



CHRISTOPHER D.  
ELDRIDGE

BOOK ONE  
OF THE  
INFINITY WAR

THE  
MARK  
OF A  
LEGEND

## The Mark of a Legend

### Prologue

The cold iron of the throne pressed against my dying flesh. Even the smallest movements I made tore the rotting skin from my thighs. The pain wrenched away my breath.

Shadows flickered across the room, cast by the dancing flames of the torches hanging from the walls. I knew better than to think they were demons or ghosts, but the shifting darkness had a life of its own.

If Delvos did not come soon, this place would be my tomb.

By my command, he'd barred the doors when he left. The sight of my condition would only frighten the men, as would the pungent stench of rot that filled the cavernous chamber.

All I could do was wait, while the body I had stolen continued to reject the transfer. In the many centuries I had been thieving bodies, no rejection had ever been so swift or accelerated so quickly.

Damn! What a fool I'd been.

I should have known better than to take a man of such age. I'd known the risks of thieving a body past childhood, but a mind and body as strong as his is hard to find. I'd been unable to deny the temptation. The transanimation went smoothly; the man's mind and soul had been cleanly purged, and his brain and body had become my vessel.

But the heart governs all.

Vendrian scientists had been wrong, as I'd always expected. The heart is not just an organ that pushes blood through the body, but rather an emotional gateway that feeds the mind, the source of premonition, psychokinesis, and telepathy. It is where the soul resides.

Stealing a man's brain only takes over his mind, eradicating his thoughts and absorbing his memories. But to truly gain control over another, heart and soul must merge.

And I'd thought I could overcome the heart. But too much time had passed. Heart and soul had intertwined. Wrenching the soul free had killed the heart. I suppose it is much the same as two lovers who've grown old together. When one dies, the other is soon to follow.

A sudden burst of pain ripped through me, and I ground my teeth. A tooth cracked. Fire spread from my mouth and surged up my face.

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The pain of a rejected transanimation is like nothing else in this world. The body dies and decomposes simultaneously. Usually horrifically slow. Cells perish one by one, organs slowly fail. Eventually the blood vessels rupture. Medicine cannot slow the process. Sedatives cannot ease the pain. I had only the strength of my mind to keep me from madness.

I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, then shifted into the Body of Negation, one of the thirteen secret Mind-Master techniques I'd learned from the Sagery. Focusing my mind, I merged my consciousness with my breathing. I visualized shutting off the pain centers in my brain, and slowly, the agony abated.

I had spent over a hundred years in the Sagery, learning their secrets and mastering the arts of the mind. It had taken me far longer to uncover their whereabouts and find a way in without being caught. Of course, the real challenge had been my battle to steal a Sage's body. It had been a young boy, barely old enough to speak, yet with a mind remarkably strong. The Sages are, after all, known for their brilliance.

The door burst open, and Delvos stumbled in. He turned to look at someone behind him, a robed and hooded figure with smoldering yellow eyes staring out at me. Kasumi. The look of concern on her face gave me comfort. Perhaps she cared after all.

Without a word, Delvos slammed the door shut and bolted it tight. He approached, and his long white hair swayed behind him with each step. Halfway across the room, he stopped, and threw a hand across his nose and mouth. His red-rimmed eyes widened. "Logeron, have mercy."

"The Founder cannot help," I replied. "Tell me you have good news."

He straightened and tried to compose himself, keeping his hand over his nose to avoid the stink of death that strangled the air.

"I brought the dreamseer with us as you requested," he said.

"And what of the boy?"

"The dreamseer couldn't get into his mind." Delvos's eyes shifted. "Well, not at first. But I convinced him to keep trying." He looked down and put his hands to his temples.

"Get on with it, man."

"The dreamseer went mindmad."

Elation ran through me. "The boy's stronger than you first anticipated. Good. Finally, after all these centuries, I'll have a worthy vessel."

"There's more," Delvos said, voice rising. "The dreamseer hasn't stopped screaming."

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Nearly drove us all insane on the journey back.” He shuddered. “We took him to the medica, and they say his brain is scrambled. Nothing they can do but euthanize him.”

“Dammit!” I slammed my fist into my hand, and then immediately regretted it. The flesh burst, and I screamed, instinctively yanking my burning hand back and cradling it close to my body. “How could Sarazan’s mind have cracked? He was the best dreamseer we had.”

Delvos shook his head. “I told you the boy was strong.”

I could sense his guilt for pushing Sarazan. “It’s not your fault. Sarazan should have known better.”

The risk we body-thieves took two or three times a century, a dreamseer took on dozens, sometimes hundreds of times a year. Inserting your mind into another’s to read thoughts and collect memories is no different than a marauder entering a village to steal women and children. The mind sees it as an enemy that must be eradicated. But push too hard, stay too long, and the invaded will gather its troops. And if his soldiers are stronger, the dreamseer’s transposed mind will be destroyed.

Then again, mind transposition was meant to be a stealth operation. In and out quick. Transanimation, on the other hand, is an all-out war. Souls in battle for control over a single mind and body. A shagan often started as a dreamseer in hopes of one day learning how to body-thieve. But only a few of us knew the secrets of transanimation.

“He wasn’t in there for more than a moment,” Delvos said. “Maybe they knew we were coming.”

“Even if they did, Sarazan should have had more time to dive. Sounds like the boy will be a challenge.” A smile crept across my lips. “It’s been a long time since I’ve had one.”

He frowned. “You can’t still be thinking of going through with this.”

I’d taught Delvos the very secrets of the Founder, everything I’d ever learned. He was not my blood, yet I valued him as much as I valued my own life.

“After a thousand years, you choose now to doubt my abilities?”

He shook his head. “It’s just that I’ve never seen a mind like his, and in your current condition, the transanimation could fail. Your soul could become lost between realms. Or worse, you could merge with the boy. Then you’d both be lost in each other’s minds.”

“That has always been the risk of immortality.”

“I know, but we can’t afford to lose you.”

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I laughed. “You worry too much, Delvos.”

“And you don’t worry enough.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, my friend. I’ve seen religions fall, civilizations crumble, ten thousand wars from east to west. I know what’s coming. The boy and I need each other. If I cannot have his mind and body, then he will have my memories and my knowledge. Then perhaps he will do what I could not.”

“You assume the boy’s heart is good. With his mind and your knowledge, he could be a hundred times worse than Kanatos. He’d make the Mage Wars look like a Highland skirmish.”

“Then his people *are* mages?”

“Yes. And I sensed blood magic.”

Delvos Whitemane had thieved an empath’s body long ago and had been fond of them ever since. Now he only stole bodies that flowed with empath blood. Being able to “sniff” out magic made him an invaluable shagan, but transferring to a mage was always risky. Many body-thieves had been lost in between realms when trying to take a mage as their vessel. A wise shagan always brought his brothers and sisters with him to take a powerful mind. That’s why I would have to bring mine.

To take the boy, I would need an army.

Fear sat behind Delvos’s sky-blue eyes. A rare thing for a man who’d lived a thousand years.

“What else did you sense?” I asked.

“I . . .” He swallowed hard. “I don’t know. Once Sarazan started screaming we had to leave.”

I watched the subtle movements of his eyes, the way his pupils dilated. “I know you well, my friend. What are you hiding? Tell me what’s troubling you.”

“Magic I’ve never encountered. Listen to reason and ignore this boy. We’ll find you another body.”

There was something special about the child, something drawing me to him. I wanted to share my feelings with Delvos, but at our core, we shagans were scientists, governed by sound logic and reason. As our leader, I could not be swayed by emotions or unexplainable hunches. And yet, after all my long years, I knew that sometimes intuition trumped reason. God, or the cosmos, or some force stronger than my own was pulling me toward this boy.

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My mind was set. “The necrosis of this vessel is accelerating. And the pain is getting worse. There is no time and no better choice. I want every shagan summoned to meet us in Vendria. We leave at dawn.”

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The Northern Taiga stretched before me in a haze of misty fog, the blue needles of the winterblooms bearded white with icicles.

Delvos plodded beside me, his breath steaming. He gripped my shoulder and stared out into the misty air. “The boy is not far. A strong pulse of magic courses with each beat of his heart, and along with it, more than a hundred others.”

“So many?”

He nodded.

“Stay close to me. The boy will be guarded.” I looked back to the nearly two hundred of my shagan brothers and sisters who waited for my command.

I gave the signal, and my brethren marched past us. Beneath their robes lay cylindrical metal drums, machines built in our underground labs. It made them appear like an army of monstrous hunchbacks lurching through the forest.

Vaporized glycerin poured out of their sleeves and from beneath their robes, pumped through tubes that ran to the machines strapped to their backs. As it came into contact with the moisture in the air, a dense cloud of fog formed around each of them, concealing their movements.

A few dozen men and women stayed behind. Armed with their own specialized machines, they waited for a different command.

Then suddenly, a blast of heat, hot as a furnace, washed over me. The intensity burned away the fog, momentarily revealing us.

“They know we’re here,” I shouted.

Blurs of dark blue moved among the ice-frosted trees. Before my eyes could focus on whatever they were, a figure rose out of the ground, revealing the pale naked torso of . . . a monster, or maybe a man. Twisted, misshapen, most of his body was covered with leaves and twigs held to his skin by patches of black mud. His haunting blue eyes glowed as bright as the moon above. Even though I didn’t believe in such superstition, I couldn’t help but think that the Spirit Moon full in midday was a bad omen.

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In a flash, the man's clawed hand closed around the leg of the shagan before him.

My shagan brother screamed, then spun, tearing the gray cloth in the naked man's grasp. Beneath the hood I recognized my old friend, Yen. Waxy and pale, his face appeared lifeless. His pupils, mere pinpricks. His eyes, a lifeless gray.

Delvos was right. Blood magic. Yen was now under the dark mage's control, lost to us.

Yen reached into his cloak, searching for something to use against us--an explosive, a corrosive chemical, maybe even a biotoxin--and then he yanked out an unopened vial.

He went to uncork it, and I moved into the Mind-Master technique, the Mind that Stretches Time. In perfect unison, billions of neurons propagated a unifying signal, flooding their surrounding synaptic environments with a host of powerful chemicals. In a flash, my entire brain came alive with electrical and chemical activity.

Everything around me slammed to a halt.

The Mind-Master techniques took a vast toll on the mind and body. Using them would accelerate the degeneration of my body, but I had always known this would be a one-way trip. I would push this vessel until it disintegrated, and I would return with a new body. Or I would not return at all.

My eyes moved past Yen, looking out into the Taiga. Dozens of monstrous men hid among the dark silhouettes of the icy winterblooms. No longer blurs, as they had been just moments ago, they appeared as frozen as the trees, as still and silent as if locked in ice. Of course, that was only my accelerated perception.

In truth, the creatures were moving quickly, hunched over, hands and feet propelling them forward across the ground like beasts. I wondered if they were even human or if their strange way of life had simply twisted them into monsters.

There were more of them peering up through holes like the one the blood mage had risen up out of.

I turned back to Yen, and shifted into the Body of Accelerated Force.

A tingling wave rushed down my body. Adrenaline surged through my veins. Acetylcholine burst from every neuromuscular junction.

