

# REALM STRIDER

*The realms are written, and one slave is able to write between the lines. He is the key to saving reality or unraveling it.*

## *Prologue*

Rays of moonlight pierced the silty green water like the ghostly stems of forest trees. Amid the tranquil gloom, a solitary figure tread the lake floor. Clothed in gray and white and carrying a walking staff, the submerged man's scarred and weathered face appeared as serene as the surrounding water.

The lakebed sloped ever downward, the guiding eye of the moon fading the deeper he traveled. A sharp spark of blue flame split the murky dark from the head of his staff, sending a cascade of bubbling steam skyward. The traveler 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 muffled circle of the moon, the traveler leaned over the abyss and extended his staff. A sudden current swept him downward 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, the traveler stopped and analyzed the enchanted membrane that held back the weight of the lake. He passed through and emerged dripping into an empty, torch-lit hall. The vaulted ceiling stretched so high it disappeared into shadow, from which descended long, rich tapestries draping over algae-streaked pillars and stonework.

The gentle crackle of torches was the only sound, but still the traveler's one piercing eye scanned, as if a faint noise caught his ear. His gaze fixed on a recess in the wall shrouded by a hanging tapestry. Without removing his eye, he plucked up a bit of stone debris from around his feet and placed it within the oval-shaped cavity near the head of his staff. With a resonant clack,

the man struck his staff against the floor. Instantly the stone debris in the staff flashed and crackled, and at the same moment a yelp emitted from behind the tapestry. A willowy girl in woven leaf garments tumbled out, ejected by a catalyzed brick in the wall.

“Hey! This is no time for games, Oris!” the girl said, dusting herself off.

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

If Oris were late autumn, Nakari was the bloom of spring. The girl’s sprightly demeanor was complemented by her wild appearance. Tangled and flying red hair contrasted with the vibrant green scales of leaves that made up her short tunic, punctuated 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 emitted another good-humored chuckle and began to proceed 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 commented, arching an eyebrow. “Where’d you get a rare thing like that?”

“I may not be able to slip through the Realms, but it is not forbidden to collect what comes through,” Oris replied in a low and stoical voice, tucking the stone into his pocket. “Knowing where to attain 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 dragon-fly 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. Because I’m an elf you assume I must be ancient like you. 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, relenting as he said, “Let’s focus. How long before Paraccadia converges? I could still use your help in a bind.”

“An hour. Maybe less,” Nakari replied, popping 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.”

“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 clapped back, flicking another berry into her mouth.

Oris fell silent as they reached the end of the hall. The open passageway terminated in a vast, multi-leveled rotunda, a spiraling stairway running around its perimeter. Oris leaned over the railing. They were at the highest story of the large round space, the greasy flicker of torchlight glistening down tiers of moist, polished stone. The ceiling drew Oris’ gaze. It was a gilded dome decorated with chipping frescoes depicting a scene of divine judgment.

Throngs of the watching world gazed up at a triad of angelic, winged figures. One, 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. Opposite her stood the visage of 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. The Priests of sun and moon, and between them kneeled a central, grim-looking man. He wore scholar’s robes as well, though his were black. The dark scholar was shackled, his emerald-green wings bound with cords. A third eye punctuated his quiet, stoic face. His whole form was enveloped by a green circle rimmed with thinly traced sigils of the Sulvanari script. Oris’ eyes lingered on the woman.

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

“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 chuckled, glancing back at Oris sweetly as she leaned over the rail. She looked back up at the fresco, continuing, “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 and asked pointedly, “Why were you hiding when I came in?”

Nakari winced at the question and toed the ground as she replied, “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 try and snatch the next berry out of her grasp. She swatted his hand and skipped back a little, saying, “That’s the thing. It’s more than likely I was seen.”

At that moment, the sound of hushed voices reverberated from the lower levels of the rotunda. Oris glanced over the railing again and saw two white-robed figures walking together, their pointed hoods hunched 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 scoffed and 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 and produced a scrap of charcoal, grinding it gently in his hand. He could hear 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 slightly, and Oris held up his open palm, blowing on the powdered black substance. Instantly, the dust formed a cloud,

hanging for a moment before spreading over him like a shadow. He stopped his breathing as the hooded men stepped into the hallway, passing inches from where he stood.

“But it’s not enough that he’s growing in strength,” 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 noted the green crest emblazoned on the collars of their white robes—an open eye with seven black rays shooting out from it, like a seven-legged spider. Oris did not stir until long after they had passed.

“No. That can’t be,” he murmured.

Oris grit his teeth, exhaled sharply, and left the safety of his enchanted charcoal shadow. Moving noiselessly down the stairs, he scanned his surroundings with newfound urgency. His footsteps echoed 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 emanated a sickly green glow. Thick, foul-smelling air exuded from the passage, along with a constant, droning hum. Oris stood frozen, staring into the maw of the passage. Echoes from the voices above signaled to him that the men were circling back. Oris proceeded inside.

