

REALM STRIDER

Prologue

“What makes slaves from men, and gods from men, is mind. Master the mind and life, nations, and all realms become your rightful throne.”

– Excerpt from the “Treatise on the Frailty of Flesh” by King Scion of Amal

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Oris was never alone. Treading the silty lake floor, the illuminating beams of the watching moons assured him of this fact. There was more than one power speaking through the smokescreen of the world. He only hoped he had heard correctly.

One thing he did know: water breathing was more taxing than he remembered. Between the mental strain of prolonged concentration and keeping his body calm while engulfed by dark leagues of water, it was all he could do to keep walking deeper. Each flickering moonbeam he passed through breathed new strength into his tired limbs. It had been a long day’s journey to the elder city of Del-Lenark, and was now becoming a long night since he began his subnautical walk. He had to remind himself that, if what he had learned was true, weary legs and an unsettled mind would be a small cost to save the Realms from a millennium of madness.

A cold eddy snaked along Oris’s cheek, where the old red scar disappeared behind his eye patch. He knew he looked older than he was in reality. The concerns and demands of his station had left their mark, weathering the natural sanguine features of his pale face and adorning his tightly-pulled black hair with a single silver streak. To keep his mind off the pressure of the water, Oris ran an

inventory of the components contained in the many pockets of his dark-brown duster coat: *gold filings, brick dust, a few copper pieces, that nasty tobacco Elati gave me, a bit of charcoal from last night's fire, and the lump of silver pumice in my mouth*, Oris thought with an inward check. *Should've restocked before I left the surface.*

The light of the moons was becoming faint. Oris held out his staff. A sharp spark of blue flame split the murky depths from the complex mechanism in the head, sending a cascade of bubbling steam skyward. The moment he could see clearly, he halted. He was standing on the rim of a sheer precipice. Far below, through the murky depths, a point of red firelight glowed, gazing up at him with menace.

Taking one last look up toward the obscured circle of the moon, Oris leaned over the abyss and extended his staff. A sudden current swept him into the endless dark. As he descended, the hazy firelight clarified into a massive arched window in the face of a ruined temple.

Setting foot on the arch's threshold, he stopped and analyzed the enchanted membrane that held back the weight of the lake. *That's some sophisticated Veicraft for an abandoned crypt*, Oris thought. *I wonder who's home.*

He passed through and emerged dripping into an empty, torchlit hall. The vaulted ceiling stretched so high it disappeared into shadow, from which descended long, rich tapestries draping over algae-streaked pillars and stonework.

He stood and listened. The crackle of torches was the only sound, but something told him he was watched. His gaze fixed on a recess in the wall shrouded by a decayed tapestry. Watching it carefully, he plucked a loose stone. It had come from one of the large bricks that composed the floors and walls. *Let's have a little fun*, Oris smiled, placing the rock inside the oval-shaped cavity in the mid-point of his staff. With a resonant clack, he struck the butt of the staff on the floor. Instantly, the stone inside flashed and crackled, resonating with a brick in the wall behind the tapestry. He

jerked the staff back. The thump of a loose brick tumbling out of the wall was followed by a yelp. A willowy girl in woven leaf garments tumbled out into the hall.

“Hey, this is no time for games, Oris.” The girl rubbed her sore rear.

“Says the elf playing hide and seek,” Oris smiled. “I’m glad you found the courage to join me after all, Nakari.”

If Oris was late autumn, Nakari was the bloom of spring. The girl’s wild appearance complemented her sprightly demeanor. Tangled red hair contrasted with the vibrant green scales of leaves that made up her short tunic, adorned by a vine belt arrayed with a collection of flower petals, seeds, and berries. An elf of Nakari’s variety was a novelty in this corner of the world.

Oris moved along the hall, Nakari following alongside. He lifted his hand to his mouth and spat a small porous stone into his palm.

“Silver pumice. That’s a fancy water-breathing trick.” Nakari arched an eyebrow. “Where’d you get a rare thing like that?”

“I may not be able to slip to another Realm like you, but it is not forbidden to collect what comes through.” Oris tucked the stone into his pocket. “Knowing where to obtain artifacts from other Realms is a privilege of my station. Speaking of which, what have you brought for tonight?”

“Oh, you know me, old man.” Nakari gave a wily smile as she began to rifle through the botanical array around her belt. “Let’s see...some seeds from a dragonfly apple, some glade berries, rose petals, and thorn darts.”

“It will have to do,” Oris grunted, eyes still scanning the hall suspiciously. “And I wish you’d stop calling me an old man. If I were an elf I could be your big brother.”

“Oh, I get it. You assume I must be ancient like you because I’m an elf. Very diplomatic.” Nakari scoffed with mild offense. “I’ll have you know I’ll be twenty this Summer Harvest. And when I’m as old as you I’ll still look the same.”

Oris sighed. “Let’s focus. How long before Paraccadia converges? I could still use your help in a bind.”

“An hour. Maybe less.” Nakari popped one of the berries into her mouth.

Oris shot her a sharp look. “An hour? What have you been doing down here all this time? And don’t waste those berries.”

“I wasn’t just hiding behind curtains. I’ve been doing reconnaissance, like you asked. There’s a lot of ground to cover in this temple, you know.” Nakari flicked another berry into her mouth.

Oris fell silent as they reached the end of the hall. The open passageway terminated in a vast, multi-level rotunda. A stairway spiraled its perimeter. Oris leaned over the railing. They were at the highest story of the large round space. The ceiling drew Oris’s gaze.

Chipped frescoes depicting a scene of divine judgment decorated the gilded dome. Throngs of the watching world gazed up at a triad of angelic, winged figures. On the left, a woman dressed in silvery white held in one hand the branch of a tree and in the other a down-turned white sword. Her relaxed wings were silver, and the crescent moon lay beneath her feet. On the right stood a golden man dressed in scholar’s robes covered in eyes, holding an open tome in one hand and a quill in the other. His wings were gold, and radiant beams of the sun haloed his head. Between them kneeled a grim-looking man in black scholar’s robes. The dark scholar was shackled, his emerald-green wings bound with cords. A third eye punctuated his stoic face. A green circle rimmed with thinly traced sigils of the Sulvanarian script enveloped his whole form. Oris’s eyes lingered on the woman.

“The Priest Sulva is your Vei Soul, isn’t she? The lady of the moon,” Nakari murmured, following Oris’s gaze.

“In part, though more so the light she reflects—at least in my best moments.” He cracked a wry smile. “It’s one of the things you and I share in common.”

“That felt like a compliment.” Nakari glanced back at Oris teasingly as she leaned over the rail. She looked back up at the fresco. “The trial of Vettu-Gnosi. Not a very popular bedtime story. I figure this must have been a temple to Sulva and Arbol, the Priests who sealed Vettu-Gnosi, if you believe the legends.”

“Or his tomb,” Oris replied in a hushed tone. He turned toward Nakari. “Why were you hiding when I came in?”

Nakari winced at the question and toed the ground. “Well, the good news is you were right. This is, without a doubt, a stronghold of the cult of Vettu-Gnosi. I’ve never felt a darker presence—hence the berries.”

“That’s the good news? What’s the bad news?” Oris scoffed, reaching to snatch the next berry out of her grasp. She swatted his hand and skipped back. “That’s the thing. It’s more than likely I was seen.”

At that moment, hushed voices reverberated from the lower levels of the rotunda. Oris glanced over the railing again and saw two white-robed figures walking together, hooded heads bent close in conversation. They were already ascending the stairs.

“You couldn’t have led with that?” Oris hissed, glancing back into the hallway—Nakari had vanished. He rolled his eyes as he tucked himself into a recess in the wall, muttering under his breath, “I hope you’re right about her.”

Oris reached into one of his coat pockets, produced a scrap of charcoal, and ground it gently in his hand. He heard the footfalls of the two men approaching as he placed a trace amount of the crumbled charcoal into the cavity in his staff. The staff flashed. He held up his open palm and blew on the powdered black substance. Instantly, the dust formed a cloud, hung for a moment, then spread over him like a shadow. He held his breath as the hooded men stepped into the hallway, passing inches from where he stood. The green crests emblazoned on the collars of their white robes—an open eye with seven black rays shooting out from it, like a seven-legged spider.

“But it’s not enough that his strength grows,” one said in an elevated whisper. “He must pervade every Realm, or they will never share his perfect mind. The lady is right—”

Their conversation faded as they moved on, leaving the last words inaudible. Oris did not stir until long after they had passed.

“No. That can’t be,” he murmured.

Oris gritted his teeth, exhaled sharply, and left the safety of his enchanted charcoal shadow. Moving down the stairs, he scanned his surroundings with newfound urgency. His footsteps echoed faintly as he reached the bottom. Three columned passageways branched from the ground floor of the rotunda. Two gaped into utter blackness. From the depths of the third diffused a sickly green glow. Thick, foul-smelling air exuded from the passage, accompanied by a constant, droning hum. Oris stood frozen, staring into the maw of the passage, then proceeded inside.

The white of Oris’s knuckles shone out of the darkness as he gripped his staff, holding it out in front of him. Painfully audible in the throbbing silence, his shaky breath seemed to drown out a thousand subtle sounds in the shadows around him. Oris shook his head to dispel an onslaught of unwanted thoughts. The droning, like inhuman, incorporeal breath, grew louder with every step. Oris kept close to the pillars that lined the walls, poised to slip between them at the first sign of movement.

He halted for a moment, bracing himself as the corridor began to swell and constrict like the rolling movement of a swallowing throat. Bewildered, he stared at the optical illusion. The hallway ahead appeared to twist into a constricting spiral. Then, as suddenly as the illusion had begun, it stopped. Oris stood in an ordinary columned hall again.

