”

“A day away, it is.” He walked over to the balcony and jumped onto the rail. “Should we take our usual route?”

She looked at him with a knowing gaze. “You promised to give him a chance.”

Aster jumped back down from the balcony. “My apologies, when I heard a ‘break’, I thought you meant from everyone.”

“You know what I meant,” Ayn smiled. It wasn’t going to be easy, but she could tell Aster was open to the challenge.

“Well, if you’re bringing a friend, I’m going to too.”

“Shall we meet in the stables?” she asked knowing whom he meant.

“An one-hour,” he said as he disappeared into the hallway.

\* \* \*

Ayn changed into her riding clothes, went down the back stair and down through the dungeons. She knew Hal hadn’t been sleeping in the room they had given him. As she opened the door, the smell hit her in the face. Looking through the darkness, she felt around for the lamp and fumbled around to light it.

“How are you sleeping down here?”

“The arrangement isn’t ideal . . .” The sound of Hal’s voice echoed across the room. Ayn lit the lamp and Hal’s face was illuminated.

“Well, the entire palace knows about him now . . . I’ll talk to my father—”

“Ahlo can take care of himself. He just needs the freedom to do so.”

“You promise he won’t harm anyone.”

“I promise,” Hal said walking towards her.

“Then let him go,” Ayn smiled. Ahlo’s eyes lit up. He stood up, and took off through the door.

“He knows the way out.”

“Good, because we’re escaping.”

“Escaping?”

“You’ll see . . .” Ayn led him out of the dungeons and out into the great hall. They grabbed a loaf of bread from the kitchens and walked out onto the lawn, taking the long walk to the stables.

Outside the sun shined gloriously just as it the day before. It was freeing to leave the castle—a mystery that sat on the edge of the forest. A spirit of alertness she hadn’t felt since before her escape. They walked slowly, enjoying the warm bread.

“So Breckin said you’re leaving Rossegard soon?”

“Yeah--I guess I am.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes—I think I am. I want to be.” With all of the recent excitement, she had forgotten about the impending future.

“It’s better now, with Oryn not being who I thought he was—but I’ll miss the forests.”

“Are there no forests in Rheece?”

“There are trees. But mostly it’s mostly mountain. They are miners by trade. It’s



beautiful—but it’s not the same elegant beauty of the southern kingdom. It’s colder there—“

“I talked to your father yesterday about the walls.”

“Was he able to help you?”

“Yes, he says the history of Aynvandeem is imprinted in the moving figures.”

“Oh yes, I had forgotten about that. Master Verin said something about them once.” They were almost to the stables. They could hear the horses baying inside.

“He mentioned a battle—a battle I saw in my dream.”

“Really?”

“I think it has something to do with Thule.”

“Hopefully it will lead me somewhere with you know,” Hal paused looking down at the ground—“the whole light problem.” He looked discouraged.

“You still doubt yourself.” She stopped walking and looked at him. She grabbed his hand and squeezed. He looked at her. “You’ll solve this. You can’t give in.”

Just then, the stable doors opened and Hazyl, Oryn and Aster walked out, each leading a horse. Ayn dropped Hal’s hand and ran up to meet them.

“Come on,” she called back to him. Hal followed.

“Ah, Ayn of Aynvandeem, right on time and I see you followed through on bringing your friend,” Aster teased passing the reigns of one of the horses he led to Ayn. Oryn gave Ayn a serious look. It must be the bronte, she thought to herself. Oryn clearly wasn’t pleased that Ayn hadn’t shared that knowledge with him the night of their truce.

“Shall we go?” Oryn asked still somber.

“I’m ready!” Hazyl interjected. “It’s been too long since I’ve left the castle.” They began walking off towards the wood. It was then that Ayn realized that Hal didn’t have a horse.

“Wait, we have to get a horse for Hal,” she said turning back to the stables.

“Oh, sorry friend.” Aster said, jumping on the back of the brown mare. “It’s just that, after yesterday—and your performance—I thought that you would be more comfortable riding with someone else.” He smirked. Ayn looked at him.

“You said you would try!”

“No, it’s okay, Ayn. He’s right,” Hal said flatly. Looking at him, he seemed calm but it was clear to her that under the surface there was hidden anger.

“I feel better getting my own ride anyway—you never know when someone may stab you in the back.”

“Alright boys—friends remember?” Hazyl said.

“She’s right, let’s go!” Oryn said and began riding away into the pasture. Aster followed leaving the girls and Breckin with the horseless Hal.

“It’s okay. I’ll catch up.”

“Hal, just hop on the back of my horse,” Ayn said.

“No, I’ll get a ride. Go on ahead.” Ayn and Hazyl looked at each other, mounted their horses and trotted on after Oryn and Aster. Breckin stayed behind and waited with Hal. Moments later through the trees they say Ahlo burst through the trees and raced back towards the stables.

“Do you think its safe?” Hazyl said. Her face looked concerned as she watched Hal jump on the bronte’s back.

“Of course it’s safe,” she said. She hadn’t known Hal a long time, but anyone who could gain the confidence of a creature as wild as Ahlo, seemed to be worthy of trust.

Moments later, Breckin, Ahlo and Hal caught up, but together the four of them stayed behind Aster and Oryn who seemed content leading from afar.

“Don’t worry about Aster.” Hazyl said to Hal. “He just questions the ‘new,’ he’ll warm up to you soon. He’s probably just mad that you almost beat him in yesterday’s tournament.”

Hal smiled politely. “It’s okay. I don’t trust him anyway.” Aster was clearly a sore subject for Hal. They reached the tree line and below them the horses’ hooves crunched newly fallen leaves. Ayn was amazed at how silent Ahlo’s feet were compared to the horses.

“Well, tell us more about you,” Hazyl said. Ayn watched her. She knew she was flirting. “Tell us how you tamed that—beast.”

Ayn heard Ahlo growl as Hazyl uttered the question.

“I uh—I—” Hal stammered.

“So Hal, how did you enjoy fighting yesterday?” She asked desperate to change the subject.

“I did actually. It was very different than what I’m used to.”

“Next time you should try the hatchet,” Breckin said, glancing menacingly at Ayn who rolled her eyes.

“I’ll do that,” Hal smiled, she could tell he was thankful she had led Hazyl away from asking questions he had no desire to answer. They rode on; Ayn continued directing the conversation to shallow topics that kept Hazyl from putting Hal on the spot. In the sky above them, the sun rose high and sat directly over their heads, casting soft rays that seemed to burn the edges of the leaves in a luminous orange glow. Around them, there were less trees and a muted rushing gradually began to drone out the noises of the forest.

\* \* \*

They rode on this way for a long time until ahead of them, Oryn and Aster started to run their horses.

“We’re almost there!” Ayn said as she kicked Pinflax racing after them.

“Wait for us!” Hazyl called. But Hal didn’t wait for her or Breckin. Ahlo read his mind and was already running, lunging ahead for Ayn. She looked over at him as they ran.

“You don’t know the way!”

“But he does!” he called back to her. They took off ahead of her and saw what they were headed for. In front of them, Oryn and Hal were already off their horses and climbing up the short hill towards the cliff overhanging a beautiful placid pool of water. Water roared from the river above, pouring down through the rocks into the deep waters below.

Hal saw the splash even before they had mounted the hill. He knew what was about to occur. They were going in together.

Racing past them, Hal heard Aster cough, “Show off,” under his breath.

Ahlo bounded up the hill in two long bursts and jumped over the cliff high into the air. Hal felt his stomach tip over onto itself as they began to fall. He quickly used his legs to push himself off the bronte’s back and moments later he broke through the water, the liquid ran over his body as he plunged deeper to the bottom of the pool. It was freezing. Opening his eyes, he had never seen anything so blue. Even through the water, the sun shown through making blurring black shadows that looked like monsters. Pushing off the rocky bottom, Hal broke through the surface and breathed the crisp, clean air.

Ahlo slowly broke from the water and walked to a spot in the sun and lay down. Hal turned back to the bank just in time to see Ayn reach the pool and was dismount.

“Is it cold?”

“It’s freezing!” He called back.

Behind them, Hal and Oryn were now at the top of the cliff. They both threw their shirts

to the side. Aster jumped. Oryn followed right behind, diving headfirst into the darker section of the lake. They popped up moments later beside Hal.

“Thanks a lot you guys!” Hazyl said as she and Breckin rode up. She quickly dismounted and joined Ayn on the bank. Breckin also dismounted, but remained by his horse.

“Come on you guys, jump in!” Aster called to them.

“No thank you!” Hazyl said tritely, clearly still upset at being left behind in the woods.

“You’re not going to come in?” Oryn called.

“That water is freezing—there’s no way I’m getting in there!” She said tying up the white mare to a nearby tree. Ayn began to climb up the cliff.

“Then why did you even come?” Aster said as he and Oryn swam up to the bank.