The white of Oris’ knuckles shone out of the darkness as he gripped his staff, holding it out in front of him. His shaky breath was painfully audible in the throbbing silence, seeming to drown out a thousand subtle sounds in the shadows around him. Oris shook his head, as if to dispel an onslaught of unwanted thoughts. The droning grew louder with every step, like inhuman, incorporeal breath. 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 suddenly, like the rolling movement of a swallowing throat. Staring in bewilderment at the optical illusion, the hallway ahead appeared to twist into a constricting spiral. Then, as soon as the illusion came, it stopped. Oris was in an ordinary columned hall again.

“What in the name of the Priests?” Oris breathed, staring stupefied.

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 melted into shock as a preciously familiar 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.

Oris stepped back, struggling to breathe normally as he said aloud, “No. This is not real.”

“Why shouldn’t it be?” hissed a half-audible voice, as if the walls of the hall had spoken.

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 it, and immediately Oris’ mind broke free of the illusion.

Instead of the girl, Oris was faced with a hunched, gnarled man, his 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. Oris noticed another two figures peering out of the shadows from behind the man. With a look of growing horror, Oris lifted his staff and illumined the hallway ahead. From behind every pillar and recess in the long corridor, a sea of glinting eyes and sallow faces gazed at him.

Traversing the hall with a clear mind, Oris tried hard not to look at the helpless cases that hemmed him on every side. The columned hall 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 could see the dim traces of moonlight through the glass dome that peered up into the murky depths of the lake.

Below, the polished floor of the sanctuary was flooded with books and papers stacked in heaps. 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 green stone in the shape of a disc. An array of jagged cracks spread out from its middle, the fissures emitting an intensified, sickly light.

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

“That’s her! The Masked Lady,” Nakari’s voice hissed excitedly in Oris’ ear. Oris nearly leaped out of his skin.

“Don’t do that,” he panted, 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, then the war is the least of our concerns.”

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

“No! That’s not what the Traveler would want,” Oris rebutted, lowering her hand. “You know that.”

“Then what’s your plan? I can’t just sit here and spy while the woman who—”

She was cut short by a cry from below as 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, and Oris held his breath as the Masked Lady’s imperious voice reverberated through the sanctuary.

“Welcome, headmaster! I know you’re a busy man and have a family to get back to, so I’ll keep this brief. I think you know something that we need. Please tell us all you know about the green prism.”

The man sobbed and blabbered, trying to rise. One of his captors struck him in the head, and he sank back to his knees, head down. He replied with a broken voice, “It was forged over a millennia 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 asked with an edge to her tone. The scholar lifted his head, replying more clearly than before.

“It would be blasphemy! He was sealed for a reason!” Another blow to the face quelled the man’s objections. He continued, chastened, “Depth and height, black and white, blade of death and blade of life.”

“Yes, we know the legends of the twin swords. You need not recite nursery rhymes to me,” she said with contempt. “You are a teacher of lore. Tell me, can an Apostate traverse the Realms?”

The scholar let out a scoff, saying with clarity, “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 said, gesturing. The scholar was lifted by the arms again and dragged toward the green stone. Those gathered around resumed their chant.

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

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

The scholar was pressed against the green stone. The cracks surged with voracious light as the shadow within warped and twisted.

A flash of green lightning. A dissonant buzz of noise. A scream. Silence. The scholar staggered back from the smoking surface of the glassy stone, his face vapid and eyes pale, like those Oris had seen in the passage.



“I’ve seen enough,” Oris breathed, grinding his teeth. He looked to his side, but Nakari had vanished again. He detected a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye from the stairs he had come from.

Oris whirled around and raised his staff. A white-hooded figure rushed toward him from the stairs. Oris swiftly dodged the thrust of a dagger and brought his staff down on the assailant’s head, staggering him. This gave Oris 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 was up again in an instant and rushed at Oris once more. Oris deftly 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 was thrown like a ragdoll across the walkway and into a wall.

Oris turned to run back down the stairs, but his limbs suddenly would not respond. Another cloaked figure approached, this one clad in black. He stretched out an inhuman, spidery seven-fingered hand. Oris struggled to break free, but even as he struggled, his feet lifted off the floor. An invisible force carried him out of the walkway and into the open air over the sanctuary floor.

The Masked Lady let out a laugh, looking up at Oris’ suspended form as she announced, “Pay due reverence, everyone. A Sulvanarian Luminary graces us with his presence.”

The cloaked worshippers filled the chamber with laughter. Removing her gold mask, the woman revealed a fair-skinned face with slender features and deep-set green eyes. The only hint of age was in her short-cut, tight-pulled raven hair, which betrayed streaks of gray. Her thin lips curled into a half-smile as she went on, “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 retorted in an even-keeled voice. “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 in white gave an amused laugh at the mention of her proper name. She strode towards Oris.

“You’ve kept your silver tongue. It 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. Like I’ve said before, you hate 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 replied as his hovering body 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 alongside Oris as he floated toward the glass.