“What in the name of the Priests?” he breathed.

A cold hand grasped his arm from the shadows.

Oris jerked away, igniting the head of his staff with a flare of fire, ready for a fight. His combative expression morphed into shock. A familiar, precious girl stood gazing back at him. Her soft, light-toned hair and wide, kind green eyes were the same as the memories he chose to preserve from their years together. Crowding behind her were the faces of others he had left behind—friends and schoolmates from beautiful years now rotten.

Oris stepped back, struggling to breathe. “No. This is not real.”

“Why shouldn’t it be?” hissed a half-audible voice from the walls of the hall.

With trembling hands, Oris held out his staff. The head began to burn white as he traced a cyclical sigil in the air, resembling an ornate crescent moon. The symbol hung in the air and flashed as he finished with a flourish. Oris’s mind broke free of the illusion.

Instead of the girl, Oris faced a hunched, gnarled man, leathery skin as pale as a corpse, arms still reaching for him. The pitiful husk of a man stared at Oris with vapid, pale eyes. Oris lowered his staff, gazing with pity at what remained of the man. The husk’s feet were shackled to the floor. He was blind, judging by the milky cataracts in his eyes.

“Who are you?” Oris whispered.

No answer came. Oris noticed another two figures peering out of the shadows from behind the man. With growing horror, Oris lifted his staff and illumined the hallway ahead. From behind

every pillar and in every recess of the long corridor, a sea of glinting eyes and sallow faces gazed at him.

Traversing the hall, Oris cleared his mind and tried hard not to look at the helpless cases that hemmed him on every side. The hellish corridor ended in a steep flight of stairs, ascending to where the source of the green glow awaited.

At the top, he found himself standing on an enclosed walkway overlooking a vast atrium. Turrets, arches, and many-windowed towers encompassed the central space of the crypt, giving the impression of standing in the heart of a subterranean city rather than the sanctuary of a temple. Overhead, arching buttresses supported the walls like the spokes of a wheel, meeting in a central unlit chandelier. A hundred feet above this, Oris saw dim traces of moonlight through the glass dome that peered up into the murky depths of the lake.

Below, books and papers stacked in heaps flooded the polished sanctuary lobby. Dozens of hooded figures in white stood facing the far wall of the sanctuary, from which the green light originated. Fixed like a gem within a complex network of carved runes was a massive, disc-shaped green stone. An intense sickly light emitted from an array of jagged cracks and hairline fissures spreading from its middle.

Something moved deep within the stone—an enigma of shadow within a carapace of glass, like a funnel-spider stirring within its web. Oris shuddered. The air of the sanctuary thrummed with the droning sound, now intense and underscored by a low, rhythmic chant. Standing with arms outspread before the radiant stone was a woman in white, her short graying hair cinched back tight.

“That’s her. The Masked Lady.” Nakari hissed in Oris’s ear.

Oris nearly leaped out of his skin.

“Don’t do that,” he hissed, shooting Nakari a sharp glance before returning his attention to the dark scene below. “Yes, you’re right. It is as we thought. If this is the true intention of the Enlightened Society, war is the least of our concerns.”

“Let’s kill her and get out of here.” Nakari drew a red rose-thorn dart from her belt.

“No,” Oris placed a hand over hers. “The Traveler wouldn’t approve.”

“I can’t just sit here and spy while the woman who—”

A cry echoed from below. A struggling man was forcibly dragged out onto the sanctuary floor. The woman in white turned, regarding the captive through the holes in her ornate gold mask. The chanting ceased. Oris held his breath.

The Masked Lady’s imperious voice reverberated through the sanctuary. “Welcome, headmaster. I know you’re a busy man and your family waits, so I’ll keep this brief. You possess information we need. Please tell us all you know about the green prism.”

The man sobbed, blabbered, and tried to rise. One of his captors struck his head. The man sank back to his knees, head down. His voice broke. “It was forged over a millennium ago by the Priests, blessed be they.”

“And to set Vettu-Gnosi free, to fill the seven Realms, what must be done?” The Masked Lady’s voice held a dangerous edge.

The scholar lifted his head, replying more clearly than before.

“Blasphemy! He was sealed for a reason.”

Another blow to the face quelled the man’s objections. He continued, tone chastened, “Depth and height, black and white, blade of death and blade of life.”

“You need not recite nursery rhymes to me. We know the legends of the twin swords.” Her lip curled. “You are a teacher of lore. Tell me, can an Apostate traverse the Realms?”

The scholar scoffed. “Never. Even free of the green prism, Vettu-Gnosi is bound by the divine laws, like all Apostates. It is why the Realms were divided in prehistory.”

“All laws have loopholes. You’re not telling me everything.” The Masked Lady gestured and the scholar’s captors dragged him toward the green stone. The crowd resumed their chant.

“I’ve told you everything I know,” the scholar protested.

“Save me from the lies of holy men.” The Masked Lady sneered. “Vettu-Gnosi will have your mind, one way or the other.”

Cruel hands pressed the scholar against the green stone. Voracious light surged from the cracks as the shadow within warped and twisted.

A flash of green lightning. A dissonant buzz. A scream. Silence.

The scholar staggered back from the smoking surface of the glassy stone, face vapid and eyes pale.

“I’ve seen enough.” Oris ground his teeth. Nakari didn’t answer. Where had she gone? He detected a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye from the stairs.

Oris whirled and raised his staff. A white-hooded figure leaped from the stairs and rushed him.

Oris swiftly dodged the thrust of a dagger and brought his staff down on the assailant’s head, staggering him. He had just enough time to write a sign in the air between them. He put his hand into the hovering symbol and winced slightly.

The hooded man regained his footing and launched at Oris.

Oris swept the knife out of the man's hand with his staff and brought his catalyzed fist against the assailant's chest. As if struck by a cannonball, the man flew back across the walkway and into a wall, crumpling like a rag doll.

Oris turned to run back down the stairs, but his limbs would not respond.

A cloaked figure approached, this one clad in black. He stretched out an inhuman, spidery seven-fingered hand. Oris strained to break free, but his feet lifted off the floor. The invisible force carried him out into the open air over the sanctuary floor.

The Masked Lady barked out a laugh. She tipped her chin toward Oris's suspended form. "Pay due reverence, everyone. A Sulvanarian Luminary graces us with his presence."

The cloaked worshippers filled the chamber with laughter. She slid the gold mask from her face to reveal fair skin, slender features, and deep-set green eyes—ageless but for the scar running down one cheek and the streaks of gray in her short, pulled-tight raven hair. Her thin lips curled into a half-smile. "After eleven years' estrangement, I would hope you'd have the manners to announce yourself formally, Oris."

"Has it really been that long? How the years fly when you're not a slave to fear and madness." Oris kept his voice even-keeled. "I admit I'm disappointed in myself for being surprised to find you at the center of this web. You really are terribly predictable, Luria."

The woman gave an amused laugh at the mention of her proper name. She strode toward Oris.

"Your silver tongue was always one of your finer qualities. But I'm hurt. You call me a slave to fear? Madness? I thought the same of you when you ran from our little project. You've always hated to look your destiny in the face, Oris." She gestured toward the green stone embedded in the wall.

"I always found your idea of destiny an ugly face to look at." Oris drifted nearer to the object.

As if awakened, the green mirror churned with cloudy shapes. Dim flashes backlit shadowy limbs moving within. The woman walked below Oris as he floated toward the glassy surface.

“What’s your game here?” Oris raised his voice. “You stand knocking at the door of the prince of lies and madness, begging for truth. Look at yourself. This is a dead end, and you know it. The Realms will fight back to keep their course.”

“That kind of limited thinking is why I abandoned the Vei academies.” The lady sighed, striding alongside Oris toward the stone. “Vettu-Gnosi does not lie. He is the well of forbidden knowledge, offering and implementing truth that your order shies away from. Limited to the Core-Realm only, he would be imprisoned again. But free to wander the Realms, he would be unstoppable, invisible even to the greatest minds as he bends their will. I have made a bargain that will liberate the Realms forever. Rejoice. You’re standing on the brink of the rebirth of the cosmos, Oris.”

Within the murky clouds of green, Oris perceived pricks of light—a thousand eyes looking back at him from a shadowy mass. At the same moment, he caught a reflection in the convex surface. He saw the glowing shape of the sign cast by the cloaked man standing on the balcony behind him, holding him suspended. He also glimpsed a second figure moving high above the sanctuary floor, creeping along the buttresses and leaping down toward the central chandelier like an agile mouse.

Oris suppressed a grin. “Vettu-Gnosi is a devourer of minds. If you set him loose upon the Realms, no mind will be free.”

“Every mind is a slave to something, Oris.” The Masked Lady laughed. “Only two are free: the mindless and the master of minds. I am here to set you free.”

The hairs on Oris’s arms and neck rose. His body hovered inches from the glassy surface, radiating with insatiable hunger.

Suddenly, Oris dropped to the floor. He fell back and scrambled away from the stone, glancing back at the Masked Lady. She looked at Oris, her jaw agape with confounded rage. She glanced back at

the cloaked man who had held him suspended, now standing with arms limp at his sides, his sigil extinguished, rose-thorn darts in his throat. He bowed forward and loudly scattered a stack of books over the sanctuary below.

The Masked Lady snarled and whipped the girdle book from her belt, beginning to write a warding sign just as two more darts shot from the ceiling. The crimson barbs tore the book from her hands. The lady turned toward the ceiling with a murderous gaze.

In that moment's pause, Oris prepared his last drop of quicksilver in the chamber of his staff.

A cry of fury burst from above. A blur of green and blazing red hair swooped down at the woman, a dagger-like thorn in her grip.