In a fraction of a second my muscles expanded violently as a host of excitatory hormones flooded my body, further ripping my brittle skin. But I felt only the swell of electrical current that blasted through me like bolts of lightning.

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With a snap of my wrist, cold metal slid down my forearm. The wooden handle glided into my hand, and I cocked the trigger back with a click.

*Forgive me, Yen.*

I fired.

My hold over the Mind-Master techniques slipped away. Time sped up. A loud bang shook the air, and my hand kicked upwards. Yen's head flew back, brains spraying out in a bloody mist.

I collapsed to my knees, exhausted, every part of my body burning. Lowering my eyes, I turned from the gruesome sight of having to kill one of my own.

In truth, I had never liked using the weapon. It was dangerous and highly illegal, and outside of the shagan community, no one had seen one since the First Age when technology had been banned. It was why I'd only ever made one.

The bones in my thumb cracked as I clicked the trigger a second time. Pain rippled up my trembling arm as I lifted the gun. But as I aimed for the blood mage's head, he vanished back into the hole from which he had sprung.

Delvos took me by the arm and lifted me to my feet. The tendons and muscles in my shoulder tore, and my vision dimmed from the blinding agony. I swore he was going to rip my arm off. I bit my tongue and held back my screams.

I focused on my anger, using rage to bind the pain. "Set the ground afire. Leave them no place to hide."

Hoarfrost coated the ground in an icy blanket, protecting the dry tinder beneath. But as the flames blasted across the needle-laden earth, it turned the thin coat of ice to vapor, and the ground caught fire.

"Pump methane down the holes," I commanded, "then burn them out."

Screams pierced the air--the sounds of men burning alive. I took no joy in it. Not because I knew well their pain, but because I'd killed more men than I could count and seen countless more die. Many of their faces still haunted me, as did their cries, which filled some of my darkest dreams.

The price of immortality is a heavy one. I had not etched away my soul for everlasting life, but rather for the chance to set humanity free. If we shagans should fall and our knowledge be lost, we would forever be bound by the strings of our invisible gods--or at least beings who



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fancied themselves as such. Never allowed to evolve as the Founder knew we could.

I looked back to the two women who waited for my commands. My two specialists. Blood magic was dangerous, but a dark mage possessed far more powerful magic, and if there were as many mages here as Delvos had sensed, I'd have to use more drastic measures than fire.

“Naya, arm the bio-cannon.”

Her emerald eyes narrowed and she grinned. Then she opened her cloak to reveal a hundred tiny pockets sewn into the thick, gray fabric. “With what, my lord?”

“Devil’s Breath.”

“But the boy,” Delvos cried.

“We have antidotes. Just get me to him quickly.”

He hesitated. Devil’s Breath was both dangerous and deadly. It took hold the moment it was inhaled, converting the body’s energy to heat by causing the mitochondria to uncouple in rapid progression. Within minutes, the body burns itself out. The blood boils. Every cell turns to dust. There are few worse ways to die.

But only the boy needed to live, and in truth, I knew he was the only one who could.

Delvos nodded, for he knew there was no other way.

Naya went to work. Beside her, Kasumi’s bright yellow eyes glowed within the darkness of her hood. I nodded, and she closed the dozen feet between us in a blink.

“At your service, my lord,” she said, removing her hood.

“My body is too frail to fight. I’ll need your blades.”

Delvos scowled at the tiny woman before him. “I can get you to the boy safely. I don’t need her help.”

Kasumi stared icily up at Delvos, her narrow face as hard as stone. She removed her robe, revealing a body of corded muscle and sinew. Dozens of striations ran across her chest, muscles replacing what once had been her breasts. A leather belt hung below her navel, along with a thin strap of cloth covering her crotch and a sheathed blade of godsmetal resting against each hip.

Kasumi, the Mist. She was what we called a Burner, a body thief who burned through vessels fifty years faster than most. This was due to her profound skill of the warrior Mind-Master techniques. Techniques so taxing on the mind and body that they could be used only a few times a day. But Kasumi would hone her newly acquired body until she could carry out such techniques at will and virtually without limit. She had never lived into her thirties, but every

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version of her had always been young and beautiful.

“You’re just jealous that he loves me. And not you.” She threw her head back and laughed.

“Why you little . . .” Delvos reached for his sword.

I grabbed his wrist. “You are my hand, Whitemane, but Kasumi is the blade. I need you both.”

Blazing bodies poured from the tunnels dug below the earth. The creatures shrieked and wailed like banshees. Kasumi unsheathed her blades, my gifts to her long ago for saving my life. A gift made from a metal so rare I’d never given it twice. White as ice, the blades would never break, nor ever need to be sharpened.

“You’re still in love with her,” he whispered into my ear. “That’s why you want her near.”

I’d loved Kasumi once. That’s why I’d taught her the secrets of immortality and had given her a gift I could have used to buy a kingdom. I’d spent more years teaching her the Mind-Master techniques than anyone else ever, even though she’d only taken to two of them.

And yet, she had never loved me back.

“That love died long ago,” I lied, burying the pain of her rejection. “There is no one better with a blade, and if we’re to survive, we’ll need her.”

He grumbled, but said nothing, for the truth of my words rang clear.

Hundreds of swords slid from leather sheaths, long and curved and deadly sharp. I did not need to give the order. Every one of my soldiers had fought by my side before.

The burning creatures charged us with inhuman speed, running on all fours, their backs and legs twisted and misshapen to accommodate their unnatural gait.

“Naya, wait for my signal.” I turned to Whitemane. “Lead me to the boy.”

Kasumi’s eyes were fixed on the enemy ahead. “Point me in the right direction and stay close behind me.”

When I was just a boy, I had a love for movies. This was of course before the Great Law had been established and the world had all but changed in the blink of an eye. I’d been fascinated that the still frames of pictures could be animated to show the smooth movements of life. Watching Kasumi move and fight reminded me of those nostalgic days before Vendria had hanged my parents and nearly every one I had known for the unwillingness to forget the past.

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Kasumi did not appear to run or move, she simply was someplace in one moment and in another the next. You could never see where she was or where she was going, only where she had been. She was the mist, something you could touch but never grasp, see but never truly behold.

Sometimes I would move into the Mind that Stretches Time and watch her. Even then she moved with such speed that my eye could barely follow. But to watch her was to know genius, to see a master at work. Every movement was perfect, deliberate, and yet so graceful, so poetic, like the hand-strokes of a Lelandian painter.

I'd spent many years of my life watching her train. The endless hours of her repetitive forms. She'd tried to teach me, but had never really had the patience to teach, and I never really had the skill to learn.

We moved quickly, following the carnage that Kasumi left in her wake. Bodies appeared to collapse on their own. Appendages dropped from bloodied stumps, and heads fell from severed necks as Kasumi moved through them like the wind, invisible blades severing everything they touched.

"They're only familiars," Whitemane shouted, "drawing us away from their masters." He pointed north. "The mages are fleeing."

I spun around. "Naya, fire the cannon!"

A thunderous boom shook the ground. A moment later, hundreds of sharp cracks sounded above. The sky turned white and rained death. The familiars collapsed as the Devil's Breath took hold.

"This way," cried Delvos, pulling me through the trees.

My heels had split open, and each step felt like landing on a bed of razors. It wouldn't be long before the bones in my legs would crack or break. Every beat of my heart hurt. Every breath burned like fire.

I gripped Delvos with what strength I had left, willing myself to keep moving. I could feel it. It wouldn't be long now before my veins would burst.

Just ahead of us, Kasumi reappeared in the midst of several dead familiars. She stood there, waiting for us to catch up to her. When we did, I collapsed at her feet.

Delvos stifled a cry and knelt beside me. "Are you still with us?" The look on his face was grim.

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Tears welled in my eyes, and suddenly I was blind. I tried not to scream but the pain was too much. I knew then it wasn't tears that flowed down my face. It was blood. The blood vessels in my eyes had ruptured. Every one of them. The pain was like a thousand fiery needles plunged into each cornea.

"The end is near," I whispered.

"How long?" asked Delvos, voice shaking.

Blood ran down my face and out of my mouth and ears. "A few minutes, maybe more."

Strong pressure pushed into my back and under my thighs. Deep, blinding pain spread across my body, as if I was being crushed by the ground beneath me.

"I'll carry him," snapped Delvos.

"There's no time to argue." Kasumi's voice was sharp as a blade. "I'm stronger. You just get us to the boy."

The whole world rose and fell, and with each moment, my body slammed against what felt like stone. *Give me death*, I thought, wanting to be rid of the unbearable torment.

*Must keep my wits. Must not give in now.*

I moved into the Mind of a Thousand Mirrors. Transferring all the energy of my non-vital organs to my brain, I divided my mind over and over. One by one, and within each mind, I unlocked each Mind-Master. The Box of Contemplation and Silence gave me clarity; the Frozen Heart of the Iron Mind gave me resolve; the Mind that Stretches Time gave me insight; the Body of Negation took away the pain; the Mind of Compromising Perception stripped away all of my mortal senses.

The outside world came alive within me. I could sense it, almost see it. A world of darkness illuminated by the lights of all things, living and non-living.

Kasumi carried me in her arms, her heartbeat pulsing against me, beating like a war drum. In a flood of noise, her emotions and thoughts washed over me. And so did Whitemane's and those of a hundred other organisms nearby.

But I pushed them all aside and focused on just one. The boy's. He was near. The Devil's Breath had him in its grip, but the strength of what flowed in his blood kept it at bay, kept it from strangling him. How could such a thing be possible?

*No time to think on it.*

I could not see the boy, but I could feel him. He was close enough now that I could make

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my move. But he was not alone. His people were with him. I would have to trust that my shagan brothers and sisters would be able to defeat them.

Knowing what was about to come, I merged the separate parts of my mind, then detached my mind from my body. With it, I separated my soul from my heart, and transposed both mind and soul onto the boy. As I felt the telltale signs of our minds merging, I severed the ties from my former body, letting it die within Kasumi's arms.

The boy and I became one, two minds, two souls sharing a single vessel. That very second, I shut down all of his senses, blinding him to the outside world.

The many hundreds of times I had transposed my mind had allowed me to bear the horror of what was about to take place. The confusion, the madness, the incomprehensible pain.

The moment our minds merged, his crashed against me, transferring his identity. All of his past began to weave its way into mine. Our thoughts and feelings intertwined. His memories became mine and my memories became his. Along with our dreams, our fears, our deepest darkest secrets. All of it, within a fraction of a second.

*Mother holds us in her arms. Her warm touch gives comfort, her smile warms the heart. She loves us with every fiber of her being, just as we love her with all that we are. And father, he reaches a strong, weathered hand out to place it against us. So big, so strong. His strength, his invincibility takes away all our fears. Beside him, uncle looks down at us with pride. The smile on his face, the way he holds his chest high, the tears that well in his eyes. He runs a finger across our feet, laughing, and we laugh too. He can always make us laugh . . . .*

Memories, so many memories. So much emotion . . . pulling at me, unraveling me.