“What’s your game here?” Oris said in a heightened tone. “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.” He stared hard at her. “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 even your Priests shy 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 Priests as he bends their minds to his will. I have made a bargain that will liberate the Realms forever. You’re standing on the brink of the rebirth of the cosmos, Oris.”

Within the murky clouds of green, Oris could perceive 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 of the glass. 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’ lips hinted at a grin, then he quickly suppressed the expression as he shouted, “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 chuckled. “There are only two who are free: the mindless, and the master of minds. Congratulations, you are soon to be the former.”

The hairs on Oris' arms and neck raised as his body came within inches of 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 lady. She looked at Oris with a confounded expression, then back at the cloaked man who had held him suspended. The man stood with arms hanging limp at his sides, his sign extinguished. Oris glimpsed the rose-thorn darts in his throat as he bowed forward and crashed to 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 jettisoned the book from her hands. The lady turned toward the ceiling with murderous eyes. In that moment's pause, Oris prepared his last drop of quicksilver in the chamber of his staff.

An instant later, 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. Oris caught a smile on the lady's face as she deftly sidestepped the attack with mocking nonchalance. Nakari hit the ground, rolled, and threw a second volley of darts up at the woman in a fluid motion. The lady anticipated the attack, ducking the projectiles and taking a step nearer to Nakari, though unarmed. Rage flared in the elf girl's face as she gripped her last remaining dart. With a savage scream, Nakari flew at the lady's throat.

Nakari's indignant cry was cut short, replaced with the pitiful sound of the single thorn clattering to the floor.

"What a pretty little accomplice you have, Oris. Though a little misbehaved," the lady intoned. Oris looked and saw the lady holding Nakari over the floor by the neck with unnatural strength. Nakari was nearly entirely paralyzed by the woman's toxic touch, causing the girl to gasp and twitch irregularly. With easy strides, the woman carried Nakari toward the green stone, saying with an air of compassion, "I hope she is no one dear to you, Oris, or this might hurt to watch."

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

“Lose your silver tongue already?” the lady chuckled, turning the girl to face the glass. “No one follows you without secrets, Oris. The glass will reveal her mind. Besides, the master is hungry.”

The lady violently thrust 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 the Masked Lady’s grip. The woman shut her eyes, as if listening, as the stone hummed with a myriad of whispered voices.

The lady’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 in his face.

“What boy?” Oris said aloud.

With a last surge of strength, Nakari swung her legs back at the woman, striking her in the stomach. The lady gasped and staggered back, dropping her. The instant Nakari’s feet touched the floor, she dove away from the glass—and vanished into a fragrant violet mist.

Oris immediately catalyzed the drop of quicksilver in his staff as 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 as supernatural speed was 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 broke.

Hundreds of tons of water thundered down toward the scattering worshippers. Oris put the silver pumice in his mouth and hastily wrote a warding sign in an arc above him to break the impact. The flood exploded over the sanctuary floor, throwing books, papers, and people into a violent cyclone of water. 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, pushing back the tide in 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. The floor was soaked, humid, and scattered with debris and saturated bodies. Oris was gone.

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

“You’ve shown your hand, Oris. The boy will unite the Realms, and the girl will lead the way.”

## Chapter 1

### A Tomb of Dragon Bones

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.

“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 would speak, it would be like a hollow rustle of inarticulate wind, in which Merik sometimes caught stray words.

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 he never left. Merik got the feeling the ghost must be someone with nearly inhuman

patience, like a spectral embodiment of the perfect landscape in front of him. No speculation was too strange for the otherworldly forest.

“What is on your mind today?” Merik asked the ghost idly, letting his calloused fingers rake through the grass like soft wavy hair. A sweet-smelling 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 unusually clear voice carried on the breeze. Merik caught his breath and stared dumbly up at where the head of the misty figure must be. He got the impression the ghost was looking down at him with knowing eyes.

“I... uh... what visitor? It’s just us here,” Merik replied, rallying himself from the shock.

“Things are about to change, Merik. Your road is about to begin,” the ghost’s voice trailed off. Merik felt a surge of irritation as he realized he felt uneasy, completely offsetting the purpose of his visits to the forest island.

“Oh, thanks for that! Now how am I supposed to relax?” Merik retorted, shooting to his feet and walking 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. He immediately felt the rejuvenating influence of the fruit vitalize his body. He knew he would need the strength for the journey back. Escapes to the island were rewarding but cost him a 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 paused and gazed up at the wind-stirred leaves, flashing in the meridian sunlight. 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, in this dream garden, Merik found he could loosen the grip on reality, and with that his emotions—if only for a few minutes. The sights and smells of the forest

were like the home he never had, cradling him like a lullaby from his forgotten childhood. 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 as Merik realized he might not be alone today. He spun around, hearing a rustle in the branches behind him. There was nothing there. He reached for the carved stone in his pocket, feeling his heart begin to pound as he scanned the foliage for any sign of an intruder.

He felt his heart leap as he heard a giggle 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 was analyzing Merik with a look of quiet amusement in her uncannily large, almond-shaped green eyes. The girl 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 first! Now... hey, wait, don't go!” Her voice trailed off into echoes as darkness consumed Merik's vision.

