

one



shadows deep

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep.

Ash and Bone

Ten months after the War of the River

Morning crept across the floor in buttery streaks, sunlight warming the wood of the cottage Tegan shared with Dr. Wilson. Normally he would've shouted her awake by now, loud with speculation about the latest round of tests. The silence scratched at her, so she clambered down from the loft, curious but not alarmed. When she found him pale and breathless, clammy in his bed, she touched his forehead.

Cold, too cold.

His lips were tinged blue. Cyanosis. *So what's the diagnosis, girl?* Wilson asked with his eyes, not his voice. She considered the possibilities quickly: pulmonary embolism or coronary failure. Either way, she had no medicine for him, and she lacked the skills to operate, as he'd said they once did, correcting broken hearts with a facility so advanced that it sounded like magic. He reached out, and she curled her warm fingers around his, noting the brittleness of his bones and the age spots on the back of his hand.

"I won't last," he wheezed.

"You promised to stay the winter."

"Can't. I'm . . . sorry, dear." Such rare affection. It thickened her throat as she clutched his hand tighter.

"What can I do?"

"Find . . . find the . . ."

"Who?"

“Catalina. Go to Rosemere. Ask . . .” But Dr. Wilson failed to finish his final request, as the last breath shivered out of him.

A rap on the door jolted her upright. She hurried to answer and found the mayor, Agnes Meriwether, pacing with an agitated air. “Get Dr. Wilson. I have to—”

“He’s gone,” Tegan cut in.

The older woman stilled, her face falling into desperate lines. “Then I’m too late.”

This woman had made the doctor’s existence a living hell, tormented with guilt over what he’d done trying to save the town. Instead his research nearly destroyed it. Tegan scowled. Even now it was about what Mrs. Meriwether needed, not that someone clever and wise had passed.

“Indeed,” she snapped.

Whatever crisis she’d come upon this time, Mrs. Meriwether put it aside. “I’ll organize the services. Quickly, wash him and get him ready.”

The mayor left, and within moments the bell sang out, tolling Dr. Wilson’s departure. Tegan counted. *Sixty-four*. That was a good age in these times, but she wished he had stayed longer. Grief came at her like a determined enemy. With grim fortitude, she filled a pail from the pump outside and hauled it in. Normally the family performed these rites, but Tegan considered this service the last she could offer. His flesh felt cool and waxy as she cleansed the world’s cares from him. Next came the anointment with scented oil. There might be some significance to this, but she reckoned it really just helped with the burning.

Once she finished, she closed his eyes and knelt beside him, waiting for the bearers. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. Is Catalina a person or a place?”

The question burrowed at her until the men arrived, shuffling outside with awkward uncertainty. She let them in before they knocked, and they were efficient about getting Dr. Wilson onto the board that would take him to eternity. Tegan finally put on

her good dress and tied her hair back. By the time she got to the center of town, everyone had already assembled.

News travels fast.

The holy man read from his little black book. Then the bearers delivered the scientist's body to the flames.

Tegan wept alone.

The rest of Winterville sighed over seeing Dr. Wilson reduced to ash and bone, but his service passed with no other exclamations of grief, for he'd left no relatives behind. Only one apprentice, who hid later in a stand of balsam fir trees, needles sere as straw beneath her feet. A crisp breeze carried the distant scent of dried herbs sparking in his pyre, as the town had stopped burying their dead after the days when they rose and ate. Now bodies went with more haste than seemed human. *Just in case.*

Tears streamed down Tegan's cheeks and she swiped at them with an impatient hand. It was time to pack up the laboratory, as this marked the end of her studies. The knowledge that had died with Dr. Wilson left her hollowed out with a regret so ferocious, it felt like sickness. *I didn't learn enough. Not nearly enough.* When people greeted her as Dr. Tegan, the title scraped her raw; she felt more like a quack, her mentor's word for a bad physician. She cried a little longer and then squared her shoulders.

During the war, when she'd served as field medic for Company D, she'd seen her share of loss, and she'd mourned for each fallen comrade, each soldier she couldn't save. Nobody had thought they could succeed, starting with only twelve volunteers, but they proved themselves to everyone in the free territories by rallying a proper army and defeating the horde—with unexpected aid from the Uroch and Gulgur. If such an unlikely alliance could thrive, well . . .

I'll get through this, too.

When she headed back toward town, she met Millie in the road. Millie's family had left Otterburn some time ago, finding the honors the villagers bestowed burdensome. The girl's skin

was burnished brown, and her hair fell in waves, black like a raven's wing, past her shoulders. In truth, Millie was pretty enough to have town boys falling over their feet, but she showed little interest in them. Most days, Tegan had to chase Millie away from the lab to get any work accomplished. Millie craved stories about what Tegan had seen and done, the places she'd gone. Sometimes Tegan felt as if she had a filigree tattooed on her forehead, with letters that read DOES NOT BELONG in ornate script.

"Are you all right?" Millie asked.

Tegan tipped her head back to study the sky. *Rain, just past nightfall*. Both the pattern of the clouds and the dull ache in her thigh promised as much.

With a sigh, she shook her head. "There's a lot to do yet."

"Will you stay and do the doctoring in his place?"

It was the first time anyone had asked that directly. Maybe it was what Dr. Wilson had wanted, but he'd died without saying so. Now she had only a word: *Catalina*. And an oblique request.

That's my answer, she realized.

"Once I finish at the lab, I'm going to Rosemere."

"Take me with you," Millie said.

She hesitated. "Can you fight?" And then she remembered her friend Deuce, known as the Huntress to the rest of the territories, handing her a weapon—without asking. So she waved the question away. "Never mind. Have you talked to your folks about this?"

"No. But they won't stop me if I choose to go. They already think I'm too good to stay in Winterville forever." A hint of pride brightened her tone.

As well it might, since Millie was famous throughout the territories as being the girl whose kindness had saved the world. Tegan beckoned her on. The wind was kicking up, whirling leaves at their feet as in a game of chase. Millie fell into step with

a merry skip that made it seem like she was dancing. Tegan hurried toward the laboratory, half-afraid she'd find the townsfolk burning Dr. Wilson's things, too.

If they try, we'll fight.

Tegan's mouth flattened into an angry line. Dr. Wilson had so many important documents, reams of data and information it would take her a lifetime to unravel. Inside the lab, it was dark and still, cold as Dr. Wilson's hands had been. Millie followed close behind, nearly bumping into Tegan when she stopped, riveted by the sight of Agnes Meriwether pawing through a stack of papers.

"Those don't belong to you."

The mayor jerked like a criminal caught in the act. "I loaned Dr. Wilson a couple of novels last week. I only wanted them back."

"He never read anything but research material." Tegan's voice rang flat and cool. "Get out. And don't let me catch you here before I've finished packing."

She'd hide all the important resources at the cottage. It wouldn't be long before Winterville purged this building and dedicated it to some other purpose. When she left, she'd take the most valuable book, the one that had curled pages and meticulous drawings of the human body. The cover was black with embossed letters, and though the thing weighed almost as much as her staff, she'd carry it with her always. Maybe with sufficient time and effort, she'd grow into her title like a sea creature that scuttled from shell to shell.

"You don't like her," Millie said.

Tegan nodded. "She wants easy answers, quick fixes. And that ends badly."

To the terminus of his life, Dr. Wilson had been troubled by what he'd done to save Winterville. He'd performed experiments on a live mutant and created a pheromone solution that repelled

the monsters, but it also drove people mad, resulting in carnage that haunted the living. Winterville still bore the scars, and the scientist had died with all that guilt still weighing on him.

“I’ve heard about what happened,” Millie murmured gravely. “Where should I start?”

“Those crates, if you don’t mind. They should stay out of the cottage while I’m away.”

With Millie’s help, it took only a couple of hours to ferry over the things she meant to keep. Exhausted, she prepared a simple meal of toasted bread covered in soft yellow cheese. She ate with Millie in silence, grateful that she didn’t have to stay here alone. With Dr. Wilson gone, this didn’t feel like home anymore.

Afterward, the girl touched her shoulder. “If you’ll be all right, I’m going. Are we leaving in the morning?”

Tegan nodded. “I’ll gather the supplies we’ll need to reach Rosemere.”

“Can we make the journey alone?”

Once, she might’ve hesitated. But she was stronger now, confident in the skills she’d learned from Morrow and in the peace Company D had forged.

“If we’re together,” she said, “then how can we be alone?”

Millie flashed a bright smile. “Thank you. For taking me seriously. It’s not that I don’t like it here, but . . .” She paused, likely gathering her thoughts. “I want to be more . . . *see* more. In Winterville, they still know me as the girl who was so, so good in Otterburn. But that can’t be the *only* thing I’m known for, my whole life.”