Luria smirked and deftly sidestepped the attack with mocking nonchalance. Nakari hit the ground, rolled, and threw a second volley of darts up at the woman in one fluid motion. Luria anticipated the attack, ducked the projectiles and took a step nearer to Nakari. Rage flared in the elf girl's face as she gripped her dagger-thorn. With a savage scream, Nakari flew at the lady's throat.

Nakari's indignant cry was cut short. Her dagger fell from stiffened fingers and clattered across the stones.

"What a pretty little accomplice you have, Oris. You should teach her better manners." Luria grasped Nakari by the neck with unnatural strength. Dangling above the floor, Nakari gasped and twitched. With easy strides, Luria carried Nakari toward the green stone. "I hope she is no one dear to you, Oris, or this might hurt to watch."

"Please—just let her go. She doesn't know anything," Oris pleaded.

"Lose your silver tongue already?" Luria turned the girl to face the glass. "No one follows you without secrets, Oris. The glass will reveal her mind. Besides, the master is hungry."

Luria hurled Nakari against the surface of the stone. The stone flashed with green light, the incited shadow within rotating like a twisting whirlpool of tendrils. Oris could see Nakari's terrified face as she let out a stifled cry and writhed helplessly in Luria's grip. The woman shut her eyes, as if listening, as the stone hummed with a myriad of whispered voices.

Luria's eyes flashed open, sparked with luminous green as she smiled at Oris and said, "And the boy in the forest—you didn't mention him."

Oris looked at Nakari with helpless bewilderment.

"What boy?" he whispered.

Nakari cried out, pulled her knees to her chest, and kicked Luria in the stomach. The woman gasped and staggered back, dropping her. The instant Nakari's feet touched the floor, she dove away from the glass—and vanished in a fragrant violet mist.

Oris immediately catalyzed the drop of quicksilver in his staff. He rushed forward to where Nakari's dart lay on the floor. Before anyone had a chance to react, Oris threw the barb up into the air, following the movement with an upward swing of his staff. The quicksilver flashed. Supernatural speed channeled through the staff and into the barb, shooting the projectile up like a skyrocket. An explosive crack and gush roared overhead as the glass dome shattered.

A sea of water thundered down toward the scattering worshippers. Oris popped the silver pumice in his mouth and hastily arced a warding sign above him to break the impact. The waterfall exploded over the sanctuary floor, throwing books, papers, and people into a violent cyclone of water.

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In the swirling chaos, the Masked Lady found her footing and touched the green stone. She formed bright white signs in the water around her, creating an expanding bubble. She added more hovering

sigils to the first, weaving a tapestry of runes that steadily pushed back the weight of water. Within minutes, the sanctuary was open air again, though humid. The floor was soaked and scattered with debris and saturated bodies. Oris was gone.

The lady stood beside the green stone, hand planted on the object as she sustained the water-manipulating sigils. She gazed thoughtfully at the churning canopy of the lake above.

“You’ve shown your hand, Oris. The boy will unleash Vettu-Gnosi, and the girl will lead the way.”

Chapter 1

A Tomb of Dragon Bones

“Young men fear because they cling to what can be stolen. They destroy themselves daily for fear of dying. I wonder if we imagine ghosts to be airy because they’re unbound to the cares for material things. Myself, having died my own death, am a ghost in the Realms. I look with shame on my youth, and the power and control I lusted for, she an emblem of both. What I would have counted useless in those days I would now die for, knowing I am only a specter and death is not to be dreaded.”

– From the Journal of a Wayfaring Luminary

* * *

“This is perfect.” Merik exhaled, a melancholy smile passing over his cracked lips. His companion did not speak, but he could hear him breathing gently beside him. He glanced at his phantom friend, a featureless man made of bright mist. To Merik’s recollection, the misty ghost had always been there with him, as attentive and quiet as his shadow. When the ghost spoke, it was like a hollow rustle of inarticulate wind, in which Merik sometimes caught stray words.

The scene was always the same. A small, contained, lush island in the center of a tranquil lake. Flowering trees bowed under the weight of enormous multicolored blossoms, kneeling to kiss the surface of the water that lapped at Merik's feet. Ballads of paradisaal birds harmonized with the hum of dragonflies in the balmy air. It was a small island, less than a mile long, but to Merik it was his royal domain. Save for the ghost, Merik was the island's sole inhabitant.

Merik never questioned that the ghost was good. He had a bottomless well of experiences with bad people. The bright ghost was unlike any of them. The ghost never imposed, never attacked, and never left. The ghost must be someone with nearly inhuman patience, like a spectral embodiment of the perfect landscape in front of him.

"What is on your mind today?" Merik asked the ghost idly, letting his calloused fingers rake through the soft, wavy grass. A sweet breeze wafted over the surface of the pond and kissed Merik's soot-stained forehead, brushing aside his hair like a tender parental hand.

"I am thinking about your visitor," the ghost said. Its voice was unusually clear, carried on the breeze. Merik caught his breath and stared up at where the face of the misty figure must be. He got the impression the ghost looked down at him with knowing eyes.

"I...uh...what visitor? It's just us here." Merik rallied himself from the shock.

"Things are about to change, Merik. Your road is about to begin—" The ghost's voice trailed off.

Unease settled in Merik's core.

"Oh, thanks for that. Now how am I supposed to relax?" Irritated, Merik shot to his feet and walked deeper into the forest. The ghost followed him, silent for the moment.

Merik yanked a yellowish-green fruit off a branch, taking a juicy bite out of the flesh. The rejuvenating influence of the fruit immediately vitalized his body. He would need the strength for the journey back. Escapes to the island were rewarding but cost him restful sleep.

He pushed through the fragrant floral underbrush, trying hard to regain a peaceful state of mind. Gradually, calm returned, and he let his thoughts drift with the swaying branches overhead. He heaved another deep breath and attempted a contented smile.

Normally, Merik did not permit himself to feel things. In his experience, feeling always dead-ended in pain. But here, Merik found he could loosen his grip on reality, and with that his emotions—if only for a few minutes. It felt cruel he could not linger here forever and leave the mines behind.

A swift shadow in the leaves snatched Merik's attention. It was not a bird—it was too large—and Merik thought he detected a human shape to its limbs. An uncanny dread twisted the perfection of the forest. Merik realized he might not be alone today.

Leaves rustled behind him. He spun. Nothing. Heart pounding, he scanned the foliage for signs of an intruder. He reached for the carved stone in his pocket. A giggle erupted directly above his head. Merik looked up and found himself staring into the freckled, grinning face of an elf girl. Her youthful complexion was perfect except for a sickly-green burn on the side of her face. She analyzed Merik, a look of quiet amusement in her large, almond-shaped green eyes. She let out a delighted laugh as Merik toppled back onto the ground in shock.

“I knew there was something weird about you. Glad I found you before she did. Now...hey, wait, don't go.” Her voice trailed into echoes as darkness consumed Merik's vision.

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Merik snapped upright on the stone floor. Waking from the forest always left him disoriented and a little sour in his stomach, never like waking from a normal dream—more like being dropped off a cliff. Merik clutched his thumping chest and tried to regulate his breathing. The appearance of someone else in the forest had violated his thinly constructed sense of security. For a long minute he sat in the dark of the cave, collecting himself.

The ambient hum of picks and machinery from the upper mines gradually tethered his weary mind back to unchanged reality. He was not king of a paradise. He was a slave laborer of the Daegonur Empire.

Merik rubbed his sore eyes, exhausted. How long had he slept? He glanced at the dim flame that illuminated the stone grotto where he had spent his sleep hour. The half-melted candle created a significant puddle of wax on the charred earth. Merik hissed a curse. He rapidly collected his pick, a crust of rations, and his rucksack containing the day's findings. Black and red crystalline fragments spilled from the mouth of his pack and littered the floor.

Merik shoveled the dragon bones into his pack. Ground dragon bones were converted into an unrefined powder the Daegon called Marstone. He paused to marvel at a particularly radiant piece. It would make for a potent batch of Marstone when refined. It was the soldiers' cruel delight to burn the bare backs of slaves with Marstone-infused branding irons.

Lugging his things and carefully keeping his candlewick lit, Merik hurried back along the passage toward the mouth of the mine shaft, a spacious cavern dug by millions of pick-strokes. Failing to haul in the required amount of dragon bone fragments would mean one more mark on the execution chart for the entire five-man crew. Whippings and branding irons were hard punishment, but they were the least of the empire's creative methods of cowing slaves. On the other hand, routinely meeting quota brought promotion. Productive slaves became the foremen they had once feared. He had even heard of some being promoted out of the mines entirely.

"It won't be long now. They'll see." Merik tested the satisfying weight of the rucksack over his shoulder.

The narrow passage abruptly opened into the stope, a hub of at least ten different mine openings in their quarter of the system. Merik's four other crew members sat outside the mouth of one of the new shafts. Their picks lay idle on the ground. The two burliest slaves ate while the other two watched.

In black leather armor and worn steel helmets, the two foremen assigned to the work crew sat passively on a shelf of rock above, iron cudgels idle on their laps.

One of the larger slaves lifted his head from his bowl and called out, “Where have you been, Blinkworm?”

“Working.” Merik approached, gesturing to his pack full of bone fragments. “Why aren’t you working?”

Both of the bullish slaves stopped eating and turned to face Merik. A close network of branding marks criss-crossed their muscular torsos. “What’s one more burn?” one of the brutes growled.

“We’re still hungry,” the other said through a mouthful of food.

They glowered at Merik before returning to their meals of gruel and dried fish.

Two empty bowls lay in front of them. He darted a glance at the other two crew members—an old man and a boy no older than nine, half Merik’s age. Neither had bowls.