He snapped upright on the stone floor, feeling a little sick and disoriented. Waking up from the forest was never like waking from a normal dream—more like being dropped off a cliff. Merik clutched his thumping chest as he tried to regulate his rapid breathing. The appearance of someone else in the forest had violated his thinly constructed sense of security and left him violently shaken. 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 Merik's tired mind back to reality. He was not king of a paradise. He was a slave laborer of the Daegonur Empire. Nothing had changed.

Merik rubbed his sore eyes, feeling exhausted. How long had he been sleeping? He glanced at the dim candle that illuminated the stone grotto where he had spent his sleep hour. It was half melted, creating a significant puddle of wax on the charred earth. Merik hissed a curse as he rapidly collected his things—his pick, a crust of rations, and his rucksack containing the day's findings. The black and red crystalline fragments lay half littered across the floor, spilling from the mouth of his pack.

As Merik shoveled the dragon bones into his pack, he took a moment to marvel at a particularly radiant piece. It would make for a potent batch of Marstone when refined. Ground dragon bones were converted into an unrefined powder the Daegon called “Marstone.” Merik knew this because 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 mine stope. 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 that was the least of the empire’s creative methods of cowing slaves. On the other hand, routinely meeting quota meant promotion. Boys Merik had sweat and bled alongside had become 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 murmured to himself, testing the satisfying weight of the rucksack over his shoulder.

The narrow passage abruptly opened into the stope, a spacious cavern dug out by millions of pick-strokes. It was the hub of at least ten different mine openings in their quarter of the system. Merik could see his four other crew members sitting outside the mouth of one of the new shafts. Their picks lay idle on the ground, and the two burliest were busy eating while the other two watched. The two foremen assigned to the work crew wore black leather armor and worn-out steel helmets, their iron cudgels on their laps. They sat passively on a shelf of rock above, watching the slaves eat.

“Where have you been, Blinkworm?” called out one of the two burly slaves, lifting his head from his bowl.

“Working,” Merik replied in a gruff tone as he approached, gesturing to his pack full of bone fragments. “Why aren’t you working?”

The two large slaves stopped eating and both turned to face Merik. Their hulking, muscular torsos were marked with a close network of branding marks burned into the flesh. Their bullish faces glowered at Merik before returning to their meals of grewal and dried fish.



“What’s one more burn?” one of the brutes growled.

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

Merik noticed two empty bowls in front of the eating slaves. He darted a glance at the other two, 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 scarfing men, smacking and grunting as they ate. Merik let out a groan of impatience, dropping his pack and discreetly plucking the carved stone from his pocket, tucking it in the center of his fist.

“You’ve had your rations. Now give back the food,” Merik asserted, feeling the stone begin to burn like hot metal. Both men raised their eyebrows, giving each other amused looks. They put the bowls down and stood up, their muscular bulk dwarfing Merik’s thin, bony physique.

Merik was aware he was not intimidating to behold. His thick black hair drooped over his large forehead and slightly outward 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 didn’t.

Still, Merik did not want a fight. He knew 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. He glanced up at the foremen who watched like grinning vultures from their rock perch, waiting for what would happen next. Merik tried again, grinding his teeth as the stone burned in his hand. He felt weary.

“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.

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

Merik took a step back. “No. I just don’t want us to get burned alive because these two couldn’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 up shakily, realizing with dawning dread on their faces what was happening. They looked up at the foremen with pleading faces, but the two guards only laughed, leaning forward to enjoy the bloodshed. Merik thought for a moment as the other brute took up his pick, both of them moving to corner the weak links.

“No, we have a better chance of exceeding quota with a five-man crew,” Merik suggested, feeling a slight wave of energy as the fruit digesting in his stomach mingled with adrenaline.

The nearest brute gave Merik a devilish smile, walking directly up to him. Merik could smell 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, ignoring the increasing heat as he growled, “Stop calling me Blinkworm.”

The brute let out a guffaw, giving his brother a look. Then, in a sudden movement that must have been intended for surprise, the brute swung his pickaxe in an arc, directly down between Merik’s chest and neck.

Merik ignited the stone, feeling his muscles instantly tense. The steel blade of the pickaxe rang in his ear as it struck his body, sounding as if it had hit solid stone.

Before the brute realized his attack had failed, Merik made his calculated strike. Focusing his remaining energy into his arm, he swung the fist containing the burning stone into the man’s

knee. Merik felt a definitive vibration of cracking bone through his numb and hardened fist. The man bellowed in pain, toppling to the ground as his hulking brother charged at Merik, winding up for a heavy swing of his pick.

Merik felt his limbs weaken as the stone began to cool. He waited, then swiftly rolled to one side as the blow fell with a resonant ring against the rock floor. Merik regained his footing as the brute lifted his pick, roaring with rage. Summoning the last of his strength, Merik channeled all the power of the stone into his leg. As the man lunged forward for a second attack, Merik kicked him in the ribs with all his might.