*Must not let them become me, must not forget . . . .*

I gathered all of those raw feelings and recollections. In an instant, I split my mind in two and moved his past from one mind to the other. I wove all of his emotions and memories together as I called forth the Locked Mind Without a Key. Then I placed them inside. All of what made him who he was vanished from my perception, and I regained my own identity.

*Who are you?* he asked. *What are you doing here?* His words were woven with confusion and anger.

We could hear each other's thoughts, feel each other's emotions. But I knew how to keep mine at bay. How to trick and lie without being caught, just as I might do when speaking face to face.

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*I am you, I replied. But a part that you have buried.*

He was confused and full of mistrust. He wanted proof, wanted me to ease his worries with his own reflections. But they were hidden from me inside the Locked Mind. I could almost sense them, almost reach out and touch them. They would not be mine until he was gone. Only then could I slowly assimilate them into my own memories and have the knowledge of all he had seen and lived.

It would not be long before his mind realized the truth. I would have to lull him into my confidence before I could sever the ties that bound him to this body. But just as he had transferred his past to me, so too had I transferred my past to him. He did not know his memories from mine, and I could ease his worries with my own reflections.

*You're scared, aren't you?* I pressed softly against him, infusing a sense of confidence, trust, and strength.

He relaxed.

*We're under attack, and you're unsure what to do.*

He stiffened at my words, and a part of him grasped for what stood right in front of him, what he could see with his own eyes if I had not blinded him. Our minds still shared the same brain, and as long as I remained blind, so would he.

*I am here to give you the courage to stand against your enemies and the power to defeat them.* I pushed a little harder, and flared a memory of mine to show him my strength.

Courage welled up inside him, and his mind relaxed. Like a gap opening in a soldier's armor, I readied the blade to plunge into his flesh.

A piercing shriek broke through the veil. I recognized that cry of pain. That voice was Kasumi's.

My heart quickened, and I let down my guard. My hold over the boy slipped. The world came into focus. All of our senses returned--sights, sounds, smells.

Kasumi knelt before a man, her face twisted up in pain. He wore a long, green robe. His hair was yellow and golden. I could feel him, a strange pulse that radiated out of his body, beating like a heart. Magic. Magic he was using to bind her, holding both her body and mind.

Just as I wondered what sort of power could enslave a woman as strong as Kasumi, I knew, for the boy's thoughts were mine.

Only feet away from Kasumi, a man laid dead, guts spilling out of his stomach. His river

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blue eyes stared out into nothing. Like the others, he wore the same green robe and had the same golden yellow hair. Seeing him dead, the child's pain wrenched at me. Tears welled in our eyes.

I gazed across the once-white field, now painted red with blood and littered with corpses. His people. My people. Our anguish intertwined, compounding upon one another.

Then a ridge of black caught my eye. Soldiers flowed over the sloping ridge and poured down across the hillside. The only sound was the thunder of their movement. Their faces and torsos were painted black, their pants gleamed a stark white. Deathmonks, an army larger than both of ours combined.

*How had they found us?*

At their back trailed a single man dressed all in white. Face and hands ghostly pale. Not paint, but white ink tattooed into the skin. Could it be Ashvik, the High Monk? I reached out, transposing a part of my mind, looking to see if he could be the dreaded White Hand of Death.

He grabbed hold of my projection, as if he'd seen me coming all along. *At last I've found you*, he said.

*You coward!*

Ashvik laughed. *I've bided my time, waiting for such an opportunity. And now, you've not only gathered all of your people together, but you've led me to the only surviving Soulwarden.*

*Soulwarden? That blood line died off long ago . . . .*

I reached out and saw what I had failed to see before. Thousands of projections emanated from the boy, soothing the departed souls of his brethren and mine. I could hear him speaking to them, guiding them, showing them the way.

I turned my focus back to Ashvik. *How did you...?*

For a brief moment Ashvik opened up his defenses, and two words trickled from his mind. *A traitor.*

*I have no traitors.* Do I? I probed his thoughts, searching for a name, hoping it was a lie. But whatever weakness he had shown had vanished. Pressing against his mind was like trying to move a mountain. He was impregnable. I knew then he had wanted me to know that someone had betrayed me. But who?

With the boy's eyes, I looked out into the forest, searching the faces of both the living and the dead. A looming darkness grew within my mind as I desperately searched for him;

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searched for the one man I could not bear to betray me.

*No. It cannot be.*

Like a blade carving itself into my flesh, the High Monk's mouth turned upward in a wicked smile. That single expression was an affirmation of horrific truth, as if spoken by God himself.

*Whitemane, where are you?* It was a desperate cry I knew, but how could Delvos betray me, and after all these years?

Ashvik took hold of my mind, his iron grip like hands upon my throat. His strong, weathered voice was like a gong banging inside my head. *Your people are an abomination, a plague. You take innocent life in order to defer your own mortality. You defy God's divine plan for your fate. But only God should live forever. Today, I will finally put to rest this evil.*

*You fool,* I shouted back. *You know nothing of our cause or of who you serve. You and your Church use the name of God to justify your murder. But you are slaves, puppets of puppets, blindly following your masters' actions. Today, I will cleanse the world of your sickness.*

My words would mean nothing to him, but I would say them nonetheless. I would have him hear the truth before I took his life, and the life of his monks. *But you are right. I am a plague. I am the pallor horse--a being of divine purpose. I carry truth, and with it, I will set this world free.*

As the deathmonks swarmed among us, I knew there was only one hope for victory--to take the boy's body now, and then unite both of our peoples.

I wrenched free of Ashvik's grip, and that small part of my transposed mind returned to the boy. Instantly, his raw emotions flowed over me. He knew who I was, knew that I had sent a dreamseer to probe his mind. The recollection of Sarazan, transposing his mind onto the boy's, turned the flame of his anger to wildfire. Rage boiled up like bile within him.

*You are an abomination,* he shouted, *violating the natural order of our journeys. So many souls are lost because of you. So many that I cannot save them all. They cry out to me, endlessly, begging for the way. And now you would see me lost as well. Who then will show the wayward the path between realms? Who then will save the lost?*

His words shook me to my core. But he was not the first to have done so. Transanimation was always painful. Each time felt like killing a friend, a brother, a sister. Each one had etched a scar into my soul, and the guilt of it never faded.



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*I am sorry, I replied, truly I am. But in the end, I will save far more than what I take. There can be no salvation without sacrifice.*

*That is because you are of the mindset that there can be no victory without war, he replied.*

*As a Soulwarden, there is little you cannot see. And yet, there are things that even you are blind to, child, for I do not fight a war against men. Like the mountains or the oceans, what I fight against cannot be reasoned or bargained with. An enemy that is not subject to the whims and fancies of humankind, or the joys and pains of mortals. You may think that all life is sacred, that none is greater or lesser than another, but you have not lived to see what I have seen.*

A deep sadness ebbed and flowed from him. Many lifetimes of pain was buried in the depths of his young heart. Such burden is why the Soulwardens fell into darkness long ago. The pain had crushed their benevolent spirits, and twisted them into monsters. They gave birth to their own monsters, and the bloodline turned to poison. Lost souls became their fodder and slaves to their command. What good there had once been had died. And yet, another shepherd to the lost had been born into this world. I do not know how or why.

If I had known, I would have never come to take him. But now I had no choice.

I looked out into the many faces one last time, searching. *Delvos, where are you? Had you known what the boy was and kept it from me? Were you an informer for the Church all along?*

A wave of anger pressed in around me, and suddenly, the boy's mind slammed against mine. Memories and emotions flooded my mind as he began his psychic assault upon me. The outside world turned to darkness once again. The metaphysical ropes that bound my mind to his began to break.

He swarmed me with the regimented focus of a hardened warrior and the precision of a mind that knew the weaknesses that lay within me. He grabbed at my own memories, plundering my past, taking hold of painful memories and sparking them like flint against kindling. They caught fire. Blinding me with the pain, he severed one tie after another.

I reeled. How was my pain not his? How could he separate my memories and emotions from his own? *He's only a boy, a mind too young to have such wisdom, such cunning.* Or was he? Had shepherding the lost matured and strengthened his mind to such a profound degree?

He pushed against me harder, and I began to slip away, about to lose my hold.

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Focusing, I unlocked the Mind of a Thousand Mirrors, splitting my mind over and over. Each mind reached out and took hold of his. Hundreds of bindings became thousands, then tens of thousands. Then they began their own assault. A thousand minds working in a concerted effort. I poured a billion memories, and a billion billion thoughts and emotions into his mind.

Like a tapestry, I weaved my past into his, each mind unleashing several hundred lifetimes of loss, sorrow, heartbreak, and betrayal. All the pain I had learned to live with.

He screamed, a thousand screams begging for death. Over and over he screamed, until it reverberated within every one of my minds. The pulses of his consciousness spread outward in a vast wave of pain and confusion. A helplessness of such magnitude it crushed me like the weight of the world.

To feel his pain within a thousand minds was unbearable. Seeking refuge, I began to merge them, but as I did, our interconnected memories compounded upon one another. *Must remember who I am. Must not forget.*

As I had before, I tried to lock away his memories from mine and keep the fabric of my own existence.

*Remember your people. Remember your mother, your father.* But so many faces sprang up, so many parents, so many pasts. Love, comfort, hatred, abuse. Which past was mine, and which ones had I stolen and made my own?

His confusion spread to me. Our entwined pasts grew ever more muddled, and the screaming within only grew louder. I could not stop the merging minds as each sewed part of itself into his. There was no undoing it. We were becoming one.

As our minds melded, and I opened my mouth to scream, I bottled the last fragment of that dissolving memory of who I was into the Locked Mind.

Pain ripped through me. I screamed, looked down at the blood that soaked my clothes, and then there was only darkness.

## The Mark of a Legend

## Chapter 1 - A Forgotten Past

I opened my eyes and found myself in an unfamiliar room. A nearby fire lit a pair of amethyst eyes that stared out from a figure hunched over me. The darkened form leaned forward. Dead-white hair and a face of cavernous wrinkles took form.

I shrank back into the bed, clutching the thick fur blanket wrapped around me.

“You’re awake, child. Praise the Almighty.” Her voice was soft and soothing, nothing like I expected. The old woman smiled, further creasing the many wrinkles in her face. “Don’t worry, you’re safe here.” She reached toward me, and I flinched, but as she placed her hand upon my forehead, my anxiety faded, and the deep pain that coursed through my body subsided. “The fever has finally broken,” she said, turning to look at something across the room.

The floor creaked, and a moment later a man peered down at me. He had prominent cheekbones and a strong jawline covered with a fine, black stubble. His dark-green eyes blazed. “What’s your name, boy?”

“My name?” The voice that came from my throat sounded unfamiliar.

The man and woman exchanged a look.

Panic came over me. Where was I? Who were these people? My eyes scanned the room, taking in my surroundings. Black iron sconces hung from white-washed walls. No windows, no decorations, no furniture other than the bed I lay in. The only escape lay far across the room--a large door made of a charcoal-black wood.

As I tried to sit up, burning pain shot through my body. I gritted my teeth and tried anyways, but found I lacked the strength to rise. My mind raced as I struggled to recall how I had gotten here.

“Can’t even remember his own name,” the man said, shaking his head.