“I just needed to get away—besides no one mentioned anything about that going swimming. Its not even really summer anymore.” She sat down on a nearby boulder. Hal watched Aster wink at Oryn. They both got out of the water. In one fluid motion, the each threw their arms around her, Aster around her back and Oryn around her feet.

“No!” She screamed. “Do not!” Hal didn’t know what to think. He looked at Ayn with concern written all over his face. “Put me down!” She nodded at him, signifying that it was okay. They began swinging her back and forth.

“One.”

“No!”

“Two.”

“Put me down, now!”

“Three!” And in unison they let her fly. She let out one more pitiful scream before she flew straight through the air; she sat suspended for a brief moment, a look of horror strung across

her face. And just as suddenly, she fell straight down, down into the frigid waters below. From the cliff, Hal heard Ayn giggle but that was quickly muffled by the sound of Hazyl crashing back up through the water, gasping for air.

“How. Dare. You.” She said through shivers. She swam briskly to the bank, the water rushing through her clothes creating gushing wave as she broke from the lake.

“Hazyl, take my riding blanket,” Ayn called from the cliff. Hazyl marched from the shallows to Pinflax and ripped the blanket from her riding pack and wrapped it around her shoulders without saying a word.

“Ah, come on Hazyl. It was all in good fun!” Oryn yelled as he crashed through the waters, coming up on the bank and began racing up the hill again, Aster in his wake.

“Come jump off with us!”

She sat unmoved, ignoring them. Hal continued wading in the lake pool. He watched Oryn and Aster bound up the cliff.

“Don’t think I don’t know why you’re coming up here!” she said.

“Whatever do you mean, Ayn?” Oryn asked mischievously.

“Yes, our intentions are quite innocent.” Aster cut in. She stood on the cliffs edge. The boys stood on either side of her and slowly began closing in. But before they could get any closer, Ayn delicately dove off the side of the cliff. Hal watched her as she whizzed through the air. She looked quite graceful as she popped up an arms length away from him.

“Ah—Ayn, you ruined our fun!” Oryn said and then jumped off the side, creating a splash that hit that surrounding trees. Aster followed, racing off the side of the cliff, landing just beside Oryn. Ayn swam closer to Hal. The other two came up for air and also followed suit. The four of them swam around together for a few minutes, Oryn and Aster keeping to themselves as

they had for much of the day while Breckin and Hazyl sat together on the bank.

“Hazyl was right you know—you really can’t worry about them.” Ayn said to Aster as the boys lumbered up the hill again to jump off the cliff.

“I know.”

“They are just competitive,”

“Competitive?”

“Yeah, you know—just like the tournament, multiple people vying to be the best,” she explained.

“I get it.” But inside he felt uncomfortable. Not knowing what else to do, he took a breath and dove deep into the waters below. Up above the sun was no longer as bright and shadows had grown. Hal propelled himself down deeper, fighting the natural buoyancy. Reaching the bottom, he held onto a rock and pulled himself down. How peaceful the murky blue blur was. There was a large splash and Hal watched as Oryn and Aster crashed down from the cliff. Their eyes closed, suspended in time as they fell through the shadowy waters until they broke the tranquility. They pushed themselves up to the surface then they were once again just legs dangling from above.

Hal opened his eyes. Oryn, Aster and Ayn’s legs all stopped moving as if shocked to stillness. Then chaos erupted as all three of them began darting to the side of the cliff. Ayn’s head suddenly appeared under the surface, her eyes wildly searching for Hal. Something was wrong.

Hal pushed off the rock and slammed into the air above. He gasped filling his lungs. Looking around he saw all three of his friends huddled under the crashing falls. Before he could open his mouth to question them, Oryn put his hands to his lips and Aster motioned him over. He followed unsure of what had happened. Looking to the bank, Breckin and Hazyl were gone.

But Ahlo was not. Standing erect, the bronte's fur stood on end from ear to tail. His eyes were aflame and his teeth barring a terrible growl, warning something in the bushes beyond them.

"What is it?" Hal whispered.

"One of him." Oryn grunted, desperately pushing himself against the rocks of the cliff. They found us.

"Hal, how do we get out of this?" he asked. All three of them looked at him with wide eyes.

"Where are Breckin and Hazyl?" Ayn answered by pointing up to the tree above where they had been. Breckin was behind Hazyl, carefully helping her climb the tree. Ahlo's growl grew louder and they could now hear what he was growling at. A horrible howl echoed off through surrounding trees. Hal knew from the sound that the call wasn't Ahlo. This one was shriller, more sinister.

A black bronte jumped out of the trees, lunging on top of Ahlo. Hal saw his eyes suspended in the air, the same rancid yellow green, just before digging his claws and teeth into Ahlo's neck. The beasts whirled in a giant pile. The sound of was terrible; a mixture of ripping skin and horrible shrieks.

"We've got to get him off of Ahlo!" Hal called to them, pushing himself off the rocks, racing as fast as he could through the heavy water.

"Are you crazy?" Aster called back.

"Hal, No!" Ayn cried.

"I've got to—he needs help!" He reached the bank and looked around. In that moment he realized he left his spear at the castle. His heart raced. Beside him the horses pulled at their



reigns trying to free themselves to escape.

Hal spotted Aster's sword on his stallion's saddle. He raced for the sword, grabbed it and pulled off the sheath, dropping it to the ground. A moment the horses broke free and ran full speed back through the woods. Hal ran forward, the weapon was heavier than he thought it would be. There was blood all over the ground around the battling bronte.

The bronte's were so entangled with one another it was impossible to enter the fray—Hal stood there unsure of what to do.

"You!" he yelled defiantly. For a moment the world seemed surreal. The bronte's spun in a mix of gray and black stopped and for a small moment, the black bronte's yellow eyes landed on Hal. The black bronte lunged forward, Ahlo desperately clawed after him.

Hal knew he didn't have time to run. This was it. He stood his ground, and held the sword out waiting for the blunt of the attack; but Ahlo pulled through—he dug his claws into the back of the bronte's legs. The aggressor screeched in agony. He turned around, diving into Ahlo's stomach. Hal heard the skin tear. His anger drove him forward. Racing ahead, he thrust the sword into the bronte's exposed hind leg where Ahlo had already taken a bite out of him. The animal screamed, whipping back around, he roared and pawed him, he felt the claws dig across his chest and his body hit the ground sharply. For a moment everything was blurring, even the growling. But a moment later the bronte was right on top of him, his face suddenly clear, his teeth ready to rip out his throat. But Ahlo attacked again, biting deep into the bronte's trunk.

It was then that Hal heard steps fall behind him. Oryn had grabbed a sword and was lunging towards the fight.

"To the left—we'll take him from both sides!" he ordered. Hal ran to the side. Oryn ran forward and jumped onto the bronte's exposed back and plunged his sword in. The beast writhed

and Oryn fell off the bronte, landing squarely on his back. The bronte howled, but this time Hal heard the pain. He was getting weaker. Ahlo drove his teeth into the beast's neck and spat meat onto the ground beside him. Blood poured out. Hal jumped forward and slashed at the beast's hind legs. More blood. Ahlo tore through the beast's chest once more and the struggle slowed. He was dying. Whining in pain, blood continued to flow from the creature. Ahlo stepped back and watched as the creature took his last breath. The whining stopped.

Silence returned to the forest. Hal ran to Ahlo, there was blood but he stood regally next to his kill panting, exhausted from the fight. Hal ran his hands over the bridge of the bronte's nose. Ahlo purred and limped over to the water and began drinking. His front left paw was bleeding. Hal suddenly felt peace run through him. Ahlo looked him and blinked slowly—he was going to be okay. Hal turned to Oryn who was back on his feet again.

“Thank you,” Hal said.

“Don't mention it.” Oryn followed Ahlo to the water, bent down and cupped his hands, taking in long gulps of water and tossing some on his face.

“Those beasts are unbelievable,” he said after a long drink.

“Hal!” he heard Breckin's voice calling for him from high up in the trees. “Is it safe to come down?”

“Yes! Ahlo finished him!” Above them the branches began to quack as Breckin and Hazyl made their way down. Ayn was on the bank now.

“Are you all right?” she said a gust.

“I'm fine.”

“You're bleeding—” she pointed to his chest ripped where the bronte had slashed him, crimson lines blared through his shirt.

“I’m fine, I promise, but we’ve got to get out of here.”

“Why? The brute’s dead.” Aster said, crashing through the shallows behind Ayn.

“Because the bronte share a mind connection—if there is one, there are more and it won’t take them long to find us.” They all looked at Hal. The news shook them.

Breckin jumped down from the tree and held out his arms for Hazyl.

“Jump!” he called to her. She jumped, landing in his arms.

“Breckin, is there somewhere between here and Fhyrrkat that’s safe—somewhere that’s closer than the castle?”