The girth of the man shot through the air like a pebble from a sling, smashing with a resounding crunch 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 as he gazed upward into a bright blur of blue-tinted light. He realized with a jolt he was staring up at a hundred-foot ceiling capped with a dome of glacial ice. He could feel the vibration of the cart beneath him, bumping along the rocky ground as the ring and clatter of mining and machinery surrounded him.

Merik lifted his throbbing head and saw he was chained to the bed of a wagon pulled by more fortunate slaves, his hands and feet tethered to each corner. He was being carted up the center road of the top level, where the kilns burned night and day to refine the dragon bones. He could see the steel manifolds of the giant furnaces built into the sides of the vast stone trench, their exhaust pipes crawling up the walls like the roots of an evil iron tree. There were only a handful of reasons a slave from Merik's end of the mines would be brought to the top level. Judging by his chains, Merik could guess the reason.

A painful impact from the iron truncheon of a foreman knocked Merik's head back down against the wood of the cart. He hissed a curse as he realized the stone was no longer in his hand. A scream from some poor 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 pleaded aloud.

“Shut it!” the foreman grunted.

“I can make up the rest.”

“This isn’t about quota. Now quiet!” the foreman growled, thumping Merik painfully on the chest with his truncheon.

Merik let out a cough and gasp, then kept his mouth shut, wondering what that could mean. He knew the cost of failing to meet quota, and if this were an execution his whole crew should be with him, chained and gagged to be dumped into one of the blazing kilns. He knew most brawls in the mines—even lethal ones—went without consequence. This was outside of ordinary procedure, and that made Merik more afraid than anything.

Merik 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 filled with red-black bone fragments. Glancing to one side, Merik could see a long makeshift wood wall funneling the slaves along the set course. Hung on the wall were the living bodies of slaves, chained by their wrists, each of their exposed torsos pocked with brand marks, recently burned.

Merik was wheeled to an empty place in the wall and removed from the cart. His bare back flinched against the rough wood as he was held up by two large foremen, another two slaves lifting his chains and hammering them up so he would hang by his hands. When they were done, they walked away, leaving Merik to hang there in front of the ceaseless parade of slaves.

The shackles were painful, biting into his skin from his weight, but Merik felt fortunate. This was punishment, not 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. It was a grueling thing to endure, but Merik had done it before. Still, something felt wrong about the whole ordeal. This was a punishment for runaways, thieves, or slaves who attacked foremen. Merik was none of these.

Merik passed the time watching the endless procession of slaves plod past, their faces vacant and expressionless. Every now and then, one of them would glance 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; 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. With enough successful delves and a cooperative crew, Merik knew he could get there. He could be the foreman on that end of the procession instead of the boy hung on the wall. Running away or embracing death offered nothing. Freedom came with power.

Hours passed and the sunlight from the ice canopy intensified, indicating it must be mid-morning. But day and night meant little in the Marstone mines. Torches stayed lit and work continued unbroken, the river of slaves flowing 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?” asked a cold voice.

Merik opened his eyes to find himself faced by a man with bright blue eyes and a close-trimmed black beard. He wore a pointed helmet pressed with the crest of the imperial dragon—a fire-breathing serpent with blue-studded eyes. Merik knew immediately this was not one of the foremen. This was an officer of the Daegon army.

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

Merik saw he was holding up a familiar object—his carved stone, a red-and-black crystalline shard of dragon bone scrawled with intricate square symbols. Merik remembered how long it had taken him to carve those signs in the correct sequence, let alone to find a tool sharp and precise enough for the task.

Merik blinked and swallowed, trying to get his weary brain to think of a safe response. In the moments Merik hesitated to respond, he suddenly felt his muscles seize up as excruciating pain flooded his senses. He could hear the sickening sizzle of the branding iron melting the skin on his exposed chest. Merik screamed, then relaxed his body as 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 as he asked, “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.

“You’re a liar!” the officer shouted, slapping Merik across the face. “Burn him again!”

Merik shut his eyes, feeling his body tense again as it anticipated the searing pain.

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

Merik opened his eyes to see the Daegon officer bowing and a tall figure in flowing white fabric drifting into view. His pain was momentarily eclipsed by wonder at the resplendent appearance of the woman in white, her silk garments laced with infinitely intricate designs. Looking up into her face, Merik was met by a gold mask of a stoical human visage, embedded with gemstones about its forehead to give the impression of seven eyes. Green eyes flashed at him through the slender eyeholes of the mask, betraying nothing of her true face. Across the crown of the mask was inscribed in small, blocky letters: *The Enlightened Society*.

“What is your name, slave boy?” the woman asked in a gentle voice.

“Merik,” he replied, dropping his eyes.

The woman laughed. “That’s not what they call you down here. Blinkworm, they call you. More creative than I’d expect from slaves. Why do they call you this?”

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

“They tell me you are an unusual slave, Merik,” the woman said, touching his chin and lifting his head. “You vanish into the ground and reappear. I wonder where you go.”