“Don’t you worry about that, child.” The woman ran her hand through my hair with a gentle touch, calming me. “I’m Lelikai, and this is Sedrick.” She turned to him. “How old do you think he is? Ten, maybe twelve?”

He nodded.

“Well, now that the boy’s awake, you should bring your brother in. See if we can’t stir his memory.” The old woman turned her gaze to mine. “We’d planned to take you home, child. But until you can remember enough for us to find your family, you’ll have to stay with us.”

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Sedrick turned and left, and for a moment I felt at peace. But then I wondered, what would they do with me if I couldn't remember? How long would they let me stay?

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I lay in bed near the warmth of the hearth, pretending to sleep. I could hear the sound of leaves crunching and opened my eyes just enough to see Lelikai hunched over a burner, drying what looked like a handful of moss.

The door creaked open, and Sedrick entered. He was followed by a man clothed in a deep-blue tunic rimmed with black fur. The man had the same striking green eyes and long, inky black hair as Sedrick. But he looked nearly twice as old and half as friendly.

"Ah, Giok, so you've finally come to see the boy?" asked Lelikai.

"Heard he lost his memory," he replied in a gruff voice. "So here I am." His gaze flickered up toward me, and I closed my eyes. "He still sleeping?"

"Aye. And I suspect he'll sleep much over the next few weeks."

"Well, let's get him into one of the wagons," Giok said. "We're already behind schedule."

"He can't be moved," Lelikai replied. "He'll have to stay here for another week or two."

"A week or two! We can't wait that long, and neither can the Grand Duke's son."

"The boy will never survive the trip in his condition," Lelikai said. "He's lucky to even be alive."

"I'm inclined to agree with her." That deep, smooth voice sounded exactly like Sedrick's. "It's nothing short of a miracle. Besides, brother, you can spend the time delving into his mind."

"The Grand Duke's son is dying. Every day we delay is one less day they'll have to save him. Would you trade his life for the boy's?"

"All life is sacred," Lelikai cried. Her words struck a chord in my heart. "This boy's life is worth every bit as much as Esterly's son. I have the chance to save him now, and I will."

Tears filled the corner of my eyes.

"Fine," growled Giok. "You can tell your son that. He already has the others in a fit. Keeps reminding everyone that we get paid nothing if he dies before we return."

"I've heard enough." There was power in the inflection of Sedrick's words. They carried a command as sharp as the edge of a blade. "I'll speak with the others. You just help the boy to remember."

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A soft touch pressed against my arm, and I opened my eyes to see Lelikai's smiling face. She turned and tossed a handful of dark green herbs into the fire. They burst into pink flames, sending off a sweet, flowery scent. The intoxicating aroma eased my aching body and soothed my troubled mind.

"What is that?" I asked, having a strong sense I'd smelled the incense before.

She turned back to me and her smile deepened. "An old family remedy. *Igneus Unguentum*."

I frowned. "That sounds awfully familiar."

"Does it now?" Lelikai raised an eyebrow. "They're the words of a dead language. One of many brought by the Pioneers. There are few left in this world who know of it or of them. Do you know what it means?"

I shook my head.

"Fiery salve. It's burning fumes have healing properties." She looked to Sedrick and he bowed his head slightly.

"Morning, boy," Sedrick said. "This is my brother, Giok."

Giok looked me up and down. "I've come to help you remember."

Sedrick nodded. "My brother was educated in the Sagery and knows many intricacies of the mind."

*Sagery*? The word had a familiar ring to it, and as I repeated it within my mind, I found it gave me comfort.

Giok bridged the short distance between us and sat beside me. He took hold of my chin and turned my head from side to side. "Pale skin, bright-blue eyes, white-blond hair. You certainly look like a Northerner. And yet you speak the common tongue."

"The what?" I asked.

He turned to Sedrick. "Guess that means he can't be one of the Nama."

"So sure are you?" Lelikai's brows narrowed, and the purple in her eyes turned a pale blue. "*Dun Griapa Daistes Zola ti sia uou*."

"And with you," I replied without thinking, delivering the customary response to the blessing in the same language Lelikai had used. The words--*uou sia tu*--sounded strange to my ears, but even as I said them, I felt the warmth of Lelikai's wish that the Great Mother, Zola, whoever she was, be with me.

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Lelikai's eyes widened. "The Nama do not teach their language to others." She turned to Giok. "And if he were one of them, he would have been able to heal his own wounds. Right?"

Giok shrugged.

"Well, ask the boy something in Nama," she said to Giok.

"Just like you, I only know the single greeting."

Sedrick narrowed his eyes and placed a finger upon his lips. He tapped his mouth several times as if contemplating. Then he said, "*Ag Gik af du Kravin, Uncruk af Darat.*"

Unlike the words Lelikai had spoken, which were formed primarily at the front of the mouth and had a melodious, almost poetic quality, this invocation was guttural. The clipped syllables originated in the throat. Still, I was able to string the harsh-sounding syllables together in my mind and decipher their meaning. I did not know Kravin, God of Blood, anymore than I knew the Great Mother, Zola, nor did I know why I should be bidden to honor him. But I knew the rejoinder, *blood of my enemy*.

"*Igid af mik sundig,*" I replied. Saying the words left a knot in my gut, knowing that one honored Kravin by bathing in his enemy's blood.

Silence stretched across the room, sending a chill through me.

A slight smile tugged at Sedrick's face. "Did you know that inherent abilities such as language are rarely ever affected by amnesia?"

I wasn't sure if he was asking me or not, but before I could answer he added, "Only a few Vendrian diplomats have learned enough of the Kantic and Nama tongue to communicate with either religion. It was in hopes of converting them, and ending any further bloodshed. But that was long ago. No outsider has been taught either of their languages since."

"But you speak them," I replied.

"We only know a greeting or two," Giok said. "And that is only because we are Seekers."

"Seekers?" I asked.

"Think of us as keepers of history," replied Sedrick. "And with such knowledge, we know things that most others do not, even the single greeting of a foreign tongue. So for you to be able to speak both, along with the common tongue, should be impossible. Unless you're a . . . ."

Giok turned to Sedrick waiting for him to continue. "Unless he's a what, brother?" Then his eyes lit up. "Unless he's a Realmwalker? You well know they've been gone for millennia,

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wiped out in the Mage Wars. Thank God for that. Besides, if he truly had the inherent ability to decipher and speak all languages, he would have had his Awakening. Then, not even a squadron of deathmonks could have stood against him.”

“He has a point,” Lelikai said with a slight head nod. “As powerful and well-trained as the deathmonks may be, they’d stand no chance against a wizard wielding the magic of all three realms, even one as young as the boy.”

“Stop talking about me as if I’m not here!” I snapped.

The three of them turned to stare at me. The sudden swell of anger quickly passed. Then I shrank into the bed, embarrassed and afraid.

“Forgive us,” Sedrick replied, “but you’re truly a conundrum. Has anything we said sparked a memory?”

How could I speak these people’s languages, yet have no memory of them? It only made me more disoriented, more lost. I blinked back tears. “No, nothing.”

Sedrick turned to his brother. “If not a Realmwalker, then what?”

“Well, the boy appears to speak the blood-cultist language, and I’ve heard that some have learned the common tongue. And being at war with the Nama, it’s possible his people may have picked up a saying or two from them. Considering the Holy Order has no problem killing heathen children, it might explain the condition we found him in.”

“But he bears no Kantic marks,” Lelikai replied.

Giok continued to scrutinize me. “True, but the boy is young. Maybe too young to take the blood-cultist ritual.”

Sedrick shook his head. “The blood-cultists would never venture out of the Northern Taiga, and the boy couldn’t have walked in his condition this far south.”

“They would for war,” Giok replied.

My heart pounded in my ears as their words began to sink in. “You mean someone tried to kill me?”

“We’re not sure,” Sedrick replied. “But we weren’t about to leave you to die on the side of the road. No matter whom your people might’ve been.”

Then they’d saved my life. But why?

“My brother’s right,” Giok said. “You are a conundrum.”

“It’s not proper to keep calling him *boy*.” Sedrick turned to me and said, “Names are

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important. The Nama believe that all things were named by the Great Mother when she created the world, and by learning these *true names*, they are granted the power to control them. As keepers of myth and legend, we Seekers believe that names are significant as well. We will help you to remember yours or at least help you to find a new one.”

“Before my father sent me off to learn from the Sagery,” Giok said, “he told me he knew the day I was born that I would do something great. That is why he gave me the name Giok, *the great one*.”

Sedrick leaned in closer. “History remembers men and women by their names, and we Seekers remember all of them, even those history has forgotten.” He smiled. “There are none we hold more highly than Valcor. History does not remember him, but we Seekers have not forgotten.”

An image flashed in my mind: *A shirtless man stands in darkness, lit only by the sword he grips in his hand. Blue as glacier ice, the blade pulses white light, beating in rhythm to the man’s heart. His jet-black hair is long and thin and straight, flowing down his muscled back like silk, and beneath the hair, there are swirls of color. Some kind of mark, but it is too hard to see.*

“Are you all right?” The voice was distant.

A soft touch brushed against my shoulder. The image faded and Sedrick was kneeling before me, his eyes staring into mine.

“Where did you just go?”

I told him of what I had seen, and his eyes lit up like fire. Giok and Lelikai inhaled a hushed breath.

“You had a vision of Valcor,” Sedrick said, awe in his voice, “the man who founded us Seekers a thousand generations ago. We have kept him a secret from outsiders. And yet I mention his name, and the image of him comes to you as clearly as if you had seen him just yesterday.”

My pulse quickened. The three of them stared at me, judging me. I could sense their mistrust. See it in their eyes. They thought I was lying to them, or worse, that I was playing them for fools.

I didn’t know what to say, didn’t know how to react or to prove that I knew nothing of my past. I was so terrified that if I could have stood, I would have ran and never looked back.

Sedrick leaned in even closer and lowered his voice to whisper. “We Seekers have never



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taken on an orphan before. We only take on men and women with great names.” He winked.

“There is no greater name to us than Valcor. It is a name I think would fit you well.”

“Valcor.” I whispered the name. The sound of it upon my lips felt as natural as breathing.

Sedrick placed his hand upon my face. “It means *to see*.”

I repeated the name again in my head, over and over. *Valcor. Valcor. Valcor.*

Giok looked to his brother. “A great name for one who has yet to earn it.”

“And when you were given your name,” I said, turning to Giok, “what had you done to earn it?”

Giok laughed. “I like the way you think.” He shrugged. “Then Valcor it is.”

“The others won’t like it,” Lelikai said.

Sedrick smirked. “You mean Brion won’t like it.” He turned his gaze back to mine. “You bear a name of legend now. That makes you worthy to join us. You could be the first foundling to earn the Mark in over fifteen millennia.”

“The Mark?” I asked.

He opened his shirt, revealing an intricate circular brand on his chest about the size of a man’s fist. Labyrinthine whorls of colors were tattooed into the pattern of raised flesh. “The Mark of the Seeker. It signifies that you are one of us. Earn the Mark and you will earn your name.”