“The village of Thiodor.”

“How far?”

“Not far, back the way we came then east at the edge of the forest.”

“But the horses got away!” Hazyl cried. “How will we get back?”

“On foot.” Oryn said. “Let’s move.”

## Chapter 17

Hal, Ayn, Aster, Breckin, Oryn and Hazyl grabbed the last of their belongings and followed the path out of the deeper part of the woods. Hazyl and Ayn walked in the front with Oryn and Hal behind, and Breckin bringing up the rear. Hal walked alongside Ahlo who still had a slight limp. They found the horses at the edge of the forest and emerged out of the trees just as the sun started to descend behind the mountains at their aw the backs. They walked east until they saw the tents.

“We’re here.” Breckin said quietly to Hal. It was twilight and the villagers began lighting lanterns. The colors of the lights ranged from every variation of purple to the deepest hue of blue to bright yellow and orange to deep gold. Hazyl turned around and waited for them.

“Breckin, why are they hanging all the lights?” she asked.

“It looks like we are just in time for the final feast.”

“What is the final feast?”

“It’s to celebrate the leaves that will begin falling from the trees. During the winter the Thiodor eat very little, this is the final feast of summer.

As they walked deeper into the lines of tents, more and more people emerged, each dressed in lovely flowing outfits. In the dying light the women’s dresses seemed to sparkle with a beautiful hint of gold.

Hal looked to Ayn who had since joined them.

“Does Fhyrrkat not celebrate?”

“No, we haven’t—” Ayn started.

“It’s because Fhyrrkat looks down on the Tryterie,” Breckin interrupted.

“I mean—they are forest rabble.” Aster laughed.

“That isn’t true.” Ayn said.

“Of course it is. The halls of the ivory keep are much too clean for the forest-Bedouins,” Breckin said sarcastically.

“We have been nothing but friends for years!” She was hurt.

“Of course we have, Ayn. But you don’t represent everyone who lives in the castle,” he said. Ayn retreated. Hal could tell his words had stung her.

Through the trees a herd of children ran barefoot with kites attached to sticks. The silk animals floated radiantly behind them as they ran. Seeing the strangers they stopped.

“Breckin’s back!” A little girl wearing a shade of lilac cried to the rest of the children. They laughed as they continued their run on the soft moss covered ground. Hal, Breckin and the others followed in their wake. Around them, the tents grew and so did the amount of lanterns. There were hundreds of them everywhere. Some scattered on the ground and others were hung high in the far branches of the trees. The sky above them was now a bright hue of lavender, the sun almost gone, but you would never know it because the lanterns were so thickly cast.

Coming out from behind a towering tent, they emerged into a glade and in it was the center of the party. In the very center was a raging bonfire that was taller than Ahlo and around it, men and women danced. Laughing and dancing in what looked like ceaseless joy. Just beyond the fire was a gathering of men, each holding a different musical instrument, the likes of which Hal had never seen. The sound resonated through the glen in a harmonic melody that was different than the music of Fhyrrkat. This sound was more casual, more whimsical. The combination of the music and the loud banter made it hard to hear. All around them were tables stacked high with delicious meats and dishes that ignited their hungry stomachs with desire.

“Oh Breckin! Can’t we stay for the party?” Hazyl turned to him with eyes wide.

“I suppose—we’ll have to get an invitation.”

“Who do we ask?”

“We don’t—they ask us.”

“Take off your shoes!” An old woman sitting at a table barked at them. She had an orange shawl wrapped around her arms, a cane in one shaky hand and wise gray eyes.

“There’s your invitation,” Breckin smiled. “But you better do what she says.”

“Shoes. Off.” She said pointy bossily at their feet. All of them moved to take off their shoes.

“Why no shoes?” Ayn asked in a whisper.

“Because this is the center of the wood. The Thiodor reside here at the end of every year when the leaves begin to fall, they then celebrate with a feast. Shoes separate man from the earth. This is the way they show their thanks to the forest so therefore, no shoes.” Breckin explained.

They left their shoes near a tree by the old woman. Around them more and more people began to join the dizzying circle around the fire.

“Come on.” Breckin lead them as they meandered through the tables, landing just beyond the fire on the opposite side they had come in from. On the other side of them was the river reflecting all the light from the lanterns and the moon that had just risen above in the cool blue twilight sky.

“Breckin! Come! Sit!” Men dressed in Breckin’s style of armor beckoned them over to a long rectangular table. They had a large emerald jar in the middle of them and each man had his own wooden cup. Breckin lead them to the table and he, Hal, Oryn, Aster, Hazyl, and Ayn sat down with the three men.

“I’ll go get some ticks!” the man who called them over rose up and pushed this way

through the crowds of people filing into fill the mass of tables.

“Well, if it isn’t Lady Ayn,” said the man with the red beard. Ayn and the rest of them sat down at the table. Hal sat next to her and felt uncomfortable as Oryn sat next to him. Ayn gave the man a look of displeasure. He didn’t seem to notice.

“Always a pleasure, Aiken.” She said solemnly.

“Whose this pretty friend of yours?” he asked brashly, taking Hazyl in with his greedy eyes. Hazyl looked back at him, a look of disgust across her face.

“Aiken here has had a bit too much to drink!” the man sitting next to him yelled loudly and then hiccupped.

“As have you, Iysa!” A younger blond boy leaned in.

“How long ago they start?” Ayn asked eyeing him suspiciously.

“This afternoon,” the boy said. “There was no stopping them as you can tell.” The man who had left the table returned with more of the small wooden cups and passed them out, giving one to each of them.

“Why thank you, Clivan!” Breckin said with a wide smile.

“Ticks!” Aiken yelled as he turned the cups over and filled them with the liquid from the emerald bottle.

“Take your glass!” Aiken called to them. “Take it, take it! Don’t you know it’s rude to refuse a glass at the final feast.” Sitting across from them, Aster took his glass eagerly.

“Well I never say no to alcohol,” he said. The others followed. Hal leaned over to Ayn.

“What is this?”

“It’s very sweet and will make you full fast. Don’t drink too much.” She whispered behind her cup.

“Ticks!” Aiken, Breckin, and Iysa began chanting together as they downed their cups in one gulp. Once they were done, they threw the cups on the table in front of them and cheered. Oryn, Hal, Hazyl, Aster and Ayn gulped theirs down too. But the minute the liquid hit Hal’s throat, he felt the burn. Yes, it was sweet but it stung all the way down, deep into the pit of his stomach. He tried to hide the face he felt himself making.

“Another!” Iysa yelled loudly through the glen as he immediately took their cups and began pouring the liquid from the emerald jar again. But over the music and all the other tables his cry was barely audible. Ayn glanced over to Hal with a look that said, see what I mean.

They took the cups in hand and downed another one. The two ticks seemed to have pacified Aiken who turned his attention away into a conversation with Breckin. Hal felt his stomach begin to bubble nicely. He suddenly felt so pleasantly warm inside.

“Ryhad, what’s been happening in the forest?” Ayn asked. Ryhad turned to Ayn. He was very relaxed and a bit too smiley.

“You know if there was anything to say, Breckin wouldn’t let me tell you,”

“Breckin isn’t even working for the Ete right now, why would he care?”

“Who says he isn’t working for the Ete?” he said eyeing Breckin who was busy downing yet another cup of Ticks.

“He’s working for my father. He’s my personal body guard.”

“Just because his current mission may align with your father’s job, doesn’t mean he isn’t still working for the brotherhood.” Ryhad said. “So I won’t be telling you anything.”

Ayn leaned back in her chair and folded her arms just as two women, one dressed in a flowing dress of sky blue, and the other in salmon carried a large platter with a whole turkey to the table, and placed it right in the middle of them. Clivan passed down some plates. The smell



of the roasted bird filled their noses. It had been a long time since Hal had eaten turkey. Birds like that were so rare in Thule—the villagers assumed the bronte ate most of them.

“Dinner!” Aiken yelled to the group as the members of the Ete, Aster, and Oryn shot another Ticks, slamming their cups back down on the table once again. Looking over his shoulder at the prince, Hal could see the drink was catching up with him. He was smiling just like Ryhad and he and Aster were getting louder and louder, laughing and calling out “ticks!” with Breckin and the rest of the Tryterie men at their table.

More women brought more plates of food until there was hardly room left on the table. Utensils were passed down and each of them dug into the delicious feast before them. Hal tore off a piece of turkey leg and dumped a bunch of the berries on his plate. While Fhyrrkat Castle had had delicious food, their delicacies were a bit foreign to him while this was so similar to the foods eaten in Thule that he felt comforted.

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They filled themselves with the delicious food and after, warm cakes with fresh strawberries were brought to each table. The tartness of the berries was delicious. When they finally finished, each of them felt full and content that they could hardly move. Even Aiken stopped taking ticks and had settled into what looked to Hal like a deep conversation with Breckin. During the meal, the music had died down and the dancers around the fire had sat to eat – but now that everyone was full, the musicians began to play a wild jig and people everywhere jumped up to join in as the fire before them roared, beckoning them.

