

PROLOGUE

MURGATH

The mountain city of Zikada had fallen. Murgath took no pleasure in watching it burn, nor in listening to the screams of the dying. His lip twitched as he breathed in smoke soured with scorched flesh. That was the extent of his sympathy. The annihilation of Doraigh weighed little upon his conscience. Gargon needed cleansed of this poison.

Only the flickering memories of Shoma writhing in those flames smothered the satisfaction of victory. Murgath squeezed his eyes shut. Perhaps it was destiny that this war should end the same way it began.

Flames flowed up the walls of the mountain city in a terrible flood of thrashing heat. The stone foundation itself was ablaze as the fire consumed wood and bodies alike, leaving only blackened granite in its wake.

Gargoyles within the city desperately took to the sky, but his army was ready—waiting. There would be no escape. As quickly as the Doraighs leapt from the growing flames, arrows greeted them, sending limp bodies fluttering back into the lake of fire amidst the razor hailstorm. There would be no mercy.

Every gargoyle from the seven remaining clans would remember this day.

The end of the Immortal Wars.

Heat instantly evaporated the sweat from Murgath's leathery wings as he weaved among the whipping flames that extended to the nearby forest. Filth and blood almost completely covered his gray skin, with the scorching temperatures searing it to his body.

Only a small contingent of Doraigns escaped, fleeing eastward toward the Yasiid, abandoning their people instead of defending them. Cowards. Scouts reported at least thirty warriors among the retreating convoy. A small fighting force Murgath gladly pursued alone.

War. Death. Pain. It filled the cavity where Murgath imagined his soul should've been. An aching desire to quench his raging bloodlust was all that remained now.

Of course, Zikada was only a fraction of the devastation facing the Doraign clan. All across the territory, their cities, towns and villages burned. Pillars of smoke throughout the horizon marked the conclusion of the Sky Viper's arduous campaign across the continents. Soon he could finally rest.

Murgath flew away from the city and into the surrounding forest. Flames embraced him in a chorus of snapping branches and groaning sap. Memories of Shoma gnawed at him, as if her soul was trapped in this horrific nightmare of inescapable heat and suffering. Murgath exhaled, trying desperately to bury his emotions and focus on catching the fleeing Doraign warriors. A distraction, but one he was grateful for.

Torture. Assassinations. Massacres. Dozenturies of senseless bloodshed and vitriol. The morrow would see a new Gargon—a world of peace. Grand ambitions of global change were not accomplished with a shield, but with a sword. Peace was taken and protected, not passively hoped for. Thus he had shown the world.

Glinting metal flashed in the sun ahead of him. Elegant metal plates covered the torsos of the Doraign warriors, betraying their position in the sky. Fashionable armor wouldn't save these Doraign cowards—not from his wrath. Hardened leather protected Murgath's torso, as it was lighter and more flexible than cumber-

some metal. Good instincts and quick senses were better than any amount of steel plating. Deep red leather made it difficult to distinguish between his armor and the blood smeared across his body. Only the flowing design of thin blue lines laced throughout the leather separated it from the gore.

“Sky Viper!” One of the men shouted as they saw Murgath emerge from the burning trees below. The gargoyles twisted smoothly in the air, establishing a standard pyramid formation, with a single gargoyle making a point at the back. A tactic used to funnel an attacker so they could be swallowed and overwhelmed. They bobbed in the air as their wings flapped steadily. Beautiful weaponry took aim, leveled at Murgath, but those sharpened blades would have an easier time wounding the wind itself. His lips twisted into a dark smile.

Black swords hissed and sang as he pulled them from their sheaths. The blades wrapped around his fists, with the stone handle fused with the metal to make the perfect punch weapon.

Murgath lurched to the side as a spear jabbed at his chest. He grabbed the wooden shaft of the weapon with his talons and yanked, pulling the terrified warrior within reach. Hissing black metal opened the man’s throat in a fountain of warm blood. Shock, fear and pain froze on his young face as he clawed at his neck before the limp carcass spiraled into the trees below.

The aerial pyramid formation swirled forward in unison, hoping to swallow Murgath in a sky prison of thrusting spikes and swinging blades. He spun through the air at the nearest gargoyles, batting away their eager spears. His swords clashed through metal, wood and flesh. Was there anything more wonderful than the howl of agony from an enemy?

Still, their formation held—adjusting and maintaining a disciplined resolve. Other squadrons would shatter in fear when facing the Sky Viper. Perhaps they knew there would be no forbearance. At least there was honor in the acceptance of reality. One final act of courage before Murgath sent these warriors to the Tangle where they belonged.

A wide arcing swing from a warhammer grazed Murgath's shoulder and knocked him into a nest of waiting spears. Collapsing his wings was all he could do before curling away from the lethal jabs. Cold metal tore through his calf, anchoring his position for a moment before he kicked his leg free and punched upward with his blades. Warm gore showered over him before two Doraighs fell away.

Where was that bastard with the warhammer? Not many Doraighs could wield such a heavy weapon, so the massive creature stood out like a tarzak among pyrds. Each flap of the man's wings was like being buffeted by a storm. Murgath sheathed his punch swords and drew out six throwing knives strapped to his chest.

Time to die.

Murgath hurled the knives faster than his enemy could blink. Tiny blades ripped through the massive blanket of wings—hardly an accomplishment considering the broad target.

An awful ripping noise mixed with the screams of the large Doraigh. Shredded membrane was no match for gravity as the man's wings puffed with air. Soon the small punctures tore into wide strips all the way to the wingarm. Muffled groans and curses faded as the mess of bloody membrane and armor plummeted. Two Doraighs broke formation, plunging after their fallen comrade and catching him before he could smash into the canopy.

Murgath plunged back into the formation of spears and swords, now more of a 'V' than a true pyramid. Their silhouettes against the indigo sky highlighted their thinning ranks. Fear radiated from these warriors, but they held firm, obeying their commander with exactness. Determination burned in every eye beneath the shine of those silver helmets.

Murgath's swords opened rivers of crimson, sending three more warriors into the next life. In the frantic slashing and jabbing, someone managed to slice his cheek, while another

spearhead his shoulder. Jolts of pain gripped his spine, making him shiver and grit his teeth.

The dwindling formation cracked, with Doraings lunging forward as they saw openings for attacks. Opting for a more proactive approach, instead of waiting for Murgath's fatal Fangs to tear them asunder. Let them come. Let them die.

Murgath tucked his wings to avoid a thrust, pulling the spear into the man behind him. Shrieks of pain gurgled, sputtered, and died, along with its host. Murgath plunged a sword beneath the chin of the attacker until the point exploded from the top of his head. The cacophony of chaos rang in Murgath's ears, lulling him to push through the aches and wounds. A sword scraped off his leather plate, slicing deep enough to open his skin. Burning liquid tickled his stomach and made his skin itch.

In a blur of motion, Viper's Fangs carved through flesh and metal as if the enemy force was frozen in the air. Falling corpses rained from the dance of battle, a humble tribute from a servant of death.

Murgath hacked through the air, eager to cleave more flesh, but met no resistance. Had he already dispatched them all? Blinking away the bloodlust took a few moments, but the pile of bodies mangled on the earth below confirmed it. No retreating silhouettes of gaudy silver armor tainted the sky.

Wiping the spattered guts of enemies from his face filled Murgath with relief. Almost over. Dodekas of war... and it was finally almost over for good. He tucked his wings for a rapid descent, the rushing air consuming all other sounds.

Long gray wings snapped open and puffed with air before he hit the tree line. Floating down gracefully, Murgath landed atop the warm corpses and severed limbs he'd offered to the earth. His talons squelched into the lifeless legs of a decapitated body, allowing him to maintain his balance despite the uneven surface of carnage.

"You bastard!" shouted a gruff voice. The large gargoyle with the warhammer sat against the trunk of a great oak. Bones slick

with blood jutted from his right leg. Didn't land so gracefully after all, it seemed. "I hope you rot a thousand lifetimes in the Tangle."

"I will live to see peace," Murgath squeezed the cool stone hilts of the Viper's Fangs. "You will not."

The blade swept through the man's neck with ease, barely making a sound. Lifeless eyes stared back before his head fell and rolled away into a patch of bright green ferns, causing some squeaking glunks to scurry for new cover. What remained of the man slumped to the side, blood squirting from a meaty stump.

"We surrender," said a young woman with pale blue skin, her tail flicking nervously behind her. Red liquid spilled from a crack near the bottom of the silver breastplate, following the raised engravings on her armor, enhancing the beauty and craftsmanship. Short red hair plastered her face, but did little to hide the terror in behind those eyes. "Please."

A discarded spear lay near a bush of flowering niltberries, out of reach from the surrendering Doraigh. In another life, Murgath would pity this woman—extend a hand of compassion even.

Another life.

Before Shoma.

Before Grath.

Hatred rushed to expel any thoughts of mercy or kindness.

Another man stood with his back turned, staring at the black smoke rising from the fallen city. Silver armor rested at his feet like an abandoned carcass of defeat. The man's embroidered tunic was soaked in sweat and soot, masking any elegance in the design. When he turned, Murgath nearly dropped his swords.

Eyes like rubies. Long graying beard tied together at the chin. Even with so many years separating their last encounter, Murgath could never forget the man's face. How could he? It haunted his nightmares and tortured his dreams on many a night. For a brief moment, Murgath questioned if he was in fact in one of those nightmares.

"You are Jozariak the Shadowsight," Murgath stated. His knuckles popped as he squeezed the Fangs.

Jozariak turned back to his burning city. "Try as I may, your face refuses to leave the corners of my mind." His voice sounded like a creaking oak-tired, but strong. "And now, the Fallen Gods see fit to reunite us in the flesh after all this time," he sighed, meeting Murgath's intense gaze. "I am truly sorry."

"No," Murgath said through clenched teeth. Years of suffering and bloodshed led him to this moment. Not the Fallen Gods. Not fate. Not luck. To hear this man attempt to rob him of this victory churned the stomach. Jozariak held no sorrow when he helped Niskar capture Murgath's family. Wasn't concerned with their agonizing screams as they burned alive. Only when death stood before Jozariak did he now pretend to feel remorse. "But you will be."

"Atrocities are the consequence of war it would seem. One death requiring the heads of twelve more, demanding the lives of a hundred and a score, then a thousand. This was always how it was going to end," Jozariak said, falling to his knees, his hollow eyes reflecting the distant flames. "I make no excuse for my part in it. Claim your vengeance, Viper."

The Doraigh woman sobbed in quiet bursts, clasping her hands over her mouth. Apparently she was not quite so eager to climb the Endless Sky.

Murgath almost complied—almost gave in to Jozariak's request for a warrior's death. What a fitting way to end the Immortal Wars, to watch the life drain from the eyes of one of his oldest enemies. He took a deep breath. That would be too quick. Too painless. Let this man suffer.

"Live in the knowledge that you are the last of your clan," said Murgath. Jozariak furrowed his brow, mouth agape. "You will walk Gargon alone, as the last Doraigh. I pray your days are long."

With that, Murgath turned and punched a Fang through the woman's breastplate. Gurgled groans bubbled from her lips before she joined her headless companion. Jozariak winced but said nothing for his fallen comrade.

"If this is the price of my sins," Jozariak said with tears

streaming down his cheeks. "Then I shudder to think what the Fallen Gods plan for you."

"My debt is paid. Peace is all I'm owed."

"I hope you're right," he sighed, drained of life and meaning.

Murgath dropped his sword and dug a claw into the man's cheek, carving his mark—a horizontal line for the sky with a wavy line intersecting it to represent a viper. Crimson streams complemented his rosy flesh in the glistening firelight.

"Let the Tangle swallow you and your kind." Murgath kicked Jozariak in the chest, sending him tumbling into a cluster of ferns.

Crackling embers hissed and popped all around Murgath, like a disturbed snake. Enough talking with this Doraigh. Let Jozariak babble about the Fallen Gods. Let him wander without a clan. Murgath collected his swords, wiped the blood off using the woman's trousers, and sheathed them. Fine work for the day. His fingers traced the stone handle, aching for the familiar sense of strength to wash over him while in his grip. The cut across his palm was already starting to close.

"The fall of Doraigh will usher the rise of Stone," Jozariak whispered, almost to himself.

"Mm." More fanatical nonsense. Murgath launched into the air, careful to avoid the few remaining burning branches.