Merik furrowed his brow, trying to determine whether he had slipped into a bizarre dream. He tried to look away, but she held his gaze with her emerald eyes. Feeling unsettled by her attention, Merik replied flatly, “I’m just doing my job, ma’am.”

“What is it you want out of life, Merik?” she asked with seeming sincerity.

Merik scoffed, the question feeling ridiculous to him. Still, his eyes broke her gaze and glanced sidelong at the foremen across the thoroughfare of slaves. The lady followed his glance, 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 at Merik worse than any insult. If he had his arms 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 slave for his insolence. The woman held up a hand, and the officer knelt back down to the floor.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why I’m speaking to you so candidly, Merik,” the lady continued in a more businesslike manner. “Do you know where I am from?”

“The Enlightened Society?” Merik replied, 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 common runes, then? Who taught you?” she inquired through a pleased smile that Merik could hear in her voice.

“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 mused, holding up Merik’s intricately etched crystal between them.

“I didn’t write that. I found it,” Merik reiterated.

“You’re gifted in many things, it seems, Merik, but lying isn’t one of them,” the lady intoned, wrapping the stone in a cloth and tucking it into her garments. She looked him up and down as she continued, “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 up dragon bones and more in your other pastimes.”

As she said this, she plucked something from the torn fabric around his knees. She held up a shred of something bright green in the torchlight, regarding it with extreme interest. Merik felt his palms sweat as he realized it was a blade of grass. It must have clung to his pants when he was sitting in the forest. Merik 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 deep thought, she turned on her heel and began walking back the way she came, saying idly over her shoulder, “Cut the boy down. 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.”*

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

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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 that would be 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 felt unreal.

The lady settled into her seat across from him, her hands folded on her lap as she regarded Merik through her expressionless gold mask. Two associates in black robes and wearing 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. He felt a wave of suffocating panic threaten to overpower his self-control.

*"Hold it together, idiot,"* Merik scolded himself inwardly. *"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, all while under the lady's unseen gazing eyes.

She made a gesture and one of the masked men tapped the roof of the cab. The carriage lurched into movement, bumping and jostling along the rocky mine road. Merik pushed back the soft curtain blocking his side window and gazed outside for relief. They were traversing 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.

Sweating herds of laboring slaves marched outside his window, the hulking black kilns looming up the towering trench walls like fire-breathing giants. They were leaving them behind—it was not a trick or a cruel joke. Merik was really being taken out of the mines. 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 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 capitol 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 fetch you.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Merik muttered mechanically, still trying to form a single concrete thought out of the fog of overwhelmed feelings that filled his head. He kept his eyes out the window for a time.

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

Merik hesitated, wondering if he was supposed to answer. She waited, so he replied, a little sheepishly, “From the ground, ma’am.”

She emitted a chuckle, inclining her head forward a little as she said, “I wonder why you play a fool. What trick of the mind keeps you there. I know that you know where they come from, so try again.”

Merik took a deep breath, feeling increasingly uneasy by 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 of the realms, so to speak.”

Merik pursed his lips and dropped his eyes nervously, wondering if she expected him to understand what she was talking about. There was an agonizing period of silence 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 in 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 tile 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. There are sixty-four cups, but only one conceals Marstone. Indicate where it is.”

Merik looked up at her, then at the board, then back again with a subtle smile, assuming this was her way of 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,” she replied in a patient tone that 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 like 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.

The table of cups was alive with colored auras Merik has never seen. Violet, white, emerald, crimson, a spectrum of hues. Merik let out an audible gasp at the bewildering sight, beginning to conclude he may have been drugged and this was some absurd dream. He glanced up at the lady, who gazed, resting clasped hands on the table as she patiently waited.

“But where is the Marstone?” she intoned.

Merik returned his eyes to the board, searching again. Despite the kaleidoscope of colors, he could not see even the slightest trace of the familiar amber glow of Marstone. His heart seized, wondering what would happen if he failed this bizarre test. He felt the sweat begin to seep from his forehead.

“Perhaps it’s too hard.” She sighed.

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

The woman removed the china cup. Underneath was a small vial of a chrome fluid. Merik felt his chest constrict with dread at his failure.

“Vertellion quicksilver. Very rare. Very expensive. But not Marstone.” She sighed again, then added, “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 bluish hue. He pointed.

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

“Now, tell me, how could you know they contained the same element?” she asked with a tone of 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. She waited for Merik to answer, then said with a little disappointment in her tone, “I suppose it could be a random chance. So many seeming wonders are. You mean to tell me you do not know where the Marstone lays?”

Merik glanced up at the woman, his expression betraying the fear growing underneath. Then he noticed a faint amber glow emanating from her clasped fingers on the table.

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

The woman unfolded her white-gloved fingers to reveal the orange crystalline shard of Marstone. She let out a sigh of satisfaction and 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?” she asked pointedly.

Merik hesitated again, then gave in. He nodded, saying, “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 chuckled. “What you saw were elements from other worlds, obtained at great cost. It takes one attuned with the realms to see their traces.”