Oryn stood up and turned to face Ayn.

“I believe it’s time for us to dance, my lady!” he said in a giddy tone.

“I’m not so sure—“ Ayn said, her cheeks turning red. She didn’t know what to think of

this—was it the ticks? Or was he suddenly trying to be her friend.

“Oh, come on!” He grabbed her hand and pulled her behind him, she turned to face Hal her eyes wide.

They went out into the great circle where other couples were starting to dance. Oryn gently grabbed her hand and put the other on her waist. She felt herself blush.

“I don’t know any Tryterie dances!” She said, yelling over the music.

“Me neither!” He laughed back. Wait what? She thought. But it was too late. He began whirling her around as the dance began. They looked to the other couples around them, but mostly they just laughed together.

“We look like fools!”

“Who cares!” Oryn yelled back as they traipsed around glen, still barefoot. Looking around, Ayn spotted Aster and Hazyl. The lanterns around them beamed incandescence over them. Through the trees, Ayn spotted some fireflies over the river.

“Not to be out done, of course.” Oryn said catching her eye.

“Hazyl will be talking about this for days,” she laughed.

“Will you?”

“Will I what?” What was he talking about?

“Will you talk about this night for days?” his eyes were so blue. She didn’t know what to say.

“I don’t know.” She mumbled unsure. She wished he would take his eyes off her.

“You don’t have to hate me you know.”

“I don’t! You and I,” she paused. “We have an understanding,” She smiled. She suddenly remembered his hand on the small of her back. She felt her palms begin to sweat in his.

He looked into her eyes and smiled. This was too much. She leaned over her shoulder and looked away at the fire behind him.

“I have to ask.” He said into her ear. Her stomach turned. What was she feeling? She didn’t know.

“If I wasn’t the son of Odis—just another member of the Ayvandeem court...”

“Oryn...” She couldn’t believe what she was hearing and she didn’t understand it.

“Why are you saying this?”

“Because despite your stubbornness,” he paused. “You are brave and loyal, true friend.” She felt her heart beating rapidly in her chest. “And someone I have come to admire.”

“Oryn,” she leaned forward and looked him in the eyes. “We’re friends.” He looked down at the ground, his smile faded.

“I know.”

The music around them softened and he continued to lead them in a slower dance. She leaned back into him and stared at the fire again. She didn’t know how, but somehow her words had hurt him. They danced in silence. The song ended and the music quickened. Around them more and more couples flocked to the dance floor. But Ayn and Oryn stood still. She pulled away from him.

“Thank you for the dance.”

“Of course.” She could still see the wounds. “We’ll do this again when we get to Rhece.”

“Oh,” his words stung. She hadn’t thought about leaving, really leaving for days. “That will be nice.” But inside she felt something rip. He must have seen it too.

“I’m sorry, did I say something?”

“No—it’s fine.” She backed away. “I’m going to go find Hal.”

“Ayn,” he shook his head. “Don’t go—I didn’t mean to—” He reached out his hand gently, but she retreated.

“It’s fine, really.” She smiled at him before turning and running back toward the tables. Sliding in between couples and the crowd of eager onlookers, she freed herself from Oryn’s gaze.

Once back at the table she saw Breckin and the rest of the Ete with Aster and Hazyl who had just come back from dancing. They sat next to each other, deep in some conversation that had Hazyl smiling ear to ear.

“Where’s Hal?” Aster turned to face her, still beaming from whatever he had just said to Hazyl. He pointed out to the fire.

“Just there.” He said laughing. “Seems your forest friend has a soft spot for Tryterie girls.” Ayn looked to where he pointed and saw Hal being taught a kind of two-step dance by a group of three Tryterie girls who couldn’t be much older than twelve. Each of them had long dark hair and each was holding her dress, showing Hal how to kick up his feet, but as did, one leg caught the other’s heel and he fell to the ground. The girls laughed wildly. Hal stood to his feet and tried again, this time clumsily completing the kick. The young girls laughed and he bowed. He looked up at Ayn and smiled, running back to the table.

“Nice foot work,” she said sitting down next to Aster. Hal filled his cup with water and drank it down.

“It’s harder than it looks!” He sat down next to Breckin across from her. “This is fun,” he said with eyes full. The green around his pupil reflected radiantly off the candles in the middle of the table.

“They don’t dance in Thule?” she asked.

“No. Never.” He poured another cup of water and downed it. What kind of place must he come from that didn’t have dancing. She wondered to herself if he missed it—but thought better to ask. He seemed so happy.

Breckin nudged Hal laughing. One of the young girls from the fire was standing behind him. She was quite thin and her green dress was the color of the grass underneath her feet.

“Will you dance with me, Hal?” She asked sheepishly.

“How could I say no?” He laughed and stood to his feet. She turned, leading him to the fire and the two took off whirling around at a dizzying speed. Breckin turned to her.

“And where did you partner go?”

“Oh, I got tired—needed a break from all the excitement, she said grabbing the water and pouring a cup for herself. He eyed her suspiciously before turning back to the Ete.

“Breckin!” she yelled over the noise of the crowd. He turned back. “I was just wondering when we were going to go back to the castle?”

“First thing in the morning, I suppose.”

“The morning?” She stood and edged to the empty seat next to him.

“Yeah—we’ll camp here. It’s not a good idea to travel in the darkness. Besides there’s no safer place for us than right here.” She knew he was right, even as he spoke she could see that his eyes were still hazy from the ticks. Venturing out, even the short distance from the edge of the forest to Fhyrrkat had already proven dangerous. She looked around. Through the candlelight, lanterns and the crowds of whirling people dancing around the fire she didn’t see him anyway. Where had he gone after she had left him alone? Should I go find him? Wait, What am I saying?

She felt so unsure of herself. How could someone she had cared nothing about three days ago suddenly throw her for such a confusing loop? I’ve got to stop thinking of him. She leaned

into the conversation between Breckin and the other Ete and tried to resist the urge to wonder where he went.

\* \* \*

by the fire, Hal and the young girl whirled around. She was considerably shorter than him but the dance seemed to make her happy. When the music finished, she bowed, and he did the same and without saying a word she ran away giggling to her friends who had been watching from a table across the way the entire time they danced.

Hal's head spun in a daze as he turned to go back to the table where Breckin and the rest of his friends sat. But as he pushed his way through the dancers he saw a strange reverberation in the river. Craning his neck, between the trees he saw someone sitting next to the shore alone. He walked closer and realized that it was Oryn. His head still spinning from the ticks he walked towards the shore and saw him throw a large stone across the surface of the river. The current was calm, but the stone didn't skip, it hit the water and sunk.

"What are you doing over here by yourself," Hal heard his voice as it reverberated off the river. It was loud compared to the calm he had walked into.

"Just thinking," Oryn said. Hal sat next to him and tried to calm his excitement to match Oryn's quiet demeanor. Away from the party, the fireflies danced beautifully above the water; the natural lanterns of the forest. The water drowned out the noise of the party with a calmly slow lull.

"I wanted to thank you again for helping me earlier today, you know, with Ahlo." He said.

"He was in trouble. It was what any good person would do."

"Yeah—but you're—" Hal couldn't believe what he heard himself say. Oryn looked over

to him with crooked smile

“I’m the terrible prince of the north?”

“Well—yes.” Hal felt himself vomiting out the truth and he couldn’t stop.

“Is that what Ayn told you?” Oryn asked, his eyes shinning in the moonlight. Hal saw them clearly for a moment; they were the color of gray stone.

“I think so—but then, I don’t think she thinks that anymore.” Hal looked from Oryn to the ground deep in thought. She had danced with I’m and seemed so happy—and even at the tournament and at the swimming hole things had been different. Oryn rolled his eyes.

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” he said quietly. But even as he spoke it out loud, Hal got the sense that he was talking more to himself. Oryn turned his attention back out to the river. The moon was directly over the waters, refracting clear white light onto the current.

“So are you going to tell me the truth about where you’re from?” Oryn asked blandly.

“I don’t know what you mean.” Hal said as he lay back onto the grass. He put his hands behind his head and looked up at the sky full of stars.

“We can keep pretending that you’re from this village—or you can tell me the truth and I will keep your secret.”

Who were they kidding? Oryn wasn’t as cruel as his father. Yes, he had put him in the tournament yesterday, but that wasn’t done out of malice. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that Ayn had done a poor job at judging him. He had been there for him today and had helped him save Ahlo. The least he could do now was be honest with him. Taking a deep breath, Hal sat up. The haze was leaving him and his mind felt clearer.

“I’m from the village of Thule.”

“Thule?”