Hovering above the forest, Murgath admired the black column of smoke stretching high into the sky. More lines of smoke in the distance marked the successful eradication of the Doraigh clan. Let it be a symbol to the others. Let all remember this day.

An eerie calm settled over the valley. No screams or pleading. No orders being barked. No clanging of metal on metal. Just... the soft cracking of burnt wood.

Would Murgath's fallen comrades ride that pillar of smoke into the Endless Sky? Would it blind his enemies and condemn them to the Tangle? Didn't matter much. Didn't care to find out for himself either. On each of the three continents, Murgath hoped to meet a foe in battle to release him from these mortal bonds. War with the seven clans proved unsuccessful. How long before he

could truly rest? His flapping wings suddenly felt very heavy. Let them close. Let him fall.

Not yet. There was still work to be done.

Setting his jaw, Murgath turned toward the mystery of the black pyramid. Some called it the Cursed Mountain, but the Doraigns called it the Yasiid. To him, it was just another monument to the Lost Ancients. Miles of dark sand encompassed the solitary peak, with no signs of life interrupting the charcoal canvas.

Even after all these years, memories of the Cursed Mountain burned at the edges of his mind. Children kidnapped, tortured, killed. All in the name of some fringe religion professing an age of magic and rejecting the sacred nature of the Endless Sky. Radicals. Extremists. Murderers. It was necessary to put an end to such a people. Good deeds too often required the darkest souls. And none were blacker than Murgath.

By the time he reached the lone entrance at its zenith, the Kroll squadrons had taken the Yasiid. Murgath's talons scraped against obsidian, searching for natural grooves or pocks to grip. The smooth surface offered no such imperfections. Murgath tucked his aching wings away—Fallen Gods knew they needed the rest.

Darza stood at the mouth of the entrance, hands behind her back. Her body was covered in a web of small cuts and bruises, which blended well with her naturally freckled skin. Short red hair hung in complete disarray, but looks had never concerned her much. He liked that about her. When a job needed doing, Darza didn't ask many questions. Just did what needed done. That's why he trusted her to lead the attack on this unholy monument.

"You're wounded," she said, her brow knitting at the blood leaking from his chest and leg. She turned to leave. "I'll call for the healers."

"Is it done?" Murgath ran a hand over his smooth scalp. No sounds of resistance echoed from the mountain. No pleas for mercy. Just the occasional shuffling of steps and scraping of talons.

A lump of pink flesh sat in a puddle of blood inches away from his foot. A tongue?

"It's done, but not by our hand." Darza clapped a fist to her chest. She swallowed, waiting for him to respond. Let the silence build. It was better than senseless chatter. Eventually, she sighed before continuing her report. "Bit tough to explain. Strange architecture, like nothing from the other clans I've seen. We did a thorough sweep at each level, so we won't be having any surprises."

"Casualties?"

"None."

"None?"

"None." Darza licked her lips, smearing dried blood and ash. "The place was mostly a bunch of priests of some sort or another. Ran deep into the mountain when they saw us coming, cutting out their own tongues before we could capture any. Best we can tell, they all killed themselves."

Good riddance. Let them rot. Let them burn in the Tangle. "Destroy everything. I want nothing left of this place."

"They did that for us already," she said with a shrug. "Probably best if you see for yourself."

It had been a long day. Dull throbbing consumed his calf and chest, the pain eager to scrape past his resolve. Inhaling sharply through his nostrils helped clear his head. Pressing his claws into his bald, gray scalp focused his senses. He'd rather be done with today—rest his weary soul and body. Soon, very soon, but not while there was still loose ends to tend. He nodded and motioned for Darza to lead the way.

The spiraling staircase was exactly as Murgath remembered it—impossibly smooth, too narrow to open his wings, and strange rings of blue light illuminating the dark descent. The rings of light wrapped from the stairs, over their heads, and connected at the other side of the steps. A mesh of translucent white and purple veins twisted within the rings, making it seem like a living thing. He pressed his hand against the marble, searching for any cracks

or imperfections without success. Strange to think such magnificent craftsmanship housed the darkest secrets and atrocities.

Hundreds of tunnels branched from the staircase as they descended, each leading to an untold number of rooms and chambers. They continued downward, undeterred and uninterested. Somewhere, in the corner of his memories, Murgath thought he heard the quiet sobs of children. He squeezed his eyes shut. Just a memory. Nothing more.

His aching knees and burning thighs were grateful when they reached the bottom of the stairs. For such remarkable architecture, why not build a tunnel at the base of the Cursed Mountain? Instead, gargoyles had to fly all the way up, just to climb all the way down. Ridiculous.

Brilliant white light spilled out of a marble doorway ahead, in stark contrast to the rest of the black interior and blue glowing rings of the Yasiid. Strange symbols and runes were carved into a tall entryway, which curved like an arch at the top of the vast opening. Passing through the entrance was like passing into a different world.

Intricate carvings of gargoyles covered every inch of the walls in the massive chamber of pure white marble. Even with all his hatred and exhaustion, Murgath's mouth fell open at the absolute magnificence and detail. Two gargoyles nearest him on the wall were frozen in an ivory battle for all time. A spear plunged into a Feren's gut, and a nearly imperceptible ridge carved the path of leaking fluid. Its face was wrinkled in pain, mouth screaming in suspended silence.

Hundreds of sculptures, each as realistic and detailed as the last, carved a stunning story. A depiction of a great battle, perhaps even the beginning of the Immortal Wars. A sculpture of a Doraigh on the far side clutched a strange scepter—it was the only object that had obsidian mingled with the rest of the marble. It almost looked alive, the white and black clashing against one another like oil and water. Perhaps it was a depiction of the Holy

Scepter of Hamalior. But why was it not in the hands of the Fallen God?

A smooth glass ceiling only added to his awe, reflecting the entire chamber to make it feel twice as big. Goosebumps prickled his arms as he spun around to capture this moment in his mind. Strange to think Doraighs left such a sacred place so pitifully protected.

Other than the astonishing sculptures covering the walls and his Kroll warriors standing about, the white chamber was empty. Save for a tiered, marble pyramid at the very center. Well, almost a pyramid. The peak was missing, leaving a flat, square surface at the top. Reflections from the ceiling revealed a dark hole at the center, just wide enough for a large gargoyle to fall into, but not enough to open their wings.

"They jumped into that hole." Blood smeared the ground, all the way to the abyss. "We dropped a torch to see where it leads but... never seemed to land."

Strange. Even for Doraighs. Murgath rested his hands on the hilts of the Fangs. Whispers tickled the back of his mind. His imagination? A side effect of exhaustion, most likely.

"See if we can lower a rope and—"

The power of stone given back to stone.

A feminine voice resonated in his skull like rushing water. The voice was familiar, saving his life on countless occasions. Except now it sounded urgent, desperate even.

"Sky Viper?"

Murgath ignored Darza and flew to the top of the tiered pyramid. There was enough room for six gargoyles to stand comfortably around the hole without risk of stumbling in. Power of stone? He hesitated as he gazed into the black precipice.

Was that warm air coming from the pit? Stories of the Tangle crept into his mind. A web of endless darkness trapping unworthy gargoyles and barring entrance to the Endless Sky. A place of torment. Tales of gargoyles being ripped apart and pieced back together over and over and over again.

Cold sweat soaked Murgath's tunic. Surely this was a portal to the Tangle, the Dark Realm itself. Even with his heart thumping in his ears, the voice rang through. Clear. Resolute. Heavy.

Stone sleeps with watchful eyes!

The rushing voice pressed into his mind like a bursting dam, with enough pressure to drop Murgath to a knee. The Tangle yearned for his soul—begged to swallow his body into the abyss. Part of him welcomed the end. But not like this.

"Murgath? Are you okay?" Darza landed beside him, placing a hand gingerly on his shoulder. The other warriors in the chamber stared with a mixture of confusion and terror. "Get the healers here now."

Murgath brushed her away. "Mm. I'm fine. The Doraigns are finished, then. Let us rebuild and make this our new home. Send word to any Kroll in the north that wishes to take up residence."

Dizzily limping away was all Murgath could muster. Concerned whispers and shifting glances danced around his swift exit from the chamber. Let them whisper. Let them wonder. Curse this place! Why would he return to these horrors?

A young warrior ran out of the chamber after him, clapping his fist to his leather breastplate. What now?

"Speak."

"A group of children were seen fleeing from the Yasiid before we arrived. Couldn't really tell, but they may've been Doraign."

"Who was dispatched to handle it?"

"Uh... no one, Sky Viper." The man swallowed as Murgath narrowed his eyes at him. "We thought it best to secure the mountain first. They were just kids. No real threat."

"No one thinks much of an acorn until it is a mighty oak. Which direction were they headed?"

"Uh, south, I think. Headed toward Reshia."

Murgath nodded, dismissing the Kroll warrior back into the white chamber. Spiraling stairs taunted his growing fatigue and his aching wounds. Going up would be a tedious thing without

VESNERATCH

wings to aid the ascent, but now wasn't the time for weakness. Peace would be secured. No matter the price.

CHAPTER ONE

FAE

Discovering unusual characteristics about relatively common creatures was wonderfully satisfying. Glunks always lurked in the bushes, but Fae hardly ever paid any attention to them until one of the little rodents ran off with a page of her sketches. Little rascals. Now, once again, Fae's curiosity was getting the better of her.

Studying the elusive creature proved more arduous than she originally anticipated. Already her left leg was numb from sitting at the base of a large oak tree for the better part of the morning. Sweltering heat and a swarm of humming gnats certainly didn't lighten her mood either.

Trembling fern leaves accompanied soft rustling. Fae held her breath and winced at the rough bark scratching at her folded wings. For the love of the Fallen Gods, please come out already.

As if on command, a glunk popped its fuzzy head out from the bushes and wriggled a pointed nose at Fae. The dark orange fur bristled as it slowly exited its burrow nestled beneath the cluster of green ferns. A long bushy tail stood perfectly erect while the animal slowly inched toward the neat pile of niltberries and acorns.

Barbed spikes hid within the fluffy fur at the tip of the tail and

around its white mane. An effective defense mechanism indeed. Don't reach into a glunk hole unless you don't need your hand for a cycle. Those sharp but fragile spikes would break under the skin and cause an atrocious rash at the very least. No thanks. Fae enjoyed her hand right where it was, scribbling notes onto the stiff parchment.

"About time," she mumbled under her breath. She'd nearly given up—several times actually—but was grateful for her resolve in the end. Two cupped ears, each as big as the glunk's head, swiveled around as it chewed on an acorn. The white mane wrapped around its neck like a scarf and swayed slightly with each breeze. Its tail flicked left and right, the barbed spikes shifting beneath the fur. The movement gave off a sound like a muffled wind chime.

Beautiful creature. Annoying, skittish, aggressive and dangerous... but beautiful. A few quick sketches would suffice for now. Adding more detail always came later. A series of squeaks and clicks beckoned three smaller glunks from the burrow.

"Oh my unblinking eyes of the Tangle," she whispered. "How adorable!" Carefree bundles of bright orange fur bounced over to the bounty of berries and nuts. Nimble paws smashed purple berries into their mouths until the front of their white manes were terribly stained.

Enough fawning. Get the sketches done. Take a few notes. Don't waste the opportunity. It was a difficult task considering the adorable babies fumbling over themselves. One even started in her direction before the mother hissed a stern warning. The scolded cub tucked its ears to its body and retreated back into the lush ferns.

Animals were so fascinating! Insects and weather patterns typically stole most of Fae's time, but strange behaviors in the animals recently spurred her curiosity. She assumed it had something to do with the increase in the earth tremors. That was her working theory anyway. But without evidence or research, a theory was opinion parading as truth. Or so her father would've

told her if she presented these ideas. Given the choice between glunk barbs and her father's lectures, she'd gladly suffer a wounded appendage.

Fae shook her head and focused on the glunks' behavior. She would've preferred to be watching a kirak, even if most people warned her to stay as far away as possible from those beasts. At least these little rodents were more interesting than the pyrds. All those dull creatures did was eat, pull carts and defecate in an endless cycle of monotony.

Pyrds were great for meat or dairy products, but they also made wonderful haulers. When gargoyles had too many supplies to carry through the sky, pyrds bore the load. Long, trunk-like legs and a broad body made them perfectly suited for the task. Coarse fur, like metal wires, covered the whole creature, including the loose flabby nose that dangled past its mouth. Although common, there was still a lot to learn about the animals—like how a few drops of honey could be used to soothe a complaining pyrd.