The artwork burned and painted into Sedrick’s flesh awed me, in a way I felt as if nothing ever had. I didn’t know what it signified, or even what a Seeker was, but I wanted the Mark.

But then it felt odd to take someone else’s name, especially one so important to these people. And yet the swelling in my heart told me that I wanted that name as much as I wanted the Mark.

I puffed up my chest as best as I could. “I will earn it.”

Sedrick laughed, deep and hearty. “Good.”

Lelikai looked stunned. She grabbed Sedrick’s shoulder and hissed, “This isn’t what we agreed to. The boy can’t--”

Rage flashed across Sedrick’s face. “You dare question my authority?”

Lelikai’s face paled, and she shrank back.

Sedrick’s burning eyes met mine. His penetrating gaze seemed to pierce right through me, and suddenly, I felt naked. No, it was more than that. It was as if he was peering into my

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mind, into my very soul, and knew exactly who I was.

Then the depth of his stare weakened, and his face softened. “I’m sorry, Lelikai. I should not have spoken to you that way.” Sedrick’s eyes never left mine as he said it. “Brion has me on edge, and I am not myself.” Then he turned and took Lelikai by the hand. “You put your faith in me years ago, and have I ever led us astray?”

She shook her head.

“Then trust me now.”

Sedrick’s words seemed to mollify Lelikai, and she relaxed, nodding her head in agreement. But he had lied. He was not sorry at all.

I do not know how I knew this, but I did. He wanted something out of me. I could feel it. He knew something I didn’t.

Giok took a step toward me. “It appears there’s at least a memory or two floating around in your subconscious, after all. Let me see what else I might draw to the surface.” He knelt and looked into my eyes. “We found you a few days to the north in the Winterlands, bloodied and unconscious along the side of the Highroad. It’s not likely somebody dumped you there. Do you have any recollection of walking through the forest or of somebody carrying you?”

I pushed down my fear that someone may have tried to kill me and then tried to remember what had happened. The faint memory of a dream lingered, but in it, I could recall only darkness. “No.”

Giok rubbed the stubble on his chin. “Then let me help you. Take my hand and close your eyes. Breathe deep and relax. Let your mind drift.”

I took Giok’s large, meaty hand. He put his other one over mine as I closed my eyes.

“Focus on your breathing,” he whispered. “Let it become a rhythm.” He held my shaking hand steady.

I wanted to pull away from him, but his grip was too strong. Why could I only remember the image of a man long dead? And why no spark of memory for the Nama, the blood-cultists, deathmonks, or Realmwalkers?

The fire crackled and my heart thumped loudly in my ears. I breathed in deeply and exhaled. As I concentrated on each breath, a sense of calm came over me. Silence filled the room, and then a voice sounded in my mind. Giok’s voice. *Let me guide your thoughts. Let me pull the memories that lie just below the surface.* Out of the darkness, a splotch of gray formed.

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*Tell me what you see.*

I opened my mouth and spoke as the memory took shape:

*Gray clouds loom overhead as the smell of damp wintergrass fills the air. Thunder rumbles over a forest of black-needed trees. Surrounding me is a sea of faces, each one hidden in shadow. In the distance, a deep bellowing horn blows, and the faces around me all turn toward the sound. My heart takes off, pounding harder and faster with each breath.*

*A strong, weathered hand reaches down and scoops me up into a large, sun-browned arm. His other hand reaches out and I place mine against his palm. I run my fingertips against rough calluses. Then his fingers close, and my hand disappears within his, filling me with a sense of comfort. I look up into his face, but it's blurry.*

*He leans forward to kiss me on the forehead.*

*Even with his face mere inches from mine, I see no features, only a blur of colors. He sets me down, and tears well in my eyes. I have the feeling that I will never see him again.*

*As he towers above me, my eyes move down his shadowed visage to his muscled body, scarred and painted in dark red. His hand moves to clench a curved sword. A blood-red crystal sits atop the bone-white hilt. Pulling the scysra from its scabbard, he brings it to his chest. The blade bites through skin as he cuts a series of symbols into his flesh. Blood runs down his body as the weapon moves steadily and gracefully.*

*Mesmerized, I stare as he carves the same symbols into the ground. Then he whispers, "Blood. Flesh. Earth. I command you."*

*A piercing roar rips through the sky, and I throw my hands over my ears to blot out the terrible sound. Suddenly, the mass of shadowed faces around me rise. Each shirtless man holds a wooden shield, weapon at his side. Then a thousand swords are wrenched from leather sheaths and pointed toward darkened skies.*

*The clouds break, and the sun's rays reach out to touch the silver blades, igniting them in white fire.*

*As I look up, the sun is eclipsed in shadow. Black smoke fills the sky. Then, smoldering yellow eyes appear from within the haze, and wings of the darkest pitch stretch out as wide as a mountain valley. The monster opens its maw and Cimmerian shade pours out, writhing through the sky like inky black fingers.*

*My breath catches in my throat, and I stumble backward.*

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*The man before me drops to a knee and pulls his blade from the ground. Blackened earth coats the blade from the coagulating blood. He presses his thumb to the crimson stone and murmurs several words too faint to hear.*

*I reach for him as he turns to leave, but he pushes me away.*

*In unison, the men move out into the blue fields, wet and frozen. The ground trembles, thunder sounds, and the cry of a winged demon chills me to the bone. The Shadowbringer's ruinous breath spreads like wildfire across the sky, burning away the daylight, turning the firmament to ash. Soon, there will be no light left in the world.*

*Shivering, I pull my legs up to my chest. Under a sky of jet-black, all I can hear is my heart thumping heavy and the screams of men fighting, or dying, or both.*

I shuddered and snapped my eyes open, trying to yank free my now burning-hot hand.

Giok's grip tightened. "Where did you hear that tale?"

"I dreamed it. I know now that I was dreaming it before I woke today."

"Dreams are the windows to the soul," Giok said, nodding his head. "Dreams say the things we cannot. They provide a glimpse into the repressions of the mind."

"Impossible," Lelikai cried. "He cannot dream of myths and religions that only we Seekers keep alive."

"Perhaps it is only a shadow dragon he dreams of," Giok countered.

"Only the Sun-Gorger Demon breathes Cimmerian shade--the darkness that consumes worlds. There is no doubt he speaks of the First Fall." Lelikai turned to me, eyes narrowed. "Tell me how you know this destruction myth." Her purple eyes weighed on me. "Well, speak!"

"Calm yourself, Lelikai," commanded Sedrick. "He's only a child."

"A child who knows far too much." Lelikai stumbled back, eyes wild. "The boy's a blood mage. He's stolen my memories." She spun to look at Giok. "Or yours."

The revulsion in her voice caught me off guard. All I could do was stare in horror.

"The blood mages are extinct, just like the Realmwalkers," Giok said.

"No. I've seen a blood-binding before. The blood mages still exist." She was trembling. "He's gotten blood from one of us. He knows our thoughts, our memories. He'll take control of me!"

"I didn't. I wouldn't," I cried, fumbling for some words to put her at ease.

Giok laughed. "Oh, and I suppose while the boy was unconscious and on the verge of

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death he snuck some of your blood and did a binding on it.” He shook his head and turned to me. “Ignore her, Valcor. She’s all but lost her good sense in old age.”

Lelikai looked back and forth from me to Giok.

“Giok’s right,” Sedrick added. “Think it through, Lelikai. You never left the boy’s side.”

She put a hand on her forehead as her eyes shifted back and forth. “I . . . I . . . You’re right. I didn’t.” She exhaled a deep breath. “He never had time to do a binding.” Her eyes moved to mine. “I’m sorry.”

Sedrick crossed his arms and gave a smug smile. “But if he were a True-Blood--”

“I won’t hear of it,” Giok snapped. “The Realmwalkers do not exist!” He rubbed his temples. “Tell me more of this dream, Valcor.”

“That’s all I can remember.”

Giok turned to Lelikai. “If his conscious mind will not relinquish these memories, then we will have to find a dreamseer.”

“Absolutely not,” shrieked Lelikai. “No dark magic.”

“It isn’t magic, you old loon,” Giok shouted. “It’s shagan science.”

“Dark magic, dark science, it’s all the same,” she said. “It’s the Gmorgon’s work.”

“And what will you do when the boy’s memory returns and you find out he’s a blood-cultist, or worse, a deadriser? Will you turn him over to the Holy Order for being a heathen?”

“I’ll not have this conversation with you again,” Lelikai cried. “I gave up my priestess vows when I returned to the Seekers.”

“And yet you still hold to the ways of the Church after all these years. You’ve already accused the boy of being a blood mage. If something does not conform to the dogma of the Order, then you think it the workings of the devil.” Giok snorted. “Is that why you betrayed me for--”

“Not in front of Valcor,” growled Sedrick.

Giok turned to me, a look of pity on his face. “It’s best not to remember who you are, boy. You could end up being hanged in Vendria Square for it. Half-dead children don’t end up beside roads here in the north out of happenstance. Someone either tried to kill you or died trying to save you.”

My eyes grew wide, and I tried to shrink into the bed.

“I didn’t bring you here to frighten him,” Sedrick said.

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“I’m sorry, Valcor,” Giok replied, “but you need to know the truth.”

Sedrick turned to me and said, “Whatever your past, we’ll help you to find it, and you needn’t be afraid of what we find. You’re safe with us. I promise.”

Giok released my hand and stood, then shot a glare at Lelikai. “If you want the boy to remember his past, a dreamseer is likely the only course. Not everything in this world that *your* religion can’t explain is evil.”

Tears welled in Lelikai’s eyes, and the pain on her face wrenched at my heart. “And when did you stop believing in Zenitonianism? When did you abandon the Almighty God?”

“When you chose my brother to lead over me.” Giok turned and walked out.

Sedrick shook his head. “I’ll go tell the others that he’ll be staying.”

“You’d better talk to Brion, alone. He won’t like it. He’s already upset that we’ve been holed up in this inn for the past week while tending to the boy.”

“Sometimes it’s hard to believe that man’s your son.” Sedrick sighed. “He wanted me to let the child die on the side of the road.” His eyes flickered to me as he said it. I knew the words were for me and not Lelikai.

Why he would tell me such a thing, I could not guess. It made me think of the young boy they were trying to save.

“What if he dies before you return?” I asked. “Won’t I be to blame?”

Sedrick frowned. “Heard us, did you?” He shook his head. “I’m sorry for that. But no, it won’t be your fault. There is no cure for what Edrin has. The boy has been wasting away ever since he was born. Esterly has tried nearly every form of medicine and magic. He’s grown desperate, and now he wishes to try dangerous high alchemy. Hopes to transmute his son’s blood or bones. If anything, he’s likely to kill the boy himself.”

“I’m against the whole thing,” Lelikai added. “Alchemy is dark stuff, dangerous and unpredictable. But the Grand Duke is too powerful a man to refuse. So we do our duty.” She waved a dismissive hand. “Enough of this talk. You need your rest.”

Sedrick tousled my hair and smiled. “Lelikai may be set in her ways and difficult at times, but with her gift of healing, you’ll be on your feet in no time.”