Tegan understood. Just as she hadn’t wanted to be labeled a former captive, Millie didn’t want to stay on the pedestal people had built for her. “You’ll love Rosemere. When I first saw it, I couldn’t believe there was anywhere so pretty in the world.”

“I can’t wait.” With a wave, Millie bolted.

Tegan got to work immediately. Though she’d been in

Winterville for a while, she hadn't forgotten how it felt to wander. Dry provisions, cook pot, walking stick, waterskin, the most accurate territory map in the doctor's collection, two changes of clothes (including socks), and finally, that precious book. *Ready*. As dusk ripened into full darkness, she climbed into the loft. Soon the rain she'd predicted earlier fell, tapping against the metal roof. Apart from Millie, she hadn't made friends here, devoting all her time to supporting Dr. Wilson.

It doesn't matter. In the morning, I'll be gone.

Millie met Tegan at the appointed hour, and they set off with minimal fanfare, though a few townsfolk waved and others called out greetings. Travel wasn't as hazardous as it had been, and they'd likely see traders along the way. Tegan set a pace she could maintain, amused to see that the other girl had a staff as well, raw cut and in need of smoothing. But she didn't tease. In fact, pleasure swirled through her like milk spreading in a cup of tea—that Millie admired her enough to emulate.

Me, not Deuce.

All over Winterville, girls sparred with twin wooden blades, reenacting the battle at the river. They always made the boys play the horde, much to their dismay. The clacking faded as the two friends put the town behind them. For a while they proceeded in silence. For some reason, Millie was collecting small stones in a pouch, but Tegan didn't ask about that.

“Have you ever traveled before?”

Millie shook her head. “Not really. Unless you count the trip from Otterburn.”

That was only a few days, not like the odyssey to Rosemere. “Where you infamously cared for the sick Mutie.” One act of kindness—that was why the Uroch had betrayed their forbearers and fought with humanity at the river. When she thought about it, the free territories owed Millie Faraday more than they

could repay. But it was also fitting. She recalled Ma Tuttle, her foster mother in Salvation, quoting, “A little child shall lead them,” from her holy book.

“Please don’t mention that,” Millie said, sighing. “It was so long ago. Did you know people bring things to our house sometimes? An old couple came all the way from Otterburn with a basket of vegetables.”

Tegan bit her lip against a smile. The pure vexation in the other girl’s tone made for bright amusement, but she managed not to laugh somehow. “It must be awful.”

“You’re mocking me. At least you *know* things.”

“Thanks to Dr. Wilson.”

“Even before, you studied under another doctor, right? In Salvation.”

Yes. That’s two healers I’ve outlived. It’s hard not to think it would be unkind to accept a third teacher. “Doc Tuttle, my foster father. He saved my life and took me in when we first came out of the ruins.”

“It was terrible there, I hear.” The statement rang like a question, but Tegan had no plans to talk about what her life had been like before.

Even when her mother had been alive, there had been too much fear and uncertainty. Afterward, it was all shame and violence. While she’d told Deuce a more sympathetic version of the truth, she’d fought to make damn sure she wouldn’t add any cubs to the Wolves’ number while clinging to such a miserable life. Blood and pain and—

No.

Deliberately, she snipped that thread of thought and tied it off in a mental suture. “The world is better now. It might be there, too.”

But I doubt it.

“Do you know lots of people in Rosemere?” At the moment, Millie was all eagerness.

Give her five days on the road, washing up in rivers and eating burned porridge. She'll lose that bounce soon enough.

Tegan thought for a moment. "Deuce and Fade are there, along with her family. Stone and Thimble and their boy, Robin. Gavin. You might remember him. And James, of course."

She'd have to be oblivious not to understand how he felt, but like Millie, Tegan wanted a lot of things more than romantic attention. James was handsome, clever, and kind; she supposed she *should* love him, but so far she could only muster the same pleasant warmth she felt for Deuce and Fade. Yet she'd nearly broken her own heart trying to save James's life, so maybe she did care a little more.

Never mind that anyway. I'll be seeing him soon enough.

"It is so incredible that you say their names like that."

"Hm?"

"As if they're just . . . people."

"That's how others see you, too," Tegan pointed out.

"I suppose. But that's just . . . strange."

Tegan understood why the other girl felt that way. The Huntress and her partner were famous in the free territories, as ferocious fighters and the leaders of Company D. They'd come from down below to change the world, and that was fairly intimidating. Yet she'd traveled with them long enough to understand that they were human.

She fell quiet and kept walking. Around midday, they took a break to eat beneath a stand of trees, basking in the sweetness of the shade. Tegan brushed her hands back and forth, the grass prickly beneath her palms. The summer had been long and dry, so it needed more rain than had fallen the night before. But the growing season was nearly done anyway. Soon the yellow would yield to brown as the leaves brightened like a weaver laying out her liveliest swathes of cloth.

"How long will it take?" Millie asked eventually.

"It depends how fast we walk. When I was with Company D, sometimes we covered twenty miles in a day. But there's no reason

to push so hard.” At the other girl’s disappointed expression, Tegan estimated the number of days, doubling what it would’ve taken on an offensive march.

Assuming we don’t run into trouble.

“I’ve never slept outside before, but I packed a bedroll. I heard Trader Kelley say he sleeps underneath his wagon.”

“Some do,” Tegan allowed. “If you’re done, we should move along. The distance between us and Rosemere won’t shrink from discussing it.”

Millie leapt up and packed the remains of lunch without being asked. Tegan dusted herself off, checked the map to make sure she was on the right track, and then resumed the trek. Now and then they met travelers on the road, but nobody showed signs of wanting to pass the time with gossip or trade, so Tegan just waved and kept moving. It was a little unnerving to spot Uroch in the distance, and once, she thought she spied one of the small folk scurrying into a burrow. But Millie didn’t seem to have noticed, and Tegan didn’t care to spook the girl.

So she said nothing.

As the shadows lengthened, she scanned for a good campsite. Perhaps a mile on down the road, she found a spot someone had used before; it even had a fire pit left from the last tenants, charred ground surrounded by a good ring of stones. The area had been cleared of small rocks and branches, so it would be fine for sleeping.

“This looks perfect,” Tegan said, dropping her pack with a sigh.

Her thigh burned with a low ache that never quite went away. Constant pain was a small price to pay for her life, after all.

With Millie’s help, Tegan built a fire. Squirrels and birds complained overhead, chattering about the girls’ intrusion. Ignoring this, Tegan made a simple stew from fresh vegetables and dried meat. They took turns eating from the pot while she hoped the smell didn’t draw anything dangerous from the woods nearby.

The darker it got, the more alone she felt . . . and yet not. Around her, the woodland creatures fell silent. Her skin prickled from the weight of unseen eyes. Scooting closer, Millie seemed to sense it, too. Tegan tilted her head and froze at the unmistakable crack of feet breaking a branch nearby. *Close. How close?* But woodcraft wasn't her specialty, so she couldn't be sure.

On a bracing breath, she jumped up and readied her staff.

Into the Unknown

“Who’s there?” Tegan called.

A cloaked figure emerged from the tangle of branches, brushing dry leaves away, surely not the act of a violent intruder. She couldn’t determine who it was, however, so she kept her weapon high. Millie clutched her own walking stick. Later, Tegan might critique the girl’s stance.

“Did I startle you?” The low rumble belonged to Szarok. He was the vanguard of the Uroch, which meant “the People” in their native tongue.

He pushed back his cowl, and she let out a relieved sigh. Millie showed no such relief, however. She probably hadn’t seen any of these creatures since she was a little girl tending what she thought was a wounded animal in the woods. His skin gleamed silver-pale in the firelight, and the shadows elongated his claws and fangs. There was a beautiful ferocity about him, Tegan thought, measuring the slant of his cheekbones and the golden gleam of his eyes. He was all precious metals, smelted and forged in the dread furnace of fate.

“A little,” she admitted.

“Where are you bound?”

“Rosemere.”

“You know him?” Millie ventured to ask.

Quietly, Tegan performed the introductions, and the other girl recovered from her nerves enough to offer her hand to shake.

But Szarok bowed instead. Deuce had told Tegan that the Uroch could share memories with a touch and that they inherited recollections from their ancestors. She had a thousand questions, but it seemed impolite to fire them at him like a cannon of inquiry.

“Are you hungry?” Millie offered Szarok the pot.

“No. Thank you. I paused to warn you to be careful. When we broke the horde, the threat was quelled, but the territories are not entirely at peace yet.”

Tegan appreciated the warning. “I’ll be alert. Our allies are still wearing armbands, yes?”