“You’ve never heard of it. It’s in the deepest part of this forest and it’s a place where there is hardly any light. The creatures, the bronte we killed today, they overrun the forest and hunt my people.”

Oryn sat up and looked deeply at Hal.

“When you and your men captured me, Ahlo and I had just broken free. I don’t know how—we were chased and then we fell over the side of a cliff. When I saw the sun for the first time, it blinded me so Ahlo took me to a cave while I recovered my vision.”

“So you had never met Ayn or anyone before that day?”

“No. We met in the dungeons at Irian. I told her the truth and she promised to help me.”

“That’s why you’re so terrible on a horse—”

“Yes, mostly. The first time I had ever been off my own two feet was riding Ahlo through the forest.” Oryn smiled.

“It shows.” They sat in quiet for a moment, the water rushed past them and the moon fell across the sky.

“So what’s your plan now? I mean, are you going to go back to Thule? Or are you here to stay?” Oryn asked. Hal looked out over the water and saw a stick being carried downstream.

“That’s what I keep asking myself. For the first few days here, I felt so lost. But now my goal is to find out why Thule was cast into darkness—but I haven’t had much success.”

“What do you mean?”

“I keep having the same dream. I dream about this war—I see this warrior cast in light carrying a strange light orb—“

“Iktarius?”

“Yes—that’s what King Aynarr thought too. He showed me the walls of the castle and



how they move and tell the histories of Ayvandeem.” Oryn looked at him perplexed.

“On my first night in the castle, the walls showed a group of warriors marching to battle. It intrigued me and then in one of my dreams I saw that same scene unfold and the warrior was there again. Aynarr thought it could have been the battle of Min Dace.”

Oryn looked deep in thought as he sat listening to Hal.

“Do you have any clues as to how this could’ve happened?” Hal asked hoping Oryn had some knowledge to help him.

“I’m sorry, Hal,” he sighed. “Like Aynarr, all I know is the legend. Of course you are welcome to come with us back to Rhece to search for answers.” Hal’s heart fell. The buzz from the ticks was gone and he suddenly realized how little he had to go on to help his people.

“Thanks” was all he could say as he lay back down on the grass. The boys were quiet as they continued looking out over the river. Behind them, the lights and music of the party began to quiet down until there was hardly any noise at all. Hal could barely tell the difference between the fireflies and the stars as he drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter 18

*“Well done indeed,” he said turning back to his desk.*

*“But you want something.”*

*“Assurance,” he answered. “I want to know that after I do what you ask, you’ll give me what you promised.” The keeper continued to stare at the man. He walked forward, grabbed his throat and squeezed the delicate pale pipes within.*

*“When I make a deal, that is the end. I don’t need bribes or gifts to ensure my promises.” In his grasp the man’s hood fell back, revealing bright blue eyes. A strange hope clung to them, an unexplained brightness. The keeper lifted the man further off the ground and threw him to the center of the chamber. The man gasped and held his bruised throat in his hands. “Now go.”*

*“Yes,” his voice was raspy and beaten. He stood up and began walking towards the door.*

*“And remember,” the keeper said. “If you fail to do any of what we’ve planned . . . it will be your life I take.” The man didn’t speak, but nodded sheepishly and turned, footfalls rang out once again and faded into the emptiness.*

\* \* \*

The next morning, the sun rose over the tents and beamed through the golden trees. Still on the shore of the river, Hal awoke to the sound of the rushing water. Sitting up, he saw Oryn leaning against a boulder, still asleep. Hal rose to his feet, his head ached a little and he felt thirsty.

“Oryn.” he said, trying to wake him. His voice was scratchy. The events of the night before rushed back to him as Oryn opened his eyes. He knows the truth. Their eyes met and Oryn followed Hal to his feet.

“Come on, let’s find Breckin,” he said. They wandered back towards the party grounds.

The tables were all pushed out of the way and the fire in the center was smaller than the blaze of the evening before. The lanterns as well as the crowds of people were gone.

“Wow. It certainly looks different in the light,” Oryn remarked.

“There they are,” Hal spotted Ayn, Hazyl, and Breckin sitting at a long table with the members of the Ete. They were drinking from the wooden cups but instead of the emerald jar, they had an iron pot with steam pouring out of the spout. He and Oryn walked up to them.

“There you two are. Would either of you like some tea?” Hazyl asked. Ayn looked up for a moment and then looked down at her tea.

“Breckin just made us some eggs.” Hazyl said spooning the hardened yellow yokes onto a wooden plate.

“Smells delicious,” Oryn said sitting down at the table. He looked around and then asked, “Where’s Aster?”

“I don’t know actually.” Hazyl said taking her first bite of egg. “He took off just a little while ago. I just assumed he went to relieve himself or something.”

“Hal sit with us.” Ayn piped up, cupping her tea with both hands.

“I’m going to go check on Ahlo, I’ll be back soon.” Hal took off back up the ridge through the thick trees and tall tents. Now that he thought about it, he hadn’t heard anything from Ahlo since they had left him at the edge of the forest the night before. But was this because of the fuzziness of the previous night? Or because Ahlo had needed rest after the battle with the bronte?

Walking to the edge of the village, he was nowhere to be found. The horses stood alone, their heads bowed as they nibbled away at the grass.

“Ahlo!” Hal said out loud hoping that the bronte was listening. He didn’t know how to

engage in the mind lock from his thoughts, but every time he had succeeded in the past, speaking out loud had been successful.

“Ahlo!” he called out again. Panic suddenly pricked his heart. Ahlo had been wounded, should he have left his friend alone in such a vulnerable state?

Hal ran further down the path to the edge of the tree line. The sun radiated off the lake and burned his eyes. In the distance, the castle shown brightly over the browning grass. How daunting it was to be inside those walls—but out here it was simpler. Hal looked out over the scene, but he saw no Ahlo. He turned back around to the forest. Of course he wouldn’t be out there. He would be in the forest, his home.

Hal ran back along the path.

“Ahlo!” he cried out again. Ahlo’s vision overtook him. There was a blur of green and brown and then his eyes were in the shadows looking at King Odis atop his horse, five members of his cavalry behind him and down below him on foot was Aster.

“Where is my son?” the king bellowed.

“He’s with Breckin and the Tryterie. We were here for the feast—“

“That wasn’t part of the plan. You’re wasting time.”

“But—we were just having a bit of fun—nothing was compromised, everything is set for tonight.”

“Nothing was compromised?” Odis was angry. His eyes narrowed. “Nothing was compromised? My book is gone, my son and my spy disappear in the night and you want to tell me nothing is compromised?”

Aster looked at the ground and didn’t look back up at Odis.

“I don’t care if you were out here to have fun! Fun isn’t part of your job—helping me

take the south is and spending the night out in the woods wasn't part of that plan."

"But, I've been watching the forest-dweller! I watched him kill one of those beasts—I thought he knew something." Aster pleaded.

"Does he have the orb?"

"I haven't seen him with it—" Aster paused hearing the insufficient-ness of his own words. "—But that doesn't mean he doesn't know where it is. There is something off about him, I know it. Something that doesn't fit."

Odis looked down on him with a cruel sneer.

"You have better find out if he knows its whereabouts." Each word came out with an intense malice. "And I mean now." And with that Odis and his armed guard rode off back through the forest towards the castle.

Ahlo's vision broke with Hal's and Hal fell on his knees back at the edge of the forest. He moved through the blur of brown and green again before coming to. As his eyes and ears settled back into focus, he heard the sound of hooves. Standing to his feet again, he dove for the nearest shrub and hid as Odis and his men rode past them, out of the trees and through the fields to the castle.

Hal couldn't believe what he had just heard. Not only was the orb real, but Odis was hunting it. I've got to find it before he does.

"Ahlo!" He called out again to the beast. This time Hal was certain that he was coming. Hal ran back along the trail where the horses had come from. The bronte came bounding towards him.

"Ahlo! Good job!" He hoped the beast was able to feel his gratitude. Once again he would have been lost without the bronte's amazing ability.

“You’ve got to go back to the castle for me. You’ve got to get my spear! You’re the only one that’s fast enough—once you’ve got it, meet me back here!” The bronte blinked slowly. His blue eye shown out luminously though the forest. Ahlo then turned and ran towards the stables where he had left his valuable weapon.

Once Ahlo was gone, Hal ran back to the Tryterie. Breckin, Ayn and Oryn were just where he had left them.

“Breckin, I need your help.” Breckin looked up at him confused about Hal’s new temperament.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s real—all of it! It’s all just as I dreamed it!”

“What’s he talking about?” Hazyl interjected taking a sip of tea.

“You mean, about the orb?” Oryn asked.

“You told him?” Ayn looked at Hal confused.

“Yes I did, and I need you’re help! I just saw Aster and Odis talking—or Ahlo did—but it doesn’t matter. He’s hunting my orb and I’ve got to find it before he does.” Hal realized that Aster was standing right behind him.