“Where’s your food?” Merik asked. The boy pointed at the two smacking and grunting slaves. Merik let out an impatient groan, dropped his pack and discreetly plucked the carved stone from his pocket. He tucked it in the center of his fist.

“You’ve had your rations. Now give back the food.” The stone in Merik’s hand began to burn like hot metal.

The men raised their eyebrows and exchanged amused looks. They set the bowls down and stood, dwarfing Merik’s thin, bony physique. Merik could imagine what they saw. Thick black hair drooped over his large forehead and slightly protruding ears, giving him a boyish look for someone on the edge of manhood. His torn pants betrayed knobby knees, and his lanky arms suggested very little in the way of physical strength. But Merik knew he had something the others did not.

Still, Merik did not want a fight. If any member of their crew underperformed, the punishment would be dealt to the entire crew. A starving slave could not swing a pick or carry loads. The foremen watched like grinning vultures from their rock perch, waiting for what would happen next.

Merik ground his teeth as the stone burned in his hand.

“I said, give back the food. Now.”

For a moment, the two brutes looked taken aback. One even glanced back down at his stolen bowl on the ground. The other grunted like a perturbed bull, shaking his head.

The man snarled, taking a step forward. “You think you’re the boss here, Blinkworm?”

Merik stepped back. “No. I just don’t want us to get burned alive because these two can’t meet the quota.”

The brute glared at the frail old man and little boy, who watched the confrontation with uneasy expressions. A sly smile crossed both brutes’ faces as they looked at the two sitting slaves. The brute nearest Merik plucked up his pickaxe.

“You’re right, Blinkworm. They’re both dead weight. We’d do better just the three of us.”

The boy and the old man stood shakily, dread dawning on their faces. They looked to the foremen for help, but the two guards only laughed and leaned forward to enjoy the bloodshed.

“We have a better chance of exceeding quota with a five-man crew.” A wave of energy buoyed Merik as the digesting fruit in his stomach mingled with adrenaline.

The nearest brute pivoted. Merik caught the reek of the man as he breathed down on him, twirling his pickaxe in his strong hands.

“Maybe we spill your guts first. You’ve got enough bones in your bag for me and my brother, eh, Blinkworm?”

Merik clenched his fist tight around the rock, ignored the increasing heat, and growled, “Stop calling me Blinkworm.”

The brute let out a guffaw. In a sudden movement intended for surprise, he swung his pickaxe in an arc, directly at Merik’s chest and neck.

Merik anticipated the attack. He ignited the stone, his muscles locking. The steel blade rang against his body as if it had hit solid stone.

Before the brute could recover, Merik swung the burning stone into the man’s knee. The crack of bone shuddered through his hardened fist. The man bellowed in pain and toppled to the ground.

His hulking brother charged, winding up for a heavy swing of his pick, aimed to pierce Merik’s skull.

Merik’s limbs weakened as the stone cooled. He waited, then swiftly rolled to one side as the blow fell against the rock floor with a resonant ring. Merik regained his footing. The brute lifted his pick, roaring with rage. Summoning the last of his strength, Merik channeled the stone’s power into his leg. As the man lunged, Merik kicked him in the ribs with all his might.

The man shot through the air like a pebble from a sling and smashed into the rock shelf beneath the two foremen. Merik glimpsed the stupefied faces of the foremen and the other slaves before his head went light and he fell to the floor. A roar of noise flooded his ears as the world went black around him.

* * *

It was the cold and light that roused Merik’s senses. His head swam. He gazed upward into a bright blur of blue-tinted light, realizing with a jolt he was staring up at a hundred-foot ceiling capped

with a dome of glacial ice. The cart beneath him vibrated and bumped along the rocky ground. The ring and clatter of mining and machinery surrounded him.

Merik lifted his throbbing head. He was chained to the bed of a wagon pulled by more fortunate slaves, his hands and feet tethered to each corner. They carted him up the center road of the top level, where the kilns burned night and day to refine the dragon bones. Steel manifolds of the giant furnaces built into the sides of the vast stone trench filled his vision, their exhaust pipes crawling up the walls like the roots of an evil iron tree. A slave from Merik's end of the mines would be brought to the top level for only a handful of reasons, few of them good. The stone was no longer in his hand. He hissed a curse.

A scream from some slave in agony echoed through the wretched place, setting Merik's teeth on edge. He turned his head slightly to look at the foreman walking alongside the cart, his iron truncheon tucked under his arm. The man looked nervous, beads of sweat glistening on his forehead.

"I made half the quota for our crew," Merik said.

"Shut it." The foreman grunted.

"I can make up the rest."

"This isn't about quota. Now quiet." The foreman growled, rapping the truncheon against the side of the cart.

Merik kept his mouth shut. *What could he mean?* Merik wondered, *If I'm being executed for failing to meet quota, the whole crew should be with me, chained and gagged, ready to be dumped into one of those kilns.* He knew most brawls in the mines—even lethal ones—went without consequence. This was outside of ordinary procedure, and that worried Merik more than beatings and threats.

He was carted to the edge of the long trench and up a stone ramp. His cart joined a vast procession of slaves, each carrying heavy sacks. A long makeshift wood wall on one side funneled the slaves along a set course. Bodies of living slaves hung chained on the wall by their wrists, each of their exposed torsos pocked with recent brand marks.

Merik was wheeled to an empty place in the wall and removed from the cart. The rough wood scraped his bare back as he was heaved up by two large foremen. Two slaves lifted his chains and hammered them up so he would hang by his hands. They left Merik to dangle in front of the ceaseless parade of slaves.

The cold metal shackles bit his wrists over time, pulling against his weight, but Merik felt fortunate to experience painful punishment rather than execution. He would be hung in full view of the other slaves for a few days, burned with branding irons, then returned to his crew to continue work as normal. Merik had survived the grueling ordeal before. Still, something felt wrong. Runaways, thieves, or slaves who attacked foremen received this punishment. Merik was none of these.

Merik marked time by counting vacant-faced slaves as the neverending line snaked past. Every now and then, slaves glanced up at him with dread and dismay before dropping their eyes again. Merik hated that look. He knew what it was like to give up hope—to resign oneself to failure—to become another rotating part in the empire's war machine. But giving up offered no relief. In spite of Merik's willingness to welcome oblivion, he continued to exist.

Merik lifted his eyes above the bobbing heads of the human cattle to the proud, upright figure of a foreman on the other side of the path. The armored man surveyed the slaves with his head held high, wringing the truncheon in his clean, strong hands. Merik longed to feel the unyielding power of that dreaded object in his own hands—to see the cowed looks of slaves as he walked by. More than domination and power, the truncheon was the emblem of self-secured safety and control, the kind no one can take away—the kind of control he had tasted only enough to crave.

With enough successful delves and a cooperative crew, Merik knew he could get there. He could be the foreman overseeing the procession instead of wall decor. Running away or embracing death offered nothing. Power brought freedom.

Hours passed. Bright sunlight intensified across the ice canopy, indicating it must be mid-morning. But day and night meant little in the Marstone mines. Torches stayed lit, work continued unbroken, and the river of slaves flowed without end. Merik hung his head, moving in and out of a half-sleep state. He tried to imagine the forest island—to go there for rest—but he could not get himself into a deep enough sleep. The pain in his wrists kept him in a cruel state of twilight consciousness.

“Where did you find this?” A cold voice woke him fully.

Merik opened his sore eyes. A man with bright blue eyes and a close-trimmed black beard stared back at him. He wore a pointed helmet pressed with the crest of the imperial dragon—a fire-breathing serpent with blue-studded eyes. This was not one of the foremen. This was an officer of the Daegon army.

“I’ll ask again. Where did you find this?”

The officer held up a familiar object. Merik’s carved stone, a red-and-black crystalline shard of dragon bone scrawled with intricate square symbols. Carving those signs in the correct sequence, let alone finding a tool sharp and precise enough for the task, had taken every spare moment of Merik’s time for months.

Merik blinked and swallowed, trying to get his weary brain to think of a safe response. His muscles seized up as excruciating pain flooded his senses. Merik’s scream drowned out the sickening sizzle of the branding iron melting the skin on his exposed chest. The iron pulled away. He breathed hard and bit his tongue, trying to ignore the lingering pain.

“We can burn you until there is no skin left,” the Daegon officer grunted, holding up the stone in Merik’s face. “Who gave this to you?”

“I found it...down in the mines,” Merik gasped, hoping the reality of his pain would help disguise his lie.

The officer roared. “You’re a liar.” He slapped Merik’s face. “Burn him again.”

Merik shut his eyes. His body tensed as it anticipated the next wave of searing pain.

“Wait!” A woman’s voice reverberated through the cavern.

Merik opened his eyes to see the Daegon officer bowing. A tall figure, resplendent in flowing white silk garments laced with infinitely intricate designs, drifted into view. Wonder momentarily eclipsed his pain. The woman wore a gold mask of a stoical human visage. Three dark eye holes gazed at him, betraying nothing of her true eyes. The crown of the mask was inscribed in small, blocky letters: The Enlightened Society.

“What is your name, slave boy?” The woman’s voice soothed like a gentle touch.

“Merik.” He dropped his gaze.

The woman laughed. “Down here they call you Blinkworm. More creative than I’d expect from slaves. Why do they call you this?”

Merik frowned. He never thought much about the name the other slaves always called him. He muttered, “I don’t know. I hate that name.”

“They tell me you are an unusual slave, Merik.” The woman touched his chin and lifted his head. “You vanish into the ground in a blink and reappear. I wonder where you go.”

Merik furrowed his brow. Had he slipped into a bizarre dream? He tried to look away, but she held his gaze with her emerald eyes. Unsettled by her attention, Merik replied flatly, "I'm just doing my job, ma'am."