Animals were creatures of habit and pattern, and it had always been satisfying to predict and record those behaviors. Even more interesting when those predictable patterns changed. What was the catalyst? And was it isolated to the woods and mountains surrounding the Kroll territory? Or were these evolutions occurring across the continents? It's not like earth tremors didn't exist throughout history. So what changed? If insights could be gleaned from the dumbest of all animals, what wonderful secrets did the other species hold?

None if Fae didn't concentrate.

The remaining two glunk cubs wrestled over an acorn, even though there was still plenty of food left in the pile.

So if these cubs don't fight due to scarcity, was it territorial? A sibling rivalry of some sort? Or was this a playful act? The mother's reaction suggests this is a normal occurrence, and she does nothing to disrupt the quarrel, Fae wrote in her journal next to her sketch.

Answers required patience. Collect and compile the research, then draw correlating conclusions. Simple, but oh so aggravating.

Especially since her father wouldn't let Fae explore beyond the border. Reshian sands, Skog marshes, Vogusian isles... all beyond her reach. Despite dodekas of peace since the end of the Immortal Wars, tensions between the gargoyle clans persisted.

The smaller of the two glunks somehow managed to overcome the bigger sibling. It scurried over to its mother with the prized acorn and placed it at her feet, which earned him a lick to the forehead. Very odd indeed.

Hopefully she wasn't impacting the natural behavior of these animals. Observing from the high branches of a tree would've been far more ideal. Already her presence banished a curious kit back to its den. Poor little thing. Perhaps Fae could toss a few berries into the hole when she was done.

It didn't help that Midnight insisted on staying by her side this morning. Honestly. You'd think a tarzak would have better things to do. Silky black fur wasn't ideal for the warming temperatures, even in the shade. She licked her chops and panted softly.

"Don't even think about it." With all those barbs, a glunk was hardly worth the effort. Not enough meat to justify a swollen mouth. Midnight's powerful shoulders rolled with a predator's endless patience. From her back rose two jointed limbs, arched high and barbed along their length, each ending in a curved spike that glistened as they swayed behind her like poised scorpion tails. Midnight huffed and tucked them away, concealed entirely in her black fur.

Scribbling notes. Making sketches. Observing patterns. Fae couldn't think of a better morning. Beams of sunlight broke through the web of leaves and illuminated Midnight's charcoal coat. As if the tarzak wasn't hot enough. Fae stretched out a pale blue wing to shade her friend.

A twig snapped, sending the little rodents scurrying back into their burrow in the blink of an eye. Midnight growled, the fur around her neck bristled slightly, her barbed limbs raising over her head.

"You mind telling that thing not to eat me?" Arkli broke

through the foliage and into the small clearing, hands raised. Deep red skin clashed with the surrounding greenery like a ruby among emeralds. At a glance, he looked more Reshian than Kroll-minus the ten spikes on his head.

"I have half a mind to let Midnight tear you apart," Fae grumbled. "I had to wait *turns* for those glunks to come out."

"Uh... oops?" He shrugged his lanky, hunched shoulders. The boy might as well be a living skeleton. Skinny arms dangled to his knees before he gingerly dropped to a crouch. At least this way he wasn't towering over her.

"Oops? Really? You're like a pyrd tromping through the woods." Midnight huffed in agreement. Arkli's lavender eyes darted from the tarzak to Fae, clearly questioning whether it was actually safe to squat.

"What's so special about glunks?" Arkli scratched his curly head of black hair, took a sniff of his fingers and shivered. Wiping a hand across his gray, tattered tunic added another stain to the filthy fabric. His baggy brown pants helped hide his red skin and bony features. A futile effort of course, but she couldn't blame him for trying. The Kroll clan had been cruel to outsiders since the Immortal Wars ended.

"That's what I was hoping to find out." Fae's own skin was such a light blue it was nearly white. Unique, but close enough to gray that she could still claim to be a member of the Kroll tribe, unlike her awkward friend.

After finishing a few final notes, Fae slapped her notebook shut and stood. Numbness in her leg soon gave way to tingling, stabbing needles, and no amount of fidgeting or stomping relieved the pain. She sighed and bit the insides of her cheeks. Just had to let it pass on its own. All this for a few brief notes and observations. What a waste.

Midnight stuck her tongue out in a stupid grin as she laid on her front paws. Arkli still eyed the tarzak with caution as he approached, but quickly became distracted again by the pile of leftover berries, cupping one hand, gathering with the other, and

plopping the lot into his mouth. Purple juice dribbled down his chin to compliment the slurping and smacking.

“You know,” he said as he munched. “I’ve heard some of the merchants in the Lower Markets talk about making an ale from niltberries. They say it takes years, dodekas even, for it to age properly. Just sounds like rotten fruit to me. How does juice ‘age’ anyway? Besides, these berries aren’t even that sweet, and have a terribly bitter aftertaste.” He stuck his tongue out and grimaced. “Anyway, I told him how dumb it was. Didn’t like that too much. But what should I have done? Kissed his ass? I’d rather—”

“Arkli, you’re doing it again.”

“Huh?”

“Rambling. Which means you’re nervous about something. So spit it out and be done with it already.” Fae pinched the front of her light red tunic and pulled it away from her moist skin, allowing the flow of air to evaporate the moisture and cool her down. Like all gargoyle tunics, it buttoned in the back—at the neck and the waist—to allow her wings to move freely.

Berry-stained teeth opened into a broad smile. “By the Endless Sky! Someone’s in a bad mood this morning. With a tone like that, people are going to mistake you for your father.”

Fae grimaced. As much as she loved her father, he was just... not like her. If he were here, he’d say something like a tree could never be a mountain. But she didn’t think there was anything wrong with being a tree. Mountains were immovable and stubborn. Trees could be firmly rooted, whilst bending and swaying in a breeze. Trees were better.

“See, here’s the thing Fae,” he said, clapping his hands and rubbing them slowly. “Well, actually, you know that niltberry ale I was talking about? I told him what’s what, right? That I’d rather drink pyrd piss. He...” Arkli coughed into his hand, “encouraged me not to return.”

Not surprising. Arkli had a way of rubbing people the wrong way. It was a miracle Fae didn’t strangle him herself half the time.

“Sounds rough. Guess you’ll have to stick to the forest for a while then.”

Living in the forest wasn’t all bad. It was certainly less crowded than Zikada. The city was built directly into a mountain along the Nashak Range. Flat levels with high walls climbed the range like a tiered cake. Where gargoyles lived and interacted was somehow a sign of status, with the highest levels reserved for the most prominent and important gargoyles. And finding trouble in the Lower Markets was easier than finding an acorn under an oak tree. Fae packed her notebook and charsticks into a leather satchel.

“Ah, yes, the forest. So much fun. Love the idea,” he said. “Except I’m supposed to be meeting someone at Gairn’s Tavern. Have you ever been? It’s lovely! I’m told it’s better than some of the mid level taverns even. But I suspect that’s an exaggeration. Probably just loyal patrons hoping to spit at some of those high level folks. Not that I mind a bit of that now and again. I was...”

Fae tuned him out. She probably wouldn’t miss much. Simple conversations didn’t exist for Arkli. Bouncing from topic to topic like a jamrabbit fleeing a tarzak’s teeth. Always distracted. If she didn’t interject now, he’d keep chattering for turns.

“No Arkli, I haven’t been to Gairn’s Tavern.”

“Great! You should come with me tonight.”

“I thought you were meeting someone there.” She raised an eyebrow at him. “A lady perhaps?...”

“Oh! No, not like that.” Arkli somehow blushed, despite his bright red skin. “First of all, it’s a man—”

“Hey, I don’t judge.”

His blush deepened. For all Arkli’s quirks, he *was* fun to tease.

“And second...” he continued, ignoring her comment, “he says he’s a traveler just returned from Umbek. So he’ll have news and gossip from the other clans and stuff! He could tell you how rainy and miserable Skog is. Or what mushrooms the Jhoks are growing.”

“More likely a con. Merchants don’t usually like to linger in Kroll longer than needed.”

“Oh, but charlatans are the best storytellers of them all! Thought about giving it a go myself a time or two. I certainly look the part, wouldn’t you say?” His arms flowed into an extravagant pose. “At worst, he’s a liar with wonderful stories. At best, we could hear about the Stonefire Cliffs, or the Fallen Freeze. C’mon, I know you’re curious about what goes on in the world.”

“Oh?”

“Seriously? You think I wouldn’t notice you sneaking off to do your dumb drawings outside the territory? You’re just lucky the Reshians aren’t as vigilant at the border.”

“Following me now, are we? That’s a bit rude.”

“Oh, please. Besides, if I was, and you didn’t notice a *bright red gargoyle*... then you have much more to worry about.” He gave her a smug smirk. “Either your observation skills suck, or your eyesight is failing. In both cases, I suppose we can’t really trust your drawings, now can we? Just the mad scratches of a blind hollowhead.”

Arkli giggled as Fae clutched her leather satchel defensively. “Well at least I know you’re not spying on my sketches. Or else you’d know how good they are!”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever you say.” He walked over and started petting Midnight, who happily accepted the attention.

“Traitor,” she mumbled at her supposedly loyal companion. Strands of black fur rained down as Arkli clapped his hands and straightened. When standing, he was almost two heads taller than she was.

“So you coming or what?”

She sighed. “Even if I wanted to, I can’t tonight.”

“What could possibly be better than a night of careless drinking with tales of foreign lands? Did I mention they have golden ale? Now *that’s* a beverage that will inspire songs and drawings!”

“You’ll drink enough for the both of us, I’m sure.” Fae rolled her eyes. “But if you must know, I’m meeting Baenok tonight to review some of his recent plant classifications. He’s found a type of

flower that eats mice! Can you believe that? It only grows near the swamps and—”

“Splendid, grand,” Arkli said. He backed away, twisting his curly hair in knots with his finger. “That sounds really exciting. No need to fuss, I’ll catch you next time. But you’re missing out! Ale is *way* better than plants.”

Flapping wings blasted debris into Fae’s eyes before she could mention that ale was technically brewed from plants. Such a strange boy. Not many people chose to live outside Zikada in the surrounding forest. Mostly outcasts and hermits. Arkli aligned with the former, while her father certainly fit the latter. The old man hated all the crowds and attention or something. What could be so bad about that?

Midnight whined softly as Arkli disappeared to the west, toward the city. “He can take care of himself,” she said. “For the most part.”

Perhaps Arkli wasn’t a fan of Baenok, which was understandable. The chieftain’s brother could be intimidating at times. But if Arkli bothered to take the time to get to know him, he’d change his mind. Baenok was nothing like Cault, despite looking nearly identical. Both gargoyles were a deep charcoal and towered over most gargoyles. He was even a good head taller than Arkli, though more broad and muscled.

Dirt and leaves erupted as Midnight shook her coat before smacking her chops. “What? The snacks I’ve been feeding you weren’t enough?” Midnight sneezed, apparently offended at such a silly question. “All right, go on. I’ll be back later tonight.”

Off to hunt her prey. Shadows from the trees and ferns swallowed Midnight’s black fur. Good luck to the poor animals of the forest. Hopefully the tarzak wouldn’t circle back to eat the glunks.

Fae held a hand over her eyes. Midday already? Where did all the time go? She’d barely have enough time for a quick bath at Scarrow Lake before visiting Baenok. A tentative sniff under her arm confirmed the necessity. Apparently, baking on the forest

floor waiting for glunks wasn't exactly a recipe for appealing fragrances.

Good thing Baenok gave her a pouch of that powdered orange flower. What did he call them again? Tripids or something? Rubbing a bit on her neck and underarms would certainly improve the smell. It was a lovely fragrance. Not obnoxiously sweet like lilacs. More subtle, with hints of spice and undertones of nuttiness. Quite a lovely discovery indeed. Except for the orange staining her pale blue skin. And Fallen Gods forbid if any of the stuff touched her ivory hair. Talk about a nightmare.

Still, she envied Baenok. Traveling to distant lands. Finding new plants and flowers, cultures and peoples. A privilege of being the diplomatic brother to a chieftain. Fae sighed and pulled her unruly hair back into a knot. Perhaps it was better to fully understand the world around her, before running off to find some new distraction. It was true that Baenok's research produced quick, fleeting gratification, but there was a certain satisfaction about sticking with one thing for the long haul. About finally unlocking that pattern—that mystery.