“Since your people cannot tell us apart. Not by appearance or smell or—”

“I can,” Tegan said with a touch of asperity. “Your skin is healthy and free of lesions. Your eyes are a different hue. And the Uroch generally do not run about naked or clad in filthy rags. The rest of my folk will catch up in time.”

“I wonder if I’ll live to see that day.”

Millie glanced between them. “Are you sick, sir?”

She could’ve answered that his people died young, a curse from stepping onto an expedited evolutionary track. But it would’ve been rude to pretend to be an expert before someone who knew better than she.

Szarok only shook his head. “Now that I’ve spoken my piece, I’ll go.”

“Stay.” The offer surprised Tegan, but she didn’t retract it. Instead she gestured at the fire. “The night is cool—and three shadows on the ground are better than two.”

“You hope my presence will deter marauders.” His amusement came across low, laughter like a snarl in his throat.

“Is that wrong?”

“No. I’ll stay. As it happens, I have business in Rosemere. I carry a message for Morrow’s father.”

Tegan wondered what it could be, but if he meant for her to

know, she'd find out soon enough. "Then we may as well continue together in the morning."

As Tegan spread her bedroll, Millie nudged her. "This is *incredible*. Is this how all your adventures begin?"

She repressed a laugh. "No, there's usually a talking horse."

"What?"

"Never mind. Get some sleep. There's a lot of walking ahead."

With minimal chatter, Millie tucked into her bedroll and Tegan eased onto her pallet, favoring her bad leg. It hurt more than usual, so she rubbed it and hoped sleep would bring some relief. To her surprise, Szarok knelt beside her and watched her fingers with apparent fascination.

"Can I help you?" Her whisper carried a faint bite.

"I might ask the same of you. This old injury, it healed poorly?"

"I'm lucky I kept my leg." She should probably hate and fear him, as one of his kind had inflicted the damage.

Yet she couldn't see him as one of them; they were clearly different species, much as the feral humans who had risen in Winterville weren't the same as those who raised vegetables and hauled water from the well. So she didn't withdraw when he leaned closer to inspect the site she was massaging. He didn't offer treatment, either, which she appreciated.

"It doesn't seem to inhibit your ambitions."

"Should it?" she snapped.

He gestured with two spread hands, talons unfurled, which somehow read like a shrug. "Some of the People are intolerant of physical imperfection. But . . . I think this prejudice did not originate with us."

"That's ours." Her sour tone indicated what she thought of that mindset.

"Go to sleep," Millie begged.

That was good advice, so she nodded to Szarok and rolled into her blankets. He settled on her side of the fire pit. With the embers smoldering nearby, it wasn't cold, and the sky through the

dark lattice of branches shone crisp and clear, the full autumn bloom of stars like a crystalline bouquet overhead, each spark of light raying like stray petals.

The Uroch was silent so long, she thought he must be sleeping. Then she caught a rustle of movement. “I’ll stand guard,” he whispered. “Dream well.”

To Tegan’s surprise, she did.

In the morning, she and Millie split the remaining stew and cleaned the pot with a hunk of bark. Though they offered Szarok breakfast, he declined. Millie bombarded him with questions and he was patient, keeping pace as he answered. In the sunlight, he kept his hood up, rendering him a mysterious figure. Around noon, they met Trader Kelley, who had fresh bread and ripe apples. Tegan would’ve bartered—she had arnica salve that was good for burns and minor injuries—but he gave them three rosy reds as a gift, along with a crusty golden loaf.

“What news?” she asked.

“Lorraine is having some kind of festival in the spring to commemorate the treaty. They’re planning on sending an emissary to Appleton.” Then Kelley took a second look at her hooded companion and added, “I guess I told the right person.”

“We’ve already established trade agreements. I’m sure delegates will be sent when the time is right,” Szarok replied.

They chatted over the meal, and then Tegan signaled the break was over by getting to her feet. She wished she could ride in a wagon all the way to the Evergreen Isle, but this caravan was headed in the wrong direction. So she saluted Trader Kelley with two fingers, as she’d learned in Salvation, and then continued the journey. It was a hot day, and the Uroch leader must have been sweltering in that cloak, but Tegan didn’t suggest he shuck it. There had to be reasons beyond vanity or camouflage for wearing it; intuition suggested it would be impolite to pry.

“At this pace, it will take two weeks to reach Rosemere,” Szarok said that night as they made camp.

“I’m aware.” Tegan didn’t glance up from her flint and tinder, focused until the tiny golden sparks became a little fire. “But any faster and I’ll suffer. So will Millie, as she’s not trained for a long trek.”

Already, her own muscles protested, sore from her uneven gait. Though she had good boots made by Deuce’s father, Edmund, they’d rubbed two new blisters by the end of the day. One of them felt puffy and tender while the other had burst, leaving her stocking sticky. She needed to peel out of her clothes and cleanse her wounds, but the Uroch’s presence left her shy. Still, Tegan was a doctor—or so they claimed—and it was nonsense to allow timidity to prevent her from treating herself. If another girl had come to her with such foolery, she’d have whacked her patient on the back of the head. After dinner she set aside some clean water and stripped out of her boots and stockings. Millie was entertaining their guest anyway, so she started when Szarok came to peer over her shoulder as she examined her own feet.

“You’re bleeding,” he said.

His evident surprise aggravated her. “I got soft studying in Winterville.”

She washed, then made short work of dotting the broken blister with salve. The other one, she decided not to pop. Though the skin felt puffy, it was better to let it split on its own. Still, she wrapped it, too, so that her stockings wouldn’t take any further damage. It would be a while before she could wash and dry them properly. She hung them up nearby to air out and headed back to the fire, where Millie was feeding thin, dry branches to the flames.

“How are your feet?” Tegan asked.

The girl glanced over with a dismayed expression. “Can you tell . . . ?”

“No, but it’s common sense. Let me see.”

Millie had three blisters, two on toes and one on a heel, so Tegan repeated the treatment. Out of habit, she glanced over at

Szarok, but his feet were bare and clawed, probably tough enough that he didn't need shoes unless the weather got considerably colder. Curiosity pecked away at her like a hungry bird, but still, courtesy kept her quiet. Treating him as Dr. Wilson had Timothy—the Freak he used to create the pheromone spray that once protected Winterville—would be unforgivable.

As she packed up her supplies, in the distance she heard a clacking, grunting snarl. *Not Freaks*, she told herself. And even if it were, the old ones might veer away since they were traveling with a Uroch. The noise got louder, almost like a challenge, and within moments Szarok was on his feet, poised for action.

Eventually a black bear rambled into view. It stood up on its hind legs and called out; Szarok responded with a growl. The two eyed each other for a long, tense moment. The bear sniffed the air, probably drawn by the smell of food. Tegan lifted her staff, but it was ridiculous to think of scaring the bear off that way. Yet she had no skill with a rifle, so there had been no point in hauling one. Better for her to bear the weight of supplies she could use.

Szarok can't fight that thing with his bare claws. Can he?

The Uroch didn't seem to know that. Without looking away, he said, "Get to safety. I'll drive it off."

Tegan wrapped a length of cloth around her palm, grabbed the pot, and ran, beckoning Millie as she went. The distraction lured the creature, but now she had a wild animal chasing them through the dark woods. Behind them, Szarok swore—or at least she guessed he had, from the guttural sounds—and a struggle crackled the undergrowth. Stones and branches bit at the soles of Tegan's feet as she dashed headlong. She might not be a great fighter, but she was clever. Running wouldn't save them, but a tree might.

"Here," she panted out.

Bears could climb, but she hoped Szarok would drive the beast off before it found them. For good measure, she left the pot at

the base of the trunk. *Better to feed it leftover stew than human flesh.* She and Millie scampered up, breathing hard. *Blast. Now I have to rewrap our feet.* That seemed a fairly mild concern, however.

Hope there's nothing worse.

In the dark, Millie clutched Tegan's hand, leaning into her. "Will he be all right? Should we have stayed to help?"

"Have you fought a bear before?"

The girl shook her head.

"Then no. Sometimes the best we can do is follow instructions."

Countless moments later Szarok came for them, a dark shadow at the base of the tree. "It's safe. Come."

Millie climbed down first and Tegan after. Szarok reached for Tegan too suddenly for her to recoil. One moment she was perched on the lowest branch, preparing to jump, and the next, he had her in his absurdly strong arms. Nobody had ever lifted her unless she was wounded, and even then, she'd wanted to fight. Generally she didn't enjoy being touched. Szarok didn't seem to register her resistance, and as he set her down, it faded.

But he smelled of copper, a sign he must be wounded. Tegan waited until they got back to camp before demanding, "Where are you hurt?"

"It's not serious."

She leveled a cool look on him, some of its impact doubtless lost in the dark. "I'm the doctor."

"Tend to your own ills first."