"What is it you want out of life, Merik?" Her voice seemed sincere.

Merik scoffed at the ridiculous question. He broke her gaze and glanced sidelong at the foremen across the thoroughfare of slaves. The lady followed his gaze, then let out a loud laugh, returning her eyes to Merik with a knowing look.

"A boy of your talents? Please, Merik. You can do better than a slave driver."

This comment dug worse than any insult. Had his arms been free, he might have followed the impulse to strike the patronizing noblewoman. Instead, Merik mumbled a vulgar insult. The army officer shot to his feet, prepared to punish the insolent human cattle. The woman held up a hand, and the officer knelt back on the floor.

"I'm sure you wonder why I speak to you so candidly, Merik," the lady continued in a more businesslike manner. "Do you know where I am from?"

"The Enlightened Society?" Merik stated, though the words conveyed nothing to him.

The woman did not reply at first, which made Merik all the more nervous for his growing bill of violations. He wished they would just burn him again and leave him to hang so he could eventually get back to work.

"You can read runes, then? Who taught you?"

"No teacher. I just know," Merik grunted.

"Very intriguing. Reading and writing, in a Veicraft script no less. All the more reason to support my hypothesis." She held up Merik's intricately etched crystal.

“I didn’t write that. I found it.”

“It seems you’re gifted in many things, Merik, but lying isn’t one of them.” The lady wrapped the stone in a cloth and tucked it into her garments. She looked him up and down. “I’ve been told by your foremen that out of all the slaves in your crew, you have the highest quotas of discovered Marstone deposits in the history of the mine. But I’m less interested in your aptitude for digging and more in your other pastimes.”

She plucked something from the torn fabric around his knees and held up a shred of something bright green in the torchlight, regarding it with extreme interest. It was a blade of grass. It must have clung to his pants when he was sitting in the forest. Merik’s palms began to sweat. He cursed himself internally for not being more careful.

The woman said nothing for a moment, rubbing the blade of grass between her gloved fingers. Then, as if absorbed in a deep thought, she turned on her heel and began walking back the way she came.

“Cut the boy down,” she said over her shoulder. “He’s coming with me.”

Chapter 2

Silver Tongue

From the solar library looked I down lofty height. Through Paralae’s glades, faerie, and Viritril’s windswept flight, and down to deathbed’s aerie, good Sulva’s nocturnal sight.

Spoke then my Vei-Traveler guide, “See below your birthplace regions, the crux on which the Realms collide. Battlefield of saints and demons, where gods of men decide.”

~Vol.3.p.182.v.9 The Many Ascents of Ophus

* * *

Opulence. Taking his seat in the spacious carriage cab, Merik’s impoverished eyes widened at the dazzling luxury of the vehicle. The richly upholstered velvet seats and ornate patterned carpeting enveloped the carriage interior in a beautiful, clean cocoon of silence. A heady smell of floral incense perfumed the lavish space, making him aware of his own bodily reek.

Merik felt blasphemously out of place. A growing fear of getting caught played on his mind. He felt he was doing something criminal, something deserving of severe punishment if caught. But there was no one to hide from this time. No guard or foreman had raised a hand to stop them. The Masked Lady had paid the sum, removed his shackles, and led him to her personal carriage. It was done, and it all felt unreal.

The lady settled into her seat across from him, hands folded on her lap. She regarded Merik through her three-eyed gold mask. Two associates in black robes and similar masks entered and sat on either side of her. The doors shut with a clap, and instantly all the familiar noise of mine-work and machinery ceased. Merik’s ears rang with the silence. A wave of suffocating panic threatened to overpower his self-control.

Hold it together, idiot. One outburst and this all goes in the dung heap. Just stay quiet and obey. He repressed the panic and remained seated, wringing his hands and gritting his teeth until the horrible sensation passed.

She gestured and one of the masked men tapped the roof of the cab. The carriage lurched, bumping and jostling along the rocky mine road. Merik pushed back the soft curtain blocking his side window and gazed outside for relief. They traversed the central road of the top level of the

mines—a road Merik knew was only used for outgoing traffic, exporting ore and Marstone to the surface. He had never seriously allowed himself to hope he would ever leave the mines by that road.

Sweaty herds of laboring slaves marched outside his window. Merik was really being taken out of the mines, leaving them behind—it was not a trick or a cruel joke. The realization settled on his mind with a dull, hollow thud. He did not know how he should feel. Beyond rumors and legends, he had no conception of what the outside world was like.

“We have a long journey ahead, Merik. Make yourself comfortable,” the Masked Lady said. “We will take the war road to Novengrad in Hestia, then you will have a chance to see the home of my Society in Del-Caeum, the great capital of Caelus. Del-Lenark in the west is our final destination, the ancient city by the lake. My master will be expecting us there. It is he who sent me to deliver you.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Merik muttered mechanically, still trying to form a single concrete thought out of the fog filling his head. He focused his gaze out the window.

The lady broke the silence. “Do you know where Marstone comes from?”

Merik hesitated. She waited, so he replied, a little sheepishly, “From the ground, ma’am.”

She tilted her head forward. “I wonder why you play a fool. What trick of the mind keeps you there? You know the answer, so try again.”

Merik took a deep breath, feeling increasingly uneasy about the interview.

“I was told Marstone comes from very old dragon bones,” he said.

“That is correct. The ancient drakes possessed a unique quality in their bones, containing an afterlife of their power. Like many rare and wonderful things, dragons are beyond this world, interlaced with the fabric that ties the seven Realms together. They are born of the Realms, so to speak.”

Merik pursed his lips and dropped his eyes, wondering if she expected him to understand what she was talking about. An agonizing period of silence passed before the Masked Lady said, in a cheerful outburst, “Well, now that we’re underway, let’s play a game.”

She reached to the ceiling of the cab and pulled a small latch. Merik focused his attention as the whirring of clockwork filled the still air. A cleverly hidden table mechanically unfolded from the ceiling and settled between the two benches. On the table’s surface was fashioned a grid of tiles, each holding a small, upside-down china cup.

“My master has an eye for insight, and so do I,” she said. “Under each of these teacups is a different material—a stone, a silver ball, a lump of lead, and so on. We see sixty-four cups, but only one conceals Marstone. Indicate which.”

Merik looked up at her, then at the board, then back again. Was the lady joking? She said nothing, folding her hands on the table as she waited.

“But...ma’am...” Merik stammered. “I can’t see it.”

“Just point to where you believe the Marstone is.” Her patient tone set Merik more on edge than if she had shouted.

Merik sighed and focused on the board of cups. He allowed his eyes to unfocus so he could detect the trace glow of the Marstone, like he had done every day in the mines. The substance had an aura to him, just as it had a texture in his hand. With a subtle reach of his mind, he could see this aura like a glare of amber-colored light on his retinas. But this time it was different.

Under his unfocused gaze, the table of cups came alive with colored auras Merik had never seen. Violet, white, emerald, crimson, a spectrum of hues. He let out an audible gasp at the bewildering sight. Maybe he had been drugged and this was some absurd dream. He glanced up at the lady, who rested clasped hands on the table and patiently waited.

“Where is the Marstone?” she pressed.

Merik returned his eyes to the board. Despite the kaleidoscope of colors, he could not see even the slightest trace of Marstone’s familiar amber glow. His heart pounded. What would happen if he failed this bizarre test? Sweat beaded on his forehead.

“Perhaps it’s too difficult.” She sighed.

Merik reached out and pointed to one of the cups, glowing a pale yellow.

The woman removed the china cup. Underneath lay a small vial of chrome fluid. Merik’s chest constricted with dread at his failure.

“Virtellion quicksilver. Very rare. Very expensive. But not Marstone.” She sighed again, then cocked her head. “I wonder, can you indicate another similar object?”

Merik scanned the board again, desperate for a chance to prove himself. A second cup glowed the same yellowish hue. He pointed.

This time the woman paused, regarding Merik before reaching to remove the cup. Beneath it was a similar vial of quicksilver.

“Now, tell me, how could you know they contained the same element?” Her tone held growing fascination.

Merik hesitated to answer. He had never spoken to anyone of his ability to locate Marstone this way, and the habit of silence was powerful.

When Merik didn’t volunteer an answer, she said with a little disappointment, “I suppose it could be random chance. So many seeming wonders are. You mean to tell me you do not know where the Marstone lies?”

Merik glanced up. Could she sense his growing fear? Then he noticed a faint amber glow emanating from her clasped fingers on the table.

“It’s in your hands.” Merik sank back into his chair with a triumphant smile.

The woman unfolded her white-gloved fingers to reveal a black, red-streaked crystalline shard of Marstone. She let out a sigh of satisfaction, laid the stone on the tabletop, and pulled the lever a second time, retracting the table into the ceiling.

“You could see the essence of the elements, couldn’t you?”

Merik hesitated, then gave in. “Yes, ma’am. But I’ve never seen more than just Marstone. I don’t know those other ones.”

“Well, I could hardly blame you. Your occupation would not have you encountering realmic artifacts often, other than Marstone.” She laughed softly. “You just saw elements from other worlds, obtained at great cost. It takes one attuned to the Realms to see their traces.”

Throwing back her white hood, the woman revealed glossy black hair threaded with white streaks, all pulled into a tight bun. She unfastened and removed her golden mask. A scar marred the cheek of an otherwise perfect, pale, slender face. She smiled faintly as she laid the mask aside, watching Merik with disarming green eyes.

“My name is Luria, and I know what no one else does: you have a vastly uncommon gift, Merik. I don’t know who your family was, but there is a deep harmony with Vei in your blood.”

These words met Merik’s ears as nonsense syllables. Still, he made an effort at a reply. “It’s dumb luck, ma’am.”