Tiny squeaks drew her attention back to the glunk den. One of the kits—the one banished from earlier—wiggled his nose at her while mostly hidden in the ferns. The fluffy orange ball burst from the shrubs and shoved the few remaining acorns and berries into its mouth. For a moment, Fae was tempted to reach out and pet the little fellow.

Until a flysk swooped down and snatched it in razor talons. The kit squeaked and scrambled helplessly under its grip, but before Fae could react, the mother burst from the den and leapt at the larger winged predator. The flysk was forced to release the kit to defend itself from the sudden onslaught of barbs. With a few flaps of its membranous wings, the flysk carried the mother into the trees, the two animals tearing at each other until they were lost in the canopy.

Fae gaped at the sudden, ruthless attack. Alive and curious one moment, dinner the next. Gone. Just like that. Knowing the way of

things didn't make it any easier to swallow. Tears threatened to fall down her cheeks. Everything serves a purpose, her father would've lectured.

Fae needed to leave. That animal's death was on her head. If she hadn't left out that pile of berries, it would still be alive. What would the kits think when their mother never returned? Would they survive? Would they search the forest, squeaking and chattering for their lost mother?

All for a few notes and sketches. Fae worked the inside of her cheeks until blood tickled the back of her throat. Nothing to do about it now. Nothing to say. Just try to forget.



BUSTLING chaos consumed every level of Zikada. Beckoning merchants selling fish and meats. Arguments and scuffles over inflated pricing. Flapping wings as gargoyles migrated between different tiers. Smells of fresh baked bread and stale ale wafted from the cobbled streets. A smile tugged at Fae's lips as she observed the functioning society somewhere beneath all that mayhem. Simply wonderful!

Bathing and getting her things in order took longer than she anticipated, and now the sun was nearly touching the peaks of the Nashak Range. Only a few more turns until sunset and she still needed to stop by Brik's blacksmith shop. Hopefully the shears were finished.

Baenok would have to forgive her tardiness. After all, how could he stay mad after she presented such a lovely gift she'd commissioned? Watching that man try to use three fat fingers to hold such small clippers was comically ridiculous. A pyrd would have better luck swinging a sword.

Now where was that shop? No matter how often Fae visited the city, she always struggled to get her bearings. She swore the whole layout changed from span to span. Navigation would've been utterly hopeless if not for all the skyward symbols painting the

roofs of the various shops. All she had to do was find a hammer with a snake wrapped around the handle. How hard could it be?

It was odd that Brik chose to work in the Lower Markets, especially since he lived with his brother Tovin on the outskirts of the Upper City. Not only was he one of the greatest blacksmiths in Kroll, but his contributions to the Immortal Wars earned him a stall in the Upper Markets.

Perhaps his rural upbringing in the north made him more comfortable down here. Rough appearances and heavy accents weren't so frowned upon among the thugs and ruffians. It wasn't exactly the sort of place for a girl with white hair and pale blue skin to wander aimlessly.

Unless everyone knew your father—and more importantly, what he was capable of.

Fae usually wore her golden earrings for decoration, more than anything else. And on the off chance someone didn't recognize her, she had the proof of travel authority between any of the tiers.

Fae descended when she spotted Brik's mark, narrowly avoiding an aerial collision—twice. Angry curses floated away with the wind. Rude. Still, how wonderful must it be to live in such a place? Connecting with friends, arguing with strangers, drinking and laughing with minstrels. The city had everything a person could ever need or want. Even thinking about living here brought a smile to her face. What fun she would have! The general buzz of excitement, bargaining, laughter and shuffling smashed together into a marvelous cacophony as she landed. The blacksmith's shop yawned open to the street, its soot-stained beams propped wide to reveal the glow of the forge within and ironwork hanging in neat rows that chimed softly whenever the wind slipped through.

Brik worked the bellows in a smooth rhythm. Heat warped the air around a small hole where he placed a glowing rod. Thick arms and legs glistened with sweat. Despite being quite tall, the man's wide frame gave him a stockier appearance. Without a shirt,

Brik's murky green belly jiggled with every pump. Not a fat man, but not exactly in his prime either.

"Hey, Brik!" she shouted, but he kept stoking the flames, grunting and growling. "Brik!" This time a little louder. The broad gargoyle blinked, furrowed his brow, then broke into a wide grin.

"Why ain't I surprised to see ya, eh?" He wiped his hands on his stained trousers and shuffled to the other side of his shop. Brik kept the front of his store open, only using a thick canvas to cover the front entrance when he closed. Thieves knew better than to steal from someone like him, despite the intricate metalwork proudly on display. "Yer at least a day early, I reckon."

"I was in the neighborhood. Figured I'd at least check in on those shears. Any chance they're done? I was hoping to give them to Baenok before his next foraging expedition."

Brik chuckled and rummaged through some tools on a workbench. His eyes were far too close together for such a wide face, and that fat nose didn't help. "It ain't like yer m'only client, y'know. Ah! Here it is."

He held up a pair of blue shears with waves of silver rippling through the metal. The long handle looked slightly awkward in Brik's hand, but it would be perfect for Baenok. The handles angled toward the center where the sharp, flat tips came together. Not big enough for major pruning endeavors, but simply fabulous for foraging and simple pruning.

"Oh, Brik, it's wonderful!" Fae exclaimed, reaching for the shears.

"Whoa there, lady!" Brik cradled the tool to his chest. "They ain't done yet. That's what I'm showin' ya's. See, t'wasn't easy figurin' the right cuttin' mechanics with such strange proportions. Yer lucky you came to me. I'd like to see any other blacksmith get this workin' right."

Fae rested her fists on her hips and tapped her foot. "They look perfect to me."

"Well, take no offense, but that's why you ain't a blacksmith."

Brik winked. Fae narrowed her eyes, which earned her a hearty guffaw from the man.

“Just give her the damn thing,” growled a man standing behind her. Identical to Brik in every way, besides the missing eye and scraggly beard.

“Hmph! Easy ‘nough for you to say, Tovin. Ain’t got yer mark on them tools. I got a reputation to hold up.”

“Forgive my brother, Fae. He’s a pain in the ass with these sorts a things. Makes sellin’ anything a damn nightmare for me!” Brik waved a hand and picked up a rag to polish the shears. Tovin shook his head and turned to Fae. “He’s just bein’ dramatic is all. Just gotta wrap the handles in leather and it’ll be ready for ya. Might could even bring it by Baenok’s place when we’re done for the day. Less than a turn, I’d say.”

Fae wrapped her arms around Tovin. “That would be lovely! I’ll be sure to throw in an extra sandstone marble for your trouble.”

“Bah! Ain’t no trouble,” huffed Tovin while scratching his beard. Flecks of gray encroached around his temples and chin. “This is a business, not a ransom. Brik’ll get it done right away, won’t you brother?”

Brik raised his eyebrows and held out his arms. “Not soundin’ like I got a choice, does it?”

“See? No problem at all. We’ll be seeing ya soon,” he promised as he shuffled back to talk with his brother. She couldn’t hear what they were saying, but Tovin reached up and rubbed his hand on Brik’s head, messing up his red hair. Brik laughed and gave him a playful shove. Even at their age, they acted like children when they were around each other—which was basically all the time.

Smiling and waving at the twins, she stretched her wings and exited the busy market. What a splendid detour. And what better way to conclude the evening than in the arms of Baenok?

CHAPTER TWO

SEDRA

Sedra was well accustomed to the stinging, burning pain on her cheek. Better to endure it quietly. She sat huddled at the base of their makeshift tent, though the position did little to stop Henber's open palm from connecting with her face. Over and over again. No use trying to make sense of her husband's fury. Since when did drunkards ever have sound reasoning? Sometimes she got lucky. Sometimes he'd pass out next to her without a word. But other times...

Smack.

This time it was the back of his plump hand connecting with her jaw. Bursts of white spots blurred her vision momentarily, and the familiar taste of copper filled her mouth. Sedra wasn't sure if it was from a bloody nose dripping down the back of her throat or maybe a split lip.

Smack.

An open flap in the tent roof allowed her to admire the night sky. Glistening stars, clouds drifting by in the red and purple moonlight. How would it feel to just fly away, trusting the winds to guide her? Better than sprawling in the dirt at the mercy of a cruel husband. But Sedra's deformed wing made flight an impossible

dream. Wallowing in the dirt was the best a cripple could hope for. Better than wallowing beneath it—sometimes.

Sedra was maimed, broken, and worthless. More useless than a pyrd, which could at least pull the carts. All she was good for was cleaning dishes and packing camp. If she did it well maybe they'd keep her around. She just had to keep her head down and mouth closed.

Her poor children, Tank and Thurdki, crouched at the other end of the small tent, forced to witness the beatings, lest Henber's rage be redirected toward them. Both had burnt orange skin, like her own, but with cloudy patches of brown and gray on their arms and face.

Tank kept his head shaved at the sides, leaving a curly patch of thick red hair on the top, which hid his budding horns. Five vertical lines on his forehead branded him Unclaimed. He hugged his younger sister and scowled silently. Budding adolescence had him challenging Henber more frequently, which always resulted in a vicious beating.

A fire burned behind Tank's amber eyes. Sedra opened her palm at him, a quiet command to stay away. He clenched his jaw and gave a stiff nod. His younger sister sobbed softly into his shoulder. Thurdki was so delicate and vulnerable in their dysfunctional family. Her own curly red hair was kept short, growing in a frizzed dome around her head.

Thunk.

Sedra gasped as Henber's foot connected with her ribs. No matter how she opened and closed her mouth, air refused to fill her lungs. Was this how it felt to take your last breath? To have death looming at the door to carry you into the Endless Sky? Maybe she wouldn't be crippled in the next life. One could hope.

"Stop it!" Tank jumped to his feet, hands clenched to fists. Why did that boy never listen?

Her husband stumbled back, panting heavily. His face was pinched together like he'd been clubbed, eyes and nose sinking into the center. Brown hair thinned at the top of his head,

revealing his ten short horns. His mustard yellow skin was slick with sweat, soaking into his stained tunic.

“Worthless. You’re all worthless,” Henber slurred his words as he rubbed his forehead. His stomach bulged past his tunic—the obesity made him seem small, despite his height. Like an oversized hedgehog pretending to be a porcupine. “Miburt wants you on the raid tomorrow. Don’t embarrass me again.”

Staggered, shuffling steps receded to the thin bedroll on the ground. Grunts and curses eventually faded into peaceful snoring. There would be no more pain tonight, at least. Better to be alive than dead. Tank whispered something to Thurdki before approaching Sedra. Thurdki wrapped her arms around her knees and rocked silently.

“I’ll kill him,” Tank said under his breath as he wiped blood from Sedra’s nose and lip. The dry washcloth was sandpaper against her fresh wounds.

“And then what? There are worse men than Henber in the camps.” She winced as she sat up straight. “Better to walk the familiar paths.”

“We should leave.”

“We’re Unclaimed. We have to stick together. You know what happens to those that go it alone.”

“Can’t be worse than this.”

“Just... stop. Please?” She sighed. “We should be grateful for Henber. Not many gargoyles would take me with my condition. Let alone raise another man’s children. It is what it is.”

“Why do you defend him?” Tank’s knuckles popped as he squeezed the rag. He was so defiant and passionate, just like his father. She rested a hand on his cheek.

“Don’t be like Henber. Learn how to use this—” She tapped his forehead. “To control this.” Her fist gently thumped his chest.

Shoving away her hand didn’t take much effort. “I’m nothing like him.”

“Anger and violence. All men are born with it. Few learn to manage it. Until you do...” She nodded over to Henber’s greasy

body sprawled across the floor. "That is the inevitable destination."

It was a harsh truth for a harsh world. No sense pretending otherwise. Tank was only a boy, but he had the burden of men well beyond his years. He was thin, but his arms and back rippled with muscle. Raiders recruited him a few years ago, shaping him into a hardened young man.

"Go fetch some water with your sister before bed," she said.

The camp was nestled in the nook between the Kol River and the south side of the Nashak Range, which created a natural barrier to the border of the Kroll territory. Being so close to the land of the Sky Viper made her nervous. Minstrels claimed the demon still flew the skies, hoping for enemies to emerge. Her crippled wing twitched and pulsed uncontrollably.