Sighing, Tegan did that, annoyed over the supplies wasted in wrapping their blisters a second time. She wrestled with putting her boots on and decided it was better to air the skin overnight. Finally she sat down beside Szarok to check the damage to his forearm. It looked as if he'd blocked a claw swipe, so it was incredible he'd only received a four-stripped gouge.

"You don't need stitches. I'll clean and wrap it for you."

His physiology fascinated her. His blood was darker than a

human's, and she analyzed possible reasons, based on what she'd learned. *Venous blood is darker because it's deoxygenated. So does that mean the Uroch have evolved to survive on less oxygen? That would mean they could thrive in high altitudes, and they would be able to hold their breath longer. Yet they're not good in water, which probably has to do with bone and muscle density—*

"You're staring," he said.

"Sorry. Am I hurting you?"

"No." His eyes remained fixed, tracing her movements as she washed away the blood. It smelled a little different, not just like copper, but something else, like wet earth after a rain. She had no specific word for it, but it wasn't unpleasant. His flesh was cool and completely smooth, but it felt thicker than her own. She suspected the lack of hair made him vulnerable to the sun.

That explains the cloak.

With careful hands, she coated the wound with healing salve and then wrapped his forearm in a bandage and tied it off. "How's the pain?"

"Bearable." He put his hand over hers for a few seconds, and she stared at the long fingers, silver-pale and topped with claws.

I'm not afraid. I should be, maybe. But I'm not.

"Thank you," Millie put in from across the small campsite.

Szarok shifted, seeming uncomfortable. Since Tegan couldn't see his face, she wasn't sure why she thought that, but his flinch confirmed that impression. Briskly, she stood, put away her doctor's bag, and hung the troublemaking pot from a high branch. Provided there was no more excitement, they could eat the leftovers in the morning.

Millie went to sleep first, and if Tegan had any sense, she'd do the same. But instead Tegan lay awake in her bedroll, listening to the other two breathe. It wasn't adrenaline keeping her awake; she'd survived much bigger battles. While she didn't love fighting like Deuce did, she didn't fear it, either.

With a curse, she rolled over to find Szarok awake and watching her. Her heart skittered. “You didn’t sleep last night, either. Is something wrong?”

There had to be some reason he’d been sent to Rosemere. Maybe the rest of the Uroch didn’t like the treaty terms? *If they want more, the free territories will go to war again. And this time—*No, there couldn’t be worse lying in wait. It had to be behind—with hope and brightness shining on the horizon.

But his whisper surprised her, stole her breath, in fact. “Could you rest at ease among your enemies? You’ve killed so many of my kind.”

“*You’re afraid of us?*” The idea seemed laughable. And yet . . . “Then why did you approach Deuce and fight alongside us?”

“Fear does not change what is right or my grief over what I’ve done. Maybe this decision was for the best. Or maybe I’ve betrayed my own people for nothing. Only time will tell.”

With her heart sinking like a stone, Tegan remembered the sea of carnage after the War of the River. “Sometimes you don’t know what’s right until it’s far too late to change it. You just do the best you can, moment to moment.”

“You are wise,” he said at length.

She shook her head wryly. “Hardly. But I’ll tell you something else.” It seemed right to whisper confidences in the dark.

“What’s that?”

This was something she’d never shared before. “I’m afraid of my people, too.”

Against the Grain

Why am I still here?

On the fifth day, Szarok asked himself this. Moving at his regular pace, he would've reached the river in a day or two. To guard these frail, slow creatures, he'd gotten wounded and delayed his mission by over a week. *Rzika will not be pleased.* The others rarely left Appleton, occupied with crafting policies that would govern their people going forward. Such work was rarely easy, as there was a wide range of intellect and outlook among them.

One female rarely stopped talking. Her questions were endless, and she granted respite only when he slept—or pretended he did. As for the other, she studied more than she spoke, her amber gaze keen as a blade. They smelled different as well. Millie must have sewn dried flowers into her clothing, because her movements carried a faint sweetness, whereas Tegan radiated a medicinal tang, likely from the salves and tinctures in her doctor's bag. Both lacked the richness of layering pheromones that would make them attractive, though the longer they traveled without scrubbing away natural musk, the more tolerable they became.

Neither had asked about the message he carried for the governor of the Evergreen Isle, and Szarok appreciated that discretion. Their company wasn't disagreeable, even if it was odd. This was the longest he had ever spent in close contact with humans.

His ears and nostrils hadn't stopped twitching under the bombardment of aural and olfactory input. They even *breathed* louder than the People, particularly when he tried to move faster.

"You need to rest?" he guessed.

They had only been walking for half a day. It was difficult to be patient when time meant such different things to their species. But he tried not to show his need for haste, as his ancestors had harmed Tegan in the first place. While he might not have injured her directly, he carried some of that responsibility by way of the rage-fueled memories he'd inherited.

Tegan nodded. "We should pause for a meal anyway."

Efficiently, she passed out equal shares of food. Szarok found it easier to chew through the tough dried meat than they did, so he finished first and tried to quell his distaste and impatience. Not well enough, evidently, for Tegan gave him a sharp look.

"You needn't travel with us the whole way. Since your arm's healing well, you have no further need of me, and we'll be fine on our own." There was no hint of hesitation in her voice, or countenance, either.

Not a bluff.

"Are you so eager to part company?" he asked, mostly to test her.

A lie will smell sharp and acrid.

"No, but I'm not the one constantly staring down the road, either."

A fair and honest response.

"Apologies if I pressured you."

"It's all right," Millie said cheerfully. "I think she's going easy since this is my first trip."

Tegan didn't deny that, so it must be true. *Interesting. She would push herself harder, but not this girl. They must be close kin.* It was a trivial fact that might prove useful, so he filed it away and let them enjoy the break until Millie's sweat had dried. By that time, she got to her feet on her own and didn't need to be prodded.

Now and then he broke and ran ahead to check the path for potential threats, but for reasons he couldn't articulate even to himself, he always circled back. The females were steady if not swift, and they were good at combining random ingredients to create edible meals. Tonight it was dry grain mingled with fresh fruit, and while he wouldn't call it delicious, it filled him up with minimal effort. The texture revolted him, but humans seemed to prefer softer food. He noticed they rarely cracked bones with their teeth and sucked out the delicious marrow. Their offerings wouldn't suffice for long; already he had to throttle the desire to hunt.

"Thank you for the food," he said once they'd eaten.

Millie chased away a couple of nighttime scavengers without even realizing it. Her voice carried well through the trees. He listened, wondering if the burrowers he'd smelled a mile back would approach. A few moments later, they did. Szarok spotted their eyes first, shining in the darkness, but he didn't move. Too warm a welcome and they'd be gone; the same for a show of force. *The Gulgur must be coaxed.*

He didn't expect the healer to follow his gaze and pinpoint what had commanded his attention. Though she didn't shift, she whispered, "What should we do?"

"Nothing. Unless you want them to run."

She stilled then, and the other female followed suit, though he suspected she was reacting to cues more than comprehending what was about to happen. The girls hardly breathed for what seemed like ages, and then at last one Gulgur stepped out of the shadows. The firelight was sufficient for his features to be visible: strong chin, large nose, wide forehead, sparse hair. Szarok hadn't seen enough of the small folk to be sure if this one was young or old.

"Am Haro," he said.

Tegan performed the introductions, much to Szarok's amusement. *She considers herself our leader, then.* Millie sat quiet,

perceptibly trying not to startle the small folk. They exchanged a few pleasantries, and the visitor made it clear why he'd emerged.

"Care to trade?" Haro asked.

"Yes, please," Tegan answered.

Apparently judging it safe, two female Gulgur emerged from the undergrowth and opened their packs next to the fire. He'd seen only males before. The group had jewelry, old-world oddities, bits of leather, and all kinds of useless junk. He didn't need anything, but it took the humans much longer to make up their minds. Millie swapped for a leather strap while Tegan haggled for an impossibly small pair of scissors. The Gulgur accepted a pot of healing ointment, the same stuff she'd rubbed on his arm. Without meaning to, he touched the bandage and smelled the infusion of herbs, and beneath that the sweetness of the oil and beeswax she'd used to create the salve.

When the transactions were complete, Tegan offered their guests the remainder of the food. After some private discussion in a tongue Szarok didn't speak, the Gulgur dug in. It surprised him that they seemed willing to share the camp, not only with two humans, but with him as well. The small folk tended to be wary and insular, rarely straying from their burrows until necessity demanded it.

"What's your name?" Millie was asking the smallest Gulgur.

"Chi."

Millie glanced at the other female, who had her hands in the cook pot. "And you?"

"Dia."

They don't speak much.