“Fortune is many things, but it is not dumb, Merik.” Her face became suddenly earnest as she leaned in, placing a firm hand on his knee. “Listen to me. I know this will be hard for you to understand, but you have to start trying. You are not like the other slaves. This connection you

have—this harmony with the Vei—it’s here for a purpose. You have a tremendous part to play in a story that has been unfolding for thousands of years. A story that will reshape the cosmos...correcting it. This is bigger than foremen, Marstone, and wars. My master has seen it. You are the key to unlocking the Realms.”

Luria paused and looked at him with searching eyes. Merik made no reply. Whether what she was saying was true or not did not enter his head. He had heard many promises before and had ceased to put any value in words, pretty as they might sound.

The woman leaned back in her seat and brushed aside a curtain to look outside. “You are gifted but undisciplined in the art of Veicraft. I will personally see to your training.”

“Training for what?” Merik blurted.

“Patience, my boy. Everything will be explained in due time.” Luria laughed softly.

Merik bowed his head, acknowledging his insolence. He glanced out one of the open windows, watching the familiar caves and black rock walls of his old prison pass by.

“Adjusting to your new life will take time, Merik. I imagine it’s been some years since you left the mines.”

“I was born here,” Merik replied, parrot-like and without hesitation.

Luria gave him a puzzled look.

“That’s what the foremen told me.” Merik added quickly, “They say all slaves were born in the ground.”

“Come now. I don’t think you really believe that. You had a mother and father, you know—just like I did,” she said with a compassionate inflection.

Merik shrugged and kept his gaze out the window. The thought of having a father or mother meant little to him. Though she seemed kind, he was not ready to swallow everything she gave him.

The mines passed in a blur. Rock walls pressed in as the carriage came to a narrow gate at the mouth of the mine. Passing through, the aperture suddenly flared with blinding daylight. His gaze refocused on steep snowdrifts along an outdoor road. The atmosphere was a bright haze of snow, churning in the early flurries of a storm. It stung Merik's eyes to look at. It had been months since Merik had seen sunlight, and right now it did not agree with him.

"Shut the curtain for our guest," Luria commanded. One of her cloaked attendants obeyed and the carriage resumed a comfortable half-light.

"The snowstorm should be passing soon, my lady," The man said in a strange, airy voice. He held a kind of metal tablet carved with elliptical circles and angular script. "We can anticipate clear skies along the road to Breckskild," the man added.

Merik gestured to the object. "Ma'am...what is that? Can he really tell the weather with it?"

Luria grinned. "That is a Diviner's Almanac—a fit aid for the growing mage. It enables one to predict possible changes in the atmosphere, though it is not perfectly accurate even in the hands of an experienced practitioner. It is but one of the lesser empowered objects you'll encounter in my care."

She took the little silver device and passed it to Merik. "Tell me, what does it say?"

Merik accepted the surprisingly heavy tool. The tablet's surface was fitted with a mechanical grid of wires and small wheels that moved over etched runes. The wheels turned slowly. Wires trembled and swayed, triangulating around certain runes.

Merik worked to unravel its meaning. At first, the runes were incomprehensible, but as he studied them, their sense began to form. He smiled. The symbols indicated by the wires were shorthand

words for weather patterns. The wheels were less immediately clear. One was etched with numbers that seemed to count down; the other was blank except for a window that revealed a symbol Merik did not recognize—an underlined circle containing a single spot.

“Harsh, cold weather ahead will last no more than two hours,” Merik said.

“Very impressive.” Luria clapped her hands softly. “You’re familiar with Malaccadian and Sulvanarian runes. You’re a scholar of languages, Merik.”

Merik’s face warmed. He pointed to the one rune he did not know. “I don’t know it perfectly. This here—I don’t understand.”

“That is because it is not one of the Vei languages.” Luria took the tablet from his hands. Merik chose not to resist, though he hated to relinquish the beautiful thing. “That is the sign for Sule. It is the lunar season for spring. You may have an innate grasp of Veiscript, but I would be surprised if you knew much about the seasons.”

Merik hesitated to ask the question that flared in his mind. A habitual fear of overplaying his luck weighted his tongue.

Luria lifted her eyebrows at him. “You want to know what I mean by Vei languages, don’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Luria smiled and produced Merik’s Marstone shard from her garments. The intricate, square carvings gleamed faintly in her hand.

“What you have written here is long-form Malaccadian—the Vei language of war and defense. Crudely done, but effective for your needs.” She held up the Diviner’s Almanac alongside the stone. The angular script on the stone was undeniably unique from the cyclical runes on the silver tablet. “This is written in shorthand Sulvanarian—the Vei language of water and mind. There are seven known Vei languages, each possessing unique capabilities. When paired with various substances,

like silver or Marstone, for example, they can be used to powerful and varied effect. For instance—touch your eye.”

Merik puzzled over what she meant by the command. But before he knew it, his hand had obediently raised to jab one of his own eyes. He resisted the impulse, lowering his hand with effort.

Luria’s smile dropped. She glanced at the symbols on the stone with disappointment. “The script could use some improvement, but you see my point. Command and discipline are within the Malaccadian sphere of influence—as well as strength and fortitude. Paired with Marstone, a powerful substance in its own right, I’m certain this little rock served you well among your peers in the mines.”

Luria tucked the stone away again and passed the almanac to one of the cloaked men. She leaned back against the cushioned seat. “You are a trickling stream, Merik. I will make you a thundering rapid. Under my teaching, you will learn the Vei languages inside and out. You already show incredible promise. I expect, before too long, you will exceed even some of the greatest minds in the Enlightened Society.”

Merik received the words with a courteous nod, though increasingly overwhelmed by what she was telling him. Before he could stop himself, he asked bluntly, “Why are you doing all this for me?”

Luria’s smile broadened. She leaned forward and said in a hushed voice, “I’m going to let you in on a secret, Merik. The world is a dream—a gossamer web woven by carefully crafted illusions and seeming truths. I can see in your eyes you don’t completely trust me. That’s good. You shouldn’t trust anyone. The powerful are those who know how to shape the dream, to harness these seeming truths. Imagine if you had the power to manipulate the dream better than anyone. Imagine it. The real world is not like your mines, with masters and foremen and slaves. There are two kinds of people in the world—those with the power to control the dream, and those too afraid to try.”

She reached up and brushed Merik's hair out of his face. "That's why I like you, Merik. You're like me. You are not afraid to try to take that power for yourself. We're both ex-slaves hungry to be the master. That is what the Enlightened Society exists to do. It's a revolution—working to strip power out of cruel and unfeeling hands and give it to those who suffer. To make kings of slaves and slaves of kings."

Merik knew how to spot a liar. This woman was telling the truth. His chest fluttered with pure childlike delight as he swallowed her words. His honed instincts quickly tamped down the intensity of the sensation to safeguard against future disappointment. But still, the gratifying feeling of being brought in—invited, recognized, wanted—simmered sweetly under his cold exterior.

The potent images of himself as king of his phantom island blossomed into something vastly more magnificent in his mind. Summoning the best his impoverished imagination could conjure, he envisioned a powerful, liberating king in soft, clean clothes. The grandeur of Merik's mental images was unconsciously accompanied by laden banquet tables, soft beds, and flourishing gardens where winter never visited. He would be free, with both the peace and simplicity of the forest island and the power and abundance of a ruler.

Merik dropped his eyes, realizing how long he had been staring at Luria, enraptured by his daydreams.

"This vision pleases you, I see." She leaned forward. "Don't be ashamed of your thoughts. You were born for great power. It is this world that has robbed you of realizing it sooner. The Enlightened Society is only a beginning milestone for the destiny laid out before you, and I will be your guide. Together, this cruel dream of life will be ours to build up and tear down as we see fit. You and I will make it right."

Merik felt something rise up in protest within him, causing an irritating discord with his excitement. All his mental mechanisms for self-preservation rang with alarm bells. It was too good to be true. She was playing up his desires.

If he were dumped back in the mines, the punishment would be an excruciating fiery death. The risk of trust was enormous—but so was rejecting her offer. He ran the calculations over and over in his head. His best chance of survival was to attach himself to this powerful person—to make himself indispensable. Trusting her good intentions was out of the question, but trust in a deal was transactional, and therefore safe.

“I am indebted to you, my lady,” Merik said with a little bow of his head, putting on as gracious and businesslike a tone as he could. “But from what you say, you need me for your plans to work. Let’s make a deal. You teach me how to become more powerful, and I will help you do whatever you need with my new power.”

“There he is. The bargainer, keeping a close eye on his wares.” Luria laughed. “You see right through me, don’t you? Yes, my mission hinges on your unique abilities, Merik. That is, if you are who I think you are. I do not need someone to scribble runes on rocks. I’m most interested in what an innate understanding of the Vei languages points to. You have a secret power that you still have not disclosed to me, Merik.”

She paused, eyeing him thoughtfully. Merik began to feel uncomfortable and wished he had kept his mouth shut.

“What do you mean?” he said, forcing an inquiring smile.

“You think I’m misled in my choice of you, Merik? You fear you are not the one I need?”

Merik swallowed and said nothing.

Luria sighed and produced from a fold in her cloak the blade of iridescent green grass she had plucked from Merik’s knee. Rotating it in her hand, she said, “You go somewhere, don’t you? You probably don’t even know where it is you vanish to, Blinkworm.” Her eyes flashed at him sharply. “Do you know where it is you go, Merik?”

Merik thought strategically before answering. “No. I don’t.”

“The ability to pass between the Realms at will,” she mused, contemplatively turning the green blade in her fingers. “I didn’t think it was possible. Kings would kill for what you can do, Merik.”