She ran her fingers across my face, and her touch was like a salve against my skin. “I didn’t mean to upset you. It’s hard to let go of the Church’s dogged teachings and of all the things I’ve seen.” She turned to Sedrick. “You’d better tell Malina to start building another

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wagon. Valcor will need a place to live.”

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When I was well enough, Sedrick took me to meet the others. I shuffled out of the inn and followed him through a thin line of winterblooms that loomed over a scattering of blue needles and cones.

Ahead of me, Sedrick walked with a swagger, his jet black-hair swishing above broad shoulders corded with muscles. He was leader of the Seekers, a man who moved with bravado and spoke with authority. I had liked him from the moment I met him.

The air was brisk, even beneath the bright, shining sun. I rubbed my clammy hands together trying to warm them. I still hadn't been able to remember a thing of my past, despite all of Giok's coaxing.

Sedrick turned back and waited for me to catch up to him. “I know you're nervous, but you needn't worry. I'll look out for you.”

Was my fear that evident? I shot a glance past him, and in the nearby open field, I spotted dozens of covered wagons. Several fires were spread about the camp, each burning within a ring of stones. People were scattered about. The place was like a tiny town, bustling with activity.

There were so many of them. What if they didn't like me? What if they were all like Brion and would have preferred to leave me by the side of the road to die?

Sedrick held out his hand and smiled. Hesitantly, I took it, and together we walked into the Seeker camp.

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## Chapter 2 - The Rite

High atop the thornwood, I looked out across the city. My city. At least it would be mine someday, whether I wanted it or not. In the distance, cobblestone streets bustled with activity, twisting their way through the two thousand some homes nestled along the bottom of Zylaria. My eyes followed the gradual sloping land and the gravel path that wound its way past the farmlands and up into the training grounds, where I should have been honing my Siba.

I shifted my hand from the tree's black bark and the sharp needles that covered its surface. It was my last day to prepare, and after so many months of planning and training I should have been confident. But the thought of accomplishing something that was not only forbidden but had never been done before was frightening.

Tomorrow was the Rite, the yearly ritual that every boy and girl must take in order to transition from child to adult. At thirteen, I would not take it for another year. Teacher had said that no prince had ever failed it, but every year at least one person came back maimed or did not return at all.

I craned my neck up toward the top of Zylaria, high above the training grounds, where the oldest thornwoods grew in a circle, their thorny branches guarding whatever lay within the Sacred Grove. Tomorrow I would stand upon their crowns and see what trials would await me in the Rite.

"Hendor!" a sharp voice shouted from below.

Startled, I lost my footing and slipped.

Beneath me, someone screamed.

I flailed my arms and snagged a branch. Thorns bit into my hands, ripping flesh. I dared not let go despite the pain that radiated up my arms. Falling from this height would mean death.

I looked down to see Lyda staring up at me from the tall grass. Her eyes were wide, and her dark, bronzed skin had paled. It gave me strength to know she cared for me, even though she'd never admit it.

I pushed back the smile forming on my lips, found a nearby branch and swung for it. It bent under my weight but held. I let out my breath, shuffled the short distance to the trunk, and then climbed the rest of the way down.

Lyda stood at the base of the thornwood, her arms crossed, brow furrowed.



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“For the love of Zola, you scared me half to death,” I said to her.

“I did not think a prince startled so easily.” She smiled and twirled a finger through her golden hair. “Nor did I think he could be so clumsy. Perhaps I should be the one to climb the thornwoods tomorrow.”

“You know the plan. Stick to it.” I gave her a playful smile. “Besides, I’m the better climber.”

She laughed. “You’re not the better anything.”

“Oh yeah? I’ll race you to the top.” I reached for the tree, but Lyda snatched my wrist. She turned my bloody palm over. “You’ve mucked up your hand again. Here, let me heal it.”

I yanked my hand back. “I can do it.”

“We both know you can’t.” Lyda rolled her eyes. “Some prince you are.”

I looked into her deep green eyes, dark and somber as the filalia trees that surrounded Zylaria and kept us hidden from the outside world. “Why do you have to be so mean?”

“You’re too thin-skinned to be king. I’m only trying to help.”

Lyda always spoke the truth, even a hard truth to a prince she had no right to. It’s one of the things I liked about her. Still, the truth of her words stung. As the crown prince, my Siba should have been the best among my peers. Instead, I had fallen behind everyone.

She placed a hand upon my chest. “So you can’t do Siba. Magic doesn’t make a king. It’s what’s in his heart. That is what’ll make you a great leader.” Her hand lingered upon my chest for a long moment, and my heart pounded in response. There was a tenderness in her touch I had never felt before, a feeling just beyond my grasp.

“Come,” she said, grabbing me by the wrist again, “I’ll take you home and fix you up there.”

We walked along the path, pebbles crunching beneath our feet. It wasn’t fair. Why did Lyda’s father have to be a lowborn cobbler? The Protector would never allow our marriage. He’d probably want me to marry one of the elder’s daughters. But I couldn’t imagine marrying anyone other than Lyda. If I was forced to be king, I would not be told whom I could marry. I would defy the elders and the Protector.

Lyda stopped suddenly. “What’s he doing here?”

In the training grounds above us, the Protector stood with Teacher, who was a tall man

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despite his age. The years had curved and twisted his back, but he looked a child beside the Protector.

“Did we mix up the days?” she asked. “Is the Rite today?”

I looked down at my cut and bloody palms. “If they see my hands like this--”

She placed her fingers on my wounds and I winced from the pain. “Hide them in your pockets and don’t let them see. I’ll go tell the others to get ready.” Her hands remained on mine, and as she held my gaze, they began to tingle.

Suddenly Lyda’s skin lightened, and she swooned. She let go of me, and I reached for an arm, but she managed to steady herself before I could catch her. “Hands in your pockets,” she ordered. Then she turned and ran toward the city below.

“Hendor,” Teacher shouted. “Come here.”

I trudged over to them, keeping my eyes down, all the while feeling their gazes upon me.

“Look at me,” Teacher demanded. “And show some respect. Take your hands out of your pockets.”

I did not move them, even though my heart pounded in my ears. Teacher scowled and grabbed hold of my wrists. His hands were withered, gnarled like filialia branches, yet rough and strong.

“What’s wrong with you, boy?” he snapped, trying to wrench my hands free.

I fought him as he pulled. But he was too powerful.

Teacher twisted my palm upward and frowned. “What’s this?”

I blinked a few times at what I saw. Blood caked my hands, wrists, and upper forearms. But there were no cuts. Lyda had healed them, but hadn’t wanted me to know she had. Why?

“Blood,” I said.

“I can see that. Whose blood? And why are your hands covered with it?”

My mind raced as I thought of an answer. “I, uh . . .” My eyes wandered in the direction that Lyda had run, then snapped back toward Teacher.

The Protector stepped forward, his giant frame casting a shadow over me like a towering motherwood. Within his hood, where a face would be, there was nothing but darkness, black of the deepest pitch. Perhaps it was magic that hid his visage, but seeing that pit of infinite darkness was no less frightening than when I’d first stared into it, many years ago.

The blackness looked down at me. “You must forget about her. She is not for you.”

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“But--”

“I am the voice of Zola,” the Protector bellowed. “I am Her power made flesh. I am not to be questioned!”

A cold shiver ran through me, and I shuddered. “Yes, Protector.”

He turned to Teacher. “Leave us.”

Teacher nodded, turned, and then left. I watched him go, wishing he wouldn't. The Protector had always frightened me. Even the adults were uneasy around him. Teacher had said that he was our direct link to the Great Mother--wise, powerful, and as old as time. I wondered if such a thing could be true. But if a tree could live for thousands of years, why not a man? I supposed Zola was the one who decided such things.

What I did know for sure was that he came only once a year to conduct the Rite and to give the elders news of the outside world. We children knew nothing of what was beyond Zylaria. Our teachers would only instruct us of such mysteries once we had passed the Sacred Ritual and had transitioned from children to adults.

The Protector knelt and I could feel him look at me. “For a thousand generations I have watched princes ascend to kings, and never have I seen a prince as unprepared as you.”

I clenched my jaw, fighting back tears. “I'm a failure, I know.” I could not let him see me cry. “I've tried, Protector, I really have. I cannot learn the ways of Siba.”

He shook his head, long and slow. “Siba is in your blood, in your breath, in every beat of your heart. You've not tried hard enough. You daydream and play with your friends when you should be studying.”

“That's not true, I--”

“Do not lie to me.” The Protector rose. “Even when I am not here, my eye is upon this place. I see everything.”

I swallowed hard, wondering if he knew what I'd been planning the past few months. Had he seen me sitting under the motherwoods with Lyda, swimming in the Zyl River with Krung and Rygor when I should have been studying?

“Do you find no relevance in learning the ways of Siba?” he asked.

I knew I was supposed to learn my people's magic because one day we Zylarians would go to war with the Evil--the monsters that had nearly destroyed us. But after so many thousands of years of us hiding in the forests and passing down the knowledge of Zola from one generation

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to the next, I doubted it would be in my lifetime.

I shrugged. “Not really.”

“Then you would rather die?”

“No.”

“Make no mistake. Children die in the Rite because they are unprepared.”

Then it was true. Failing the Rite meant death. But why would the Protector hide us from the Evil, only to send us to die in a ritual of his own creation? I opened my mouth to protest, then shut it, too afraid to question his authority. “If I’m to be king, why must I take it?”

“Passing the Rite is the first step to preparing yourself to fight the Evil.”

“But kings don’t fight in wars. They order other men to.”

“That is where you are wrong, Hendor. As king, *you* will lead us against the Evil.” Two sparks of light emanated from where his eyes would be. “Our long wait in exile is soon to be over.”

I didn’t want to go to war. I only wanted to play with my friends, to swim in the Zyl River when it flooded in the spring and catch flutterbugs when the flowers bloomed in summer.

“Then let Rygor be king. I don’t want it.”

The Protector slammed his foot to the ground. “Rygor!” The sky groaned beneath his bellow. “He does not have king’s blood. He is not you! Only you have the strength to lead us, if you would but find it.”

I wanted to find that strength, to be strong like my father, but in that moment, I was more terrified than ever. I closed my eyes, felt every part of my body tremble. I listened to my heart pound so loudly that it drowned out the roar of the wind, the snapping of branches, the crackling of thunder. The Protector’s Siba was so strong that his fury was Zola’s. His tears the rain. His voice the thunder. His footfalls were the shake of the earth, and his was breath the gale of the wind.

The Protector grabbed me by the shirt and lifted me up to stare into his face, so close that I should have been able to see it, so close that I should have been able to feel his breath. Instead, I saw only an empty space and felt cold air that made every hair on my body stand on end.

Then his voice exploded, and I had to cover my ringing ears. “Do you think I like keeping my people in hiding?” As his voice grew louder, the sky grew more tumultuous. “This world was ours once, and it will be ours once again.”

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I cowered in his grasp, searching for even a shred of courage. A thousand terrifying images sprung into my mind--war, blood, fire, death. Thousands of corpses burned and tattered, buildings and trees scorched to ash. Then Lyda's face appeared. Her smile washed away the fear, and as I imagined her in my arms, a vision of my best friend Rygor standing beside us filled me with strength.