“So you were eavesdropping.”

“Don’t turn this back on me, Aster. You’ve been spying for Odis.” Aster didn’t say anything but just looked back at him with a look of disdain.

“Just because I’ve been helping the future king of Ayvandeem look for something, that doesn’t mean I’m spying.” Hal saw Ayn’s fists clench and her eyes narrow.

“I heard you tell him about me.” Hal said.

“So what? Just because I see right through you doesn’t mean anything. I warned the king

and told him the truth. You have secrets and he has every right to be leery of you and your plots.”

“Just leave.” Ayn said.

“Ayn—you can’t be serious.”

“Go.”

“So you’re actually going to choose this conniving forest-dweller over me?” His eyes were bluer than ever and his face had a look of brash disbelief.

She stared at him. She didn’t say anything as he shook his head, turned around and walked through the glen. All of them were quiet until he gone out of sight.

Hal turned back to Breckin.

“I need you to show me the way back to Thule.”

“But Hal, you’re the only one that’s been there. I’ve looked for it for years and never found it. You of all people—“

“I know, I just need you to take me back to the falls. The large ones that flow into this river.” He pointed to the bank where he and Oryn had slept. “The edge of the forest is just above them.”

“But how will you get in? Isn’t the boundary sealed?” Ayn asked.

“Yes, but riding Ahlo I was able to get out, for some reason the bronte can cross the line. As long as I am riding him, I should be able to get back.” Breckin sighed.

“What is back in Thule that you are so eager to find?”

“There is a wise soul there. His name’s Brael and if anyone were to know where the orb was, it would be him.” But even as he said it out loud he wondered what had happened to him after he had fallen out of Thule . . . the vision of him racing up the mountain with the bronte all

around him suddenly filled his mind.

“It’s half a days hike.” Breckin said. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I don’t know why Odis is after the orb—but his reasons can’t be good.”

Breckin nodded and rose from the table.

“I’ll get the horses!” Oryn said taking one last sip of tea before rising and heading for the forest. For a moment Hal wasn’t sure what was going on.

“I’ll find our things.” Ayn followed.

“Wait! All of you!” Oryn and Ayn stopped and turned back to him. “I feel bad enough bringing Breckin into this. I can’t risk the bronte hurting any of you—and once we get close to the border there is just no guarantee of safety.” Oryn turned to Hal.

“What’s going to happen if you are overrun by one of those beasts again? You couldn’t take him alone yesterday and with Ahlo still hurt, I’m guessing your chances of fairing well in a fight are not good.” Oryn had a point. While Ahlo’s limp was gone, the wounds on his hide were still fresh.

“You need us, Hal. We want to help!” Ayn said. Hazyl was the only one left at the table.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” she said shyly.

“Hazyl, you’ve got to go back to the castle. We need to help Hal and it’s going to be dangerous,” Ayn said.

“No!” Hal said. “I won’t risk anyone else getting hurt.” A wave of emotion washed through him and he remembered could hear Mare’s screams ringing out through the forest.

“Hal, you need us. Let us help you,” she said. Hal looked at her and Oryn. Maybe she was right. Maybe he couldn’t do this alone.

“Alright. But you guys can’t cross the line. Once we get to the falls, you’ve got to



promise you'll go back to Fhyrrkat." Oryn and Ayn nodded and they both took off towards the horses. Hal waited for Breckin and they followed behind.

Once they were all back at the edge of the Tryterie village, they put Hazyl on a horse and said goodbye as she took off back to the castle.

"Where's Ahlo?" Oryn asked. But just as he did the bronte ran up behind them, carrying Hal's spear in his mouth.

"I trust you learned your lesson, then?" Breckin looked at him with a knowing gaze. Hal smiled and took the spear from Ahlo and jumped onto his back.

"Speaking of weapons," Breckin said to Ayn. "Take this." He handed her a bow, a quiver of arrows and a sharpened hatchet. She smiled and took them, putting the quiver on her back, the hatchet in her belt and keeping the bow in her hands as she mounted Pinfalx.

"Everyone ready?" she asked. Oryn and Breckin mounted their horses and nodded. Hal signaled to Ahlo and they all raced forward into the forest.

They rode back through the forest, around the Tryterie settlement and met up with the Thios, following it west higher into the mountains. Hal could tell it was frustrating for Ahlo to wait for the horses. But Hal wasn't sure how to find the falls without Breckin's direction so Ahlo would run forward, bounding far ahead of them and then wait as the others followed. They continued like this for a long time until the sun rose high above them and started to descend over the tips of the mountains.

"There it is!" Hal shouted as they crested a ridge. Standing on top of the hill, the others filed in behind him. They stared at the magnificent falls. The sky above them was orange. Hal couldn't believe they had survived the fall.

"But how are you going to get up there?" Ayn asked. Hal looked up at the falls. She had a

point. He couldn't even count how many spears long the falls were, not to mention that the mountain that the water fell from cascaded in almost a sheer cliff.

"There's got to be a way. Let's get closer." Hal said. Ahlo led them down into the valley where the liquid ran from the falls into the river. The water pooled in a beautiful blue hole, the water inside it was almost crystal clear. Looking down inside the pool, they could see down far—the pit of water didn't seem to end but just turned into what looked like an endless black cave. As he looked at it, Hal was thankful. It had been those depths that had saved both he and Ahlo's lives. But something about the water made him feel restless—like something lived deep down below and was watching them from the incalculable depths.

As they drew nearer, the mist of the falls fell on them. There was no way around the rock wall. The only way through was up and he saw no way for Ahlo to climb and hold both of them.

Breckin, Oryn, and Ayn rode up to the wall and turned to Hal and Ahlo. Each of their faces said what Hal couldn't admit.

"There's got to be a way," he said, trying to convince himself. No one said anything as they each looked around, trying to see what wasn't there.

"Hal," Breckin broke in after a long silence.

"No," he said defiantly. He hadn't wanted to go back to Thule for good. But he held onto the hope of Ames. There had also been the hope that he still go home if he wanted to. Now he was bared from it forever. Inside, his heart was beat rapidly as he began to sweat. The light had now faded from the sky and darkness was descending.

"Hal," Breckin's voice was as gentle as he had ever heard it. "We can't stay here, it's too dangerous."

Ignoring him, Hal jumped off of Ahlo and ran to the rock wall. The mist turned into thick

rain-sized droplets and he was completely drenched when he reached the wall. He threw up his hands and beat them against the rock. Anger and frustration filled his eyes with hot tears as he kicked and hit the wall. He crumbled to his feet and held his face in his hands, lost. His parents were gone. Mare was gone. Brael was gone. Ames was gone. Thule was gone. He could never go home. It was lost in darkness and there was nothing he could do to change it.

Hal felt someone wrap their arms around him.

“It’s alright. Hal, it’s alright.” Ayn’s voice rang through the torrents of falling water. “We’re all here for you. But we’ve got to go, we can’t stay.” Hal opened his eyes and put down his arms. Her eyes were full of empathy; Breckin and Oryn were standing just behind her holding the horses.

“Let’s go back,” Ayn’s voice was desperate. Hal shrunk to his knees. His fists were bleeding. Ames’ face filled his mind. He had ignored his only living relative for so long—thinking that he could one day return to his side. But that future was gone.

“Please.” Ayn yelled again. Hal looked her and for a moment. She was right—but her voice was suddenly obscured by the sound of whispers.

“What is that?” Oryn yelled out. But the whispers, all soft like a woman’s voice rang over his yell. Hal covered his ears with his hands and looked around desperately. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw shadows edge out of the forest behind them. Hal was sucked through the blur and back to the edge of the dark pool. He was growling and barring his teeth at the hoard of bronte erupting from the woods. But that wasn’t all he saw; he focused on the giant beast that led them. A panther with fur as black as the deepest shadow, the beast had six long arms and a woman’s face covered in fur. The beast had the same yellow eyes as the rest of the bronte. Ahlo thrust Hal out of his mind and fell forward onto the rocks in front of him. Ayn was still beside

him but she, Oryn and Breckin had turned to face the mass of yellow eyes that were encircling them. The horses screamed and ran away into the forest. Brontes chased after them. Moment's later ear piercing screams issued from the darkness but the sound of the whispers amassed. Hal raced back to Ahlo, jumping onto his back. Breckin, Ayn and Oryn followed. The she-beast in front of them joined the bronte in circling them.

*I've led them to their deaths.*

The she-beast ran towards Hal, stopping only to let out an ear-piercing scream. The whispers ceased. The panther stopped again and looked at the blue-eyed bronte with disdain.