Merik thought to speak, but a dreadful suspicion kept his lips closed. He knew she must be speaking about his forest island. But the place was like a dream—something only accessible in sleep. He could not go there at will, though he had tried many times. If her expectations hung on this misunderstanding, she would have no use for him.

Suddenly, the carriage pitched and rocked in a strong howl of wind outside.

“I thought you divined the storm would pass by now,” Luria groaned with irritation at the man beside her.

“Yes, my lady...” the man hissed, scrutinizing the silver surface of the Diviner’s Almanac in his hands. “It ought to have passed by now. Something is amiss with this Almanac.”

“You fool. The Almanac does not lie,” Luria snapped back. “Someone is tampering with the weather.”

Chapter 3

An Unnatural Storm

“After the binding, I looked up from the Tree and saw fire and lightning filling the margins of heaven. The sun spoke to the living moon, the stars chastised her. Then, when it was silent, she spoke. “Let the children grow and choose what is good, lest we in fear cut to splinters the Tree planted for the joining of the Realms.” The Vei Traveler cast judgement with Sulva, and there was peace in heaven.”

– From The Meditations of Mother Riverlynn

* * *

“Stop the carriage!” Luria cried at the driver, beating a fist against the ceiling.

The rapid pace of the vehicle did not slacken, and the roar of the wind outside increased. Another powerful gust shook the compartment.

“The old fool’s as deaf as he is worthless,” Luria grumbled. “You up there, halt at once.”

No reply came, and the carriage seemed to accelerate. He leaned over and pushed back the window curtain. Outside was a blind mass of white. Merik was thrown back into his seat as the carriage pitched violently. The driver had swerved over a shelf of ice on the edge of the road.

“Well?” Luria roared at the two men. “Do something about this!”

One of the masked men rose from his seat and opened the carriage door. Immediately the cab was flooded with a howling flurry of snow. Merik watched, clinging to the far wall, as the man began the treacherous effort of climbing out of the cab and onto the side of the carriage. The vehicle swerved again and lurched violently. The man was thrown out into the swirling white chaos.

The second man shot to his feet. Un-gloving his hand, he pressed it against the ceiling of the cab directly beneath where the driver’s bench was on the roof. Merik recoiled in disgust at the sight: knuckly tendrils, like pale spider legs, in place of fingers.

“There is no driver,” the masked creature hissed.

The carriage lurched again, but this time it did not recover. For one terrifying moment, the world turned sideways and Merik left his seat. Sparks showered. A sharp pain tore through his arm as his body slammed against the carriage wall. The vehicle skidded and screeched to a halt on its side. Then only the lonely whistle of wind.

Merik sat up, panting, his head pulsing with adrenaline, as he assessed his surroundings. The carriage door lay open to the white sky above.

“Stay inside.” Luria seemed unharmed in the crash. She had replaced her mask and held a long, ornate silver dagger. She gestured at her attendant. “You. Come with me.”

Merik shrank into a corner of the ruined carriage as the two climbed up and out through the open door.

Miserable, Merik sat alone in the cold and dark, waiting for a sound. Letting his eyes wander about the cab, he noticed a white handkerchief lying near the broken glass where Luria had been. As he reached for it, his arm throbbed with a deep pain. Merik cursed. *A broken wrist will take months to heal right.* He crouched forward, using his good arm to pick up the white cloth.

His heart leaped as a little red and black stone tumbled from the wrapping. Merik seized his carved Marstone fragment and drew in a deep breath. He shut his eyes and imagined the forest island—the warm breeze, the soft grass, the flashing lake, and the bright ghost at his side. He reached out to the ghost, hopeful for a little relief.

“C’mon, let me numb it,” Merik hissed.

The stone began to heat in his hand. He let the energy flow up his arm, through his chest, and down to his injured wrist. It was not the ideal solution, but the muscle stiffened and the pain dulled.

Merik let out a puff of relief. “Thanks.”

After a little deliberation, Merik stood and clambered up toward the open door. Poking his head out, he squinted into the glare and wind of the blizzard, searching for a sign of Luria and her attendant. Nothing was visible.

An animal-like instinct to leap out of the carriage and bolt crossed his mind. *No. Think! That would be suicide*, Merik thought. *Luria is your best chance at survival now—survival and a future with any freedom in it.*

Merik climbed onto the upturned side of the carriage. The driver's seat lay empty and there was no sign of the horses. From somewhere in the deafening whirlwind came a shriek.

Merik turned toward the sound. A hurtling mass of black cloth crashed into the side of the wrecked carriage. The shock of the impact knocked him off his feet, throwing him headlong into the snowbank.

Floundering for a moment in deep powder, Merik lifted his head. In front of him, motionless against the wooden wreckage, lay one of the masked men. A widening circumference of dark blood marred the pristine snow.

A maddening terror seized him. Frantic, he scrambled to escape the pit of snow, plowing up chunks of it as he tried to run. His feet found relatively solid ground.

He heard an animal grunt. A hulking, dark figure loomed over him.

The beast stood on two legs like a man, but woolly hair projected everywhere not covered by armor. Gleaming, inhuman yellow eyes glowered at him from a snouted, bull-like face. Its large snub nose, red from the cold, exuded steam as it breathed. Two short, ox-like horns curled out of long brown hair that whipped in the wind. Large, calf-like ears drooped downward. In one hand, the figure gripped the hilt of a formidable longsword, its blade etched with runes and tinted with a tapering film of blood.

Before Merik could rally his wits, the monster had him in its strong hands. It effortlessly slung him over its shoulder. Merik cried out and thrashed wildly, but the beast's hairy arms were unyielding.

"Quit squirming and stay quiet," the creature growled. It waded through the snow.

The female quality of the voice took Merik off guard. He lifted his head in an effort to look back toward the carriage, but everything was lost in a blank white void.

"We don't have long," the creature grumbled to itself. "Oris! Where in the Realms are you?"

Merik craned his head upward. The sun's fuzzy outline burned through the snowstorm. The blizzard was dying out.

"Oris!" The beast roared.

The next moment, a lumbering dark shape revealed itself in the blizzard. Merik renewed his cries for help as another monster—this one much larger and on all fours—came trudging into view. A leopard-like beast the size of a workhorse, gray-white with the agile, powerful legs of a predator. Strangest of all was its face. The oval disk, beaded with stabbing black eyes, a beak, and two pointed ears, resembled an enormous barred owl.

The bizarre creature came within a hand's breadth of Merik, examining the boy with its deep obsidian eyes.

"Finally, I got him. Now let's get out of here." The woolly warrior jostled Merik.

"You did admirably, Elati," boomed a rich and genial voice.

Merik craned his neck. A gray-cloaked man sat saddled atop the wild creature. His long face, short-trimmed black beard, and eyepatch reminded Merik a little of the foremen, though he could tell this man was not from Daegonur. His skin was clearly accustomed to the sun, and his one good eye was a duller hue of gray than the telltale Daegon blue.

He held an ornate staff whose wheel-like head contained a central cavity. Inside the cavity sat an orange-glowing sphere of ice, charged with some kind of energy. As Merik watched, the ball of ice appeared to melt, shrinking moment by moment.

These were not ordinary highway robbers—they knew magic. Oris’s teeth glinted in a smile. “Climb up quick! She’ll wise up to us before long.”

With a jarring jolt, strong hands heaved Merik onto the shaggy back of the owl-cat like a piece of cargo. The warrior situated herself in the saddle, pinioning Merik between herself and the man, keeping a firm hand on his back. The mount broke into a swift gallop, gliding catlike over the loose-packed snow.

Merik shut his eyes tight as his body bumped up and down. Over the brutal years, he had made a habit never to indulge the illusion that his life could not end at any moment. Still, his gut churned with a dread he could not master. But he did not know what these two strangers might do, and the unordinary events of the day drowned any sense of reliable foresight.

Before long, the blizzard cleared into a blinding haze. Stooping silhouettes of black boulders jutted up from the earth all around them. The path took them up a steep incline, and although the sun was bright, it was already low on the horizon.

“That’s all the snow and wind I can conjure,” Oris said. He sounded slightly out of breath.

“How do you feel?” the female voice of the creature asked. Her tone contained a vibration of concern.

“Physically tired...but we cannot stop to rest yet,” Oris replied.

“I meant your mind. Conjuring a storm that big can have a cost,” Elati called out over a loud howl of wind.

“I’m fine, Elati. My mind is too stubborn for that,” Oris said with a laugh. “But I’ll need to sleep under the moon tonight.”

“What do you plan to do with the slave?” Elati asked.

“Get him out of Daegonur and the Valley of Slaves,” Oris replied.

“And then what?” Elati quipped.

The silence that followed was punctuated by the whistle of wind as the owlcat kept its unyielding pace over the snow and ice.

“Del-Lenark. That is the end of our road,” Oris said at last, his tone ambiguous.

A grunt from Elati vibrated through the saddle. She did not reply.

The ground beneath them began to grow extremely steep, and the owlcat slowed its run, becoming more methodical with its steps. Elati bent over Merik, holding him fast against the saddle as the creature scaled a near-vertical glacier shelf.

Hanging over the back of the beast, Merik was forced to look down the face of the glacier as they ascended. The jagged shards and bottomless crags of ice looked like teeth and maw, ready to devour them should the creature slip. Merik shut his eyes, but that was almost worse. The perfect silence and the irregular movements of the nimble cat made every muscle in his body rigid.

The ground soon leveled and they were racing at a steady clip again. Opening his eyes, Merik saw the white mist of the passing storm had faded, and they were traversing the rim of the enormous glacier like an insect on the rim of a bowl.