But he smelled the wariness rolling off them in waves strong enough that it skirted fear. Yet he didn't think anything in the camp warranted such a reaction. He raised his head and scanned the perimeter, seeking threats, and found none. Puzzled, Szarok studied the Gulgur.

“It’s you,” Tegan whispered.

Because he didn’t care to admit he couldn’t guess her meaning, he held silent.

“You’re making them nervous. You didn’t look at their things or offer hospitality. All you do is watch. While I understand you don’t mean any harm, the Gulgur find it intimidating. You’re not giving any cues that you’re friendly.”

“Friendly is not a quality the Uroch cultivate,” he said with a chill in his tone.

“Exactly. And we haven’t been at peace that long. It’s an uneasy truce in some ways, and they don’t know if they’ll offend you somehow. It won’t hurt to make an effort.”

Stung, he demanded, “How?”

“Talk with them. Don’t study them.”

She doesn’t understand. As vanguard, it is my duty, my honor and my obligation, to learn as much as I can. Only recently had the People realized how critical it was to take in information as the one service they could provide to their descendants. If only my ancestors had known, perhaps I would be wise. Perhaps I would not be so uncertain if such memories had been given to me instead of so much hate and violence. Certainly she couldn’t understand that each moment he chose not to lash out, he repressed the tide of loathing that surged from breathing human stink; that required a choice, control over impulse.

My instincts tell me it would be better if you were dead, healer, that I would enjoy the taste of your blood in my mouth.

Szarok imagined speaking the words aloud, Tegan’s cries of terror startling the birds from sleep in a frantic panic of beating wings. But no, the Uroch had chosen peace; they had chosen not to join with the horde to annihilate their distant ancestors. Even if humans were dumb and slow, heavy like clay boxes, their bones had provided the foundation that brought the People to life. Rzika had put it best:

If we destroy the last of our distant kin out of blind hate and fear,

we may as well be like the old ones. We may as well live and die without Awakening.

Beside him, Tegan stirred. She touched her throat. For some reason, it pleased him to make her uneasy.

Though he remained unnaturally aware of Tegan's discomfort, Szarok addressed Haro. "I saw another trading party, half a day from Appleton. Would you know them?"

"Definitely." Thus encouraged, Haro launched into an explanation of how the bravest of the Gulgur were being tested. The ones who survived and returned with anything of value—objects or information—would be promoted in clan hierarchy.

"Interesting." Szarok knew little about the structures of Gulgur society, so he asked questions as long as Haro would indulge his curiosity.

It proved to be longer than anyone else cared to listen, as the females began settling in for the night. Eventually Haro tired as well, and Szarok relaxed enough to let exhaustion trickle in. *How many days has it been since I slept well?* He couldn't recall, certainly not since he'd joined company with the humans. Szarok thought everyone else was asleep, so he startled when he turned and found the healer far too close. Somehow he swallowed the instinctive snarl. *I don't hate her. I barely know her.* Breathing deep, striving for calm, only drove her scent deeper into his lungs, an unpleasant tangle of smoke and sweat.

"What?" The guttural exclamation shamed him.

I should be better at feigning courtesy.

"We got interrupted before I could change your bandage earlier." She spoke so softly, he could barely make out her words.

Since he could smell the fluids on the cloth, other predators probably could, too. So he nodded in mute acceptance and didn't protest when she unwound the fabric. But she didn't discard it, merely folded it over and tucked it into her bag. There shouldn't be any sinister reason why she would want traces of his blood,

but . . . it troubled him. Szarok had heard how her mentor had tortured one of his people until the poor soul had died, mad with loneliness.

Stung, he demanded, “What will you do with that?”

“Scrub, boil it until it’s clean, dry it, and use it again,” she said, as if that answer should be obvious. “But not until we get to Rosemere, so be careful. Between our feet and your arm, I’m already running low on supplies. Don’t move.”

She rubbed her palms together briskly so that her hands were warm when she touched him, so much that it was a shock to his cool flesh. He fought the urge to pull away; her fingers were soft, like creeping slugs. *She’s helping you. Be grateful.* But anger boiled up because her kindness likely carried a hidden sting in the tail.

She will hunt you, too. Humans can’t be trusted. They shoot and stab and kill. Those, the last words his sire had snarled at him on the battlefield, on a bloody plain before the river. Szarok had taken his memories as blood surged over his claws, spattered on his skin. *One day my offspring will know everything I have done.* The People were too young to consider this a crime, but he sensed the wrongness in his bones. *I went against the one who gave me life. He died on my claws.* The warning troubled him still, more now that there was dissent in Appleton. His sire had been speaking of the Huntress, of course, not this healer.

And yet . . .

Not noticing his tension, Tegan pressed up and down the scabbed wound. “This looks good. It’s sealed, no signs of infection. I’ll put more salve on it, but it doesn’t need to be wrapped. Just be careful not to break it open.”

“Very well,” he said.

Holding still proved excruciating torture. First she tugged on his arm, angling it toward the fire, and then she painted delicate stripes on each individual wound. He wondered briefly if she meant to torture him, or if this was some test sent to measure

his patience. By the time she finished, he'd broken out in a cold sweat and his jaw ached from clenching his teeth to swallow the snarls. *Human hands, ugh, human hands.*

"You don't like me."

It took him a moment to realize she'd actually spoken those words. *I should be polite. I should be tactful.* Somehow the truth came out instead.

"Not only you."

"You don't like any humans?" She seemed surprised to hear this for some reason.

At first he didn't answer, as it seemed like a stupid question. How many did she think he knew? There had been the Huntress and her mate, the storyteller and his politician of a sire, and the soldiers who'd slaughtered his people like beasts. Even if the old ones were monstrous and mindless, they had no hand in their own creation. Humans only ever saw them as a threat or monsters to be put down. If any had ever pitied the elders, other than the talkative girl they called Millie, Szarok had never heard. It was her actions, after all, that changed everything, so he tried to be patient and respectful. That might count as liking, he supposed.

"Millie," he said finally. "She's flowers and sunlight."

Tegan's hands stopped moving on his arm, so there was only pressure. Finally he yielded to the urge to shake her off, and then he scratched at his skin, trying to dislodge the sensation of insects crawling. A good rake of his claws made it better.

Scowling, Tegan bristled. "So you did this for one girl. That makes no sense. You helped us. You sided with us. Yet not only do you fear us, as you said before, you also actively dislike us. Except for Millie. So why not destroy us then?"

Szarok wondered if it would do any good to have this conversation, yet he didn't turn away. "Have you destroyed everything you hate and fear?"

A shudder rolled through her, so hard that she doubled over, and for a moment he thought she might be sick. The sour stink

of her sweat sharpened, and he hesitated, unsure what he was supposed to do. But whatever had triggered such an extreme reaction, she controlled it, as he so often did. Eventually she straightened and lifted her chin, daring him to comment on that momentary weakness. *She may be a healer, but she is a warrior, too. I would do well to remember.* Reluctant respect lanced through him, bright as a blade.

Tegan breathed audibly through her nose. “No. But I wanted to.”

“Then you understand my feelings precisely.”

“Do I? How intriguing.” She let out a mirthless laugh that sent a chill down his spine. “But now I wonder whether I should be afraid of *you*.”

“Possibly,” he said.

“I’m too tired for that. I only have the energy for certain threats.” With that, she rolled into her blankets and gave him her back, impressively unconcerned.

Unwillingly, his ire melted into amusement. *Even with all the old ones who ever lived and died shouting in my head, I will not hurt you.* He didn’t mean that stray thought like a promise, but it sank into the center of him like a vow. Some of the contention slid away, too. For tonight, he would set aside all his questions and the issues of right and wrong. Szarok listened to her breathing even out, the snorts and snuffles from the Gulgur huddled together across the fire.

This, this is a good moment, a memory worth passing down.

When Dreams Come True

James Morrow had been watching the horizon for months. That longing stare had become part of his routine, in fact, and it didn't matter how many teasing remarks it mustered. Every day, without fail, rain or shine, he had his breakfast and then went to the dock to stare out over the water. If he waited long enough, Tegan would return to Rosemere. He had good reasons for believing, because she had friends so close here that they might as well be called family. He didn't waste more than five minutes this way, but each time, it felt like a promise in good faith.

That morning his patience bore fruit as, instead of empty river, he glimpsed the blossoming white sails of a boatman heading for the Evergreen Isle. At the hour, it could only mean he'd spotted hopeful travelers on the shore. Nearby, a fisherman checked his net with careful eyes while sparing him a smile.

"Think this is your lucky day, lad?"

"Could be. If it is, buy me a drink." Morrow flashed a smile, trying to hide the wistful ache square in his chest.

If she loved you, she wouldn't have gone.