The tent canvas flapped gently in the cool breeze, carrying with it scents of moss and wet grass. It was less chilly than desert nights in southern Reshia. Sedra welcomed the fresh air, hoping it would dispel some of her husband's lingering stench.

"Are you really going on the raid tomorrow?" asked Tank. He'd been on enough of his own excursions to understand the danger.

"We all have to earn our keep." Sedra hated going on raids, but it was one of the only ways to keep her family fed. Especially with Henber wasting half their share to gambling and drink. "Take your spear too, in case you see any fish."

Grumbling complaints followed Tank all the way over to the bucket at the foot of his bedroll. That stubborn kid was always making a fuss. He gently held it out to Thurdki, who hugged it, barely able to touch her fingertips together. Soft giggles bubbled out when he lifted her off the ground by the rope handle. Such a sweet pair. Even with cheeks still wet with tears, Tank found a way to make Thurdki smile.

"Back soon. Unless we see some fish. Might be a bit longer," Tank said, opening his wings. "Try to get some sleep."

Sedra waited until her children were out of sight before limping over to her side of the bedroll. Pressure on a bruised rib

made her inhale sharply through her nose. It was probably broken—like the rest of her worthless body. Tears quietly rolled down her cheeks and into her curly hair.



BY THE MORNING, Sedra had a swollen eye and splotches of purple and blue blossoming across her cheek. None of which compared to the pain in her ribs. The simple task of buttoning her tunic behind her neck and lower back nearly made her collapse. Even now, standing with Miburt's crew, she struggled to draw a deep breath.

How long could she survive until Henber killed her during a drunken rampage? Maybe it didn't even matter. No one would miss a broken Reshian. It would be one less burden to worry about. Sedra checked to make sure her hair covered the ten horns on her head. Her long hair wrapped neatly at the top into a bun, ensuring considerable modesty, even with some pulled free to cover her Unclaimed brand. She didn't want any of these criminals to get the wrong idea about her, even if she was Unclaimed.

"Wow Sedra, committing to your role. I'm loving the dedication hun," said Heshla. She wore a promiscuous top that laced together at the neck and beneath her wings, revealing plenty of cleavage and her entire stomach. Dirt was smeared across her gray skin and golden hair, yet she still had a sort of rugged beauty.

"Better to get it over with." At least with Henber's beating, she looked the part of a distressed, helpless woman. Waves of nausea made her grind her teeth. Was it the nerves of a raid? Or the realization that her 'disguise' was a harsh reflection of truth? Maybe both.

"You're so serious!" Heshla puckered her lips at her. "I don't see what you're so worried about. We've got the easiest part. Men can't resist helping such destitute women. Even you, hun."

Folding her arms forced Heshla's exposed cleavage to bulge out even further. A beautiful woman like that certainly knew how

to draw a gaze. Several of the crew tried to sneak a glance, while the rest outright stared.

No one looked at Sedra. And why should they? Heshla was young and stunning, full of curves and tone. Sedra rubbed her forearm and kept her eyes down. Her own hooked nose and wide-set eyes made her look like she'd fallen out of a tree as a baby.

"Move go," Miburt commanded in a gruff voice. It sounded like gravel scraping over hardened clay. "Village need is reached by sun gone. Us wait until eyes watch their patrol leave."

Skoggers used such a strange language. Reshians, Ferens, Kroll, Jhoks and Vogusians all shared a language. Only Owa and Skog spoke a foreign tongue. Luckily, Miburt's accent wasn't too bad, considering he spent most of his life in the marshes.

His skin was covered in deep blue scales, the edges lined with gold. Glistening yellow eyes housed a black slit for a pupil like a snake. Most Skoggers were hairless due to their tiny scales, but he somehow managed to grow an awkward black tuft on his chin. Straps holding his war club to his back and ragged shorts was the extent of his clothing.

"Ready sunshine?" Heshla barreled on before she could reply. "Ah, doesn't matter. Don't want to keep Miburt waiting, do we?"

A quick wink turned the man's scales from blue to black. Attractive and flirtatious enough to make even a Skogger blush. Maybe the cooler temperatures had something to do with Kroll beauty. Then again, Heshla was the only Unclaimed Kroll, so there wasn't exactly much to compare with.

Walking through the tall grass tickled her thighs and ankles. She had to stop several times to itch the unbearable scratches, but Heshla didn't seem to mind. Wind ripped across the blades like waves lapping a sandy shore.

All the land south of the Dunelands lacked any greenery to this extent. Hydale was the northernmost village in Reshia, and despite the sparse population, the village was a significant producer of brakern to the other southern cities. It wouldn't be long before they reached the outskirts of its red fields.

"Might wanna let more of your hair down," Heshla said, reaching for the pin holding her bun together.

"Don't!" Sedra slapped her hand away without thinking. She cleared her throat and tucked a loose strand behind her ear.

"Bleeding origin pillars woman..." She rolled her eyes and fluffed her own hair. "What's with you Reshians and your horns?"

"I'm sorry."

Heshla shrugged. "I've had worse, if you know what I mean, eh? Still, can't you mess it up a little? Doesn't really match the rest of the uh... outfit."

Her eyes lazily drifted across the various bruises and cuts covering Sedra's body. She licked her lips and shifted nervously as they walked through the tall grass. Maybe Heshla was right. A few more loose strands wouldn't leave her too exposed. Somewhat begrudgingly, Sedra carefully pulled away clumps of hair from the neat bun.

"Much better. So is that a war wound? Or are you just unfortunate?" Heshla's blunt question caught her off guard. She blinked and tried to process an appropriate response. "Oh for the sake of the Fallen Gods, you're not slow in the head, are you? Your wing, hun. What happened to the wing?"

Sedra bit her lip. Most gargoyles avoided her, as if her condition were a disease they might catch if they got too close. Heshla's brazen inquiry rattled her. She couldn't remember the last time someone bothered to ask about her condition.

She pulled her good wing in front of her so she could stroke the orange membrane. The skin tingled where she dragged the tips of her claws. Her other wing was nothing more than a small, twisted clump of flesh, like it belonged to the rotting corpse of a child. Hanging from her back like a wet cloth, only twitching or flapping against her will.

"I was born with it."

"The slow wits or the wing?" Heshla quipped. Sedra ignored the insult. She was accustomed to those. "I'm kidding, relax. Gotta pass the time somehow, don't we?"

"At my expense, it seems." Sedra flinched as soon as the words left her mouth.

"Nonsense! Ask me anything. If you'd rather have me do all the talking," Heshla didn't seem to notice Sedra's apprehension.

"I suppose walking in silence isn't an option?"

"Nope."

Sedra sighed. "Fine. Well... where are you from?"

"Small talk? Seriously?" Heshla groaned.

"Where else do you start a conversation?"

"In the middle preferably," she said. "Just pretend we already did that other stuff. Jump to where things get interesting."

Sedra wasn't sure about this woman. One quint she was insulting her, the next, she expected them to chat like old friends.

"Well then," Sedra said and licked her lips. "How did you escape a Void sentencing? I thought your clan didn't use exile as a punishment for criminals. And as far as I know, you're the only Kroll at camp."

"Much better! But who says I'm a criminal?" Heshla winked. "It *is* nice to see you've heard about our customs, though. I love hearing stories about my clan." She seemed genuinely excited as she grabbed Sedra's hand. "Tell me, what horrifying tales do Reshians tell their children?"

Sedra kept her eyes down. Was this a trap? Goaded her into saying something offensive? "Well... they say the Kroll women fight alongside the men. Sometimes the children too."

"Aye, true enough. A woman can fight just as well as a man. Seems a waste not to put it to use. Children... well, they're a bit clumsy, but good for initial assaults."

Sedra's eyes widened and her mouth hung ajar. Heshla laughed and slapped her on the shoulder. It was meant to be a friendly gesture, but she hit a bruise and made her wince.

"I'm kidding, hun! Breathe a little, eh? What else? Come on, give us some real myths and legends."

"We don't need myths or legends." She gingerly massaged her aggravated shoulder. "The Sky Viper lives there. That's enough."

“Ah yes, very scary indeed.” Heshla nodded, waiting for Sedra to continue.

“Some say,” Sedra said, indulging her, “that the Sky Viper looked into the belly of the Black Mountain and saw the souls of the gargoyles he’d slaughtered waiting for him in the Tangle. So, the Kroll clan condemns criminals to the Void, the mouth to the endless abyss itself. Giving them a chance at redemption by fighting lost spirits that seek the Sky Viper’s soul.”

“Hm...” Heshla scratched her bare stomach. “I hadn’t heard that one. I *like* it!”

“It never made much sense to me.”

“No?”

“Why would the Sky Viper be worried about the people he’s killed?” Sedra asked, almost to herself. “If he sent them to the Tangle in the first place, I don’t see why he’d be afraid to fight them again. I mean, clearly he’s the better warrior. I doubt the next life would change that.”

“Possibly, but reality never does make for much of a story, does it?” Heshla smiled. “Best not to think too hard on old folktales.”

Tall grass swallowed their path surprisingly well. Only a thin dent gave any indication of their approach. They’d circled over to the western side of the village to avoid too much attention to the north, where Miburt and his crew waited in a grove of trees.

“Why do Reshians eat sand?”

Was this the start of a joke? It was hard to tell with Heshla. “We don’t.”

“Maybe *you* don’t. But I’ve seen several Reshians sprinkle sand on their meats while it roasts on a spit.”

“Oh. That.” Sedra sometimes forgot how different the other races were from her own. “Those are just spices we separate from the sand.”

“So it *is* sand then.”

“Well, I...” She almost explained the process of sifting sand through a tight sieve, using water to drain the spice into a barrel.

Then letting the pool of water evaporate, leaving behind the tangy spice in bright red clumps. "Sure," she said instead.

An amusing enough response for the Kroll. Her step had a bounce to it, making her loose golden hair flick left and right as they walked. What crime had this young woman committed to wind up with the Unclaimed?

"You never answered my question," Sedra said.

"No, I suppose I didn't." Heshla raised an eyebrow as she smiled at her. "You ready?"

Sure enough, soft village lights flickered in the distance. The sun's pale blue light turned violet as it touched the horizon. Apparently conversation actually helped with the boredom and the wandering thoughts during a journey. Heshla was likely the only gargoyle who didn't cringe while speaking with her.

Pyrds and scrofa complained lazily from the gentle prodding of farmers. Small huts were evenly spaced through the village, with fenced areas in between for stockades and tools. The smell of manure and straw hit her in bursts with the changing winds.

Sedra opened and closed her sweaty palms. Time to do her part. She placed her arm around Heshla's shoulders and feigned a limp as they exited the grass and stepped onto a dirt road leading to the village square.

"Help! Somebody please help us!" Heshla cleared her throat and breathed in and out in short bursts. She was quite a talented performer.

Meandering villagers and farmers spun to see the two women staggering down the road. A tall Reshian with tan, leathery skin rushed over. His flimsy straw hat flopped and bounced as he approached. One of his arms ended in a nub at the wrist. A warrior from the Immortal Wars reduced to a simple farmer. How drastically times could change.

"What happened?" he asked, placing Sedra's other arm around his shoulders. Gargoyles whispered and ushered children into huts while he guided them over to a pair of stools used for milking.

"We were just a small caravan. What could they possibly want?" Heshla sobbed. She had a glazed look in her eye that almost had Sedra convinced of the lie.

"Child, can you hear me?" he asked. Heshla nodded softly, though she didn't look at him directly. "Was it tarzaks? Bandits? Tell me!"

"Unclaimed," Heshla whispered, blinking out a tear. Sedra hid her amazement by nursing her bruised ribs. "We hid and..."

"You did right. Come, there's a fire inside." He gestured to a woman at the doorway, too young to be his wife. Daughter most likely. She had the same tan skin with long brown hair twisted at the top to hide her horns. "How many?"

Heshla didn't answer. The awkwardness of the silence made her skin crawl.

"Not many. Maybe five or seven?" said Sedra. "It happened so fast. We stopped at the river to let the pyrds drink when..."

The man shuffled away, urgently directing other gargoyles to meet him in the square. Miburt's plan was working. The villagers would fly to the river and see Oble and Birg waiting near some toppled carts. With enough evidence to corroborate the story, the Unclaimed would lure away the village's protectors. A plan with no bloodshed. Better to lose some grain and meat than a life.