In that moment, Ahlo linked his thoughts with Hal's, but this time, Hal was somehow seeing from his own eyes and Ahlo's. Hissing whispers returned with full force. All light was extinguished from the wood—everything but the countless yellow eyes popping against the indigo and black. They disappeared behind each other, reappeared and seemed to defy gravity. But her's were the largest. They shown more brightly than all the rest and they bore down on him with weight. He felt himself falling. The she-beast roared, but through the roar Hal could see. Visions like those Ahlo had showed to him through the feelings and emotions of their mind-link but clearer, more vivid and more terrifying.

Slamming against the ground, he was standing in an empty field, around him the dirt, grasses, and trees flew through the air disintegrating into the dust of a tornado of wind and whispers. The scene was different, but he had been here before. It was his dream but this time, all the warriors were around him. Racing forward towards the yellow eyes, the dust and whispers intensified and everything seemed to fade once again as he saw her. She was above the lake where the waterfall had been. A roar echoed through the growing void and there was another voice. Somebody or something was behind her, but Hal couldn't make it out. Staring through the

wind, he made out a face. Cold eyes were looking at him.

The whispers grew louder. They were searing his ears. Hal struggled to hear. “Iktarius.” The word made no sense to him, but the whispers were clearly repeating it now. Accusing him of something beyond his understanding.

Transfixed, his body went cold and rigid. His face was in the dirt; he tasted sand and blood. Everything began to fade into itself. Gray became white and white became hot orange. But then the she-beast, the cold eyes—everything fell into the water. The eyes disappeared. Relief washed over him and something was radiating on his face. He couldn’t see the flames, but he could smell them burning the earth. It encircled him, and as it did, the numbness faded. He was lying on his back in the forest. He struggled to stand. Ahlo stood too. Ayn, Breckin and Oryn were around him once again. Each of them covered in blood. They had been fighting the hoard but the mysterious fire had given them a moment of relief.

Through the flames, all the yellow eyes of the bronte were on them. The entire hoard began to growl and seemed to recoil in unison.

Hal gripped his spear and prepared to fight. Ayn had her bow with an arrow ready, both Breckin and Oryn had their swords withdrawn. That’s when they lunged forward. But as they did, a circle of fire erupted around them. The flames ignited the sky in a fiery orange glow. The first three bronte to hit it erupted in fire. They retreated, whimpering as they ran into the forest. The she-beast whirled around looking everywhere for the source of the magic.

Hal saw him, crouched within the circle he created, was Brael. Brael held his finger up to his mouth. The others saw him too. The fire around them began to recede and the rest of the hoard waited, pacing around the flames as they began to die. The last embers turned a deep orange, then red, and then purple as the light went out.

“The spear!” Brael’s eyes were wild as he pointed at Hal’s weapon. The beasts raced forward. Ahlo jumped in between Hal and the hoard, racing towards the yellow-eyed bronte. Ayn let her arrows fly and Oryn and Breckin stepped forward and engaged the beasts, driving their swords into the hides of the oncoming devils.

“Strike the ground!” Brael looked at him desperately. Hal took the spear in both hands and drove the dull end of the spear into the ground. Bright blue light beamed from the spear and shot out through the soil, radiating through the ground in waves.

“Take your friends and run. There won’t be anything else I can do to help you,” Brael said.

“But I have so many questions—“

“There isn’t time. You’ve got to go now. Everything you have been seeking is in that spear.” He pointed to the spear in his hand. “Everything I said to you in the forest, it’s all true. You are the savior of the forest, the heir of Iktarius.” There it was again, that word. With one final nod, Hal took the spear and ran to Ahlo.

“Jump on!” he yelled at his friends. He had no idea if Ahlo could carry them all, but they didn’t have a choice. He was their only escape. They each turned as another ray of light shot out into the sky. The beam surged and seized before exploding and igniting each and every one of the beasts that pursued them. Ampia screamed. But they were already gone; Ahlo bounded through the forest, narrowly missing trees, stumps, and boulders as they raced down from the mountain. Hal looked behind them, expecting to see the haunting yellow eyes. But he couldn’t ask any more of Ahlo. Hal could feel him shaking from the weight and his movements were not precise. He could hardly believe it when they reached the tree line.

The castle lights shown brightly through the night sky, reflecting peacefully into the

nearby lake. The bronte stayed on Ahlo's back all the way to the stables. Even as they got within the safety of the castle, Hal felt the gaze of Ampia and her yellow-eyed devils.

## Chapter 19

Riding into the stables, Ahlo's legs began to give out. The bronte was breathing so heavily, Hal thought his heart would give out.

"Ahlo stop!" he said forcefully. Ahlo finally stopped and Hal jumped off. Ayn followed and Oryn, but Breckin was slower.

"What's wrong?" Ayn said taking his hand as he descended from the bronte. Breckin didn't answer her. He didn't have to. His entire tunic was covered in blood. Hal's heart sank into his stomach as he turned to look at him. Breckin held his chest, but the bite was awful. A whole piece of meat was missing just above his ribcage.

"Breckin, why didn't you say something?" Ayn asked in a whisper.

"What should I have said?" he smiled weakly.

"We've got to get him inside now," she said. "Help me."

Ayn and together they hobbled forward. Oryn and Hal opened the trap door and helped hoist Breckin down. Once inside the dungeons, Ayn helped him through the darkness. Even under the roof of the castle, each of them looked through the black with fear on their hearts, afraid that the horrible yellow eyes would appear.

When they finally ascended the stairs and opened the door into the hallway, Hal breathed in the light.

"Go find my father!" Ayn said. "I'll take Breckin to the healer." Hal looked at Breckin, he was pale and he could see that blood was flowing from the wound, leaving a crimson trail behind him.

"Go!" she ordered angrily. She had seen the blood too. He and Oryn took off down the passageway into the hall, up the main stairs, and down the hallway into the king's study. But



when they walked through the thick wooden doors, the pair realized they were not the only ones who had come for the king.

Before them, the room was dark except for a dying fire. Two figures stood in front of the flames; one of them had a sword extended out to the other's throat. Oryn and Hal stepped closer into the room, their footfalls echoed across the stone. The faces of Aynarr and Aster were illuminated in the shallow light.

"What is this?" Hal asked running into the room. Aster was the one with the sword.

"Well if it isn't our own little hero." Aster didn't move the sword but turned his attention to Hal and Oryn, a look of disgust on his face.

"Put the sword down." Hal walked forward, his spear extended.

"Did you have fun on your epic quest with this one?" Aster's voice was condescending.

"Aster, leave Aynarr alone."

"You know what, Hal, I'm just about sick of you. Who do you think sent me here?"

"Give me the sword." Hal said.

"Don't do this." Aynarr said. But he wasn't speaking to Aster. He was looking at Oryn. Oryn blinked back unmoved. Aster looked at them, his eyes aflame, he was shaking. The tip of his sword quivered.

"Put it down," Hal said, warning in his voice. His spear was at his throat. "This is your last chance." Aster dropped his sword to the ground, but as Hal bent down to pick it up, he felt intense pain on the back of his head and fell forward into the blur of the dying orange and growing black. For a brief moment, everything disappeared. There was nothing but the sublime feeling of color. The shadows around him swirled in a great circle of movement, and then he felt someone fall next to him. The weight of the body reverberated through the stone. Hal struggled

to find his hands; everything seemed to be happening in slow motion, as though time itself had slowed. He reached for his head and found the source of the pain, then pushed himself up off the ground—just in time to see Oryn climb through a nearby window.

Remembering what just happened, Hal struggled to his feet. The world rolled around him. Just as he was back on two legs he tripped on his way to the window. Reaching down, he felt warm flesh and hot liquid. Looking through the dim light, he saw the face of Aster.

Hal jumped back in shock. The doors behind him opened and someone raced forward. Ayn appeared. She looked down at Aster and gasped.

“Hal, are you—“ but something else had caught her eyes.

“Father?” She turned from Hal to another body just feet away from them and screamed. She threw her arms around her father, shaking him.

Hal suddenly felt so unsure of everything. What had happened in the moments after he had fallen unconscious? Had Oryn set them up? Was this all just part of he and Aster’s plan—to fool both of them into believing that Oryn wasn’t the traitor he was? Surely not—but then why else would Oryn had run from him?

“Go!” she cried pointing to the window, her face stained with tears. Adrenaline raced through his veins as he jumped to the window and saw Oryn climb off the side of the castle, landing in the gardens below.

Hal’s eyes narrowed. He had to catch the traitor. Throwing his legs through the window, he jumped down onto a nearby balcony. He pulled himself over the ledge and prepared for the fall. He was already behind. He didn’t have time to be cautious. His legs felt the brunt of the fall and he struggled to begin the run. From above it had looked like Oryn had taken off through the gardens to the cliffs over the ocean. Hal ran as fast as he could. But there was no one in sight.

“Oryn! I know you’re out here!” He said, his lungs heavy with the weight of the run.