But love didn't always grow at the same pace. For some, the feeling shot up like a determined vine after a hard rain; for others, it sprouted by increments so tiny, you wouldn't notice at all until the minuscule green shoots finally broke through into the light. He hoped Tegan was the latter, and when she caught up, he'd be

waiting. The graceful boat surged closer until it tapped up against the dock and its owner leapt lightly onto the boards to tie it up.

Eagerly, Morrow skimmed the passengers for Tegan's face . . . and found it. She was sunburnt and weary, but her eyes held the same bright, beautiful gleam. She had always been beyond clever, seeking patterns, striving to understand the inexplicable. Her craving for knowledge matched his thirst for stories, so he'd always thought they would make perfect partners. More than once, he'd imagined continuing his quest to replenish Rosemere's library, Tegan beside him, but she'd left to study in Winterville before he could ask.

Now she's back.

"You couldn't stay away," he said, smiling.

Her head came up, and she grinned. "Have you been waiting here all that time?"

Wiley the fisherman decided to weigh in. "It's powerful sad, miss. He doesn't even go home. We have to bring him a bit of bread and fish now and then to keep him from dying. I think his feet have rooted to those planks."

"Wiley," Morrow scolded.

But in truth, he didn't mind her thinking he had waited with such single-minded devotion. He'd never made any secret of his courtship, silly to complain now. But Tegan only laughed and accepted a hand from the boatman. Despite her slight limp, she was sure and graceful. A girl Morrow didn't recognize came after her, and a cloaked figure who could only be Szarok. A chill ran through him as he considered what this visit portended.

"You must be James Morrow." The girl had a pretty face, brown skin, and thick black hair, tied back with a simple leather strap. Her eyes rounded as she peered up at him, and he almost took a step back at the delight that flared bright as a signal fire in her expression. "You are, you're him."

"Er, yes," he said.

She seized his hand and shook it with great enthusiasm. "I'm

Millie Faraday. I was born in Otterburn, but I moved to Winter-ville last fall.”

“Nice to meet you.”

Somehow Tegan slipped past while he was greeting the rest of the party. This reunion wasn’t going at all as he’d hoped. Millie stuck close, asking about the island, and soon he lost sight of Tegan altogether. But based on the way she was headed . . . *She must be visiting Deuce and Fade*. Millie spun in a slow circle, taking in the bright houses and the cheerful chatter in the distant marketplace.

“It’s remarkable,” she breathed. “I mean, Tegan told me this was the prettiest place she’d ever seen, but I couldn’t picture it. I don’t know what to do first.”

With every fiber of his being, he wanted to chase Tegan, but that would be beyond rude to a first-time guest. “If you’ll give me a moment, I can show you around.”

He turned and bowed to Szarok, for he’d noticed that the Uroch didn’t make casual contact even among themselves, let alone with humans. “It’s good to see you again.”

That was courtesy, not strictly truth, but he’d been raised too well to greet anyone with a blunt inquiry into their business. The Uroch leader returned the bow, matching his manners.

“Is your father at home? I bear a message for him.”

Morrow nodded. “Do you remember the way?”

“Don’t trouble yourself. I can find it.”

That was easy to believe, since James and his father lived in the largest house on the island, three bedrooms instead of a cottage with a loft. In a moment more the Uroch headed away from the dock, threading behind the storage sheds on the shore. His chosen path would keep him away from the townsfolk, probably for the best. There was nothing to gain in rousing anxiety. Which left him with an excited girl, currently bouncing on the balls of her feet.

But she wasn’t oblivious to the nuances of his mood, apparently.

“Are you positive you want to guide me around? It’s all right if you have other things to do.”

“I’m sure,” he said with a persuasive smile. “Who knows the best stories better than me?”

And so, the first four hours of Tegan’s return Morrow spent with Millie Faraday. They covered every inch of the market, pausing every five feet for her to exclaim or admire. She couldn’t be that much younger than Tegan, but her enthusiasm felt childlike, possibly because she’d seen so little of the world. He bought her some fresh fried fish and vegetables for the midday meal, and she got tipsy on a mug of hard cider.

Finally she stumbled a little, ready to rest. “Do you have any idea where Tegan went?”

“I have a guess,” he said.

Sure enough, he found her ensconced in the stone cottage on a rise at the far end of the village. Voices came from inside, jokes and laughter, and he followed the sound all the way in. Millie seemed less sure of her welcome, but Morrow had supper here at least once a week and sometimes he spent the night in their loft, so he had no doubts about his reception, no matter who else they might be entertaining.

“It took you longer than I thought,” Deuce said.

“I figured you’d be her shadow,” Fade added, tilting his head at Tegan.

With his eyes, he pleaded for them to shut up. His affection wasn’t a secret, but did they have to be so obvious?

Tegan only laughed. “Unless I’ve underestimated our James, he’s been playing host with Millie, demonstrating Rosemere’s charm.”

“That’s true.” Millie bobbed a curtsy to Deuce and Fade in succession.

Though Morrow doubted she realized, the girl shrank back against him, trembling in the presence of such great heroes. *Lord, that must be tiring.* He set a steady hand beneath her elbow and

she threw a look over one shoulder, such melting gratitude that it astounded him. But he supposed their legends had grown larger than life, so maybe it was hard being confronted with the reality. He tried to imagine how the scene looked to Millie and couldn't superimpose her perception over his own.

The stone cottage with its hand-sewn cushions and simple furniture was basically his second home. From the herbs drying on hooks in the kitchen, to the pans and dishes stacked on the shelves, everything about this place was familiar and dear. The rafters had been polished recently, so the house smelled clean. There was a pot of something bubbling in the hearth, adding to that air of warmth.

"Come on," Deuce said. "It's not that cold yet, but we shouldn't leave the door open."

Fade grinned. "You say that like you'll be the one chopping wood."

"She can't cook, either," Tegan added. "Do you smell that? It's awful."

Deuce shook a fist. "That's *your* laundry."

At first Morrow suspected she was joking, but when he peered into the pot, they were definitely simmering strips of pale cloth. Millie let out a nervous laugh and settled on a pile of cushions near the fire. Since there weren't enough chairs for everyone, he guessed she was showing respect with that gesture, and he did the same, not wanting her to feel less than everyone else.

Fade poured mugs of spiced ale and sat down in a chair big enough to hold him and Deuce. It helped that she curled into him the moment he nudged in, and Morrow glanced away from the sweetness of their comfortable intimacy. By contrast, Tegan had a seat to herself across the way, and he only wished she wanted him close. Millie swirled the liquid in her mug, watching the foam boil up.

"Do you want something else?" he whispered.

“No, it’s all right. I’ve had cider and ale before.” But she didn’t seem enthusiastic.

Not my concern.

“How are you, really?” Deuce was asking.

“It’s hard to imagine that Dr. Wilson’s gone,” Fade added.

Oh. That’s why she came.

It shouldn’t hurt—why did it?—but of course, it made sense. If her mentor were alive and well, Tegan would still be in Winter-ville. He didn’t realize he was leaving until he unfolded to his feet. “I should make sure Szarok found our house. Please, excuse me.”

He hurried off without waiting to see if anyone would call him back. If anything, his steps moved faster because she wouldn’t . . . and it would be worse if someone else did. Running, it took him only fifteen minutes to race through the village and up the winding path that led to the spacious house he’d grown up in. Funny, a girl who didn’t love him had driven him away from Rosemere, and on his travels, he’d met Tegan. Now when he saw Clara, happily married to the town smith, his heart no longer clenched.

Morrow let himself in quietly, breathing in the familiar scents of home: oil and beeswax, dried lavender, and a sachet of sweet herbs, given as a gift by one of the widows who hadn’t given up on tempting his father to remarry. With quiet steps, he headed for the governor’s office, but loud voices halted him in his tracks. *I thought Szarok would’ve already been and gone.*

“You’ve done nothing but hint at a second war for the past hour,” his father shouted. “How am I supposed to react? I have no authority to—”

“But you permitted my people to camp at the other end of the isle. Why is a permanent settlement too much to ask?”

A long, fraught pause followed. Finally his father sighed. “It’s too soon. Give us time to acclimate, and then we’ll talk again.”

“My people already question your rights to decide what ground we hold, where we rest, and where we’re allowed to live.

I came to you because I judged you a man of reason once. I'm trying to prevent further bloodshed." From the Uroch's impassioned tone, Morrow guessed all of this must be true.

But it's alarming.

"I understand all of that—I do. But only last year we were slaughtering one another. You think people are ready for Uroch neighbors? The villagers will rise up if I grant permission for you to found a colony here."

Ferocity gave power to Szarok's reply. "Because the Evergreen Isle is pure? Because you want to keep it that way? You'll leave us the places you don't want, force us to live in your ruins, and hope we don't get sick from mechanisms we don't even understand."