"We've got brakern stew inside," the girl said as she knelt next to them, her eyes filled with compassion and sympathy. She wore modest working overalls that almost billowed like a dress and ended at the knees. Sedra's stomach twisted.

"We really should get back..." Heshla said, eyes still glazed over and mouth ajar.

"Come," she urged again, cradling Heshla's hand in her own. She nodded and allowed the girl to lead them inside the hut.

Comforting warmth and light radiated from the flames in the hearth. Thick, reddish liquid bubbled with vegetables in an iron pot. Although brakern stew wasn't particularly flavorful, it was hearty.

If the Unclaimed had any sense, they'd grow the brakern

themselves. They could end the raids and the plundering. Create some self-sustaining peace for the outcasts of the clans. But planting crops meant staying in one place long enough for a harvest. And Vinsek never stayed in one place for very long.

Sedra tried to be upset, to feel the wrongness of her actions, but morality and righteousness faded with enough time and exposure to cruelty. Instead she kept her head down and tried to get through one day at a time.

What else was there for a cripple? Nothing, except her children. It's all she lived for now. And, unfortunately, that meant distracting these poor people. Just outside the door, about fifteen villagers jumped into the sky. Sedra interlocked her fingers and squeezed.

"My name's Avarin, but everyone calls me Rin," the young woman said as she handed them a couple of steaming bowls. Clumps of white tubers and bursts of colored corn broke up the red pulp. Savory wafts of spices and garlic made her mouth water.

"Heshla. And this is Sedra."

"Eat, please."

Despite eager growls from Sedra's stomach, the thought of food made her queasy. How could she accept such hospitality? Indulge in a fine meal while her cohorts stabbed them in the back? She politely fiddled with the stew. Heshla cautiously shoveled in small bites between sobs. How was she capable of such seamless deception?

"What brings you up north?" Rin asked. Sedra looked to Heshla for a response, but she was too engulfed in her warm stew. Now seemed like a good moment to set down her own bowl. The young villager had shallow bags under her eyes, which were only visible due to the shadows of flickering firelight.

"We're stonebrokers." Not as crafty a lie as her companion, but it was what she rehearsed so it'd have to do. "We were bringing our shipment back to Gan when we were attacked."

"Dangerous business," Rin said. Stonebrokers controlled marble exchanges between clans. Kroll valued sandstone marbles,

which were abundant in Reshia. Reshians, in turn, valued the granite marbles so plentiful in the Nashak Range. Skogs, Vogusians, Ferens all had their preferences as well between sandstone, marble and obsidian. Not an ideal business, considering the clans' hatred of each other.

Yet, scarcity and abundance worked together in harmony to create a balanced global economy. With tensions lingering, stonebrokers had a habit of disappearing. Keeping their identities a secret was the best they could do to avoid stalking and ambushes. It was all a bit complicated for her liking, but if she posed as a stonebroker, she better know the basics of the business.

"Let's get something for that eye." Rin smiled and left the room before Sedra could protest. Deep shades of violet heralded the final descent of the sun. Darkness swallowed the village outside. There were only a few moments of peace before screams broke the silence.

"You were excellent, hun." Heshla smiled and scraped the rest of the stew from her bowl before standing by the fire to warm her hands.

Sedra stared at her own weathered palms. Hands of a working woman. Hands of a cripple. Hands of a liar. Unclaimed gargoyles dropped from the sky and rounded up the remaining villagers. Less than a hundred from what she could tell. All of which would have punctured wing membrane before the night was done. Couldn't have them flying off to retrieve the warriors she'd sent away.

Oak sap mixed with trench moss would repair the wounds easy enough, but the savagery of stabbing the wings of women and children made Sedra grimace. Rin ran back into the room and peeked out the open doorway. Her wrapped brown hair had loosened a bit, exposing a single black horn. Sedra blushed and lowered her eyes.

"Quick! Hide! The Unclaimed are here."

"Oh, sweetie," Heshla said. Fear and helplessness were replaced with smug satisfaction. She wiped the dirt from her fore-

head to reveal the vertical brands. “We know. Who do you think brought them here? The stew was quite lovely though. Might even be worth a return trip.”

Rin furrowed her brow at Sedra. Prickling anxiety worked its way from her stomach to her throat until her mouth released a soft groan. She didn’t even have enough dignity to explain herself to this young woman. Rin swallowed, lifted her head and clenched her fists at her sides.

“Tangle the both of you.”

“Yes, yes,” Heshla said, waving a hand and patting the girl on the cheek. “May we all be banished to the Tangle and so forth. Sedra, time to go.”

All Sedra could do was keep her eyes down as she moved to the open doorway. A hand shot out and grabbed her arm, squeezing with surprising strength. She forced herself to look into Rin’s burning amber eyes. She’d seen that same look in Tank many times.

“I’m so sorry,” Sedra whispered, forcing down the lump in her throat. She pulled her arm free and followed Heshla out into the night. Women held their children while they cried. Young men tried to defend their grain stores with pitchforks and daggers. Scrofa squealed relentlessly as gargoyles collected them. It was absolute chaos. May the Fallen Gods forgive her.

Glinting steel flashed with moonlight as Rin charged into the fray. Hurk—a stout brown gargoyle with a splotchy beard—found the blade rammed through his chest before he could blink. His eyes bulged as he choked in his own blood, dropping without so much as a groan.

Two more Unclaimed fell before Miburt coordinated a proper counterattack. Rin crouched, holding a long, thin blade in front of her in a two-handed grip. Hair whipped around her fierce, snarling face. It took true courage to stand against these savages. Courage like that would get her killed.

Rin leapt into the air, swinging her sword to the right and removing Bain’s hand as he reached for her. He screamed in agony,

grabbing his stump as a fountain of blood spurted upward. Miburt grabbed Rin's foot and yanked her back down before she could climb the sky. Unclaimed jumped to disarm and subdue the cursing Reshian.

"Supplies is good load," Miburt commanded. The other gargoyles had paused the looting to watch the deadly scuffle. They quickly resumed loading packs with brakern and cuts from scrofa they had clumsily butchered. Quiet weeping hung in the air like a fog while the gargoyles flew away with the villagers' supplies. At least they still had their lives.

The fleeing bandits looked like bloated pyrdys floating in the air with those packs drooping from their torsos. Full of their plunder—full of goods from these honest, hard-working people.

Vibrant laughter interrupted the dismal devastation. Heshla clapped softly and shook her head at Rin. "Very impressive! I didn't expect that from you, hun. I hope you don't take offense."

Rin spat at her, earning her a kick to the stomach from Miburt. Sedra flinched, instinctively touching her own bruised ribs.

"Hold her down." Miburt unsheathed a curved knife from his belt.

"No!" Sedra was surprised to hear her own pleading voice. The Skogger turned to her with raised eyebrows. "Please," she added softly. Surrounding gargoyles burst into rough chuckles and jeers. She pulled on her good wing and began stroking the membrane.

"I mean, the stew *was* good," Heshla said. "But she also killed three of us—two, if we don't count Hurk. I think we can all agree he was about as useful as sand in the Dunelands."

Miburt walked up to Sedra and slapped her with a scaled hand. Thankfully it was on a less bruised side, so she only had to endure the initial sting.

"Not to speak again," he hissed. "Missed not to you if not return. Henber is thank me for it."

His yellow eyes had a faint glow in the darkness, along with the golden edges of his scales. She lowered her head and slowly backed away. If it was between her and Rin, maybe she'd have the

strength to stand firm, but she had to think about Tank and Thurdki. Shivers ran up her wingarms. She couldn't afford to leave her children in the hands of her husband.

"Pretty sword," Miburt said, picking the blade off the ground. A small round hilt separated the curved blade from the two-handed grip, which was wrapped in red leather. "Collection will be added in mine."

"Go Tangle yourself."

"Young girl mouth is filled foul." Miburt lowered her own blade and rested it on her shoulder.

"I'm not afraid."

"Easy thing is say," Miburt said. "We does see."

Metal gleamed with the faint crimson and violet light of the crescent moons. Better not to watch. Sedra squeezed her eyes shut, listening to the whistle of metal cutting the air, followed by a muffled thud. Sedra pursed her lips and slowly peeled her eyes open.

Skog curses erupted from their leader as he clutched his shoulder where a long black arrow sprouted. Rin's sword clinked back to the ground before more whistling filled the air. Arrows buried into the dirt and Unclaimed alike. The village sentries had returned faster than expected. Something always had to go awry.

"Carry what can hold to move!" Miburt growled through clenched teeth. He snatched a sack of grain in his talons as he flew north, cradling his wounded shoulder.

Time to flee. Where was Shilvar? A tall Skogger with shimmering green scales shouldn't be so hard to find. Without her assigned escort, Sedra couldn't escape. Sweat beaded at her back and neck. Crippled and helpless. Yet again a burden to those around her. Maybe he already left her behind.

Shilvar slung a bag of brakern over his shoulder and shoved aside a crying woman. Sedra sighed and grabbed her chest. Thank the Fallen Gods. His nose crinkled as she grabbed his dense bicep.

"Miburt is right," Shilvar said coldly, hissing as he spoke. "None is will miss you."

With that broken declaration, he launched into the air. Leaving only Heshla as the last Unclaimed in the village. Sedra opened her mouth to plead with her.

“I’m gonna stop you right there, hun,” she said, holding up her hands and backing away. “If I try to carry you, we’ll both get captured.” Another arrow whipped past Heshla’s head. She nodded toward the arrow sticking out of the ground. “See? Best of luck though. It was nice chatting.”

Heshla and the rest of the Unclaimed shrank into the sky. Only a few warriors from the village pursued, though it was far too late.

There was no point in running. Sedra bit her lip and tried to blink back her tears.

“Take her,” said the farmer with the missing hand. He knelt next to Rin as three large villagers grabbed Sedra roughly under the arms.

Hatred squirmed inside of her. Not for these villagers, but for herself. Her own people—if the Unclaimed could be called a people—abandoned her. Once again, her life was nothing more than a weed in a field of blooming lilies. Some things would never change.

CHAPTER THREE

MURGATH

Thin white wisps followed Murgath through a punctured cloud. Vast mountain ranges disappeared beneath him as a gentle breeze erased his entry into the sky. The shifting ocean of gray and ivory radiated with the sun's blue light and warmth. Fortunately, the winds of the upper sky swept away any lingering heat. Nothing calmed him more than solitude, caressed by the whims of the changing air.

After dodekas of stability, patrolling Zikada was more symbolic than necessary. No clan dared cross the Nashak Range into Kroll territory. Not while the Sky Viper still haunted the skies.

Murgath hated that his gray skin had started to wrinkle and sag, despite his rigorous exercise routines. His battle scars slowly started to blend in with the rest of his body's emerging creases. Not even the Sky Viper could ignore a summons from the Endless Sky forever.

Descending through the clouds, his ear flicked toward the general hum of Zikada. Gargoyles flew lazily between the various levels of the city like wasps. Hooped earrings of gold or silver or iron marked their status and tier limitations. Murgath had no need for such trivial adornments.

From above, the city resembled a hive, with a broad base at the

bottom and hundreds of tiers stacking above it, pressing right into the mountain itself. Disgusting. Nonsense to live in such a crowded place when the forest was enough to give life and purpose.

Even this high above the mountain city, Murgath could hear snippets of arguments and laughter mixing with the rushing wind. Simple wooden buildings and a network of caves created a mangled society. Homes. Markets. Crime. Hardly worth the hassle.

Many of the original granite blocks still bore the black stains from the raging fire that consumed the city dodekas ago. In some places, the stones had even warped and melted slightly under the incredible heat. Dark days.

Few trees or foliage broke through the monochromatic structures. Only the crouching and gliding gargoyle silhouettes gave any sort of color to the otherwise bland city. The soft skin tones of gargoyles usually made it easy to blend in with the rocky cliffs, as well as the fertile landscape. But here, amidst the black and gray architecture, they might as well have torches on their heads.

One gargoyle watched Murgath fly overhead as he stoked a small flame, cooking a turgon, or perhaps a muskrat, in front of his shop. Gargoyles crowded around, waving marble pouches for a slice of the meat. A brief whiff of the meal made its way to Murgath's nose, triggering a soft grumble from his stomach.

Food could wait. All things must wait while work was to be done. The membrane of his gray wings puffed and stretched as he maneuvered back to the peaks.