Throwing back her white hood, the woman revealed a head of short glossy gray hair threaded with black streaks, pulled into a tight bun. Unfastening her golden mask, she removed it to reveal

a slender, pale complexion. Her face appeared perfect, except for a circular scar that marred her cheek. 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: that you have a vastly uncommon gift, Merik. I don’t know who your family was, but there is a deep harmony with the 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 mines, Marstone, and wars. My master has seen it. You are the key to unlocking the realms.”

Luria paused and looked at him with a searching expression. Merik made no reply; not even a lift of an eyebrow agitated his vapid expression.

Whether what she was saying was true or not did not enter his head. He had heard many things and many promises before and had ceased to put any value in words, pretty as they might sound.

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

“Training for what?” Merik blurted out.

“Patience, my boy. Everything will be explained in due time,” Luria said with a soft laugh.

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

“It may take time for you to adjust to what’s happening to you, Merik. I would 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. Merik glanced at her, saying with a little surprise, “That’s what the foremen told me. 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 myself,” 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, and although he was growing to enjoy her company, he was not ready to swallow everything she gave him.

The mines passed in a blur outside Merik’s window. His eyes stung as the aperture suddenly flared with blinding white light. 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. The light dazzled Merik, and he shut the blinds, curious as he was to see the outside world. It had been months since he had seen sunlight, and right now it did not agree with him.

“The snowstorm should be passing soon, my lady,” one of the men said in a strange, airy voice.

Merik looked and noticed the cloaked man handling 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 in his hands. “Ma’am... what is that? Can he really tell the weather with it?”

Luria grinned and replied with scholarly indulgence, “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 humbly took the tool, feeling its surprising weight. The tablet’s surface was fitted with a mechanical grid of wires and small wheels that moved over etched runes. The wires trembled and swayed like oscillating needles, triangulating around certain runes while the wheels turned slowly.

He smiled at the intricate device as his mind worked to unravel its meaning. At first, the runes were incomprehensible, but as he studied them, their sense began to form. The symbols indicated by the wires were shorthand words for weather patterns. However, 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 dot.

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

“Very impressive!” Luria said, clapping her hands softly. “You’re familiar with Malacadian and Sulvanarian. You’re a scholar of languages, Merik.”

Merik blushed slightly, looking down at the tablet again. 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 said, taking the tablet from his hands. Merik chose not to resist, though he did not want 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 Vei script, 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 weighing down his tongue. Luria lifted her eyebrows at him, as if she guessed his question. “You want to know what I mean by Vei languages, don’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Merik blurted out with relief.

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 Malacadian—the Vei language of war and defense. Crudely done, but effective." 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."

A crooked smile played on Merik's lips as he 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 Malacadian 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, leaning back leisurely as she continued, "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 feeling increasingly overwhelmed by what she was telling him. Before he could stop himself, he asked, "Why are you doing all this for me?"

Luria's smile broadened. She leaned forward in her seat 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—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 as she continued, “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, or a truncheon-wielding foreman, 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 image borrowing much from glimpses of the Daegon masters who sometimes visited the mines to elect new foremen. 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 shamefacedly, realizing how long he had been staring at Luria, enraptured by his daydreams.

“This vision pleases you, I see,” she chortled. “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. Before long, you will even eclipse me in power. 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, 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 than you, 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 burst out in an amused laugh. “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 sharply. "Do you know where it is you go, Merik?"

Merik thought strategically before answering, choosing his words with care. "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

"Stop the carriage!" the lady 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,” the lady grumbled. “You up there, halt at once!”

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

“Well?” the woman bawled angrily at the two men sitting on either side of her. “Do something about this!”

One of the masked men rose from his seat and opened the carriage door. Immediately the cab was flooded by the howling flurry of the snowstorm. 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, lurched violently, and 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 of the man’s exposed fingers—a crazy mass of pale, knuckly, spider-like tendrils.

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

The carriage lurched again—but this time it did not recover. For one terrifying moment, Merik felt himself lift out of his seat as the world turned sideways. He saw sparks and felt a sharp pain in his arm as his body slammed against the carriage wall. There was a screeching noise as the carriage came to a skidding halt on its side. Then nothing but the lonely whistle of wind could be heard.

Merik sat up panting, his head pulsing with adrenaline as he assessed his surroundings. The carriage door was still open above him, gazing into the white sky.

“Stay inside,” the woman said in a steely tone, seeming unharmed in the crash. She had replaced her mask and was holding a long, ornate silver dagger. She gestured at her attendant, saying, “You—come with me.”

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

For a miserable time, he 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 the lady had been. As he reached for it, his arm throbbed with a deep pain. Merik cursed his broken wrist. It would take months to heal properly. He crouched forward, using his good arm to pick up the white cloth.

He felt his heart leap 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.”

He felt the stone begin 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 he felt the muscle stiffen and the pain dull. He let out a puff of relief.

“Thanks.”

With a little deliberation, Merik stood and clambered up onto one of the now-sideways benches. Poking his head out the door, he squinted into the glare and wind of the blizzard, searching for a sign of the woman and her attendant. Nothing was visible in the tumult.