Though eavesdropping was beyond rude, Morrow couldn't tear himself away.

"It's not about purity; it's about keeping the peace."

"Then this is your final word?"

His father sighed. "I'm not saying no. I'm just saying . . . not yet."

"How long must we wait? Do you understand that our lives burn at a different pace? While you wait for the perfect moment, you may be explaining to my offspring why you denied such a reasonable request. Or perhaps there will be no talk at all by then."

"Are you threatening me?"

"We are a warlike people inexperienced in the pursuit of peace. If you refuse our good faith offers, I can't guarantee the truce will hold. I can smell your fear, even now. You are uneasy at having me in your home. The rest would feel the same over allowing us to settle the other end of the island, yes?"

Another pause, then the governor confirmed, "Yes. Can you give me some time to think? I understand your position, and you're not wrong. I don't like myself for being so afraid."

"Acknowledging fear is the first step to overcoming it," Szarok said.

“Perhaps. I haven’t even thought about integrated towns, but that would be the next step, wouldn’t it?”

“It’s one that frightens us also, but we don’t want to be left behind, and there is much we can learn from one another if we’re brave enough.”

“Well spoken.”

Both parties seemed calmer now, so Morrow relaxed a little. He leaned against the wall, wrestling with the idea that he should go before he got caught. Yet there might be a little more to learn here, and curiosity flickered like a candle that couldn’t be blown out.

“To answer, yes, I can give you a while to consider. I’m not eager to return to the elders with a firm rejection. The situation was . . . volatile when I left.”

“They’re not content with Appleton?” the governor asked.

“It is a ruin. We don’t have the resources to rebuild, and we squat in filthy houses that are falling down around us.”

Morrow imagined the conditions must be awful. The Horde might not care about corpses or hygiene, but the young ones, the Uroch, were doubtless overwhelmed by the squalor they had inherited. Cleaning and rebuilding an old-world city? No. It was too big an undertaking, so no wonder they wanted better land upon which to start fresh. But his father was right; the prospect of a Uroch town on the Evergreen Isle would terrify the townsfolk.

“I hadn’t even thought of that,” his father said heavily.

“What is not given must be taken.” Szarok sounded firm. “I don’t mean this as a threat, only a truth. I much prefer for you to choose generosity. But understand, this request is only a courtesy. You cannot claim all this land.”

True, the Evergreen Isle had a history of welcoming anyone who wanted to stay. Nobody quibbled over ownership; they just made room. *But the immigrants were all human.* It troubled Morrow that he made the mental distinction. He hadn’t realized he

nurtured such prejudice until this moment, but they were only a year or so past realizing that the Uroch weren't mindless monsters.

"You don't have to settle here," the governor snapped.

"So you prefer if we struggled elsewhere, where trade is difficult and we have no one to ask for help."

"I can see we've reached an impasse for today."

Movement from the office alerted Morrow to the imminent exodus, and he leapt away from the wall, backtracking until he could dart around a corner. Shamefaced, he felt about five years old as they passed his hiding spot. His father watched until Szarok left the house. Afterward his shoulders slumped and he retraced his steps.

Without thinking, he went after the Uroch leader, who was unaccountably waiting just outside the front door. He raised a brow. "You were expecting me?"

"Yes. I smelled you as soon as you stepped inside."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"It seemed impolite. You must have had your reasons for skulking about."

He clenched his jaw, ignoring the heat that washed his cheeks. "I'll speak to my father for you. You made good, sound arguments."

Szarok sighed. Despite the cowl, the slope of his shoulders hinted at great weariness. "Even if he agrees, this will be no easy task."

"Maybe I can help with that, too. The villagers like me, so they might—"

"A pale thing such as 'like' will melt away when you request a terrifying favor. A kind offer . . . but stick with your stories." With that, Szarok strode away.

Morrow might well feel the sting of that rejection for days.

Questions and Answers

Afternoon ripened into night before Tegan finished catching up with Deuce and Fade. For as long as she'd known the girl, Millie had never been quiet so long. Instead of questions, she had only admiring stares. But over dinner and two cups of ale, she loosened up enough to quiz the two about their time down below.

That suited Tegan fine. She'd already asked if they knew anyone named Catalina, and since they were newcomers, it didn't surprise her to learn that they didn't. *I ought to ask James*, she thought, but he'd taken off so fast that she didn't have a chance. In the morning would be soon enough, however. Tonight all she really wanted was to feel clean. She hated to ask, since Fade looked so comfortable, but she couldn't stand going to bed this way.

"If you'll point me in the right direction, I want to draw a bath."

With obvious reluctance, he pulled his hand from Deuce's shoulder. "There's a cistern out back. I'll haul the water for you."

That spurred Deuce into action, and she fetched a cauldron large enough to stand in. "This is what we usually use, and here's the dipper for rinsing."

"Would it be too much trouble for me to wash up as well?" Millie asked.

Tegan smiled. “We might as well do it together. I suspect they’ll be happier when we scrub the stink off.”

Laughing, Deuce said, “It’s been a while since I lived so rough, but the smell has *not* gotten better.”

After he brought in several buckets, Fade took off. Tegan appreciated his discretion, since the house didn’t offer much privacy. It might be fine for Deuce to strip off in front of her man, but as for Millie and herself, this was best. Deuce heated the water a little at a time, enough to wash and rinse. Tegan grimaced at how cloudy and scummed the water was by the time they’d finished. Sighing with pleasure, Millie put on clean clothes. While Tegan did the same, Deuce dumped the dirty water onto her kitchen garden.

“Careful you don’t kill your vegetables,” Tegan teased.

“Eh, they’re already growing in dirt.”

This made Millie laugh, but then she clapped both hands over her mouth as if she weren’t sure she was allowed to find the Huntress so entertaining. Tegan encouraged her with a smile. Though these were her comrades, they had to seem larger than life to Millie. She tried to imagine what it would’ve been like to live quietly in Otterburn and then suddenly have the greatest heroes in the free territories show up and pronounce that she’d played a role in saving the human race.

It’s no wonder she’s nervous.

As a distraction and out of real curiosity, she asked, “What was that we used to wash with? It wasn’t the same as what they use in Winterville.”

Soapmaking was a huge undertaking, and half the town turned out to cooperate. They used a mixture of ashes and animal fat with enormous vats for stirring and cooling, and the end result was tan and soft, given out in cups to everyone who participated. But Deuce had shaved what looked like a chip of wood directly into the washing water and then agitated until

it turned white with suds. Tegan had never seen anything like it.

“It’s some root that grows around here. You can dig it up in the fall,” Deuce answered.

“And it requires no processing?” After Tegan asked, she read the impatience in her friend’s expression. *Yes, I did forget who I was asking. Sorry.* If it wasn’t a weapon, Deuce had relatively little interest in learning more about it. Or at least, that used to be the case.

But she answered anyway, indulging Tegan’s spectrum of curiosity. “No. It’s not easy to find, though, and it grows deep. There’s a man in town who makes his living on searching for it.”

“They had so *many* things at the market,” Millie put in. “Life must be easier here. In Otterburn, we didn’t make anything that wasn’t useful, and it was like that in Winterville, too.”

She must be talking about the jewelry and scrimshaw. Tegan recalled her own first impression of Rosemere, how she’d marveled at the beautiful bone carving of a fanciful creature that James had told her truly existed. *Dolphin.* From that day on, she’d longed to see one, just once, leaping in the sea.

“It’s like a dream,” Deuce admitted, cleaning up after their bath. “You can’t imagine how it was down below. The sun scared me half to death when I first came topside with Fade.”

“You truly grew up under the ruins of Gotham?” Millie ventured to ask.

“So they tell me. Our elders told us the above world was all poison and death. We thought being exiled was the same as an execution.”

Tegan considered this, comparing it to her own childhood. Her mother had lived with a small pocket of survivors in what they’d called a university. Teaching her to read while they hid from the gangs and the occasional monster had been the best gift her mom had been able to offer, despite her physical weakness.

Tegan couldn't remember ever seeing her mother fight; she was all bones and eyes and fear. Once, she'd asked about her father and received only sobbing in response and such a look of heart-rending grief that she never dared again. She remembered uncles, one so old that he looked like a statue, and aunties as well, but dying came so easy.

By thirteen, she was alone.

And at fourteen, the Wolves found her.

She clenched her teeth against a wave of rage. When Tegan lifted her gaze, she found Deuce watching her with a worried expression, but she couldn't bring herself to force a smile. Some things were beyond forgiveness, and some evils left only poison at the bottom of the well. She glanced at Millie, relaxed now before the fire.

"I hear you came with Szarok," Fade said some while later. He smelled of cedar smoke and liquor, but he wasn't drunk.

"He's here?" Deuce asked, perking up.