A faint cry in the wind floated from the upper levels, distinct from the other rumblings below. Murgath squinted in the fading sunlight before shaking his head and huffing his nose. Where were the other Sentries? They should be patrolling those tiers, yet it was strangely devoid of security. Likely nothing to worry about. He angled his wings to launch back up through the clouds, away from all the chaos of the city.

As he climbed past the upper levels, a desperate whimper escaped a nearby cave. Another scan revealed no available Sky

Sentries in the nearby vicinity. Just his luck. Still, no task was too small.

Murgath dove back down and flared his wings. Wind slapped into the membrane and yanked his torso back while his legs swung in front. Using the momentum, he tucked his wings, curled into a ball, flipped once in the air, and reopened his wings before slamming into the rocky surface. Sparks spat from his talons as he skidded to a stop.

The mouth of a cave on one of the second highest level loomed before him. Was that where the plea originated? Everything was so much quieter up here. It was less crowded as gargoyles ascended the tiers—markets gradually giving way to the homes and privacy of wealthy or influential gargoyles.

The air was still. With evening approaching, perhaps no one was home. Only the most brazen criminal would attempt malfeasance this high in the city.

This particular cave belonged to Baenok. The courtyard in front of the cave was filled with a large swath of plants. Always growing his collection. Strange flowers. Twisting vines. Bulbous mushrooms. Gentle breezes rustled the tall jin reeds, which were usually found near rivers to the south. The thick, hollow stalks made dull clunking noises as he approached the mouth of the cave.

Vivid, blue light from the sun gave way to the dim flicker of candlelight as he crept deeper into the cave where the cry originated. The smell of copper tainted the air like rust on a rainy day. A familiar odor indeed. Blood. Danger. Death.

Murgath quietly unsheathed the curved daggers from his belt, ears shifting to collect any stray sounds to aid his investigation. The cave angled right, cutting off his view, and cold, rough stone bit into his wings as he pressed against the wall. He paused to listen for any movement before slowly peeking around the corner.

The room was destroyed. Torn paintings on the wall. Shattered shelves. Books and papers scattered around broken furniture. Even the chandelier that normally swung from the top of the tall

cave had crashed down. A few small embers glowed where the candles tipped onto a stray page or wooden splinters.

Amidst it all, massive black wings drooped across the wreckage. Jagged bones protruded from several areas of torn flesh, allowing small streams of blood to collect beneath an equally massive torso. Judging by the crimson puddle emerging, the gargoyles had only recently been slain.

Where was the assassin? Murgath scanned the rest of the cave before sheathing his daggers and approaching the corpse.

“Baenok... what happened to you?” he whispered as he crouched and placed a hand on the man’s bruised shoulder. It was easy to recognize Baenok. The body was so massive, Murgath barely had to crouch to check for life signs.

Ending the wars between clans, only to war with themselves. Disgraceful. Dishonorable. Could they not live in peace? He sighed, rubbing the creases on his forehead.

Who would risk such a brazen attack on the chieftain’s brother? Cault would not rest until the murderer was apprehended and executed, despite the strained relationship with Baenok. This would be seen as a stain on Cault’s legacy more than anything else. How could he protect the clan if he could not even protect his own kin? Murgath grimaced at his own callous assessment.

A wing fluttered, sloshing some blood onto his legs. Murgath raised an eyebrow and inspected the membrane. Final death spasms were common enough. Still, he grabbed the joint and folded in the broken wing, several broken bones popping and grinding as he did so. With the membrane now retracted, Murgath could see a small gargoyles hidden beneath Baenok’s lifeless arm.

Murgath’s talons searched the rough ground for sufficient leverage to push against Baenok’s limp shoulder. Dead weight was not an easy thing to manage for a gargoyles of Murgath’s size—or age. It took an extra flap of his wings to give himself enough of a boost to roll the massive man onto his back and off of the unconscious attacker.

Three jagged slashes exposed Baenok's throat. Efficient. Personal. No need for a weapon. Hollow eyes stared back until Murgath gently pulled the eyelids closed.

"Climb the Endless Sky," he said, turning his attention to the motionless attacker, now freed from the bodyweight. Murgath wouldn't be surprised if the mass of Baenok's corpse suffocated the smaller assassin. Murgath couldn't help but smile at the thought of Baenok getting revenge with his final breath. A good death.

That smile quickly faded as Murgath recognized the feminine features of the gargoyle laying before his feet. Patches of pale blue skin appeared through cracks in the drying blood that drenched her entire body.

He dropped to his knees and hovered over her, scanning for any severe damage. The woman flinched as Murgath pressed his hands against her ribs. Cracked. Perhaps broken entirely. Hard to tell.

Crystal blue eyes snapped open, quickly followed by a vicious swipe toward his head. Murgath jerked his head back, skin bristling as the outstretched claws grazed the air just in front of his throat.

"It's me, Fae!" he growled, avoiding a kick with a flap of his wings to propel him safely out of her reach. Her fierce eyes relaxed. Recognizing Murgath, she let out a soft sob as he cautiously approached. "What happened? Are you hurt?"

"I... we..." Fae looked over to Baenok's body. "Curses of the Fallen Gods!" Her tears created two streams, clearing away the blood spattered on her face. She clenched her teeth, shaking with rage. Her eyes fluttered and rolled back, as she collapsed back into the pool of blood.

His ear twitched behind him toward the cave's entrance. Multiple pairs of shuffling footsteps. Not the assassin. Sky Sentries perhaps. Didn't matter. Word of this would spread.

Murgath needed to get Fae out of here, without anyone seeing her. When Cault caught wind of this, he'd jump to conclusions—

conclusions Murgath himself had entertained before recognizing the girl. He cursed under his breath. Steady.

His eyes darted across the cave, desperately searching for an escape in the soft candlelight. Basic furniture lay broken and scattered, while the fur rugs and blankets began drinking the red liquid seeping across the floor. Dead end. Nowhere to hide.

Let them come then.

Murgath snarled and stood over Fae as the prying gargoyles turned the corner to witness the carnage. Four people entered the room, eyes widening when they saw Baenok's slashed throat.

Brik and Tovin stood taller than Murgath, with muscles making them seem twice as wide. He could usually only tell them apart from the scar that stole Tovin's left eye. Brik held a wrapped box against his chest.

Brylle, the Sentry Prime, had a tight braid draped over her shoulder and—although she was shorter and much slimmer—commanded respect. She leaned into her tall spear and surveyed the scene with black eyes.

Murgath's stomach lurched when Cault stepped forward. The others were insignificant by comparison. The massive man was the epitome of gargoyle physique and aspirations, standing almost twice as tall as Murgath. Faint candlelight cast shadows across his scarred skin, accentuating the victories of many battles over the years. Even after the wars ended, Cault found reasons to duel and battle other warriors. His lust for glory was as vast as the clouds during a blowing tempest. Perhaps that was why the last chieftain chose him as his successor after the disappearance of his son.

Cault's lips twitched when he saw his brother sprawled across the floor, flashing his sharp teeth. Loose strands of hair escaped a neat hair tail and swayed gently, in perfect rhythm with each controlled breath. Murgath was grateful he didn't have any hair to give away his own tense breathing.

A tense stillness gripped the room. Cault released a shallow breath as he approached Baenok's body. "Tell me what happened here."

Not so simple. Like a child asking a mother where she got supper. The simplest answer might be the Markets, but that doesn't tell the whole story, does it? Perhaps meat came from a pyrd, which was raised in Flix, and tubers grown from Hoint. But people always wanted simple answers to complex inquiries.

Silence would be the only reply, as no response would satisfy Cault. Murgath resisted the urge to scratch at the drying, sticky blood around his feet. He blinked, shifting his gaze back to the other three blocking the room's entrance.

Brik and Tovin were too nervous to meet his eye. Great warriors many years ago. Now, the blacksmiths likely weren't prepared for such a confrontation. They knew all too well what Murgath was capable of. Let their fears fester. What were those two even doing here?

Then there was Brylle. Unreadable. Emotionless. Calculated. A respectable Kroll. Untested by true war, but strong enough to rise in the Sky Sentries. It would be hard to predict her next move.

"I said," Cault spoke through clenched teeth. "What... happened?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know. Perhaps your eyesight has fogged with age. Move aside," he snarled as his eyes bounced between Murgath and Fae. "I see my brother managed to kill the bastard before he died. Who was he?"

"She's not dead," Murgath said. "And I was unable to assess the room—"

"She?" His furrowed brow melted away, mouth ajar as Cault recognized the alleged assassin. As quickly as his shock blossomed, it died, leaving only rage to fester in its place. He stepped toward Murgath, covering an alarming distance with one stride. "Get out of my way!"

"No," Murgath whispered, vibrating his wings as a warning. Cault hesitated, stopping to maintain a safe distance between them. It was unusual to see Cault so apprehensive. "Fae is a witness to the murder. Even if she *did* kill him, you, of all people,

should want to know *why*. Jumping to conclusions now would only smother the truth from seeing the light.” He kept his voice low, controlled. “They were courting, were they not? Or do you know so little of your brother? Baenok—”

“Do *not* say his name!” Cault seethed. The twins shifted nervously in the flickering candlelight. “Vengeance is my *right*. And I’ll not have you standing in the way of it. Kin or not, your daughter will face justice.”

Tension. An old friend that often preceded conflict. Let it come. Sweat dripped down Tovin’s brow, while Brik twisted the box tightly in his hands. Their eyes darted nervously between Cault and Murgath, unsure of how to approach the escalating situation. Would they come to their chieftain’s defense? Or would the Sky Viper legacy be enough to keep them at bay?

Cault carried no weapons, a bold demonstration to show he didn’t need them to defeat an opponent. Pride killed more gargoyles than any blade.

“As chieftain, are you not required to hold Sentencing for any accused?” Murgath knew the answer. “Judgment does not belong to you. It is for the Council to decide.”

Cault flared his nostrils, glaring at Murgath. Not many gargoyles would rehearse the law to a chieftain, especially under such grim circumstances. But a Viper did not shrink from the pyrd just because of the size discrepancy.

“In the case of personal assault, Kroll are also permitted to challenge an opponent to single combat. To the death.”

“Fae is injured and unconscious,” Murgath said calmly. “Your honor should not be tainted by such a cowardly challenge. Perhaps if I stood in as her champion, you could tempt the nine circles of stone.”

Let the words drive deep like a spear. Both refused to break eye contact as an inevitable conflict brewed on the horizon. The dusk of pride and anger grew brighter still.

Murgath calculated likely attacks. Cault was much larger but limited to a direct assault inside such a small cave. Murgath, on the

other hand, could leverage his wings for added speed and agility. No doubt Cault felt the outcome weighing in Murgath's favor, but his body language radiated with raw bloodlust. Let him charge first.

"Enough." Brylle calmly sauntered between the two of them. "Blood has already been shed. Why add to it?" Her firmness reminded him of her mother Darza. Brylle was named the Sentry Prime after her mother fell ill a few years back.

She turned to Cault. "I will take Fae to the Yasiid. I will need time to find Sentries to assist in the escort."

"No. I want her imprisoned immediately. Take Tovin if you must." Cault's voice left no room for discussion. Tovin opened his mouth to protest, but thought better of it, shuffling and scratching his beard instead.

"Very well. You may take Baenok's body, but leave everything else as it is. We will need answers and evidence," Brylle spoke to Cault like she would any other clansmen.

Despite Brylle's presence between them, Murgath kept his knees bent and wings slightly open, bracing for a surprise attack. For all he knew, Brylle could join the fray—she was nearly impossible to read.

Finally, Cault gave a stiff, reluctant nod of approval. Tovin stopped fidgeting and pretended to scratch his forehead, quietly wiping away the moisture accumulating where an eye should have been. His scar funneled the sweat like a river searching for a lake.

Confident no one would attack, Murgath knelt beside Fae, gently brushing the hair from her face. Seeing the white hair bleached red with blood almost made her unrecognizable.

"Escort me to the holding cells," he said. "I will take Fae there myself." Murgath glared at the gargoyles in the room. Waiting for a challenge—a protest. None came.

He scooped Fae into his arms, fresh blood dripped down his arms and body as he pulled her in close. Cault's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing. Murgath moved toward the exit, never letting his guard down as he walked past the twins.