"If you want me to be king, then I want Rygor as my Fist and Lyda as my wife."

The sky darkened. Lightning flashed and thunder crackled. Rage emanated from the Protector like heat from a fire. "You dare give me orders! You will do as I command."

The bravado leaked out of me. I had no say in my life. I never had.

"I can see the cowardice in your eyes, Hendor. You would think to run and escape your duty."

"No," I cried, no longer hiding my tears. Yet the thought of fleeing had never been stronger. "I know that leaving would endanger Zylaria."

"Endanger? Oh, no. Leaving would result in the death of everyone here. Step foot out of Zylaria and the magic that keeps this place hidden from the Evil would be broken."

Known as the Law, it was the one rule we could never defy. It is why no Zylarian had ever stepped foot beyond the circle of our city.

"The magic it takes to keep this place hidden is not easy to invoke. It is ancient Siba, powerful illusion that warps not only sight, but thought. If you run, there will not be enough time for me to restore it before the Evil learns of this place and comes to destroy Zylaria. Not even I have the strength to stop them. But one day you will."

The fear that had resided in the back of my mind as long as I could remember washed over me. I could not run, and I could never give up my duty as king. But without command over Siba, how could I ever hope to lead us against the Evil?

"I don't understand," I cried. "Your Siba is greater than all of ours. And yet, you expect me to do what you cannot."

"I do not see with mortal eyes. Within you slumbers a power greater than all of Zylaria. Greater than mine. It is time we awaken it."

What sort of power?

The Protector exhaled a breath, and the clouds broke apart. The sky cleared, the wind dissipated. "I must see to the preparations for today's Rite." He turned and made his way up the

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hill toward the Sacred Grove.

The Rite was supposed to be tomorrow. Had we been wrong or had the Protector come early? I took a deep breath and looked up the long path that led to the Sacred Grove. I could not see it from here but knew that it sat atop the city and overlooked the surrounding Zylarian forest for miles. I was not allowed to walk up the path, for only those who were set to undergo the Rite, or who had already passed it, could do so.

The Protector continued the long climb and Teacher came to stand beside me. He placed a twisted hand on my shoulder and said, "I know you are curious to see the Sacred Ritual, but it is forbidden. You cannot know what awaits you."

"Yes, Teacher." I knew that I'd have to go through with my plan. I only hoped the others would not back out.

Teacher turned toward the houses below. "I must gather those who are to undertake the Rite today. Run along."

I turned to the west and the towering motherwoods that made up the Whispering Garden--our meeting place before we'd try and sneak into the Grove. There was no turning back now.

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I crouched behind a group of filalia trees in the training grounds, my friends Rygor and Bron beside me. Thousands of citizens made their way up the path to the Sacred Grove from the city below.

Lyda lay in the tall grass across the way from us, and Krung hid by a rock, a wide smile stretched across his face, his hands filled with poisonous retchweed. Impatient Krung, either truly brave or truly stupid--I hadn't decided yet. He glanced over, looking for me to give him the sign. I shook my head *no* for the twentieth time. I was still worried about having him swallow the toxic plant, no matter how much was at stake.

I caught Lyda's eye, the deepest Zylarian green, and silently begged her to make sure Krung didn't do anything foolish. I smiled, and she looked away as she reached into her long, golden hair and twirled it around a finger.

"I don't know why you bother with Lyda, Hendor," Bron said. "You know the Protector will pick your bride after the Rite. Not even your father got to choose his wife."

"If I survive the Rite."

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Rygor smacked me on the back of the head. “Don’t talk like that. No prince has ever failed the Sacred Ritual.”

“Teacher thinks I won’t be prepared.” I looked into Rygor’s bright, blue eyes. “You know how far behind I am on my training.”

“Then why’ve you been ignoring your lessons?”

I’d tried to learn the ways of Siba from Teacher, but no matter how hard I tried, I just fell further and further behind. So I’d stopped trying, stopped listening. “I just never thought--”

“That’s why we’re going to get you to the Grove.” Bron clapped me on the back. “Then we’ll know what truly awaits us.”

I peered down the hill, waiting for the last of the stragglers to leave their homes. According to Father, everyone went to see the Rite, except for those of us who had yet to undergo the Sacred Ritual. I was thirteen, old enough to take it and be considered a man, but my time wouldn’t come this year.

Teacher had said that failing the Rite meant death, but I had never believed him. I’d always thought it was his way of getting me to pay attention to his lectures.

Today I would find out the truth.

The elders were so worried about us children sneaking into the Rite that we were forbidden to leave our homes. But I had begged my father to allow us to pray in the Whispering Garden, since Bron’s brother was undergoing the Rite today. He had consented, as long as Degro, my father’s Fist, acted as our chaperone. A few drops of ground dream-twine leaf in our guardian’s water this morning had solved that problem. He shouldn’t wake until late in the evening. Father would be furious.

As the throng in the city below thinned, I gave Krung the okay to choke down the retchweed. It would make him sick, but it wouldn’t kill him. All he’d have to do was puke on one of the two guards and make him think he was dying. It was Lyda’s job to ensure the soldier took Krung to the elders for healing. Bron would then distract the second guard, as would Rygor if needed. It was up to me to make it the Grove.

Krung gagged a few times on the retchweed, but after several long moments of chewing, he managed to swallow it all. After that, we only needed to wait.

Once the city emptied, however, six men rather than two came to stand guard along the path. The others looked to me, and in their eyes I saw defeat. A sudden lump formed in my

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throat.

Krung reached for his stomach. He turned toward Lyda and slapped his hand across his mouth. Then he jumped to his feet and ran out of the training grounds. Lyda turned to me and shrugged.

“After him,” I whispered.

Krung was halfway to the first guard before Lyda followed. He collapsed just as the guard went to intercept him. *Oh, Zola. What if I was wrong and the retchweed kills him?*

The guard stopped when he reached Krung’s motionless body. The man stood for a moment, a bewildered look on his face, then knelt beside Krung and shook him. Krung did not respond.

As the guard rolled Krung over, my stomach twisted. Krung’s bronzed skin had turned milkpod white. The guard stumbled backward. For a long moment he stared at Krung like a fool, too stricken to move. Then he clambered up and yelled to the guard nearest him, motioning for him to come and help.

By the time Lyda reached the two guards, she was trembling. She grabbed the nearest man and shook him frantically. Though I could not hear the words, her screaming told me just how dire the situation was.

It was all going horribly wrong. I stood, intent on going to Krung.

“Don’t,” Rygor protested, grabbing me by the arm. The skystone that glimmered on his bracelet matched his eyes. The elders had given it to him at birth, along with his name, Rygor Sky-Eyes, the first Zylarian ever born without green eyes. “Stick to the plan.”

I pulled free. “What if he dies?”

“You can’t do anything more than Lyda can.”

“Look,” Bron said, “those two guards are taking Krung toward the city.”

“I’m going. I have to make sure he’s all right.”

Bron turned and met my gaze. “This was your plan, Hendor. See it through.”

“If I do nothing now and he dies, I’ll never forgive myself.”

“Not even a king can save someone who is meant for death,” Rygor said. “Only the Great Mother, Zola has such power. As king, you will have to accept that people may die because of your decisions.”

I clenched my hands to keep them from trembling. If he only knew the truth of his words.



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For thousands of years we've stayed hidden in the forests, waiting to go to war with the Evil. And now after all this time, I was supposed to do what even the great and powerful Protector could not.

But I knew Rygor was right. I could do nothing for Krung. "Fine." Then before I could say more, Bron stood up and bolted for the path.

"One day you'll be our king." Rygor smiled, trying to hide the fear that gleamed in his eyes. "And I will look back and know that this is the day when your rule began."

I embraced him, hoping he was right. "And as king, you'll be my Fist, Sky-Eyes."

"It's only fitting," he replied, "since I'm much better with Siba than you are."

I gave him a sad smile. "That's not saying much. Just about everyone is."

At the sudden shouting of men, I dropped to my stomach. Two guards had Bron by his arms and legs.

"I have to see my brother," Bron screamed, over and over.

"Good luck," Rygor whispered as he jumped to his feet.

"No, wait--" I protested. But it was too late.

Rygor had already made his way out of the training grounds.

Amidst the chaos of Bron yelling and struggling, the guards didn't even notice Rygor cutting across the gravel path and into the knee-high grass. Then he stopped suddenly at the edge of the trees. *What are you doing? Keep running.* But he just stood there looking at the guards. Then one of them spotted him. Rygor waved at the man, then turned and sprinted toward the Grove.

"After him," ordered the man as he tried to hold Bron still.

Rygor disappeared into the trees and the other two guards ran after him.

I held my breath as the two guards holding Bron took him down the gravel road. Once they passed the training grounds, I sprinted across the path and dove into the grass.

I peeked above the yellow blades. No one was in sight. I leapt to my feet and ran along the opposite side of the path that Rygor had taken, then made my way up toward the Grove.

At the top of the hill, the Sacred Grove stood like an imposing fortress, a circle of towering thornwoods that grew so close together, they appeared impenetrable. Hoping to find a back way in, I skirted the entrance and headed around the side.

"Hey, what are you doing?" a man bellowed.

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Heart slamming hard against my chest, I threw my hood over my head and darted into a small gap in the trees.

“Come back here!” the man shouted.

I scrambled up the largest of the thornwoods, being careful not to cut myself on the jagged, black bark.

Once clear of the canopy, I stared in awe at the spectacle beneath me. Below, the circle of thornwoods that made up the Grove was about fifty trees thick and surrounded an enormous field of grass. Thousands of citizens lined the trees within the meadow, and in the center stood the Protector. Even from afar, he loomed over everyone like a giant, twice the height and several times as wide as a normal man.

The Protector raised his hand, and the chatter quieted. He held his arm up for another moment. The sun shining down upon the Grove shifted toward the Protector, as if his magic, his Siba, drew its rays to him. Teacher had said that his connection to the Great Mother was so great that he commanded all of nature’s power and fury. After seeing his anger toward me for falling so behind in my studies this morning, I did not doubt Teacher’s claim.

But it wasn’t his power to draw the sun, the wind, or even lightning to him that frightened me. It was the dark crystal that hung from his neck. Not even the sun could brighten it. It drank the light, always remaining absolutely black. I’d stared into that crystal every time I’d seen him, and I swore a thousand eyes had stared out at me. I shuddered at the thought of it.

The Protector turned, and his gaze stopped on my father. I ducked down and nearly lost my balance. I stared at Father for a long moment. What if the man who’d spotted me went to him? What if he sent everyone after me? And then I wondered if my father knew that the Protector had ordained me to lead us against the Evil, or if instead, the Protector had lied to me so that I might listen to Teacher’s instructions.

I looked to the old men, the council of teachers that stood behind Father. They had instructed us every day of our lives since we were five, teaching us the ways of the Great Mother, Zola, so that we would be prepared to undergo the Sacred Ritual. At their lead was my teacher, who had educated three generations of kings. He did not think I would even pass the Rite, let alone that I had what it took to be king. I’d show him he was wrong.