She clearly liked the Uroch leader, but Tegan suspected she didn't know him well enough to hold that opinion. He'd done his best to make a good impression on the great and terrible huntress who had slaughtered so many of his kind. *Apparently he cares less about influencing the company healer.*

"He said he had business with James's father . . . and before you ask, no. I don't know what kind."

A wry grin quirked Deuce's mouth. Even when she smiled, she wasn't attractive. Living underground had left her sickly pale with skin that never took color, only peeled and burned and peeled again. Likewise, her eyes were a milky gray, and her teeth uneven. But she was fierce, loyal, and lethal in a fight. Tegan would do her best never to cross her.

"It's not my business," the Huntress muttered.

"I'm your business," Fade said, settling beside her.

Tegan mumbled something as she headed for the loft. It was impossible to talk to them when they were like this. Since Millie

was a smart girl, she followed Tegan up, where two pallets were already spread. The space smelled smoky and sweet, cozy because of the hot air wafting upward from the fire. Sighing, Tegan snuggled into her blankets.

“They’re not what I expected,” Millie whispered.

“Nobody ever is.”

That seemed to settle the conversation. Fade and Deuce quieted downstairs and eventually retreated to their room. Lying in the dark, Tegan stared up at the rafters, wondering why she felt out of sorts. Aggravated at herself, she closed her eyes. They snapped open when she realized she was worried about Szarok, where he might be sleeping, if he’d eaten, if he was cold, and whether his errand had gone well. James *should* have offered hospitality, and he had ample space to play host. Yet such thoughts weren’t like her.

Odd. But I suppose you can get used to anything.

In the morning, she woke, still wondering, so she slipped out of the loft before anyone else awakened. The sky was still pink and gold, light creeping over the water and painting the treetops. They truly had a lovely view from here, and she paused long enough to savor it before putting on her boots and hastening toward town. Market vendors were barely stirring, though the boatmen had already taken to the water, and fishermen were casting nets from rowing boats closer to the shore. Awed, she watched one woman’s impeccable balance despite the rocking of the water, momentarily distracted from her errand.

“I consider myself to possess reasonable courage, but I’d rather be burned alive than try that,” a deep voice rumbled at her shoulder.

Tegan turned and found Szarok, hooded as ever. His brown-clad figure created a little chaos near the pier where they stood, townsfolk giving second and third looks and a wide berth. That unnecessary caution sparked an urge to scold, but Tegan restrained it because she reckoned he wouldn’t welcome her interference.

Still, she understood all too well how it felt to be alone among your enemies.

“You hate the water that much?”

“I believe you already know the answer, healer. Did I not make my discomfort plain during yesterday’s crossing?”

She *had* noticed that he crouched in the center of the boat, his claws dug into the wood as if he could prevent the craft from flipping through sheer determination. “I’m teasing. Don’t the Uroch do that?”

“We do,” he said with gentle stress. “But that presumes a certain degree of kinship.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize.” Genuine regret pierced her.

“Presumption sometimes reads like kindness, if it’s well meant.”

“If you say so. Did James take care of you last night?”

It was impossible to see more than a hint of his features, given the angle of the rising sun and the shadow of his cowl. “Was he supposed to?”

“Then I guess not. Where did you sleep?”

He paused, probably weighing whether she needed that information. In the end, he gave it, though Tegan didn’t know why. “I made camp outside the village. It seemed . . . safer.”

“Than what? Staying with James or asking for a room at the tavern?”

“Either. Take your pick.”

“Deuce and Fade will put you up. There’s a space in their loft with Millie and me.” Tegan made the offer on impulse, but she had no doubt her friends would back it up.

Szarok stared at her in silence.

If not for the Uroch joining their side and negotiating with the Gulgur, they would’ve made their final stand at the river. *None of us would even be here, so I can’t believe they’re treating him this way.* With a ferocious scowl, she tugged at his sleeve.

“Come, they’ll be fixing breakfast. Don’t dawdle.”

Without waiting to see if he'd follow, she led the way through town, back to the cottage. Though sometimes she felt wistful about not having such a place of her own, she also understood that meant being unable to pick up and go on a whim. Roots in the ground equaled personal business to tend, and she wanted no part of that. There were dolphins in the world, after all, and they were only the first of many wonders.

When she stepped through the front door, Szarok in tow, Deuce waved from stirring something in a pot. It smelled like burning. Laughing, Fade took the spoon from her and whispered something that made her hit him. Millie was sitting at the table, wearing a shy smile. Her visible relief at recognizing Tegan made her feel bad for sneaking out.

"I brought someone," she murmured somewhat unnecessarily.

"You shouldn't have needed bringing," Deuce said to Szarok. "Take off that cloak. It's plenty warm in here, and we all know what you look like."

Fade echoed the greeting as he served somewhat charred porridge. There was also bread, cheese, and fruit, along with baked fish left from the night before. Fade brought a chair from the back room, so everyone had a place at the table. Tegan served herself a little of everything, letting the conversation wash over her; she noticed the Uroch didn't eat much. Deuce and Fade carried most of it as they offered Szarok news related to the Evergreen Isle.

And eventually Deuce asked so Tegan didn't have to. "I hear you had business with the elder Morrow. Anything serious?"

"It's not your worry," Fade muttered.

Tegan had the sense he said that a lot. She stifled a smile.

"I'd rather not discuss it until I have an answer from the governor." It was a polite refusal, but Szarok definitely had no desire to involve Deuce in his affairs.

That quelled the talk a little, so Tegan did her part to liven

things up again. “I need to speak with him myself. He might know something about Catalina.”

“Can I go with you?” Millie asked softly.

“Certainly. Unless I don’t know him as well as I think, James should appear shortly and he’ll escort us.”

Before the breakfast dishes were put away, Morrow proved Tegan right. Deuce laughed as she answered his knock and called, “Good thing I didn’t bet against you.”

“I’m so predictable?” The storyteller hung his head in mock despair.

Quietly, Szarok followed Fade out to help with some household chore. Tegan had already gathered her bag, as she didn’t like to move without it, just in case someone needed treatment. Her time with Doc Tuttle had persuaded her that preparation was half the key to saving lives. As she set out, she noticed that Millie practically glowed over seeing James again. She tried to hang back and let the girl monopolize his attention, but James caught on and slowed his pace, putting himself between them.

You are too kind, truly.

Passing the docks for the second time, Tegan didn’t expect anything of note, but a larger ship than she’d ever seen had its sails unfurled, streaming toward Rosemere. She stopped and got jostled from behind. James drew her smoothly out of the path of some merchants lugging a crate of wares, and she pushed his hand away halfheartedly, her gaze locked.

He laughed quietly. “The long-haulers don’t come often, but when they do, you can expect some excitement.”

“Who are they? Where are they from? What *kind* of excitement?” The questions tumbled out of Millie and, for once, Tegan shared her enthusiasm.

“By their colors, this ship’s out of Antecost, an isle north of here. They’ve got goods to trade, for sure. About twice a year they stop to see if anyone wants to sign on for a long voyage.”

“To where?” Tegan demanded.

James furrowed his brow, seeming troubled. “You’d have to talk to their captain to learn more. They’ll be docked for a few days, laying in supplies.”

“Ah, there’s no rush, then. I do have a question for your father. We should take care of that first.”

“Maybe I can help?” he offered.

“Do you know of anyone or anything called Catalina?”

“Hm. That’s familiar. Why . . . oh. I’m positive that was the name of an island in an old book. But it’s across the world. I don’t know of anyone who’s ever traveled so far. At least, if they went, they never came back.”

Dr. Wilson wouldn’t have sent me on an impossible quest.

With a final look at the impressive ship still some distance away, she turned. Millie seemed just as riveted, so Tegan tapped the girl’s arm. She practically stumbled over her feet as they moved away from the docks and toward the market. The back-and-forth of haggling villagers contrasted sharply with the solemn atmosphere in Winterville.

It’s like a different world, here.

“Is that all you can remember?” Tegan asked, disappointed.

James took her arm to guide her around a wagon stalled in the road and then paused to ask if the man fiddling with the wheel needed any help. “Do you have your tools, Cedric? I can run to your workshop—”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll be done in a jiff.”

Millie smiled as they went by, seeming charmed by everything Rosemere had to offer. In fact, the other girl opted out of visiting the governor in favor of chatting with people in the market. James watched her, evidently concerned about leaving her behind, and Tegan nudged him when he didn’t appear to realize he’d left her question dangling.

“James,” she prompted.

“Yes, right. Well, there *was* a woman,” he said, teasing her with a bright spark of hope that foundered when he frowned. “Wait, no. She might’ve been Catarina. I’d need to confirm with my father. I was pretty young when she died.”

“Then let’s ask him.”