The animal-like instinct to leap out of the carriage and bolt into the wild crossed his mind, but the thought of the woman in white held him. She was his best chance of survival—and a future.

Climbing up onto the upturned side of the carriage, Merik saw 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 when a hurtling mass of black cloth came crashing 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, lying motionless against the wooden wreckage, was one of the masked men, bleeding dark blood into a widening circumference of snow.

A maddening terror seized him as he scrambled to escape the pit of enveloping snow, plowing up chunks of it as he tried frantically to run. His feet soon found relatively solid ground. But as he regained his footing, he distinctly heard an animal grunt.

Merik looked up to find himself confronted by a hulking, dark figure.

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 that almost appeared human. Its large snub nose was red from the cold and exuded steam as it breathed. Two short, ox-like horns curled out of long brown hair that whipped in the powerful 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, effortlessly slinging him over its shoulder. Merik cried out and thrashed wildly, but the beast's hairy arms were as unyielding as mountain stone.

"Quit squirming and stay quiet!" the creature growled as it waded through the snow.

The womanly quality of the voice took Merik off guard. He lifted his head with 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 and noticed he could see the fuzzy outline of the sun burning through the snowstorm. The blizzard was dying out.

"Oris!" the beast called out with a roar.

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 head—an oval disk beaded with stabbing black eyes, a beak, and two pointed ears, resembling 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 the boy, now let's get out of here," the woolly warrior said, jostling Merik.

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

Merik craned his head to see the form of a gray-cloaked man 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 instantly this man was not from Daegonur. His skin had been accustomed to the sun, and his one good eye was a duller hue of blue than the telltale Daegon cerulean.

He held an ornate-looking staff with a kind of hole in its middle and a head like a wheel. Placed inside the hole, Merik spied an orange-glowing sphere of ice, charged from the inside with some kind of energy. As he looked, the ball of ice appeared to be melting—shrinking moment by moment.

These were not ordinary highway robbers—they knew magic. The man's teeth glinted in a smile as he said, "Climb up quick! She'll wise up to us before long."

With a jarring jolt, Merik felt himself heaved and thrown onto the shaggy back of the owlcat like a piece of cargo. Elati situated herself in the saddle, pinioning Merik between herself and Oris, 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. His guts 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, revealing the stooping silhouettes of black boulders jutting up from the earth all around them. Merik could see their path was taking them up a steep incline, and although the sun was bright, it was already getting low on the horizon.

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

“How do you feel?” the womanly voice of the creature asked, with 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 projected over a loud howl of wind.

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

“What do you plan to do with the boy?” Elati asked in a tone Merik did not find comforting.

“Get him out of 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.

Merik felt the vibration of a grunt from Elati, who 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.



After a while, Merik could feel they were level again and racing along at a steady clip. Opening his eyes, he 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 a view of the 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 smoke 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 realistically 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 the Masked Lady. In the scales of Merik's analytical mind, she still weighed as his best chance at survival and freedom. If her words had been in earnest, she would kill these robbers and save him. But until that happened, Merik concluded his best chance would be to act defeated, stay quiet, and wait.

Oris and Elati exchanged few words as the owlcat carried them miles into the desolate wastes. Clumps of slender, wind-battered fir trees jutted from the frozen tundra here and there, their pointed heads arched like weary travelers. Ahead, through misty distance, Merik could see the blue outline of a toothy mountain range.

Minutes turned into hours, and 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 take in. 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 slipped into an uneasy sleep for some time, because when he became aware of his surroundings again, it was night and they had stopped.

He felt the soreness in his sides acutely as he was lifted off the back of the owlcat again and carried like a rolled rug toward a small 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 snaggle-toothed 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 wonder and 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 thick canopy of dark fir boughs. She sat him down on a mat beside a crackling fire, illuminating the dense fir-tree alcove, and Oris sitting cross-legged opposite the fire.

“Glad to see you’re awake,” Oris said, carving 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 again. He sat up quickly, masking his pain as he nursed the injured arm.

“Great, he’s broken,” Elati chuckled. 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, taking 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 meat.

Merik turned his face away, remaining on the periphery of the fire, hardly benefiting from its warmth as he cradled his broken wrist. 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.

Merik jolted as he felt a hand touch his back. 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 as he knelt beside Merik. He held out his large, calloused hands and asked, “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 small circle around Merik.

With the base of the staff, Oris traced a circle 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 circle of light. Plucking a silver object from the central cavity of his staff, Oris laid the staff aside.

He knelt 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 between them. The phantasmal symbol pulsed as Oris finished, its circular pattern seeming to move and turn 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 begin to recoil. Oris grabbed Merik by the wrist, holding his arm in the sigil longer. Merik pulled against the man and 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.

“I am Oris,” said the man with a cordial smile, “and this is my cohort, Elati. The fair beast 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, laying 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 the kingdom’s 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 worries.”

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 and said, “Don’t let her temper scare you. We are here to help you, 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 lay down but 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 of trees, 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.