In the lowland they had left behind, Merik had his first view of the whole Valley of Slaves—the hole that had been both his cradle and his curse. The man-made valley was a shelved quarry of ice and stone descending to a deep trough where the massive underground iron kilns belched black clouds

out of jutting smokestacks. He could see, in the lowest trenches of the valley, gaping archways opening into black tunnels, through which he could just distinguish the thin ranks of slaves and soldiers issuing in and out.

Looking back at his lifelong home had a dreamlike flavor of unreality to Merik. This was not the kind of thing he thought could happen—for a slave to be snatched from the mines like stolen goods. At least in the mines he knew what to expect. The regularity of labor, rations, quotas, and beatings was an enormous comfort to him. Without the dark of the tunnels, the bite of the whip, and the savor of working toward a foreman promotion, Merik did not know who he was.

The only consolation he could conjure was Luria. In the scales of Merik's analytical mind, she still weighed as his best chance at survival and freedom. *If she was telling the truth, she will kill these robbers and save me*, Merik consoled himself. But until that happened, he concluded his best chance would be to act defeated, stay quiet, and wait.

Few words were exchanged between the two strangers during the following hours. The owlcat carried them miles, deep into the desolate wastes and far from any habitation. Clumps of slender, wind-battered fir trees jutted from the frozen tundra here and there, their pointed heads arched like weary travelers. Through misty distance, Merik saw the blue outline of a toothy mountain range. Minutes turned into hours. The low arch of the sun ahead of them diffused the horizon with rich hues of red, painting the mountains a dark indigo.

Despite Merik's aching ribs as he lay on the back of the jostling beast, he absorbed the sunset with relish. The array of colors cascading in gradients of light was almost too much for him to mentally absorb. The solar display ignited his imagination, silencing his gloomier thoughts long enough to think of freedom. "What would it be like to end every day with a sunset?" Merik's head swam with dreamy thoughts as he succumbed to exhaustion.

Merik knew he must have slept, because when he became aware of his surroundings again, it was night and they had stopped.

The soreness in his sides sharpened as he was lifted off the back of the owlcat again and carried like a rolled rug toward a grove of fir trees. Merik caught a glint of something above them and looked up with a sting of fear.

Above the snowfields, the deep blue dome of the night sky was filled with a vast riot of tiny lights, flashing like a crystal-studded cavern in torchlight. Gleaming at its zenith, the turquoise circle of the moon looked down, bathing the sleeping world in pale, aquatic light. A second, sickle moon was rising ruddy red on the horizon, over a black ridge of snagged mountains.

But what entranced Merik most were the moving ribbons of light. Like great, misty brush strokes from an invisible hand, tiered bands of multicolored light arched across the sky in elliptical patterns. They had depth—like rays of light through dust—revealing the vast height of the infinite sky.

A longing welled from some unknown depth in Merik's chest, his eyes hungrily absorbing the heavenly sight. It reminded him of the otherworldly beauty of his forest island—more in essence than in form. The display conjured almost perfectly the essence of peace and wonder that perfused his ventures through the leaves and blossoms of his island.

The sky vanished as Elati carried Merik under a canopy of dark fir boughs. She sat him down on a mat beside a crackling fire. The warm light illuminated the dense fir-tree alcove, and Oris sitting cross-legged opposite.

"Glad to see you're awake." Oris carved off a chunk of fragrant roasted meat.

Merik sat up a little and tried to prop himself with his arm when he was rudely reminded of his injury from the carriage crash. He let out a stifled yelp of pain and fell back onto the mat. He sat up quickly, masking his pain as he nursed his injured arm.

"Great, he's broken," Elati said with a short laugh. She bent down next to Merik and held out her large, woolly hands. "Let me see that arm of yours."

Something about her bestial appearance, distorted by the shifting firelight, made Merik hate the look of her—especially her grotesque four-fingered hands with hoof-like nails. He recoiled, and she stopped. Merik was prepared to kick and claw rather than have those hands touch him again.

“Boy, if you want to survive out here, you’re going to need to extend some trust,” Oris murmured. He took a bite from his spit of meat.

Merik glanced at him but made no sign of standing down. Elati grunted and shrugged, resuming her seat beside the fire and plucking up a spit of roasted vegetables.

Merik turned his face away, remaining on the periphery of the fire. He hardly benefited from its warmth as he cradled his broken wrist at a safe distance. The pain in his arm and the soreness of his body had put his head into an active state, and he was weighing his options of escape. There was the way he had come in, and some possible gaps in the tent-like grove where the moonlight shone through.

A hand touched Merik’s back and he jolted. He snapped his head around to see Oris standing over him with an alarmed expression.

“Don’t panic. I’m just going to try and help,” Oris said soothingly. He knelt beside Merik and held out his calloused hands. “Please, let me have a look.”

Merik said nothing, clutching his broken arm tighter and wincing at the pain. Oris sniffed and stood upright. Plucking up his elaborate black staff, he began to walk in a circle around Merik.

With the base of the staff, Oris traced an ellipse in the bed of deteriorated pine needles. Merik’s discomfort intensified as he found himself suddenly hedged in by a glowing circle of pale blue, radiating in particles of light from the ground.

“What are you doing?” Merik burst out, feeling trapped by the strange light.

“Just breathe,” Oris grinned patiently, finishing the ring of light. Plucking a silver object from the central cavity of his staff, he laid the staff aside.

He kneeled in front of Merik and shut his eyes, drawing in a deep breath. Then, reaching out, Oris began to move his hands in an elliptical pattern in front of him. As he did, thin threads of light followed where his hands traced, forming a complicated sigil that hovered in the air. The phantasmal symbol pulsed as he finished, its circular pattern like planets in their orbits.

“Now, put your hurt hand through the sign,” Oris instructed.

Merik hesitated, deliberating whether to trust this unknown sorcerer with his arm. As he did, he realized the pain of the broken bone had already lost its sting, as if treated by some numbing agent. Suppressing his worst fears, Merik obeyed.

He reached up and, supporting the broken arm with his other hand, put it into the hovering sigil. A startlingly sharp tingle and ache traveled up his arm and into his shoulder, causing him to pull back. Oris grabbed Merik by the wrist, holding his arm in the sigil longer. Merik pulled harder then realized, to his great relief, there was no more pain.

Oris released him, and Merik pulled his arm in, eyeing it in wonder as if it had been replaced by an entirely new limb. He could not resist bursting out in a little bout of relieved laughter, which he quickly quelled.

The man gave a cordial smile. “My name is Oris.” Merik had picked up the name already—but what it meant and to whom it belonged was still a mystery to him. “And this is my cohort, Elati. My owlsh pet you hear growling over bones outside is Luna. What is your name?”

Merik’s eyes darted between Oris and Elati, deliberating whether it would be more or less risky to answer truthfully. Finally, he decided the odds of punishment outweighed his desire to remain anonymous.

“Merik,” he grunted.

Tossing her empty skewer into the flames, Elati asked with keen attention, “Where do you come from, Merik?”

Merik wondered if the question was intended as some kind of joke. He gestured vaguely in the direction they had come from, toward the Valley of Slaves.

“Come, Elati. The boy clearly doesn’t wish to speak,” Oris said. He lay back on his animal-skin mat with a weary sigh.

“I just think if we’re supposed to trust him we should know a little more about him,” Elati grumbled. “If he’s so important that we risk our necks in this frozen hell, why can’t you tell me anything about him? Or did we just commit a crime against Caelus’ sworn enemy for nothing?”

“You forget yourself, Elati,” Oris grunted, folding his hands over his chest as he lay. “I’m not concealing anything from you. The boy is essential to our mission. If you like living in a cosmos not puppeted by an Apostate, you’ll devote as much attention to keeping Merik safe as you do to me.”

“He’s a slave of the Daegon war machine, Oris! We don’t know who this boy is. Not even he seems to know!” Elati shouted, erupting to her feet.

Merik’s eyes darted to the nearest route of escape, preparing his limbs to flee in the event of violence.

“Elati, sit down,” Oris groaned, sitting up on his bed mat.

She did not.

Oris continued in a calm voice, “You’re right in one thing—I don’t know who he is, but I know he is vital to keeping the Realms safe. Or have you already forgotten who we stole him from? If the

Enlightened Society thinks he's important enough to buy out of slavery, that alone should allay your skepticism."

Elati sank down onto her bed of skins and sent Merik a withering glare. "We are wasting precious time. We need a champion, not a dirt-scraping slave boy." She wrapped herself in warm skins and lay down, turning her back to them both.

There was a period of silence in which Merik watched Oris and Oris watched the fire. Finally, after several minutes, Oris looked up. "Don't let her temper scare you. We are here to help, Merik."

The man smiled at him, and Merik looked down at the fire, saying nothing.

"You'll learn to trust us. Get some rest. We have a long day of travel tomorrow." Oris rose and disappeared out of the trees.

Merik found it impossible to sleep. His thoughts gravitated back to the night sky outside—the moons, the sparks of light, and the vibrant ribbons.

After some time, Merik managed to slip into a light sleep, his senses still alert for any noise or disturbance.

Once during the night, Merik awoke and sat up. Outside the shelter of the trees, he could hear talking. He slid from his bed mat to the edge of the alcove, pushing away some of the prickly branches to peer outside.

Beyond the shelter, Merik could see the smooth snow glowing ghostly under the lights in the sky. He could see the owlcat, curled and sleeping near the trees. Just beyond the creature, Oris was kneeling under the moonlight, his staff laid in front of him.

In Merik's half-awake state, he thought Oris's body was strangely luminous, as if the cascading light of the moons formed an atmosphere around him. He was speaking in a low tone, in words Merik could not quite make out.

As Merik lay down again and began to drift off, he thought for a moment he could discern a second voice speaking.