I choked back the bile rising in my throat and gazed off into the distance. As I stood high above Zylaria, the world revealed itself to me as it never had before. To the north, no less than

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the span of twenty men, the land fell below the trees in a giant precipice. One could not reach the bottom with ten motherwoods stacked base to crown. No one had ever told me our city sat atop a mountain.

A gravel-lined path led south, from the Sacred Grove to the training grounds. From there, the path split. One fork meandered east past the city's farmlands to my home, a castle of gray stone, and the other south, down to the city. The buildings looked like wooden boxes no larger than the size of my thumbnail. Even my home seemed small enough to scoop up into my hands.

Below, something scraped against the bark of the thornwood. I pivoted. A man, face obscured in the darkness of the trees, clung to the trunk. My breath caught in my throat. I slipped and grabbed the side of the tree to keep from falling. A sharp pain ran through my hand. I grimaced, set my foot back on the branch, and pulled my hand free.

The man's eyes glowed green in the dark undergrowth, and he raced up the tree with unnatural speed, using claws of hardened stone from his sudden transformation into the Body of Stone and Might.

I spun around and leapt from the canopy aiming for a nearby tree. Branches whizzed by. Sharpened needles tore at my face and arms.

A branch rushed up to meet me and snapped under my weight. I suppressed a scream, flailing my arms wildly, hoping to grab hold of something.

My hand snagged a limb. The razor-sharp bark ripped into my flesh. Fire radiated up my arm, the pain so intense, I yanked my hand back. I tumbled further down the tree.

My head bounced off the side of the trunk, and then my foot caught a branch. It cracked, but held.

Dangling precariously by my foot, I reached out and gripped the trunk of the tree with my good hand. My head pounded and my palm burned, but I pushed the pain aside and righted myself. Shaking, I tore off a piece of cloth from my pants and wrapped it around my bloody hand.

Then I made my way back up the tree until I found a close enough thornwood and jumped to it. I climbed up and down trunks, jumping from one tree to another, moving as quickly as I dared.

When I had the courage to look behind me, the man was nowhere in sight. I exhaled. My lungs burned. My arms and legs ached. The wounds in my hand throbbed as did the growing

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lump on my head.

*Remember why you're here, I told myself. Have the resolve to see this through.*

I pushed past my weariness, and ascended back into the canopy. Blue sky greeted me. So did the Whispering Garden to the west. Even though our prayer grounds lay far below the Sacred Grove, the motherwoods drew my eyes so high into the sky that I had to crane my neck to see their crowns. With green trees spreading from horizon to horizon, the blood-red motherwoods with their copper leaves seemed so out of place. It was as if Zola herself had reached down and put them in the earth.

A voice boomed from below, sharp and heavy as the explosion of a tree from a lightning strike. It was the Protector. He was dragging three strange-looking men, small and thin, each bound by what appeared to be a metal rope. Or maybe they were boys. They wore no shirts, only odd-looking shorts, and their skin was strangely colored. They did not have our golden skin, or our long, golden hair. One of them was kind of pinkish, with yellow hair on his body and head. Another of them was dark, almost black, and had no hair at all. The third was a light brown, like the earth.

I gasped. Were these strange creatures the Evil? The Protector had spoken of them with disdain, and these men were certainly ugly. And yet they didn't appear to be monsters worthy of fearing or hiding from. If anything, they should be pitied. But where had they come from? How had they gotten here?

Across from the outsiders stood one of the boys undergoing the Rite. I couldn't be sure, but I thought it was Idok. The Protector dragged the three strangers before the boy, and then spoke. Despite the Protector's loud voice, which seemed to emanate from the very trees, I could not understand what he was saying.

The Protector then reached out and touched the rings bound to the black boy's neck. The metal crumbled to dust. My jaw dropped. I had never seen a Zylarian do more than bend metal, even with the power of Siba.

After freeing the man, the Protector reached into his cloak and pulled out a curved piece of metal about the length of an arm. At one end, the steel tapered to a point, and at the other was a handle.

The black-skinned boy-man took the strange tool from the Protector's outstretched hand. I glanced down into the trees. No sign of my pursuer. Perhaps I had lost him. Then I spotted

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movement, the outline of a figure. Then another and another appeared. The three figures turned to six, then ten, then twenty. There was no way I could outrun them. I'd have to hide.

I moved up to the very top of the tree, hanging precariously as it swayed. Then I pulled myself up against the trunk and stood deathly still, until the tree stopped moving.

In the heart of the Grove, the dark man raised the metal instrument above his head and ran at Idok. Idok jumped back into a defensive stance and balled his hands into fists. The outsider brought the curved steel down and Idok threw up his arm to block it.

The steel ripped open a gash and Idok screamed. His blood-curdling cries were a wound in my heart.

The man wrenched the tool free and blood poured from the gaping wound. Idok grabbed for his forearm as it flopped like a waving hand. My stomach turned.

The boy-man drove the deadly instrument forward. Idok lunged backward, narrowly avoiding the sharp metal point, but lost his balance and fell. His left hand hit the ground. Whatever bone was holding his forearm together broke. I turned, fighting the urge to vomit, but Idok's tortured screams ripped through me, shaking me to my core. I grasped the tree and shuddered.

When I looked back, the man leapt on Idok as he cradled his dangling arm to his body. The man raised his arm to deliver the final blow, and I closed my eyes, too afraid to watch Idok die.

The screaming ceased. I looked and saw Idok running away from the stranger, his forearm completely gone. He stopped suddenly and spun around. Raising his bloody stub into the air, he shouted, unleashing the Body of Stone and Might. Although I had seen the technique invoked several times before, Teacher had yet to show me how to do it.

Idok's body transformed. Muscles swelled twice their size. A crimson river gushed down his arm. But as his golden skin turned gray and began to harden to rock, the blood ceased. Stone formed around the wound, sealing it. Idok looked more a man now than the scrawny stranger before him.

"There!" shouted a nearby voice.

From the undergrowth below, a man pointed at me. Dozens of men scaled the trees all around me. I didn't have long but was determined to see all of Idok's Rite, even if they had to pry my bloody hands from the tree and drag me back kicking and screaming.

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Wrapping my arms and legs around the tree with all my might, I turned my focus back to the meadow. The black-skinned man swung the tapered steel toward Idok's head. He ducked as the man's arm swept over him.

Idok sprung up and punched the man under his chin. Then he leapt forward and drove him into the ground with his fist. The boy-man's legs jerked violently.

To the roar of three thousand Zylarians, Idok slammed his fist over and over into the man's face until he lay still. A pool of blood encircled what remained of his face. Idok raised his bloodied hand and roared. It was not the same voice of the boy who had begun the fight.

People cheered and shouted, but I felt no joy. I was sickened.

The Protector held his hand up for silence. A hush fell over the crowd as he reached out and freed the other two men from their bonds. Just as he had before, the Protector gave them the same curved, pointed metal. For Idok to pass the Rite, he would have to survive the attacks of both of them.

The entire tree bowed, pitching me forward. I clung to the trunk. Then a hand yanked my ankle so hard I had to bite my tongue to keep from crying out. Bark tore into the flesh of my arms as I squeezed the tree with all my strength. But no matter how hard I held on, I couldn't keep myself from being pulled down.

"Here, boy!" shouted an angry voice.

I gritted my teeth and kicked for a hand.

"Ugh!" wheezed the voice.

I pulled my foot free and scrambled back up the tree to watch. The two outsiders below spread apart.

Cautiously, the two men moved toward Idok, but he didn't wait for their attacks. Idok moved his right arm across his body and placed his hand against his left shoulder. Then his arm swept across his body in an arcing blur. The air in front of his fingertips rippled like wind against water, only the ripples moved a hundred times as fast.

The pink man yelped and his arm fell to the ground, metal tool still in hand. The man looked down and gawked at his bleeding stump.

Idok cocked his arm back, breathing heavily. Teacher had said it took many years to build up the stamina to invoke even a single Siba technique.

Waves exploded from Idok. The pale man shot a glance down to the red line forming

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across his stomach. He opened his mouth as if to scream just as his body fell in two.

All this time I'd been goofing off while my friends had been learning how to do that instead. I was shocked, appalled.

Idok put his good hand to his knee. His body heaved with each breath. The earth-colored man stood several feet from him, hands trembling.

Suddenly, thunderous pain flooded my head. My limbs grew weak and darkness crept around my vision. Strong pressure on my shoulder brought me back into focus, and I was wrenched from the tree.

Deep green eyes blazed before me as a face pressed close to mine.

"Hendor!" a deep voice snarled.

I didn't recognize the man. When I tried to turn to look back down, he grabbed me by the hair.

"Don't look," he shouted. "You've seen too much already."

I turned to look anyway, but his grip on my hair tightened. My scalp tore. I pushed past the pain and grabbed the tree, keeping my eyes on the meadow below.

Idok stood up. His legs quivered.

The brown man's grip on the curved steel tightened. He crouched down and ran at Idok, thrusting his elbow back and pointing the metal tip forward.

Idok's arm moved out and locked straight. He opened his hand, laid his fingers flat, then swung his arm up toward the sky as if pointing to the stars.

"Let go, Hendor," a second man barked as he grabbed my left wrist and ripped it free.

With my right hand, I dug my nails into the tree and blinked back tears as the bark tore into my fingers. I slammed my legs into the tree and wrapped my feet around the trunk, ignoring the burns that spread from the fresh wounds in my thighs.

"Don't you know what the elders will do to you?" said a third voice, one that sounded familiar. Another hand grabbed my other wrist and pried it loose.

As the three men yanked at me, the only thing holding me to the tree were the thorns embedded in my legs. Inside my head I was screaming, pushing back the fear and the pain that threatened to overwhelm me. Yet something inside my gut gave me the courage to keep fighting.

The men holding me grunted, giving one final pull. It would not be enough to pry me loose. After all my friends had sacrificed, I would see Idok's fight to the end, no matter what.

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Below, the man drove the steel toward Idok's chest, just as Idok's arm moved toward him.

The clang of metal against stone rang through the Grove. A hush went through the crowd, as if three thousand people were holding their breath.

Idok coughed, and blood poured from his mouth. The man released the handle of his metal tool, now lodged in Idok's throat. Idok took a sideways step then collapsed to the ground. His Body of Stone and Might had not been strong enough. The stone exterior had been no thicker than skin.

Tears welled in my eyes. The Protector shook his head, and then flicked his wrist as if swatting an insect. The brown-man's head exploded.

I lost my hold of the tree, legs now numb from the pain.

For a moment, I felt weightless as the three men lifted me into the air. Degro's hardened face stared into mine. I hadn't given my father's loyal servant enough dream-twine. He was probably the one who'd followed me into the Grove.

As the other two men released me, Degro held me by my shirt with one meaty hand. "Do you know the punishment for watching the Rite?" he asked.

Of course I knew, but I didn't care. I was so furious I could have spat in his face. Our parents were forcing us to fight and die, and they weren't even telling us. And the Protector . . . he was preparing us for war.

I yanked a thorn from my leg and slammed it into Degro's hand.

His arm jerked back as he let me go, and I fell backward. There were no nearby branches to grab, only empty air and trees just out of reach.

The screams of two dozen men rang in my ears as the ground rushed up before me.