“You’re a coward!” Hal gripped his spear, but no one appeared. Hal turned round again and then he heard someone struggling to breath. Hal peered through the darkness and on the edge of the cliffs he saw a shadowy figure lying in the grass. He ran towards shadow and saw Oryn coughing and choking, his eyes were no longer gray, but were swirling into themselves, the color fading. Hal put his spear at his throat. Oryn looked at him and struggled. Hal noticed a strange black mark began to appear on his forehead. A long straight line with a thin line falling diagonal from the tip of one side.

“I didn’t—I didn’t,” he choked, but the mark on his forehead was now solid.

“Please—” In his last breaths, Hal could see the desperation. Oryn hadn’t killed Aynarr and as his eyes turned black and the life inside him faded, Hal knew the truth.

\* \* \*

Hal walked back inside the castle, he didn’t hear anything; he saw only shadows and blurs as the people of Fhyrrkat raced past him. The whole castle was ablaze with the news of the assassination. Hal walked slowly up to the king’s study, pushing himself past the crowds of people that stood in the passageway waiting for news. He reached the door, but was stopped by one of the many guards.

“Let me see her.” He said coldly to the guard. His eyes were dark and ominous.

“No one gets through by order of King Odis,” the guard barked.

“I said, let me through.”

The guard drew his sword, just as the door to the study opened. A face appeared and it took a second glance for Hal to realize that he was looking at Ayn. He face red, splotching and her hair a mess of tangles, he hardly recognized her.

“Let him through.” She said coldly. The door opened and Hal walked through into the same room, but everything was different. The fire was ablaze again and lamps had been lit, igniting the room in a veil of artificial light. There was a group of men around King Aynarr, his body covered by a thin blanket, only his legs poked out. Aster had been moved to the side of the room, his body also covered by a blanket.

“What is he doing here?” Odis barked across the room, looking at Hal with a look of distaste.

“Your son is dead.” Hal said flatly. Odis looked at him and for a moment his face wild, as if it were about to break into an assortment of emotions.

“You lie,” he spat back.

“I found him lying by the cliffs, he had just fled the scene.” Hal said. Odis breathed heavily, falling back into the chair behind him. He pointed to the door and a handful of guards ran inside. He grabbed his heart as he looked deeply into the fire.

“How?” Odis said, still staring into the fire, his face in a trance.

“I don’t know. He was choking—he wasn’t himself,” Hal explained. The doors swung open again and one of the guards walked through.

“The prince is dead,” the guard said. Odis cupped his hands over his face. “But he’s not gone. His soul has been taken,” They sat watching him. Hal had no idea what these words meant. Odis shook himself from the spell and stood to his feet, charging towards Hal.

“You.” He said. Hal looked around. Inside his own mind, Hal called to Ahlo.

“You did this! Guards, take him!” The guards that were left charged forward towards Hal. He gripped his spear, the tip pointed, ready. They stopped short.

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Take him!” Odis ordered. The guards drew their swords. Hal turned quickly to Ayn, he drew her close to him.

“Ahshare. Sundown,” he whispered before lunging past the guards, throwing himself out the same window he had jumped from as he pursued Oryn. Ayn ran to the window, and saw Hal ride off out of the gardens on top of Ahlo. They d

## Chapter 20

*The man had finally gone. But the interruption had not been a waste. Finally sure he was alone, the keeper put down his nib, pulled out the book; a thin, triumphant smile spread across his lips. The guesswork was over. He had found the missing piece he had been searching for.*

Ayn awoke the next morning lying in her bed. Sleep had given her an escape into oblivion, but she felt herself waking up and that meant facing the events of the previous night. She didn't want to open her eyes or move. She felt the truth in the back of her mind and if she moved, it meant accepting that she was now in a world where her father was not.

She dressed in black dress and was met at the door by a member of Odis' guard.

"They're waiting for you down for breakfast, ma'am," the guard said.

Odis had anticipated her escape. She didn't look at the guard, but simply descended down the stairs, her eyes fixed at the floor. She sat through breakfast but didn't eat a thing. Inside she felt empty, and she had no desire to fill the void. Through the morning, she sat in silence. The rest of the world moved around her but she refused to partake. She refused to see Odis sitting in her father's chair. She refused to accept any of it.

After she was excused from the meal, Ayn walked through the castle to the gardens. Without making any sound, she picked a lone lily and proceeded through the side entrance to the north wing. Her bodyguard followed her at a distance. The north wing was the one part of the castle she had avoided. Every memory she had of the place was tarnished in loss. It was the place her mother had been prepared for burial, the place her father was now being prepared, and now the place where Breckin was dying. She had walked him into the room last night and the healers took him from her. They placed him on a table and immediately began to treat his wounds. She

remembered the terrible look on their faces as they peeled back his shirt. She remembered the pale color of his face as he fainted. When he started to scream, she had left to find Hal and Oryn who had gone in search of her father—

Her footfalls echoed through the large open room as she entered the healing room. The sunlight poured in through the windows on each side. It felt oddly peaceful. Breckin was lying on the table. His skin even paler than it had been the night before. A healer greeted her with a weak smile as she approached his bed.

“How’s he doing?” she asked.

“He lost consciousness after they sewed him up—he’s been gone ever since.” The healer paused, looking down. “They say he will pass before nightfall.” Ayn didn’t say anything but placed the lily on his bedside table, sat down in the chair next to him and grabbed his hand.

She remained there for a long time until outside the windows of the castle she saw the sun hanging just above the mountains. It was almost time, but before she left, she had to say goodbye. She leaned over Breckin’s lifeless face and kissed his cheek.

“Goodbye, dear friend” she whispered in his ear and then turned and walked back through the hallway.

Followed by her guard, she walked up the main stairs to her father’s study. When they reached the door, she stopped and looked at the guard with an empty stare.

“Give me a moment.” He nodded and she opened the door and went inside. His body had been moved and was downstairs being prepared for burning. Later that night they would scatter her father’s ashes over the cliffs as part of the kingdom’s custom.

She walked into the room. The fire was gone but everything else was just as he left it. She walked over to his desk and sat in the large leather chair. There were so many memories in this

room. She couldn't remember how many times she had run up here and saw him sitting just as she did now. She could almost see his face looking up at her as she remembered. Her heart broke remembering.

She shook the feeling away and turned her attention to the desk before her. There were the usual maps, the usual stacks of paper, but lying just below these items she noticed something odd on the corner of one of the papers in the stack—a marking that looked strangely familiar. She reached for it and pulled out a piece of paper with the ancient letters that looked similar to the ones from the book that Oryn had given her.

The book. She suddenly remembered the book that Oryn had stolen from his father. Or had that been part of the plan—had the book even been Odis' at all—or just another piece of the puzzle in his deception. She grabbed the stack of papers, folded them up and tucked them in the inside of her palm so that when she opened the door and rushed back out with the guard on her heels, they weren't seen.

Back in her room, Ayn pulled back the tapestry and opened the trap door. The book was still there. She pulled it out, and sat down on her bed and opened it. A map fell out from one of the pages. It was an ordinary map of Mira, but out in the ocean, her father had drawn an island in and written the word Irdita. Leafing through the book, she saw the word written. She had never noticed the familiar words written in her language before. She suddenly saw more and more of them.

“Father, what were you trying to do?” she whispered. But as she looked through the pages, her question was quickly answered. It had come from a book; the edges of the paper had been ripped. Her father had underlined everything she needed to know:

“ . . . And the histories of the forging and making of the great weapons of light were



written in three trivola written by the great Agmorian . . .”

Holding the book in her hands, she now understood why Odis had hunted the book. He was looking for the great weapons of light—the same weapons that brought power to their bearer. She had to find Hal.

*Ashmere. Sundown.* His words reverberated in her head. She got off the bed and looked out over the balcony. The sun was beginning to fall behind the mountains.

Opening her hope chest, she grabbed a small sack and threw items inside. Taking the book, she put the papers inside one of the pages and wrapped the book in a long piece of cloth. It wasn't the best disguise, but it was better than nothing. With her provisions on her back, she went to the balcony and climbed down, following her usual route. When she reached the ground, she let go of the castle walls and felt the weight of the moment. She was truly leaving and would perhaps never return. Running through the gardens, the peet gravel crunched under her. Minutes later, she reached the entrance to the underground tunnels.

She didn't know what lay ahead of them, but she and Hal's path was set. They were the guardians of light. Ayn felt this truth burning in her heart as she descended from the castle passageways down into the darkness of the caves where she knew Hal was waiting for her.

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## Vita

Meagan is from Little Rock, Arkansas. While working on her English Education degree from the University of Central Arkansas, she spent her free time running Division I Cross Country and Track as a UCA Bear. After graduating, she moved to El Paso, Texas with her husband and three dogs. *Keeper of Darkness* stands as her thesis for the completion of her Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing that she has attempted while attending the University of Texas at El Paso. Over the last three years while completing this degree she has served as a Teachers Assistant for the Rhetoric and Writing Studies Department.

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