Fortunately, Fae was like himself. Small. Light. He felt Cault's gaze searing into him, but he didn't give him the satisfaction of turning back. His ears would alert him if anyone tried anything foolish. Let them try.

Music of the hollow jin reeds waited for them as they exited the cave. The sun dipped behind the Nashak Range, with deep purples and blues engulfing the landscape. It was a long flight to the Yasiid, but Murgath couldn't risk his daughter in the hands of Cault's Elite, or even Brylle's Sentries.

Darkness soon swallowed them as they flew over the uninhabited hills and forests below. Wildlife thrived in the cool mountain air, which ensured Kroll always had plenty to eat. Not to mention the farmlands near the southern border, pyrd ranches on the western side of the Nashak Range, and an abundance of fish from the Ardox Ocean and Scarrow Lake.

Why did Fae insist upon frequenting Zikada? She was bound to run into trouble eventually. It didn't help that she'd chosen to court Baenok—a man who willfully ignored the borders, crossing into foreign lands with reckless abandon. Irresponsible. Dangerous. All for what? A flower that would wilt and die within a cycle? Foolishness.

Murgath held Fae from under her arms so she didn't impede his flight, though the blood made it difficult to get a solid grip. He wrapped his legs around her until she was flush with his own body. With her limp body secured, he could fly more naturally toward the prison that awaited her.

Prison. Sentencing. The Void. When was the last time a prisoner was freed from the Cursed Mountain?

Never.

Well then... Fae would have to be the first. All things begin with a first. The first Fall opened the Endless Sky. The first disputes created the Immortal Wars. Fae would chart a course to freedom—despite any evidence weighed against her.

He looked to the south, toward Owa, a land largely uninhab-

ited due to the frozen landscape. He'd have to get past Reshia and across the Obsidian Sea, but it was out there.

Flee. A valid option. If Murgath turned now, he could definitely outrun Tovin—the man bobbed erratically under his own weight, breathing heavily. But could he outrun Brylle? For now he had to trust the Fallen Gods.

Only two crescent moons shattered the darkness. Barely enough light to guide their journey east, to the Yasiid. Even at night, the towering mountain was blacker still. Cold. Lifeless. Cursed. Birds never flew near it. Plants refused to take root. Wildlife never approached. Only gargoyles were foolish enough to inhabit such a unnatural heap of stone.

Only a single entrance and exit existed at the peak of the pyramid, which made it ideal for holding high-security prisoners. His muscles burned as he finally reached the lip of the entrance, but was careful not to let Fae hit the stone during the landing. Some of Baenok's blood had dried and flaked away during the flight, revealing patches of pale blue skin in the moonlight.

Brylle drifted gracefully to his side, while Tovin slammed onto the ledge and tried—unsuccessfully—to hide his labored breathing, clumsily stomping onto the ledge. Those with Tovin's body structure were more accustomed to short, intense bursts of aerial combat, not long, uninterrupted journeys across miles of territory. The man leaned on his knees, though it didn't seem to help much.

Two guards strolled over to greet the new arrivals. Their nonchalant demeanor stiffened upon seeing Murgath amongst the group. They were both tall, but looked hollow with their leather armor loosely clapping against their thin frames.

Brylle spoke firmly as the guards approached. "Escort Murgath to the holding cells. He is carrying a prisoner that is to be kept under constant guard until her Sentence is delivered," she ordered. Brylle grimaced as she assessed the guards' appearance. "Tovin, if you don't mind making sure there aren't any problems? I must inform the Sky Sentries of the night's developments."

Without another word, Brylle dove from the lip of the cave.

She was a blur, careening down the slick pyramid wall before she opened her wings and disappeared into the night sky.

The guards stared blankly after her with mouths slightly ajar. Hard to blame them. She was certainly a unique woman, and attractive by all accounts. Though Murgath didn't really pay much attention to those sorts of things.

Tovin scratched a pointed ear before clearing his throat, though his breathing still came in deep huffs. The guard closest to him jumped and turned to head into the cave. The movement was so sudden that the other guard didn't have a chance to move out of the way as they awkwardly crashed into each other.

They grumbled under their breath while Tovin and Murgath looked at each other before following them into the well-lit cavern. He could see Tovin shaking his head out of the corner of his eye.

Everything about the Yasiid carried an unnatural beauty. The tunnel was perfectly smooth and stairs were cut to accommodate the spiraling descent. Every few steps they'd pass through a blue vein running in a perfect circle from the steps to the ceiling, somehow illuminating the passageway with a luminescent glow. The blue rings twisting down the tunnel always made Murgath feel like he was being swallowed by the pyramid. Eaten. Digested. Forgotten.

"She wounded at all?" Tovin asked, his gruff voice echoing softly. He fidgeted and did his best to avoid direct eye contact. It helped that his missing eye was closest to Murgath. Obviously he preferred casual conversation over the suffocating silence.

"Mm," he grunted distractedly.

Murgath stared at Fae's bloody body, her head gently resting on his shoulder as he carried her deeper into the mountain. Although blood was everywhere, it appeared to be dry now, with no sign of fresh leaks coming from his daughter. A more thorough examination was required to determine any internal damage. He remembered feeling her ribs, which caused her to awaken for that

brief moment. He could only hope that was the extent of her harm.

“How long have you known Fae?” Murgath asked. He didn’t much care for small talk, but it often helped him work out a problem when he could discuss it aloud. Tovin didn’t seem to mind the change of topic, releasing a quiet sigh.

“Since she was a lass, I suppose.” He itched his cheek absent-mindedly. “Always pestering people with questions. Bit of a pain in the ass, if you don’t mind me saying so.”

Murgath appreciated Tovin’s attempt to lighten the mood, but he couldn’t escape the dread burrowed in his stomach. “Can you think of any reason Fae would do something like this?”

Tovin paused, then slowly shook his head. “Can’t say as I can. She’s been waitin’ cycles to give Baenok some special kind of shears. Made just for him. Cost a heavy marble, I might add. Don’t make much sense killing the man after all that.”

“Mm.” Murgath sighed, his mind wandered as they continued their descent. “You know, when Fae was young, we discovered a hive of bees in a tree near our cave. Small. Hardly worth my time or attention. Told Fae to avoid it or she’d get stung. Another time I’d show her how to harvest the honey.

“Of course Fae didn’t listen. She would sneak away with some charsticks and paper and watch those bees for turns at a time, scribbling notes and drawings.”

It was rare for Murgath to speak at length about anything. Tovin clung to every word, relaxing for the first time since Baenok’s cave. The soft click of talons on the stone steps followed them as they were consumed by the ancient pyramid.

“One day she didn’t come home. I went searching for her, only to discover her near the hive, swarmed by the insects.” He adjusted Fae in his arms. His muscles burned and ached with the loose weight. “So, I rushed over. Destroyed the hive. Flapped my wings to blast them away from her. Then grabbed her and covered us with my wings. I must’ve been stung hundreds of times. But she hadn’t been stung a single time. Not once.”

“Got there just in time, eh?”

“Mm.”

They had finally reached the bottom of the staircase and began walking past empty rooms. A bright light emanated from one of the upcoming doorways. Marble trim encompassed the entrance, runes and glyphs carved precisely into the stone.

As they passed, he couldn't help but feel awed by the sheer size of the marble-covered cavern. Intricate sculptures and designs covered every square inch of the walls. Reflective glass on the ceiling served to make the space appear even bigger than it already was. Yet, for all its beauty, the platform at the center of the large room mitigated the ambience.

People simply called it the Void. The peak of the tiered platform was missing, leaving a flat square that could comfortably fit seven large gargoyles. At the center was a hole big enough for a large gargoyle to fit into, but small enough that they couldn't extend their wings. Strange writing also surrounded the hole, creating a ring of the carvings.

Murgath was grateful to move past the room, though Tovin appeared unfazed. Clearly eager to hear the rest of the story.

“Fae was looking down at her cupped hands. She opened them at my demand. I thought perhaps she was injured, but in her palm rested a very large bee. You see, her plan was to move it into a basket she had built with removable drawers.

“Seemed like foolishness at the time. I was angry, but Fae calmly explained that these bees were following their chieftain. She had found a way to peacefully lure them out into a structure that would produce honey time and time again. It was incredible.”

Murgath shook his head as he remembered the scene. “But in my haste to protect her, I destroyed it.”

Pangs of guilt pricked at him. Of course, he'd helped her rebuild the structure. Found another hive. Before long the entire clan praised her wonderful invention, but it did not change the look on her face that day. Disappointment. Sadness. Betrayal.

Murgath was silent. Tovin didn't know how to respond, so he

swallowed hard and stared at the smooth walls as they walked. Not much else to say.

“So this is the Thread the fates have chosen,” said an old man as they passed his cell. His stained white beard contrasted against skin the color of ripened acorns, and his lack of wings gave Murgath pause. “There are worse destinies than losing a daughter. It would be quite a shame to lose Gargon for your selfish pursuits.”

“Shut up, old man!” said one of the guards, smacking his spear against the bars. “He gets crazier every year.”

They moved on and eventually stopped in front of a cell near the end. The steel bars were jammed roughly into the sides of the wall. The crude prison diminished the elegant and smooth architecture. It reminded him of soldiers trying to wear a battle tunic after gaining weight. Even if it somehow managed to fit, it was clearly out of place.

One of the guards fumbled around his loosely-fitted armor to retrieve a set of keys. The door screeched on its hinges, as if it were angry to be awoken from a long nap. Murgath stepped through the opening, careful not to smack Fae’s head against the bars.

Old straw littered the floor as a pitiful excuse for bedding. He attempted to sweep the straw into a more condensed pile with his foot before laying her down on top of it. He made sure not to lay her down on the side with her injured rib.

His arms and back flooded with relief. Although Fae was small, the long journey took its toll. He moved a strand of white hair from her face before turning back to Tovin.

“You and I are blinded by the lens of war and violence. We expect the worst because we’ve seen the worst. But Fae... she wants to understand the world. She sees these fragmented pieces as part of a greater whole and wants to find ways to live in harmony.”

“I wouldn’t say we’re blinded. We just...” Tovin cleared his throat. “We uphold the safety and protection of Kroll.”

“Mm,” he said quietly, almost to himself. Murgath turned to the young gargoyles that escorted them to the prison. “Guards.”

Both perked up, their loose armor clanging and echoing in the chamber as they stood at attention. “Yes, Sky Viper?”

“This prisoner is to have fresh buckets of water before she arises. At least two. And a clean cloth for her to wash with.” He scanned the sorry state of her blood-stained attire. “If there is any spare clothing, bring that to her cell as well.”

Murgath walked out of the cell so the guards could lock the door. Technically, he didn’t have the authority to order them around, but a stern look sent them scurrying off to gather the requested supplies. The Sky Viper was not a man to refuse.

“Well, I suppose that’s it then. I’ll leave you be now,” said Tovin, turning toward the exit.

“No,” he said. “I couldn’t trust those guards to protect a bowl of fruit, let alone my daughter. Wouldn’t be surprised if Cault tried to kill her before the Sentencing. I need you to stand guard at her cell until then.”

“But Cault—”

“You can risk Cault’s wrath or my own, the choice is yours,” Murgath snapped. Tovin tried to swallow past the lump in his throat, making an audible gulp. His eyes flicked between Murgath and Fae, before finally bowing his head in a curt nod. “I’d do it myself, but... I need to know what happened. Keep her safe.”

Murgath hated using fear to get what he wanted but he didn’t have the patience to persuade Tovin to help him. Cault would likely rush through the Sentencing to seek retribution for his brother’s death. The chances of him actually pursuing a fair judgment was highly unlikely. Murgath shook his head, recognizing the irony of his own stubborn unwillingness to see Fae as the assassin.

He had to get back to that cave before it was cleared. There had to be something that could prove his daughter’s innocence—or guilt. Was he prepared to accept that as an outcome? Could he refuse the Sentencing and place himself above the law he helped craft? Such an act would undermine their entire system of justice.

For now, Murgath had to choose to believe in her innocence.

Hopefully Baenok's funeral preparations would keep Cault distracted for a few days, maybe even spans. He only needed a few moments alone in that cave.

Doubt crept in as Murgath reviewed the scene in his mind. He struggled to discard the implications and consequences that awaited. He walked up the stairs, saving his wing strength for his flight back to the cave. He was exhausted and hungry, but Fae needed him.

And time was running out.